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#StayAwake in the Time of Pandemic

A Case of Anti-Government Protests in Slovenia

Almost every Saturday afternoon in the past two months, the so called 'Hygiene-Demo' takes place at the Rosa Luxemburg Platz in Berlin, where up to thousand people gather. According to local media, the participants protest against the ongoing lockdown measures decreed by the federal states to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus (Der Tagesspiegel 2020). They believe that their constitutional right of freedom of assembly is being curtailed under the pretense of anti-coronavirus measures. On the other side of the Atlantic, we see armed citizens storming the Michigan statehouse and US-flag-weaving citizens blocking the roads. Similarly, they demand lockdown to be lifted and to be allowed to return to work (BBC 2020). Both media outlets quoted above describe the participants of the protests mainly as a mixture of right-wing libertarians, anti-vaccination activists, and conspiracy theorists, including artists and people who lost their jobs due to the anti-coronavirus measures. Often local right-wing organizations or parties are involved in planning the protests.

While the lockdown measures are similar in different parts of the world, the reasons for which people are protesting against them are different. I am a Slovenian citizen living in Berlin for nearly five years and in the recent weeks I have been puzzled by the growing public indignation and protests that erupted against the lockdown measures in my home country, a small nation in the southern part of Central Europe. My bewilderment has much more to do with the fact that, contrary to the protests I described above, among the people who are voicing indignation in Slovenia, whether through the social media or in front of the parliament, are people with left-wing political orientation – from my friends who are faculty members, to activists for social justice, journalists and cultural workers. How is it possible that people with such political positioning end up similarly criticizing the governmental measures

intended to curb the pandemic as the ones described by the abovementioned media?[1]

To find an answer to this question and understand the demands protesters make in different parts of the world, I believe we need to be attentive to local political geographies. This is the starting point of the following blog piece, in which I will position public perceptions of anti-coronavirus measures vis-à-vis the current political situation and protests in Slovenia, as an argument for showing how different social and political contexts shape the local understanding of a global health crisis.

Understanding the virus in a concrete political context

Anthropologists have always had the task to document local experiences and explanations of epidemics (Keck et al. 2010). In the case of the current epidemic, Izabella Main and Anna Witeska-Młynarczyk have developed a wonderful portrayal of how local communities react to the global crisis. They have shown how, in Poland, the quarantine imposed by the state on its citizens to prevent the spread of the new coronavirus was initially framed by many Poles like a holiday. Only a few weeks later it became clear that the lockdown posed an existential threat to those who had lost – or were afraid to lose – their jobs (Main and Witeska-Młynarczyk 2020). The closure of service providers and other industries was not limited to Poland alone. Indeed, these strict measures have been pursued by nearly all countries in the European Union and around the globe, including Slovenia.

On 12 March 2020, Slovenia declared an epidemic in accordance with Article 7 of the Infectious Diseases Act due to the increasing number of cases of coronavirus infections (GOV.SI 2020). In a week's time, the government appealed to people to stay home, except in cases of going to work, shopping, or to see a doctor. Big venues and non-essential stores closed, public transportation was stopped, hospitals

postponed non-urgent operations, homeschooling was introduced, and the movement between municipalities was prohibited. The government also banned public gatherings with a special decree adopted on 19 March. The fact that the country of two million people reported only 1445 infections and 98 deaths between 15 February and 5 May 2020 was likely a result of these harsh measures.

However, focusing solely on the effectiveness of preventive measures obfuscates the political controversies that occur in times of emergency. Anthropologists have demonstrated how epidemics often provide the pretext for the extension of governmental power across all forms of life and manners of living (Caduff 2014). While I do not believe that governments have adopted the measures against the coronavirus pandemic to exert total control over the lives of their citizens, I do think we should carefully analyze specific political contexts to understand why the management of pandemics provokes public indignation. An illustrative example is the growing dissatisfaction in Slovenia in the past two months. After the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS), the ruling political party, and its leader Janez Janša, used the health crisis as an opportunity to exert their political influence to shape the functioning of public institutions and push through harmful laws, citizens started to protest against the government.

Janez Janša was sworn in as the new Prime Minister at the beginning of March, roughly at the same time as COVID-19 became a global pandemic. His government replaced the former center-left governing coalition, which dissolved due to internal tensions between coalition partners after two years in power. Janša was one of the central figures among political dissidents in the final years of the Socialist Federation of Yugoslavia in the late 1980s. Although termed a pro-democracy activist at that time, he shifted further rightwards throughout his political career after the Slovenian secession in 1991. He started as Minister of Defense in the early 1990s and served three terms as Prime Minister of the Slovenian Government after 2000. His political party, SDS, pursues a neoliberal economic policy and a socially conservative political

agenda (Verseck 2020), often campaigning with xenophobic and Islamophobic slogans against asylum seekers and promoting 'traditional family values' against the demands of the LGBTQ+ community. Moreover, Janša is involved in a number of controversies. He was suspected of accepting bribes in arms sales during and after the Yugoslav wars and arranging business for his family members through public-private partnerships.

In just a few days after taking power in March 2020, his decisions caused public indignation. His government dismissed former state functionaries from their positions and replaced them with the ones close to his party, while the supporters of the ruling party publicly labeled journalists who criticized these actions as the 'enemies of the state', receiving Janša's approval (Reporters without Borders 2020). Moreover, as the pandemic took over the parliamentary debates agenda, the government used this opportunity to pass the law that removes the rights of most NGOs to take part in environmental assessments of infrastructure projects (Walker 2020). Public dissatisfaction peaked after Ivan Gale, the former deputy director of the Agency of the Republic of Slovenia for Commodity Reserves (ZRSBR), was invited to a talk show at the national television on 23 April and revealed that the government appointed the ZRSBR to make all purchases for protective equipment against the coronavirus. These purchases would normally have been made by the Ministry of Health and other state-level health agencies (Perman et al 2020). Gale, hailed as a whistleblower by many Slovenian citizens, published all his work emails. He revealed that the protective equipment was not only overpriced and inadequate, but some government officials urged the ZRSBR to make these deals with companies they were closely associated with.

Bikes against the government

In the already eerie atmosphere during the lockdown throughout April, Ljubljana was

suddenly plastered with SDS party billboards. Featuring their party colors, a small logo at the bottom, and the Slovenian flag, these billboards contained captions saying 'Thank you for staying home' or included photos of doctors, police, army, and firemen with a large 'Thank you' written next to them. In the midst of its political scandals, the ruling party invoked the preventative measures prescribed by the medical authorities to justify its actions. In other words, it used a 'medicalized' discourse to govern citizens' health and moral behavior (Lock 2004: 117). Not only did SDS express patronizing care to Slovenian citizens to hide its corruptive side, it also used this opportunity to pursue early political campaigning for the regular parliamentary elections in June 2022.



Figure 1: SDS billboards in Ljubljana. Copyright: Irena Podgornik. Published with permission

The SDS discourse did not convince most of the citizens, civil society, and activist

groups, which started actively organizing different forms of protest against the government. They mainly started sharing posts on Facebook about different scandals and organized loud actions on the balconies. These actions were soon accompanied by peaceful symbolic protests on the large concrete square in front of the parliament. Individuals or smaller groups would bring placards with protest slogans and disobeyed police orders despite the ban on public gatherings.

After Gale disclosed the allegedly unprofessional and shady ways in which the government purchased the protective gear, the protests began to take the form of rallies attended by a few hundred people who came on foot or with bikes. The 'Ivan Gale support group' on Facebook, which has almost 70,000 members so far, has helped to facilitate the protests. However, by far the largest rallies took place on 1 and 8 May. The national media reported that around 3,500 and 10,000 cyclists, respectively, took the streets of Ljubljana, while protests also took place in other cities such as Maribor and Nova Gorica (G.C. & M.Z. 2020).



Figure 2: Protest 'From balconies to bikes' on 8 May. Copyright: Sara Bajec. Published with permission

While social protests unveil collective dissent in different political geographies (Cayli et al. 2018: 160), the composition of protesters and their demands are by no means homogeneous. Protesters make up of cultural and service workers who are demanding financial substitutes for the closure of venues, members of civil society and citizens concerned that the government is becoming increasingly authoritarian and is using the lockdown to discriminate against the most vulnerable groups and harm the environment. Despite the heterogeneity of their demands, they all associate the low credibility of the imposed lockdown with the political incompetence and scandals of the current government.

In fact, the 'From balconies to bikes' protests are being organized by 23 initiatives, which mainly belong to progressive and left-wing civil society groups composed of

anarchists, no-border activists, feminist organizations, civil rights and housing initiatives, etc. These initiatives have so far succeeded to convince a large number of people who oppose the current government to protest by using sufficiently broad narratives in their call published on the Facebook event page they created for the anti-governmental protest. For instance, they include sentences such as: "*under the guise of fighting the virus, the government of Janez Janša is introducing a state of emergency and curtailing our freedoms on a daily basis*" and "*...controversial moves by authorities...exclude the most precarious from social assistance measures, spread intolerance, and attack journalists and journalistic freedom...*". Their narrative framework takes the form of anti-governmental discourse, which re-politicizes the justifications for the anti-pandemic measures. Even if the government coordinated these measures with the responsible health institutions and the lockdown does not differ much from other EU countries, Slovenian citizens do not directly target the measures during the protests. Rather, they want to prevent the government from using the lockdown as an excuse to endanger the future of the country's democracy. More protests are already planned for every Friday in May.

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Figure 3: Protest 'From balconies to bikes' on 8 May. Copyright: Andrej Jakil. Published with permission

Conclusion

In this blog piece, I have outlined the context for the ongoing protests in Slovenia and how they differ from their counterparts in other parts of the world to argue that we can only understand recent anti-coronavirus-measure protests if we contextualize them in concrete political geographies. While many of my Facebook friends from Berlin and the US use the frame #stayhome next to their profile photos, my Slovenian ones use #stayawake to refuse to accept what Janša's government is doing under the pretense of lockdown measures. Only by focusing on the specific political and social context in which these protests are created we can understand the differences between the groups of people supporting them, such as their political orientation, motivations, and demands.

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#Witnessing Corona

This article was simultaneously published on the Blog Medical Anthropology . Witnessing Corona is a joint blog series by the Blog Medical Anthropology / Medizinethnologie, Curare: Journal of Medical Anthropology, the Global South Studies Center Cologne, and boasblogs.

Footnotes

[1] Although there were reports in the media about a small number of left-wing demonstrators joining the protests in Berlin, I noticed that left-wing groups were mainly organizing counter demonstration against the 'Hygiene-Demo' when I passed the recent protest on Saturday 9 May 2020 (Hänel 2020).

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