Hungary at the Vanguard of Europe’s Rearguard? Emerging Subterranean Politics and Civil Dissent

Jody Jensen

Introduction

Hungary had a rich tradition of peaceful street protest, from the pro-democracy demonstrations of the late 1980s to the Democratic Charta’s anti-fascist, anti-extreme right protests in 1991 and 1992. This peaceful tradition ended in 2006 with what many perceive post festum as the breaking of the social contract between Hungarian citizens and their government. A secret speech by Prime Minister Gyurcsány was leaked and broadcast to the public, in which he admitted lying to the country for years about the economy to win the recent election. Repeated, spontaneous demonstrations after the leak turned violent under suspicious circumstances that are still under investigation.

Around the 50th anniversary of the 1956 October Revolution in 2006, many Hungarians identified themselves with the revolutionaries, feeling that their freedom and democracy was under direct threat from what some termed ‘a parliamentary dictatorship’. An unspecified anger burst out after people took to the streets to peacefully celebrate the anniversary of 1956, and they were met with sanctioned police violence. There was little to no response from the European Union (EU) or other European countries, or international human rights institutions, in regard to the uncontrolled police violence and obvious manipulation of events by the authorities. The explosion of emotions, frustration and anger surprised everyone. Subterranean politics suddenly revealed itself.

Another example of the resilience and tenacity of protestors and an important series of online and offline actions began in 2010 against the
arrest, imprisonment and maltreatment of Ágnes Geréb, a doctor and midwife who attended home births, which are still illegal in Hungary today. This protest was framed in terms of human rights and addressed democratic deficiencies in the country. The protest confronted the lack of choice in weak and fragile (no-choice) democracies that silence voices who speak out against monopolies of power, such as the medical establishment in Hungary. This protest provoked widespread regional and international coverage and support.2

Subterranean politics in Hungary encompasses a wide and multi-level range of anti-government and anti-corruption discourses already present before the global financial crisis. Tent cities established outside the parliament after the street battles in 2006 can be seen as forerunners to present day global revolts in terms of format, modus operandi and message. This was also the first time that nationalist, right-wing, anti-government groups took advantage of social unrest and began articulating their message in an organised and structured way.

More protests emerged in 2011–2012 in opposition to the criminalisation of the homeless with actions around the country by groups like A Város Mindenkié (The City Belongs to Everyone). A sudden upheaval of subterranean activity then arose in response to the government’s introduction of controversial measures related to constitutional changes, the media laws, retirement age of judges and overseeing of the national bank. A recurring leitmotif, sometimes in the background of protests, sometimes in the foreground, was protests against racism, anti-Semitism, anti-Roma and the perceived support by the government of right-wing policies.3

Our research concentrated on the period 2011–2012, a time of many pro- and anti-government actions and street protests in response to a variety of triggers, some mentioned above. The research team conducted online searches of groups and their activities in order to map the landscape of protests and the main actors. We conducted both online and face-to-face interviews with protestors, sometimes live during street demonstrations. The main aims of the research were to map the terrains of activity, the issues around which new groups had emerged and organised, and to create a timeline of protests for the period covered by the research to judge their frequency and persistence.

In many ways what we discovered is similar to the emergence of subterranean politics in other parts of Europe and the rest of the world, and events in Hungary mirror the global timeline of activism. There is no question that the global momentum provided impetus and support for an otherwise somewhat lethargic population to take to the streets in protests about the direction in which their country was heading.