

Lack of reason to protest

The easiest government to protest against is a completely detached one, as was the case in the French Revolution or the protests against the USSR in the late 1980's, because the government comes to a position of staunch opposition to the will of the people. In Latvia the revolution against the USSR started with ecological concerns about the destruction of certain landscapes by the building of another hydroelectric dam near Daugavpils.¹ This was a common goal for most Latvians, because some culturally significant natural landscapes had already been lost in projects of this kind before. From this the common goal of a huge proportion of the Latvian nation started shifting towards some level of democratization, autonomy or total independence, but, importantly, it was far easier on people's conscience because the ruling government seemed completely foreign and hostile to Latvian ethnicity as a whole, therefore all kinds of protest seemed morally acceptable including, for example, the demolition of a train after a rock concert.² When the people have no legal way of promoting change all that is left is illegal action, quite often - violent protest. In the case of the French revolution where the vast majority of peasants could be outvoted by an alliance of the clergy and the nobles there seemed nothing else to do than have the heads of the noblemen on pikes. For the people of the lower classes that was an increasingly moral thing to do, but nowadays the reverse is happening. In modern times most people believe that violent protest against their government can't ever be justified³, but that idea is only logical in today's politics. The public constitutes the elector and therefore is directly responsible for the elected officials, therefore far reaching protest against the government seems to some to be protest against oneself. Moreover for long lasting change you can just wait for a few years and elect someone completely different, at least that is the belief. Violent protest especially becomes more incomprehensible to more people in democracies because the majority of both sides of the social contract see far more damage than value in it. You might note that I am talking about violent protests but the truth is that any strong protest can easily be labeled as violent in one way or another by stretching the definition of violence.⁴

The modern non-protester

In 2020 the USA was struck by mass protest against racial discrimination which managed to maintain relative non violence⁵ (of course there were some confrontations and some damage was caused), but proved that mass protests can still happen. The reason for this was a real alienation of the government - the police, which is effectively seen as an arm of the

¹<https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/dzive--stils/vesture/raksts-kas-1986-gada-aptureja-daugavpils-hes-celtniecibu.a350470/>

²<https://www.parmuziku.lv/industrijas-zinas/personibas/pirms-30-gadiem-pec-perkona-koncerta-ogre-izde-moleja-vilcienu-kadel-ta-notika-519>

³ Safarpour, A., Druckman, J., Lazer, D., Trujillo, K. L., Shere, A., Baum, M., ... Lin, J. (2022, January 31). The COVID States Project #80: Americans' views on violence against the government. <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/753cb>

⁴ "Violence & Protest | Philosophy Tube" by Philosophy Tube on youtube, 2021

⁵ "This summer's Black Lives Matter protesters were overwhelmingly peaceful, our research finds" by Erica Chenoweth and Jeremy Pressman, 16.10.2020

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/10/16/this-summer-black-lives-matter-protesters-were-overwhelming-peaceful-our-research-finds/>

government, killed George Floyd and large parts of the American public needed to show that these kinds of incidents and racist beliefs do not represent them. But such a large-scale alienation is hard to come by nowadays, especially in multi-party states, because every belief is supposedly already represented in the government. We are left with small scale and vague protests, as was the case in the women's day march in Riga in 2024, where the signs were mostly vague slogans: "my life - my choice", "safety for all women", "no, thank you". There were some more concrete calls to action, like calling for a ceasefire in Gaza with reference to the many female deaths there, but overall the slogans were very general, in contrast to this there was a brief window of opportunity in 2023 for both women's and LGBT community's rights protesters to rally around the call for the ratification of the Istanbul convention. That is the core need for almost all successful mass protests - a clear and united end goal. In the 1960's protesters including large numbers of students were involved in massive protests against the Vietnam war, where the goal to rally around was quite clear - the removal of American troops from Vietnam and the end of the draft.⁶ Such movements with both clear leadership and a set end goal are more tangible and therefore effective than vague goals like "cultural equality of women and men". In other words, strong protests usually have specific and easily communicable policy questions as their end goal, but that seems to be going out of fashion. The growing individualistic drive of man is killing large protests.

On the vast forests of the internet every bird shouts in a different voice(which often are only slightly different) and each voice has someone else screaming back at it things which counteract them. Where every expert or leader can be struck down and where the scientist and the anti - vaxxer have the same voice no truth or conclusion can be made. No moral position can be achieved because every proposition has some caveat which we now want to see as completely unacceptable - a side effect of real liberalism. Is the anti-vax hillbilly, to whom avoiding the slight risk of a vaccine is more important than protecting the fragile senior citizen, not the real liberal? Oddly, that is the fear of the modern protester as well, best put by The Clash in "White riot": *"And everybody's doing/ Just what they're told to/ And nobody wants/ To go to jail"*. The fear of hurting someone or, even more so, being hurt yourself is the fear every protester would need to give up to submit themselves to the cause. The internet proves to be the perfect ground for the modern protester, because for the anonymous commentator there is still the feeling of untouchability, but the flip side of that coin is that the protests is so ineffective it is almost laughable.

The breed of people willing to subject themselves to the big other - the just cause - is not extinct but we are growing more and more confused when we see them. Navalny is the latest example - after his death many very liberal nations were bewildered as to what urged him to return to Russia, because his faith was probably sealed from the moment he stepped on the plane heading to Russia. But that is the real dissident, willing to give himself up entirely for the cause. When religion and nationalism fall and liberal individualism takes over, collective action under the big other falls with them - it mustn't. In no way am I advocating for nationalism or religion, but the principle of working as a collective is something the left must learn from them. To me, the popular fronts of history are the pinnacle of effective leftist action, because the algorithm for a rise in right power is simple: when individual truths and fragmentations in the left

⁶ Student Protest. (1969). *AAUP Bulletin*, 55(3), 309–326. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40223829>

rise the right stays united and when they eventually win, it turns out that the center-left is not ready to strike with the leftists side by side.

Returning to the nature of internet discourse it can be seen that it is incredibly useful for the organization of protest, but the short form content found on the internet is troublesome to the spread of revolutionary or subversive ideas, because the existing political knowledge manages to lower nuanced and well-argued opinions to the level of schizo speech. A good example is the phrase "from the river to the sea". In Latvia the government recognizes that as anti-semitic speech, whereas other people see it as a call to cease relentless aggression against Palestine, then some others intend it as a call to a democratic regime across all of the territory of Palestine and Israel. The individual message is lost, because our search for short form content has condensed many viewpoints into one and now most people are at least wary of the phrase, and a phrase to rally under is now a plague to avoid for many. What is more, the constant flow of tweets and whatever else discourse on the internet gives a false sense of fulfillment to the people who otherwise would be out on the street with placards.

To conclude, the general public is growing more and more tacit in their protests, ignorant in their understanding of protest and are increasingly willing to allow the cogs of democracy to turn with no input from themselves. I am not calling for violent protests just for the sake of protesting, not at all, but we must consider whether commenting online or tweeting about the dissatisfaction we feel is a valid form of protest or just a shout in the dark.