Social Unrest: A Systemic Risk Perspective¹

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Abstract – In this paper we develop a framework of social unrest within a complex understanding of systemic risk. The term ‘systemic’ describes the extent to which any risk is embedded in the larger contexts of social and cultural aspects that shape our understanding of risk, influence our attention to causal relationships and trigger our activities for handling these risks. Social unrest can be grouped into this concept of systemic risks. It can be a cause of risk to others, it can be a consequence of experiencing risk (for example a terrorist threat) or the manifestation of such a risk (the actual terrorist attack) or it can be a promoter of a risk chain that is located in other functional systems of society (for example financial crisis). Since social unrest is more a process of escalation than a finite state of the world we have conceptualized the term in from of a step-by-step escalation scheme. Each step makes social unrest more severe. We assume that that people who will engage themselves publicly on any subject have to be dissatisfied with their situation or perceive a problem that they would like to address. Even if people are dissatisfied nothing will happen unless that dissatisfaction is displayed in some kind of public arena. Unsatisfied people have to become active (e.g. organization of protests). If public expression of dissatisfaction and the organization of protest does not help to improve the situation the probability for further social mobilization increases. Social mobilization goes beyond expressing dissatisfaction and it comprises all activities that require an organizational effort to concentrate forces, to develop and enact a strategy for gaining public attention and for putting pressure on those who are targeted to make changes. In the course of this process, activities may get more and more radical, in particular if these collective protest actions are ignored or even oppressed (examples may be wild strikes, regional boycotts or blockades). Then the continuum enters the next step: violent outbreak. This can ultimately lead to civil war.

Keywords – social unrest, risk, systemic risk

1. Introduction

Risks can generally be understood as the potential for experiencing harm. More specifically it denotes the likelihood of a scenario leading to adverse effects caused by an activity, event or technology. The causal chain is not always one-directional. In ordinary terms, a risk agent (hazard) impacts on a risk object that is of value to individuals or society as a whole. The impacted risk object can then be the cause of further risks to other objects or even trigger a feed back to the source of the hazard. Damages arising from such events can generally be described as physical or psychological harm to objects that humans value. This may be the loss of property, health or even life (Renn/Zwick 2008). Since objects that humans value are at stake the term risk does not only denote an analytical concept of how to link hazards with potential damage to valuable objects but also a normative orientation to mitigate, reduce or avoid risks. The idea of interaction between hazard and risk object and the focus on analytical as well as normative perspective is also major starting points for dealing with the connection between risks and social unrests. Social unrest can be viewed as a risk: depending on its manifestations objects that humans value can be threatened by violence or other forms of social outrage. Social unrest, however, can also be the trigger or the initial hazard leading to damage in other areas, for example economic losses due to technological sabotage or boycott. Social unrest is hence cause and effect in a complex risk web that links technological, natural, social and cul-

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tural drivers. This situation is best described in the framework of systemic risks. The term ‘systemic’ describes in this context the extent to which any risk to human health, the environment, the economy or individual well-being is embedded in the larger contexts of social and cultural aspects that shape our understanding of risk, influence our attention to causal relationships and trigger our activities for handling these risks.

Our goal in this paper is to develop a framework of social unrest within a complex understanding of systemic risk. On order to reach this goal we will try to identify triggers and drivers for the emergence of social unrest and, based on this functional analysis, to design policy options telling us how to avoid, mitigate or handle unrest. The framework should enable us to improve our understanding about the circumstances that may trigger social unrest, how intensely that unrest is likely to materialize and what interventions promise to deescalate the conflict or even avoid social unrest in the first place. In order to identify a basic understanding of social unrests we give a general definition of the subject in a first step. In a second step we outline an analytic model that can be used to capture the combined effects learned from the case study analysis. In order to identify relevant drivers and cluster of drivers we will investigate a case study with the financial crises in Greece as topic. The main question is how the events there did or could cause social unrests. In a forth step we will give a synopsis between the model and the case study trying to illustrate our assumptions.

2. Theoretical part

2.1. Definition

Our literature review revealed that the term social unrest is not frequently used in scientific research. Most definitions are operational, that means the term is explained by using indicators of their measurement. Such definitions are not conceptual but empirical (Dury/Olson 1998; Zhang et al 2005). Our common experience associates social unrest with protests in the form of peaceful as well as violent demonstrations, strikes and with acts of civil and political violence. This first impression is supported when we take a closer look at the indicators that are used in operational definitions by scholars. For example, Keidel links social unrest with a protest that includes more than eight persons. The intensity of social unrest can be measured by the number of demonstrations, riots, armed infringements and strikes within a year (Keidel 2005).

Within the semantic area of activities that underlie social unrest protests, demonstrations and political violence are most frequently mentioned. These manifestations are also part of another social science tradition, i.e. the theory and concepts of political participation. That concept includes actions that are operated by citizens aiming at influencing collective decisions on several levels of the political system (Barnes/Kaase 1979). Kaase distinguishes conventional and unconventional political participation. While conventional participation includes activities such as voting or writing letters to the editor, unconventional political participation includes activities such as signing petitions, demonstrations, boycotts, sit-ins, rent and tax strikes, traffic blockades and wild strikes (Kaase 2002). This listing of unconventional activities seems to be close to the list we found in the literature about social unrests. Activities associated with social unrest are often linked to unconventional political participation. Conventional political participations such as elections or the attendance of a political event are definitely not part of social unrest. Seen from a theoretical perspective it can be concluded that activities that are designed to serve a specific function within a functional system belong to the ordinary, expected and conventional from of serving this function, while unconventional or unexpected forms of expressing a desire for change or intervention can turn into social unrest. Even those unconventional forms may be functional if the corresponding system is in urgent need of a radical reform. So in view of this line of argument social unrest is not necessarily dysfunctional but its manifestations appear as unexpected, unplanned, often spontaneous as well as unconstrained or uncontrollable within the functional system in which they occur.

The analytical division between conventional or unconventional is hence contingent on time period, location and culture. What appears to be a common form of political expression in one country is seen as major deviant behavior in another country. Social unrest is not a term that can be defined irrespective of the context in which it is used. Any political system constructs a boundary between conventional and unconventional. That boundary is fluid, however. We conclude that social unrest is an expression of collective dissatisfaction with the political system and manifests itself in unconventional forms of protest behavior. The exact definition of what is regarded as unconventional and the degree and extent of collective actions that constitute the demarcation line between protest and social unrest cannot be defined in advance but relates to the context in which social unrest is studied. Social unrest can be seen as an extreme expression of social mobilization with major impacts for society, with the proviso that the extent of the term “major” is subject to wide cultural, social and individual interpretations.

2.1.1. A stepwise approach to conceptualize social unrest

As has been outlined in the last two chapters the basic assumption of our approach is a continuum underlying a range of collective actions that may or may not meet the cultural construction of what is regarded as social unrest. Social unrest does not occur out of the blue. Our attempt is to identify steps that gradually lead to social unrest. For unfolding the model we come up with ideas for factors and drivers stemming from the case studies, but also we go a more deductive way and try to identify further important variables out of the body of theory. With every step taken, the probability for an escalation towards more unconventional forms of protest will rise. The model is thought to be cumulative, each steps taken is a necessary condition for the next step. At each step we want to investigate which interventions or actions are likely to escalate
or de-escalate the situation. These interventions or events are then triggers for reaching the next step or going back one step. A return to the previous step does not mean that the risk is gone but that the likelihood of further escalation is reduced.

Communication of dissatisfaction
Within the body of literature the concept of social production functions emerges as an appropriate candidate for explaining dissatisfaction. “The theory states two universal goals: physical well-being and social well-being). These are accomplished through five main instrumental goals (stimulation, comfort, status, behavioral confirmation and affection)” (Ormel et al 1999). We assume that individuals strive for these goals. The means to reach these goals can be deducted from the theory of rational choice. Within this school of thought it is assumed that individuals choose the most effective and efficient means for reaching a pre-determined goal. The production functions illustrate the relationship between goal attainment and personal costs. Risks occur if either the degree of goal attainment and/or the extent of costs are uncertain. Often it depends on the actions and decisions of others if one’s expectations become true. These contingencies express themselves as risks to the individual decision maker.

Social mobilization theory claims that individuals express dissatisfaction in public arenas if the costs of going public are low and the expectation that somebody will respond to it high. In cultures where the expression of dissatisfaction is encouraged we will find more public manifestations of dissatisfaction than in those culture in which such behavior is politically or socially sanctioned. However, the likelihood of further escalation rises if people face high costs of expressing dissatisfaction. The reasons is obvious: If people decide in spite of high costs to go public they are much more inclined to organize themselves and mobilize other citizens than in a situation where there is no obstacle to expressing dissatisfaction.

If one turns specifically to the experience of risk, we can be more specific. Psychometric research has demonstrated the properties of risks and risk-related situations that amplify or attenuate the feeling of being endangered or threatened. The main characteristics that shape risk perception include voluntariness, personal control, dread, impression of inequities, blame, familiarity and others. Risks that are perceived as dreadful, involuntarily or out of personal control trigger more stress and concern than risks that are taken voluntarily, have no or minute catastrophic potential and allow personal control. Accordingly we can expect people sharing a perception of high risk to be more inclined to express dissatisfaction than those with low risk perception. This insight is useful when diagnosing the types of risks that could trigger the first steps of social unrest. If people face risks such as the global financial crisis they will probably associate a feeling of dread, involuntariness, lack of control and blame with this crisis, while other collective risks such as car accidents with a high death toll are attenuated due to the perception of voluntariness, personal control and lack of catastrophes.

In addition to the well-known psychometric variables one needs to consider two other relevant factors. The first factor relates to the perception of inequity or injustice. Even small risks are seen as intolerable if the persons exposed to this risk believe that all the benefits of the risk-bearing activity are reaped by others. The financial crisis may be a good example of such a perception of inequity. More frequent are risk situations in which people believe that they are expected to take all the risks while only sharing a small proportion of the benefits. If people feel to be treated unfairly they are not only dissatisfied with the resulting risk they are also deeply disappointed about the way that political or economic decision makers have violated their sense of justice. This will contribute to a loss of trust, the second factor that is likely to promote a feeling of dissatisfaction. Trust is particularly important in cases of lacking personal control. If people do not trust the operators and/or the regulators they will most likely be dissatisfied with the situation and express this publicly (Renn/Zwick 2008).

2.1.2. Organization of protest

The escalation from expressing dissatisfaction to organized protest rests upon many conditions. First, the number of people that share the same feeling of dissatisfaction must be large enough to from a larger group. Secondly, the potentially affected individuals must know of each other and find a way to communicate to each other. Most important, however, is the motivation to invest time, effort and often finances to start an organization or relate to an existing organization. The theory of collective behavior, most notably the studies by Mancur Olson, provides some hints of what motivates dissatisfied people to become organized. Olson claims that the organization of interests is the more likely to occur the more the benefits of such collective actions can be exclusively used by the members and not shared with non-members. Again rational actor theory provides the explanation: if everybody benefits there is no incentive for each individual to get active since one can reap the benefits without investing one’s own resources. This free rider position is the main reason for a lack of organized groups that engage for goals that are in everybody’s interest (Olson 2004). Common interests are connected with individual interests. Common goods serve common interests and are available for every member within the group (Leuffen 2006).

The emergence of groups depends for Olson on the size of the group in relation to the rest of the population. If the group is too small it may not be visible in the political arena. Potential members will not even bother to join since the organization demands resources but does not promise any realistic opportunity for success. The same is true if the group is very large. Then each individual has no incentive to join because his or her engagement adds only marginal benefit to the success of the group. So recruiting new members will be difficult in particular if non-members will also benefit from the group’s success. In this respect it is crucial to have the right size: small enough to provide motivation for each individual to join and large enough to convey a realistic expectation that the group’s goals are reached (Olson 2004).
2.1.3. Mobilization of protest groups

Organized groups could use their momentum and strength to influence the policy making process by using legal and conventional means. What counts as legal and conventional depends on the culture in which the organization is located. Strikes may be legal forms of protest in one culture but not in another. At the next step of our escalator the question arises what motivates organized protest groups to choose unconventional forms of expressing their claims. To answer this question we will have a closer look at resource mobilization theories. Resource mobilization theories use the rational action paradigm to explain the procedure of selecting the most appropriate means for reaching pre-defined goals (Klandermans 1984). Most conventional forms of influencing decisions rely on the means of money, power, value commitment, evidence and social solidarity. These means are called resources (McCarthy and Zald 1977).

If a group has little access to resources or is not allowed to use its given reservoir of resources the likelihood that illegal and/or unconventional modes of actions are selected increases steadily. Resource mobilization theory predicts that particularly groups with highly motivated individuals will retreat to unconventional forms of protest if other channels of influencing public decision making are not available or simply ignored. This insight leads to the normative conclusion that, for a society that attempts to avoid unconventional forms of protest, the availability of channels for communication and decision making as well as access to resources are crucial.

In addition, theorists of social mobilization have discussed more formal properties of groups that tend to use unconventional means for reaching their goals. Organizations need a minimum of money and commitment of its members to initiate unconventional protest. They require also some experience and knowledge about the effectiveness of their actions. In addition, they must take into account the potential support by people who are either sympathetic to their cause or at least indifferent. If these bystanders perceive the actions as non-proportionate or illegitimate the protest movement can easily break down or the legal authorities face far less public resistance against the use of force to break the protest. If the protest is supported by large portions of the population the protest is reinforced and the legal authorities face major difficulties in justifying force or other radical forms of sustaining order. It is self-evident that the total number of participants (the more participants the higher the likelihood of success), the dedication of the members, (dis-)trust in the official authorities, and the common appeal and resonance of the cause of action among the total population increase the chance that even unconventional means are perceived as acceptable and may become more attractive for the respective organizations (Geissel/Thüllmann 2006). In addition, escalation is likely to occur if the response by public authorities (police or military force) to first signs of violence or unconventional methods is perceived as being out of proportion.

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2.1.5. Mobilization of protest groups

Deliberate and organized civil violence is the last step of escalation. Such planned violent acts may even result in civil war. Occasional uncontrolled violence is always a risk when large masses of people take their protest to the streets. In most cases such acts of isolated violence do not lend themselves to further escalation. On the contrary, most protest organization distance themselves from violent outbreaks if there were neither planned nor secretly tolerated. In most countries, civil violence is seen as a clearly illegitimate action of protest. So if violence occurs the leaders of the respective protest organizations can either distance themselves from the violence or blame the other side for having provoked the violence. Yet they normally will try hard to reduce the extent to which its members use force during protest actions. Although small pockets of violence can also initiate a route of gradual escalation, this is rather unlikely.

The picture changes dramatically if protest organizations plan or tolerate the outburst of violence as means to promote their cause of action. The leaders of these organizations may not disclose their strategies publicly and insist in the public on a peaceful pathway to pursue their cause. Secretly, however, they encourage their members to use violence and justify these actions later as "spontaneous" outbursts of public frustrations. In most cases, organization need to legitimize their radical protest by blaming the other side to perform major acts of civil rights violations or to exploit one part of the population to the benefit of the other part. Often such accusations are linked with ethnic, religious or class-related differences which tend to amplify motivation and willingness to use violence. Many outbreaks of civil violence are also expressions of major unresolved geographic conflicts (Misra 2008). In any case, a call to violent actions requires a major cause. Such causes may appear not very dramatic or as being highly exaggerated by an outside observer, what counts is that they are believed by those who are sympathetic to the cause (not only the activists). Furthermore, there must be a common conviction among the activists and their sympathizers that the conditions will only change if violence is used. Both conditions can transform a peaceful movement into a radical uprising that leads to numerous acts of violence.

It is not clear, however, how such a gradual escalation evolves over time and what factors are causing the stepwise escalation from mere dissatisfaction to civil war. There are many case studies but we still lack a coherent theory of what leads to violent outbreaks and what measures can help society to prevent them. In line with our arguments, Keppinger has outlined a typical escalation scenario that starts with the rise of critical positions towards one’s own society or parts therein. If this criticism is not taken up by any authority, small protest groups will emerge who will start to recruit members for joining their cause and to use the media for legitimizing their actions (Keppinger 2009). Broad media coverage in conjunction with some demonstrative actions makes the cause a top topic in the respective society. This experience of sudden prominence encourages the protest groups to become more pronounced in their communication and often more radical in their demands. If the public authorities ignore the protest or employ rather harsh counter-measures, the
conflict is likely to escalate. Yet even if public authorities signal openness to the demands and try to accommodate the protest groups they may fail to de-escalate the situation. Many protest leaders may interpret this as a sign of a weakness and take the opportunity to fight for even more radical changes in the political system. So both a too strong as well as a too lenient approach may actually contribute to the escalation. Most effective is probably a step-by-step approach by which negotiations with the protest groups and the setting of clear boundaries are used intermittently.

3. Illustration

3.1. Financial crisis in Greece 2010

In 2008 various demonstrations and strikes took place in Greece as a response to the lack of job opportunities among young people. This protest was present not only in Athens but also in almost all larger cities in Greece. The demonstrations were aggravated by the death of a demonstrator who was shot by the police on Dec 2008 (Eckert 2008). In the end, university campuses, radio stations and even the studios of the National Television were occupied by protesters (Sotiris 2010).

Reasons for this first outbreak of public dissatisfaction are numerous: Young people are faced with a more than 20% unemployment rate in Greece in the year 2007 which is one of the highest rates in Europe (Tausch 2009). Even with a university graduation it is difficult to get a decent job in Greece (Sotiris 2010, Bratsis 2010). This situation became even worse with the introduction of the Bologna process that caused a tendency to de-link university degrees from professional qualifications, and made the opportunities for a well-paid job even more uncertain. Furthermore it was considered to legalize private higher education in Greece that is normally excluded by the constitution. So all in all the protest movement of young people in Greece was triggered by the perception of social misbalance and inequities as well as the experience of missing reactions by the public authorities (Sotiris 2010).

In contrast to similar uprisings in France or other countries, the riots in Greece seemed not to be limited to a certain group of young people such as students or socially disadvantaged youngsters but included a large cross-section of society within the younger generation. Some authors explain this breadth of the movement by referring to the fact that all young people in Greece face similarly bad employment conditions (Sotiris 2010). However, some observers detect a new quality of protest in this Greek case. Most demonstrations happened in different cities during the same time employing similar strategies and means of actions. The demonstrations were obviously coordinated by using modern communication technology, in particular cellular phones. The riots in Greece calmed down in 2009 but with a further decrease of economic prosperity in the country mainly linked to the world financial crisis, experts expected a new wave of uprising in 2010. And this expectation turned out to be true.

With the advent of the world economic crises and a national new debt of about 13% of the Greek national budget, the Greek economy faced a serious financial crisis. Those new debts endangered the stability of the Euro. Driven by demands of the EU and the International Monetary Funds, the Greek government and parliament passed a plan on 06 May 2010 that included drastic measures for getting the national debts under control in exchange for mandatory guarantees by the EU and the IMF. The Greek government promised to reduce national debts to 3 % of the gross national product in 2011 (this amounts to 25 billion Euros). To reach this goal the Greek government decided to reduce the wages for governmental employees, to lower pensions and to increase the value-added tax. Also taxes on products like tobacco or alcohol were increased. Military expenses were also reduced (SpiegelONLINE 2010 a ; SpiegelONLINE 2010 b). Against these massive measures of reducing governmental spending, many people (this time not only the young) started protesting. The reasons for the protest are manifold: Only around 40% of the interviewees of a representative survey by „Kathimiritin“, a daily press organ, believed in the ability of Greece government to resolve the financial crisis and social problems within the country (Pick, 2010). Many people in Greece live below the poverty line - in 2008 around 20%. During the protests mainly organized by the labor unions violent outbreaks occurred causing the death of three people. After this dramatic event the riots came to an end.

3.2. Reflection of the case in light of the theoretical model

In the case of financial crises people seemed to be dissatisfied with their situation. On the grounds of our assumption the situation can be described in the following way: Many people feared to find no job, to lose their job, to be faced with a decline of social status or feared not being able to earn enough income to hold up their common standard of living. As nobody would seriously fear famine in that country we face mainly a problem of psychological well-being with a physical component. At the same time many people might have felt to be treated in an unfair way, as they had to pay for the financial crises without being at fault. In their eyes the failures were done by others who were not made accountable for their inability to provide effective and fair countermeasures. They were also accused of reaping some benefits from this crisis. Many Greeks had been disillusioned about the financial institutions in their country even before the global financial crisis took place. So the global financial crisis made the situation even worse. The vulnerability of the Greek society was very high to be hit by the financial crisis as the government had overspent their budget for many years. In addition, the social vulnerability was high as the country had witnessed numerous protests against alleged injustice over the last three decades, most notably in 2008. In terms of consequences it is obvious that the country faced financial losses and individuals were forced to pay higher taxes or to forgo economic benefits. Also four lives were lost as a consequence of the riots. The affected people had not voluntarily taken this risk and had no personal control over its outcomes. In addition, the people
were quick in blaming economic and political institutions for the crisis. Accordingly the attribution of trust to the key actors was low. Most Greeks did not believe that the Greece government was able to resolve the problems. In addition to the feeling of strong dissatisfaction, the costs of the protesters to take to the streets and make their outrage visible were low, as Greece provides the opportunity of public demonstration as an essential right to citizens as integral part of its democratic system. All this has lead to an open communication of dissatisfaction among the Greek.

The next step: organization of protest can also be traced in the Greek case study. First of all the dissatisfied groups in 2008 as well as in 2010 were large enough to make a difference in public opinion and were well organized in order to form a rather coherent movement. So the possibility was given to be publicly recognized in the political arena. The main actors knew each other and were powerful enough to mobilize the public effectively. In 2008 the group consisted mainly of students - a hint for the thesis that well educated people are more expected to start a movement in 2010 also other groups like employees and workers were involved. In both cases networks were formed in which individuals had personal contacts to each other and were able to organize mass demonstrations and joint actions. Maybe this fact helps to explain the motivation of the individuals to join the organization: This is less probable in the case of the student protests. In 2010, however it appealed to almost all classes in society: there were enough incentives for a larger coalition to join the protest. The protests in 2010 included activists from labor unions and small businesses. These new groups hoped for revisions of the governmental plans which in their eyes were biased to the disadvantage of the poorer sections of society. The fact that those groups already existed and were well organized facilitated their participation and kept the costs for mobilization low. It is also important to note that the financial crisis evoked feelings of being treated unfairly and that the big guys would get away with it while the little guys were asked to take most of the burden.

Why did the organized groups become active? Many protest groups had not enough access to money and power to stimulate conventional forms of influencing politics. So they resorted to unconventional forms of protest. This is less dependent on the availability of monetary resources and relies more on the ability to provoke the attendance of mass media. In 2008 the death of the young protester (interpreted as sign of violence that should not happen in a open political system) has triggered the outbreak of the protests among students. So the ground for more protests was well prepared when the financial crisis stroke. The press was alerted and through their extensive coverage enabled the organizers to receive nationwide attention and visibility. They were able to coordinate the protest mainly by using the public media as well as mobile phones and the internet. The provision of communication infrastructure seems to play an important role in this case.

The outbreak of violence during the protests 2010 signaled the end of the protests. Since the violence originated from the side of the protesters their moral integrity was challenged and the great wave of sympathy towards the protesters came to an abrupt end. The government also amplified this by disseminating the information that protesters refused to help saving people from a deadly fire. In the end it was shown that these allegations were not true but given the allegation in the popular press the protest movement basically collapsed.

4. Conclusion

With the help of rational choice theory we could outline five motives that people strive for (stimulation, comfort, status, behavioral confirmation and affection). The theory helps us to explain why people decided to act, but not which specific ways they preferred to express their dissatisfaction. We assume, in accordance with the scientific literature, that dissatisfaction originates in a misfit between personal expectations and perceived reality. The expectations as well as the perception of how these expectations are met in reality depend on social and cultural norms and values. This assumption could be illustrated in our case studies. The perception or actual experienced harm induced by an event or an activity is directly related to the degree of people’s dissatisfaction. In the terms of rational choice theory we could say that people confronted with harmful events are unable to reach their expected goals. In theory they would try to change that situation by initiating actions that promise to reach the predefined goals again. Whether they are able and motivated to act against the barriers of reaching their goals depends on the costs associated with the action and the benefits that they are likely to gain when the actions succeed. In terms of the rational actor paradigm individuals calculate the costs of involvement and protest against the product of probability and expected revenues of being successful. Such calculations will not be performed in any conscious act of deliberation but more or less as an internalized process of weighing the pros and cons (Jaeger et al. 2001). Furthermore, as resource mobilization theory suggests the likelihood of success as well as the costs for protests are highly dependent on the actions of others. The more people join the movement the more likely the success and the lower the individual costs. At the same time, with more people to join the movement, the incentive to play out the free rider role also increases. So the success of a movement rests on the perception of each actor that s/he can count on the solidarity of many others but that his or her personal involvement is crucial for serving the common cause. In the Greek case it was apparent that each protester had the feeling to be embraced by a large movement but, at the same time, it was essential for each individual to turn to the streets even if one more protester would not make much of a difference. Furthermore, as the balance between costs of engagement and probability of success indicates, the degree of dissatisfaction has to reach a special plateau (threshold) before it seems rational for an individual to invest time and resources in protest movements since the success of such movements is always contested and uncertain while the costs of one’s own engagement are truly certain and inevitable.
Both the motivation to act and the assessment of costs and benefits depend highly on the images that are portrayed in the public sphere. A highly influential factor here is assumed legitimacy. In addition to personal gains and losses people are driven by the quest for social recognition and socio-cultural identity. Both aspects are highly dependent on the perceptions of others and the portrayal of the cause in the public media. The importance of legitimization was highly visible in the case of the Greek protest movement. The movement almost collapsed when three “innocent” bystanders were killed as a consequence of protesters’ inability to provide access for the rescue teams. Individual actors do not want to be involved in any action that appears as being illegitimate in the eyes of their respected reference groups. Turning to the second step, we outlined reasons why people organize themselves in interest groups. Rational actor theory would predict that people organize in groups if they can gain a collective good exclusively and if the costs of becoming organized are low. The case studies confirmed this insight from theory and specified some of the conditions for the likelihood that dissatisfaction can translate into organized protest. A major condition for the emergence of an organized protest is a real or easy-to-construct fit with an already existing agenda of major interest groups. If nobody is there to pick up the dissatisfaction of the affected individuals it is very unlikely that the individualized protesters would be able to organize themselves. In the case of the Greek finance crisis the unions were the natural partner for the dissatisfied people.

The third step addressed the issue of mobilization. According to rational actor theory, organizations calculate the expected benefits for using conventional versus unconventional forms of protest. This calculation is ultimately related to the perceived probability of success. However, the value of the probability assessment depends on many variables. These include: the expected reactions by public authorities, the solidarity effects by the general population, the major images that are conveyed by the public media, the impression of legitimacy for the protest goals and means of reaching them and the availability of solutions if the protesters have success in changing the course of actions. In addition to cost-benefit considerations, mobilization depends on the access to resources and strategies. Important here are factors such as the knowledge of how to organize and protest, to deal with the media and to control the emotions of those who feel deeply dissatisfied. Lack of control was one the major reasons that delegitimized the Greek protest when protesters blocked the entrance for rescue operations. Our case studies also demonstrated the importance of new media like mobile phones or the internet. Access to these new media provide timely tools for coordinating protest even across distant areas and to disseminate opinions, pictures and reports to a wider public. Turning to step 4 we concluded that the management skills of the public authorities are the main drivers for escalating violence. Again the issue of legitimacy is crucial here. It all depends on who is responsible for the increased violence in the public eye. If the public authorities are blamed the protest movement can respond adequately and counter the violence with similar violent actions. However, if the public believes that the violence has been caused by the protest movement the sympathy will be attributed to the public authorities. This may indicate the end of the protest movement or at least a phase of re-sorting and re-organizing the movement. The description of the escalation ladder leads to the question whether we can identify causes or triggers that are responsible for each stage of escalation or de-escalation. Some of these causal factors have been mentioned in the previous sections. Looking over the entire escalation chain one driver appears to dominate the escalation process: institutional failure to respond to the protest in the various stages of protest articulation.

In the very early stages protest movements are often simply ignored or ridiculed. Once the protest movements evolve into more powerful organizations they are either criminalized or labeled as deviant outsiders. This strategy of segregating the movement from the rest of society encourages the members of the protest groups to become more radical and determined to fight for their goals. As soon as they start to use violence public authorities often tend to overreact by using undue force. This leads to a spiral of violence on both sides. The other extreme of giving in and retreating quickly may be just as detrimental for sustaining public order as is the use of excessive violence. In the end both under-reaction and overreaction may fuel the escalation of the process. In addition, if public institutions are not functioning at all or appear to be incoherent and arbitrary civil violence is most likely to increase. What can government and other responsible actors do to promote de-escalation? Organizational theory can provide some clues of how a route of de-escalation can be pursued. First, public institutions should develop monitoring services that detect the emergence of dissatisfaction and unease within the population. One important variable to watch is the perception of fairness. If public decisions are seen as unfair or unjust it is likely that people feel motivated to express their discontent in public. Another important factor is the alleged or real violation of religious or value-laden beliefs and convictions. High trust in governmental institutions can act as a moderator in this situation. Often people lack the expertise or the knowledge to understand complex decisions so that they need to trust that the “right” decision has been made. Trust in the competence of the decision making bodies can overcome a lack of understanding in the rationale of public policies (Short 1984). However, trust cannot be manufactured and is itself a product of experience that in the past even difficult-to-understand decisions turned out to benefit society as a whole.

So if public officials face a lack of trust or experience a wave of dissatisfaction they need to act immediately. The effectiveness of public protest is not a question of how many people are dissatisfied but how many of them are willing to articulate their protest in the public arenas. Most often 5% of individuals out of a affected population who are willing to act in the public is already enough to make the protest movement visible in the public eye and to attract massive media attention. Therefore it is essential
to install a monitoring system that does not only include public surveys but also more focused methods of social sciences (such as focus groups, media analysis, and surveys among special groups). Once the monitoring system detects a high degree of dissatisfaction, in particular if special groups are involved or issues of fairness and belief are affected, policy makers should respond by a revision of policies (if justified), a better strategy to communicate the rationale for existing policies and an open debate about how to deal with the problems. Such actions could already be sufficient to stop the escalation process from the beginning.

At the second stage, i.e. organization of protest movements, public authorities can provide platforms for these movements to voice their opinions, to develop alternative strategies and to have access to those who are legitimate decision makers. Often it is sufficient that these organizations experience that they are taken seriously, their arguments are taken into consideration and their values and preferences are respected by public authorities. They may still continue to protest and oppose governmental policies but is very unlikely that they will then use force to press for change.

During the third and fourth step of increasing violence institutions may retreat to neutral and highly respected individuals and organizations for facilitating a negotiated agreement between the protesters and the public authorities. In addition, the response to violence should be proportional to the extent of the original violation yet decisive enough to demonstrate to others that violence is not tolerated. To fulfill their function of keeping order public institutions should avoid the impression that their authority is in doubt. "Authorization can be seen as a process by which norms supporting the exercises of authority by a given agent are defined and enforced by a subordinate unit. Authority is legitimate power" (Scott 1987). If people have the feeling that there is no public authority left they may even join the protest movement as a means to be on the winning team or to re-establish order.

References


Citation