Repression Will Be Televised: Micro-Dynamics of Mobilization in 1989 East Germany

Katrin Paula
Hochschule für Politik/TUM School of Governance

How does information about repression affect the spread of protest in an autocracy? The relationship between repression and political uprisings is still unclear, given mixed findings in previous research, ranging from mobilizing to deterring to curvilinear effects. Arguments are traditionally tested on data at a high level of aggregation, neglecting subnational variation, and most accounts leave open the question of how people gain knowledge about repression – a crucial precondition for any effect to work. Paula argues that the effect of repression can be heterogeneous since protest behaviour is a function of spatially varying costs, and threat perceptions depend on the distance to the threat. Moreover, if repression at one protest site is to have an impact on mobilization elsewhere, information about repression must be communicated through a channel that reaches a large part of society. Combining novel daily geo-referenced data on protests and repression at the level of municipalities in 1989 East Germany with a content analysis of West German television broadcasts, she demonstrates that media reports about repression fostered protest diffusion nationwide. At the same time, these reports deterred protests locally: Reports on repression at a specific protest location reduced the subsequent protest propensity in surrounding communities. Conversely, acts of repression without media coverage had no effect on the spread of protests. The findings have implications for the study of the repression-protest nexus and for the effects of media on the stability of autocratic regimes.

Prof. Dr. Katrin Paula is Assistant Professor of Global Security and Technology at the HfP/TUM School of Governance. She works at the intersection of human security, contentious politics, and information and communication technologies. Her research examining how changing information technologies affect political mobilization and violence has been published in the American Journal of Political Science and the Journal of Peace Research. Prior to joining the HfP/TUM, Prof. Paula was a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Chair of Sociological Methodology at the University of Mannheim. She studied Sociology at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich and at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona and holds a Ph.D. (Dr. rer. soc.) from the University of Mannheim.

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