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Pető, Andrea; Vasali, Zoltán

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Chapter 4

Political Space: Half Empty? The Case of Hungary

Andrea Petó

Central European University, Budapest

Zoltán Vasali

King Sigismund College, Budapest

In post-democracy (Crouch 2004), new political programmes emerging from the re-articulation of the relationship between state and citizens are constructing new spaces. These new spaces are placing democratic actors in an opposing binary position to the establishment, which has a major impact on their performance. If our aim is to assess the level of social activism in the political space based on sociological and political scientific factors, to identify the factors that are known from international research and yet which are also capable of describing the dynamics of trends in Hungary is a challenging task.

Specific conditions in Hungary

Since 2010 Hungary's Christian-conservative coalition government, with a two-thirds parliamentary majority, has successfully constructed its own state-funded (pseudo) NGO sector by means of a policy of centralization that aims, according to the government, to promote good government and efficiency. The NGO sector established in this manner – including the Peace March (*Békemenet*) and associated organizations – is not based on liberal values and human rights (*Békemenet után kísértetjárás* 2012).

The NGO sector, which had previously acted as a watchdog and a voice for human rights values in accordance with the principles of liberal democracy, has been fundamentally transformed and now struggles to respond effectively to [the government's] fundamental structural positions which have broad support in society. In order to understand this phenomenon we need first and foremost to explain its motivation. Viktor Orbán's resounding election victory in 2010 was preceded by a significant moral and economic crisis that called into question most of the ambitions and aims of the policy consensus that had been established in the wake of democratization in 1990 (Pogátsa 2013). Indicative of this crisis was the failure – manifest by 2010 – of government policies towards the Roma and in such fields as equal opportunities, reforms to the education system and social security. Under such circumstances, it became very difficult to represent norms that contrast positively with those represented by the government and the political parties, and then to generate social cooperation and put forward alternative policy options.

The consolidation of the Orbán government, one of whose aims has been to create a National Cooperation System, has profoundly affected social (NGO) activism in the country and has reinforced negative structural trends that experts had previously failed to spot. The government, consciously exploiting the norms of democracy for its own purposes and reconfiguring the social contract for the benefit of its own voter groups, ran up against an initial wave of protests against government policies in 2010 and 2011 (Petőcz 2012a). However, these civil society protests peaked in 2012 and 2013, since when activism has narrowed to the efforts of a small group of people who have sought to formulate the consequences and dangers of efforts by the government to undermine constitutional norms and who have been able to draw onto the streets those social groups sensitive to such dangers.

The new electoral system and the centralization and politicization of the distribution of state funds have forced the actors who organized the initial street protests to approach the opposition parties, as actors with a monopoly on political representation and resources. This development, however, is based on the acceptance of two premises: that the new electoral system is legitimate and that the imperative aim is to maximize the number of votes (for the opposition parties at the next election).

The groups in question, motivated by their wish to avoid the systemic disaster that would result from their rejection of these two premises, have jeopardized their own credibility, given that they previously employed an anti-establishment rhetoric and argued in favor of a new beginning. Furthermore, they have now entered a public space where the norms of political expression leave very little room for authentic identity formation. The women's movements (those with a human rights orientation), which watched critically as the new protest movements adopted uncritically the political elite's male-dominated attitudes and positions, continue to value their independence from the political parties (despite earlier failures) and to uphold their watchdog function, relying principally on the institutional and normative power of the European Union. In the meantime, however, they have been rather unsuccessful in expanding their social support base and network.

International themes and domestic developments

Since the political changes of 1989/90, social development models have only partially succeeded in arousing interest in Hungary in the major problems that are being addressed internationally. Whether we are speaking of the uncontrolled influence over democratic states of the banks and other global financial actors, or of the ecological crisis that dates back to the 1970s, or of the issue of gender inequality, there has been no groundbreaking progress in the Hungarian NGO sector in terms of establishing standards and insisting on compliance with such standards. We might even say that a critique of globalization – one that addresses both the ecological crisis and the objectives of the women's movements and other anti-establishment groups – has had only a minimal effect on the domestic political agenda. The strengthening – after 2006 – of racist and nationalist movements in Hungary offering anti-modernism as a real alternative to neo-liberal democracy and the market economy, coupled with the failure of attempts to adapt the Third-Way social democratic model, led to the marginalization [or, indeed, capitulation] of the democratic values of the Third Republic. Those actors that argued for the restoration of such values or launched a leftist critique of the weaknesses of the Third Republic in effect relinquished their social legitimacy.

In seeking to determine the extent to which Occupy Wall Street (OWS) influenced the development of the opposition protests and movements in Hungary, we need to highlight two fundamental problems: first, the domestication in Hungarian politics of the topics addressed by OWS; second, the modification of OWS original goals and objectives. Simplifying, we may say that the movement launched in New York in September 2011 arose primarily as a response to the lack of democratic controls (and distributive norms) in the world of finance. This message was not new in Hungary, as various alternative and environmentalist movements (e.g., Protect the Future (*Védegylet*), whose name derived from a 19th-century ethnocentric consumers movement, which had promoted Hungarian goods within the Habsburg Empire) had earlier employed similar themes to draw people onto the streets at the time of the WTO talks. Of course, such movements cannot be classified as mass movements and, regrettably, they failed to influence in a meaningful way public debates at the time. Even so, their message was “present” in Hungarian politics – an achievement in itself in an East Central European society undergoing a drawn-out process of transition. It should also be noted that this political current was a factor in the choice of President of Hungary in 2005.

Worth highlighting is the importance of statements made by the governing party (Fidesz) on topics related to the financial system, for these stated positions have served to limit acceptance in society for messages like those of the OWS movement. Over the past four years, the governing parties have used their political mandate to portray the banks as the “major culprits” in the foreign-currency loan fiasco. In an increasingly impoverished society, there is inevitably a tendency to accept the simplified portrayal of such complex issues as a “battle between good and bad.” By 2013 the result in Hungary was that public discontent manifested in street protests became limited to actions by the “victims of foreign currency” (*devizakárosultak*), i.e. people who had taken out foreign currency loans in the hope of more favorable interest rates, but who were struggling to make their repayments after the value of the forint plummeted. Apart from a number of student occupations at universities, almost nothing was left of the critical objectives represented by the OWS movement. The mass introduction of foreign-currency loans dates to the period of the socialist-liberal government (2004–2010). This

meant that a link could be made between international finance and the leftist governments of the period – which had indeed pursued neoliberal economic policies. It also meant that the eight years of leftist government (a period marked by various policy shifts) could be treated as a single and uniform political era. At the same time, the principled stand taken by the OWS movement gave rise to an expectation that similar movements in the future would not seek links with political parties. However the OWS phenomenon did put down roots in Hungary, if only to a minimal extent. For instance, we could cite the Anonymous and OWS demonstration held in Budapest (as in 400 other cities around the world) on November 5, 2013, which in Budapest drew no more than a few hundred activists wearing Guy Fawkes masks and protesting against the “lies of the banks, governments, political parties and media.” Although, when it comes to actions of this type, it is best to avoid relativizing the minimal level of public participation, nevertheless the slogan “We are the 99 percent!” inevitably draws our attention to the contradictions surrounding such initiatives. Among the social movements that may currently be regarded as significant actors in Hungary, we should highlight the Facebook group “One Million for Press Freedom in Hungary” (*Milla*¹), the Student Network (*HaHa*²), and the Hungarian women’s movements – all of which need to be explained, if we are to prove our assertion.

From the outset, the *Milla* demonstrations drew attention to the violation of the separation of powers, to the reduction in the transparency of decision-making, to the need to defend public non-governmental forums, and to restrictions on basic democratic rights (Boda & Csigó 2012). Public consternation at the power aspirations of the Orbán government after 2010 gave an impulse to the *Milla* movement, whose stated ambition was to become an NGO initiative that would serve as a counterweight to Fidesz and that would be politically independent and enjoy mass support.

“The PR expert and social activist Péter Juhász created the Facebook page on December 21, 2010, following Parliament’s adoption of the media law the previous night and a minute’s silence held by the Hungarian radio presenter Attila Mong in the morning of the same day in response

¹ The Facebook page was created by Péter Juhász on December 21, 2010.

² A group named “Student Network (*Hallgatói Hálózat*) was formed as early as 2006, but it only became known nationally in the course of the organized protests in 2011.

to the passage of the law. This was one of the most dramatic days of the 22 years since the fall of communism.” (Petőcz 2012a)

Given the limits of our analysis, we cannot describe in detail the rise and fall of the *Milla* movement. However, based on the previously defined criteria, we can assess its achievements and its effect on social movements in Hungary. The critical messages of *Milla* in the initial phase of its development drew attention to the dangers of the measures implemented by the Orbán government, most of which have now been revealed to the international community. Practical instances of this are the Tavares Report on the state of fundamental rights in Hungary (June 25, 2013), a report authored by the Green Party MEP Rui Tavares on behalf of the European Parliament Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs, as well as the inquiries and hearings launched by the European Commission and by the European Parliament. The reactions of the Hungarian government to the Tavares Report are difficult to take at face value, for the report does no more than describe the process by which the Orbán government dismantled the system of political institutions. And yet this process was none other than what had officially been formulated in the government’s programme as a policy of transforming Hungary in response to the global, European and Hungarian effects of the crisis.

The *Milla* movement also strove to sustain its mass appeal by strengthening diversity and offering support to NGO activists (Petőcz 2012b). Despite the polarization of the public life in Hungary and the *Milla* movement’s marginalization by the Orbán government’s National Cooperation System, the initiative achieved several important successes in what is a fundamentally apolitical and passive social milieu. In the space of 18 months, it reached the peak of its popularity, articulating major social and political issues. The question arose, however, as to whether (or to what extent) it would be able to maintain its independence from the political parties. The dilemma resulted in a rather odd pitfall: those who were confident of creating a new pole of opposition (one critical of the regime) assumed that action on the Internet and mass participation in protests could be channeled towards support for the democratic opposition parties, which were struggling to survive. This process jeopardized, however, the NGO character of the *Milla* movement as well as its independence from the political parties and its diversity. Thus, in 2012, it was impossible to say whether the established and newly-formed

leftist parties, the Greens or the Liberals would end up benefiting from the “people power” unleashed by *Milla*. When *Milla* subsequently joined the party alliance Together-PM (*Együtt-PM*) led by Gordon Bajnai, who had served as a minister in the Socialist-Liberal government and subsequently – after the fall of that government – as prime minister in the interim government of experts, it seemed that the issue had been decided. We now see that the strength and uniqueness of the *Milla* movement is crumbling in the face of the failure to form a political party.

The history of the Student Network (*HaHa*) goes back much further than the series of protests held in the 2012 academic year against the abolition of a guaranteed number of state-funded university places (Szabó 2012). It is no accident that the organization has been compared in the international press with the 1968 movement, as university students constitute its support base. Indeed, even though many university students in Hungary have right-wing or far-right sympathies, *HaHa* still managed to mobilize significant numbers of students for events held jointly with the official students’ representative body, the *HÖÖK*. Founded in 2006, *HaHa* “banged on the doors of the same university where it later managed to gain a footing, attracting thousands of students to its forums from numerous educational institutions” (Hogyan készült? A Forradalom 2012). Regarding its aims, the organization was established with a view to offering alternatives to what it termed erroneous government policies, but as an organization it has managed to function on the basis of grassroots democratic principles. It has even established a free university where, among other things, the sexism present within the movement and in universities and other areas of academic life has been debated. Most importantly perhaps, *HaHa* succeeded in reaching out to other social and professional groups, thereby establishing solidarity and cooperation among the various NGO initiatives Network for Freedom in Education (*Hálózat a Tanszabadságért*), Parents’ Network (*Szülői Hálózat*), and Lecturers’ Network (*Oktatói Hálózat*). That is to say, even though the Government’s communication strategy – in the absence of any real counter-argument or readiness for negotiation or cooperation – sought to write off *HaHa* as a movement with links to the leftist-liberal parties (*Együtt-PM*) and to call into question the organization’s representative legitimacy, *HaHa*’s supporters – both teaching staff and students – managed to set the domestic political agenda through street

demonstrations in the cold of winter and through their occupation of university buildings. *HaHa* became quite evidently an independent and self-organizing movement. It soon advanced to the stage of cellular growth, forming smaller and larger groups around the country. In this way, it engendered a series of protests, which drew sustenance from the errors of government policy decision-makers in the field of education (Krstev 2013).

Regarding the internal operations of *HaHa*, it is worth highlighting that when planning and coordinating its actions, the organization has utilized the methods summarized in *Occupation Cookbook*, a publication authored by Croatian activists (Hogyan készült? A Forradalom 2012). We see, therefore, how *HaHa* successfully applied external models when seeking to consolidate its own organization. Interestingly, these models were not Western European ones, but were drawn from the Central European region. Here an analogy may be made with the Polish women's congress, which has served as a model for the women's movements in Hungary. *HaHa*'s achievements were facilitated by its effective use of Loomio, an online collaborative decision-making platform built by a New Zealand team of developers. Use of the platform enabled *HaHa* to make grassroots democratic decisions via the Internet without having to organize meetings.

If we define the criteria of mobilization within the OWS framework as the making of anti-establishment statements, the occupation of spaces, grassroots democracy, an absence of formal leadership, spontaneous events, and the use of creative symbols, then we should also include in this group the street demonstration that took place in 2006 in the aftermath of the leaking of the then prime minister's "secret" speech. The protests culminated with the occupation of Hungarian Television's headquarters. This, however, proves our assertion that under Hungarian conditions caution must be shown when applying international norms and criteria as analytical categories. The same also applies to the women's movement: although we might think that Hungary has accepted the principle of gender equality since becoming a member of the EU, this is far from being the case.

In Hungary party voting preferences influence women's political mobilization. After 1989, women's NGOs with a human rights orientation rejected any direct links with political parties; they wished to serve as

watchdogs, while also consulting with the liberal party. After the liberal party (and its support base) was “invisibilized” in Hungarian politics (Pogátsa 2013), this type of women’s activism found an ally in the Green Party (*Lehet Más a Politika*, LMP), which also has an urban middle-class base. The pillarization of the Hungarian political system was also mirrored in the representation and articulation of women’s interests at the NGO level. The most effective way to get access to resources and policy making has been to cooperate with a particular party and to avoid bipartisan action on women’s issues (domestic violence, participation in politics and the economy) that are – or should be – above the logic of party cleavages.

The very weak women’s NGOs in Hungary constitute three separate umbrella organizations: socialist, liberal, and conservative-religious. In June 2013, these three umbrella organizations signed a declaration demanding parity on national party and European Parliamentary election lists (Összefoglaló: A nők politikai részvétele demokratikus érték 2013). The term “parity” was chosen in lieu of “quota,” a term that carries heavy ideological baggage (moreover, the last bipartisan action seeking the adoption of a quota law in Hungary had failed at the time of the leftist-liberal government, despite the support of several conservative women MPs). This declaration, signed by the three umbrella organizations, seemed to have created a new space for articulating the demand for more women in politics.

The story did not end well. When the declaration became known, the conservative umbrella organization ousted its successful and popular leader and withdrew its support for the Hungarian Women’s Congress, which was held on November 11, 2013 and was based on the very successful Polish example. It has also declined to participate in the conferences on women’s participation in politics organized by the OSCE and CEU. The declaration was only the second attempt since the Roundtable Discussions in 1988–1989 to redefine public interest across party lines. But it has failed due to party cleavages. *Heti Válasz*, a major conservative weekly, published a “fact-finding” article about how foreign entities, including the Open Society Institute and the Norwegian Embassy, were financing anti-government propaganda by way of women’s NGOs in Hungary (*Heti Válasz*, August 15, 2013, pp. 12–15).

Hungary has a low ranking on the Gender Equality Index. The recent Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against

Women report warned that nearly all fields of inquiry have remained largely ignored by the government (CEDAW 2013). In the EU, Hungary is at the bottom of the list in terms of women's participation in politics. As an analysis of the electoral system proves, the new electoral law for the 2014 elections will further diminish the number of women in politics – with the introduction of single majority districts.

The “women's policies” of the national right-wing political parties all focus on the normative cult of motherhood. In their political language, these parties refer to “family policy” rather than “women's politics,” whereby the social role of women is normative motherhood. The liberal-leftist critique of the normative cult of motherhood places the emphasis on women's individual human rights and the right to choose motherhood. This option includes the right to reject maternity – which in the conservative discourse is regarded as “national” sabotage (Pető 2010).

The illusion that 1989 would bring a general democratization to post-communist Europe is over, and family policy is now used as a way of reinstating “old-new” divisions. As Duncan Light has pointed out in his analysis of post-communist identities, they are driven “by the desire to construct new post-communist identities, characterized by a democratic, pluralist, capitalist and largely westward-looking orientation.” (Light 2000, p. 158). Attempts by the right wing to redefine women's political space are not characterized by “a democratic, pluralist, capitalist and largely westward-looking orientation” but rather by an anti-pluralist understanding. The resurfacing anti-modernism in Eastern Europe, coupled with criticism of the spiritual and social consequences of neoliberal capitalism, has also appropriated discourses concerning the family in order to achieve its aim, namely to create a *viable, livable and desirable alternative*. This space can be also connected to anti-modernist green politics and to the emerging far-right political forces (Pető 2012, pp. 130–8).

As far as gendered analysis is concerned, the concept of “New Woman” was labelled by Rita Felski in her work *The Gender of Modernity* as rendering women “prisoners of progress” (Felski 1995, pp. 11–33). In the rhetoric of the progressive women's movement, women represent the new beginning, whereby the future is conceived as a normative project with a linear development. The historical meta-narrative about women's past is hierarchical and exclusive, while aiming to forge a counter-identity.

The discourse of the women's movement is a strategic discourse which is emotionally charged. Its language is creating collective subjectivity with shared rituals, symbols of meanings and stories.

The political context and the proposed solutions

Social movements in Hungary have developed in a specific manner. As has been stated on many occasions, the country's NGO sector is weak and vulnerable in terms of both public support and funding (Miszlivetz 2012). The second Orbán government has strengthened the negative trend as part of a power-political game. By 2011 it had helped to establish a pseudo NGO movement enjoying mass support by means of state funding, with livelihoods provided by opaque interest groups and with populism-based party communication. It would be a mistake to question people's identification with, and support for, such NGOs or to explain the process in terms of lavish state funding alone. The presence of the Peace March movement has transformed the interpretative framework, for this pro-government initiative – which enjoys a level of mass support that is unprecedented in Europe – well demonstrates the crisis of democratic norms that serves also to nurture the initiatives that form the subject of our investigation.

The movements investigated by us have sought to generate activism in a social milieu where people are difficult to activate even at the time of elections and have minimal knowledge of politics (and so can be easily influenced). Further, the value system of this milieu is closer to that of the East European authoritarian regimes (Ipsos 2013; FES-Policy Solutions 2013). It is important to emphasize these points, because the successes and the failures can only be assessed and understood within these frameworks. These interrelationships are well exemplified by the co-occurrence – in this situation the necessarily antagonistic co-occurrence – of efforts to achieve autonomy from the political parties (a defining feature of such organizations) and of objectives seeking to effectively influence political decision-making. For this reason, it is particularly important that such domestic initiatives as *Milla*, *HaHa*, and Women's Interest (*Női Érdek*) have devoted significant energies – based on international examples – to maintaining their diversity and openness and to developing grassroots internal democratic structures, as a means of guaranteeing their long-

term success. This is what *Női Érdek* did when, on November 30, 2013, the conservative women's movement, Interest Association of Hungarian Ladies (*Magyar Asszonyok Érdekszövetsége*), awarded its annual prize, the Golden Grain, to a journalist who is known for her denial of the Holocaust and for other extremist views (*Nőszövetségnek álcázott nácisimogató, miniszterre 2013*). When seeking to establish as researchers what practical (policy) solutions the initiatives under investigation have proposed to the problems we have raised, we should recognize that there is an important dividing line between political parties and NGOs. The dividing line is whether NGO's can risk giving their support to a critique of the same liberal democracy that has been rejected by Fidesz (with its establishment of an alternative to such liberal democracy), as long as criticism of this anti-modernist and communitarian alternative is based on a rather wobbly theoretical framework.

Raising political issues and the international context

Reflecting on the campaign for the European Parliamentary election, we can identify with increasing clarity the international issues that have escaped Hungary's attention and those that could be formulated for public consumption. In seeking to address the public, the NGOs find themselves in a very difficult and competitive situation, whereby their differentiated messages are often presented in oversimplified contexts. The exception is the issue of domestic violence (violence within the family), which the Fidesz government has managed – with great difficulty – to integrate into its own conceptual framework by re-branding the problem as “violence in households”.

It should be noted that, despite the achievements of the movements under investigation in this paper, the discourses at European level on multiculturalism, social integration, and equal opportunities have tended to appear in Hungarian public consciousness only after their translation into Hungarian. This in itself is a Hungarian political paradox, given that the conservative party has made successful use of the rhetoric of anti-establishment social movements in other countries and disposes of the means to do so. A good example of this is the OWS movement, where the issues were not really new, but the dynamics were different. In the case of *HaHa*, we see that its development has been significantly

influenced by the experiences of movements in other countries, even though international issues were not the subject-matter of its protests. The case of *Milla* does have an international perspective, for media independence and the application in the EU countries of the democratic norms formulated in the Copenhagen Criteria have featured in its various protests and are unavoidable. It remains an interesting and open question whether and to what extent Hungary's domestic movements will be influenced in their development by initiatives elsewhere in Europe that have taken up the fight against corruption and social tensions. As far as the leftist and liberal women's movements are concerned, the question is not only the manner in which they can represent international norms (such as gender equality), but also how they evaluate and react to the fact that their political influence has not grown in the post-1989 period, even while gender inequality has increased to unprecedented levels in all fields.

The conservative women's movement, with its focus on the primacy of the family and its denial of freedom of choice and structural discrimination, has found a rival in the field of women's politics. Far-right fundamentalist gender politics, also based on the politics of care and placing the family in the centre, seeks in the long run to absorb the political space for conservative women's politics, while uniting all these political forces under the rhetoric of hostility to communist oppression. This is evidenced by the award given to a neo-Nazi journalist by the conservative women's umbrella organization. The rhetoric of progress, the concept of a "New Woman" is being appropriated by anti-modernist political forces. This rhetoric of the victorious neoconservative politics after 1989 has left the emancipatory leftists in a defensive position, as their rhetoric is a defensive and negative one. Having failed to critique the basis of neoliberal politics, it remains the prisoner of progress.

This is a particularly important point in the aftermath of the economic crisis with increased competition among the nation-states in terms of their economic models and when the absurd solutions of Hungary's so-called unorthodox economic policies – solutions such as the nationalization of state pensions and government price-fixing in the public utility sector (measures that call into question the basic and necessary premises of liberal democracy and the market economy) – are applied by other European countries in the hope of resolving the crisis.

Locality is usually not conceptualized as a major space for rethinking politics, no matter that this is the basis of representational politics. Progressive intellectuals, like Cas Mudde among others, are still prisoners to the aufklarist/enlightenment paradigm that intellectuals should “spill down” their ideas to the society and build up class consciousness (Mudde 2013). Mudde is right that political parties are not up to the task of creating a new identity politics, as they are products and representatives of an old-identity politics regime. The future will tell us whether reinventing locality in the age of identity politics in the Hungarian national context, together with new movements, can change political parties as institutions of representation.

It seems, at present, that the success or failure of the model established in response to the crisis that arose out of the response to globalization and to Hungary's exemplary transition, will not depend on the application of norms derived from social reactions. Rather, people will base their judgment on whether or not the social crisis is overcome, which in itself bears the possibility of a new kind of long-term political model, which Kim Schepele has referred to as the development of the Frankenstate.

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