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Rebuilding the Hungarian Right through Civil
Organization and Contention:
The Civic Circles Movement

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Abstract

Starting in 2010, the Fidesz party achieved in a row six (partly landslide) victories at municipal, national, and European Parliament elections. Not questioning other explanations, my ongoing research traces the remarkable resilience of the ruling party above all to earlier “tectonic” shifts in civil society, which helped the Right accumulate ample social capital well before its political triumph. This process was decisively advanced by the Civic Circles Movement founded by Viktor Orbán after the lost election of 2002. This movement was militant in terms of its hegemonic aspirations and collective practices; massive in terms of its membership and activism; middle-class based in terms of social stratification; and dominantly metropolitan and urban on the spatial dimension. Parallel to contentious mobilization, the civic circles re-organized and extended the Right’s grass-roots networks, associations, and media; rediscovered and reinvented its holidays and everyday life-styles, symbols, and heroes; and explored innovative ways for cultural, charity, leisure, and political activities. Leading activists, among them patriots, priests, professionals, politicians, and pundits, offered new frames and practices for Hungarians to feel, think, and act as members of “imagined communities”: the nation, Christianity, citizenry, and Europe.

Keywords

Civil society and the struggle for Right-wing hegemony, Versatile nationalism, Church-bound activism, „Organic intellectuals” of Right-wing media.

Introduction

The shock waves sent by Brexit and Donald Trump's Presidency through the political establishment intensified the scholarly debates about the sources and consequences of discontent with liberal democracy. This paper seeks to contribute to these debates with a new analysis of the Hungarian case.

¹ I submit that the rise of illiberal, nationalist, and xenophobic leaders in some long-established Western and new post-socialist democracies make the Hungarian Premier Viktor Orbán's illiberal state-building appear as less exceptional or extreme than was the case before. Even so, some key features of the Orbán regime, namely its resilience, emergence through incremental but transformative change, and roots in a vibrant Right-dominated civil society, point to its broader relevance for comparativists.

Compared to Western illiberal political projects so far in opposition (as in France or Austria) or still in their infancy when in power (as in the USA or Poland), the Hungarian regime has already ample proofs of its viability. Starting in 2010, Orbán's Fidesz party achieved in a row six (partly landslide) victories at municipal, national, and European parliamentary elections. The party's popularity during the run-up to the 2018 elections indicates that it has a good chance for staying in power for a third term. At the same time, in contrast to the electoral authoritarianisms of Russia or Turkey, these successes have been achieved without open repression or systematic large-scale electoral fraud. Instead, the regime evolved almost surreptitiously through adoption of a patchwork of illiberal „worst practices” allegedly emulating other democracies.

Backed by the party's super-majority and barely constrained by the fragmented opposition, these measures undermined media freedom, extended government control over the judiciary, weakened the constitutional protection of minorities, and manipulated the electoral law in favour of the incumbent. Most recently, NGOs active in the fields of human rights, civil liberties, and control of corruption, and even a private higher education institution, the Central European University, became targets of harassment by the authority. By 2017 hardly any actor or institution of the polity escaped the regime's direct or indirect control. The rollback of Hungarian democracy seems to be a textbook example of incremental but ultimately transformative change indeed.²

Not questioning other explanations, which stress the Fidesz governments' skill and will to cement their rule, weakness of the opposition, and the EU's ineffective response to democratic backsliding,³ this paper emphasizes a so far neglected factor: the superior social embeddedness of the Right and its consequences.

I trace the rise and resilience of the Orbán regime to earlier „tectonic” shifts in civil society, which allowed the Right to accumulate ample social capital well before its political victory in 2010.⁴ I argue that while in opposition in 2002-2010, Fidesz and its allies in civil society worked hard to catch up with the Left, which, due to inherited resources, initially seemed to be better positioned to foster civil

¹ I presented an earlier version of the paper at the seminar series of the Robert Schuman Center for Advanced Studies of European University Institute, Florence, October 12 2016.

² For a summary of these measures see János Kornai, „Hungary's U-Turn: Retreating from Democracy.” *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 3, July 2015: 34-48. For an analysis of the „legalistic” methods used by the Orbán regime to roll back democracy see Gábor Halmai, „The Decline of Liberal Democracy in Europe's Midst”, *EUROZINE*, 27 September 2016, accessed online on June 2 2017 at <http://www.eurozine.com/the-decline-of-liberal-democracy-in-europes-midst/>

³ See the articles by Jacques Rupnik, „How Things Went Wrong”, 132-37; Miklós Bánkuti, Gábor Halmai, and Kim Lane Scheppele, „Disabling the Constitution, 138-46; and Erin K. Jenne and Cas Mudde, „Can Outsiders Help?”, 147-55, all in *Journal of Democracy* 23, no. 3, July 2012.

⁴ This thesis was originally proposed in Béla Greskovits and Jason Wittenberg, „Civil Society and Democratic Consolidation in Hungary in the 1990s and 2000s”. Paper presented at the Council for European Studies' Twentieth International Conference of Europeanists, Amsterdam, 25-27 June 2013.

organization. Even if it took eight years for the Right to eventually transform its social capital into political capital, there is an essential element of truth in the quip of one Socialist politician: “Fidesz did not win its super-majority in the lottery.” The paper elaborates *that the seeds of success were sown by the Civic Circles Movement founded by Orbán in Spring 2002.*

My analysis is based on the Civic Circles Event Database of about 4900 events organized, co-organized, or sponsored by the movement and attended by its members in the period July 2002-April 2006. I constructed the database from the Electronic Newsletter of Civic Circles, and other media sources. Originally collected by civic circle members and preserved by Open Society Archives (OSA), the newsletter consists of civic circle messages. The database does not contain personal, secret or classified data. Per Hungarian and EU law, the messages are anonymized except for those from persons performing public functions about public matters, and used solely for my historical research.

The first section highlights two prominent features of the movement: its ambivalence towards formal democratic institutions, and its dual, simultaneously civic and hegemonic, strategy to transform civil society. These features are explained by the motivations of leaders and activists influenced by the political situation at the movement’s birth.

The second section characterizes the movement’s contentious actions, the social status of members and activists, its geographical spread, and organizational and individual membership. The third section focuses on the circles’ mode of coordination, which differed in various periods.

The fourth section argues that the movement’s lasting impact stems from its success in demarcating and expanding the Right’s “own” public sphere by frames and practices of versatile nationalism, church-bound activism, and uphill struggles for creating the outlets and captive audiences of Right-wing media.

The conclusions summarize the findings and point to puzzles for future research.

“Janus-faced” at birth

Founded after Fidesz marginally lost the Spring 2002 elections, the movement was born out of a compromise proposed by Viktor Orbán, who came relatively fast to terms with the defeat at the hands of the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) and the Liberal Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ), and willy-nilly accepted by his radicalized constituency, for which it was more difficult to reconcile itself with the fiasco. Given that Orbán’s speech delivered at a massive rally on May 7th, 2002 is rightly seen as the movement’s founding document, it deserves to be reviewed at some length.

Declaring that the elections were a closed case after their results were officially confirmed, Orbán suggested his followers to accept the outcome, however unjust it might have seemed in their eyes, and put an end to their ongoing massive campaign of street protests, petitions and lawsuits for recounting the votes. Instead, he invited them for common soul-searching. Was it not the case, Orbán asked, that the defeat was also because the forces of “civic Hungary” were not yet fully prepared for their mission of rising the nation, and if so, what was to be done about it? He saw the solution in the Civic Circles Movement.

“I ask you in the coming three months to form small groups of people, troupes of friends, civic circles. What we need is not formal organizations, but to get together, join our forces, and be on the alert. We need to launch hundreds of civic circles and companionships. Our force is in our numbers, but it will become real power only if we can get organized. Our force becomes real only if we can create and organize the public sphere of civic Hungary. Therefore, I ask the hundreds of

civic circles, which I hope will emerge, to check in at the known phone numbers of Democracy Center. We need to know about each other to move together when our fate wills so.”⁵

Orbán’s call appealed to various groups within the Right-wing constituency. After all, the circles promised to help avoid the two dangers political losers usually face: apathy and radicalization. By creating community spaces for grassroots organization, participation and initiative, the circles offered a medicine against apathy and, in line with a “Tocquevillian” view of civil society, could become bulwarks of freedom and autonomy in a regime, which their members viewed as illegitimate and unresponsive.⁶

Indeed, the “circles” meant direct reference to “small circles of freedom”, a catchword in Hungarian political parlance. Originally coined by the great Hungarian scholar István Bibó, the phrase was rich in historical connotations, as it denoted autonomous sites and networks of solidarity and safeguarding of interests, which since the Middle Ages fiercely resisted the powerholders’ brutal attempts to subordinate people to centralized political rule, and thus became hotbeds of civic virtue and social progress, albeit more in Western Europe than in Hungary.⁷

At the same time, the movement could provide an alternative to further radicalization, which was an imminent danger at the time. The “troupes” of militant activist were asked to return to still to-be-built “barracks” in civil society, and transform their strength in numbers into organized real power before launching a new assault on the power-holders. This way, the circles were meant to elicit a compromise between the less and the more radical Right-wing constituencies as well.

Nevertheless, the following example of one of the many protests initiated by the movement shows that anger about the “stolen” elections coupled with distrust in the MSZP-SZDSZ coalition government had been formative for the activists’ mindset for years to come.

„[T]hose who feel that the procedures of the Spring 2002 elections were illegally manipulated or its results faked, should wear a black mourning band at the anniversary [...] as a symbol of our farewell to our government’s achievements [...] new highways, family farms, new jobs, rights for free assembly, media, and speech, rising wages and pensions, for three more years. [...] Let us devote two weeks to nation-wide mourning, and then combat the madness of the current government with even more resolve. If we were not allowed to recount the votes, let us count at least those who believe the elections were unfair.”⁸

This example puts the motivation of activists in sharp relief. They appear to have been individuals who, driven by particularly intense political preferences, were ready to question election outcomes and resort to resistance whenever key rules of democratic decisions, the “one man one vote” rule and the rule of periodic vote, relegated them to a minority exposed to what they viewed as a “tyranny of the majority.”⁹

Albert Hirschman’s succinct summary of the dual character of democratic vote helps to clarify the sources of the civic circles’ ambivalence towards formal democracy. On the one hand, Hirschman sees the voting rules as key elements of “an institutional framework affording a defence against an excessively *repressive* state; on the other [...] as a safeguard against an excessively *expressive*

⁵ Orbán Viktor beszéde a Disz téren on 7th May 2002. Accessed on 2016 November 17 at <http://mkdsz1.freeweb.hu/n22/orban020507.html> Translations of all the cited Hungarian texts are by myself.

⁶ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*. (New York: Vintage, 1990).

⁷ Bibó István, „A magyar társadalomfejlődés és az 1945 évi változás értelme,” [Hungarian Social Development and the Sense of the Changes in 1945] in. *Válogatott tanulmányok. Második kötet, 1945-1949*. (Budapest: Magvető Könyvkiadó, 1986), 485-504, esp. 492-499.

⁸ Event Database, 2003.

⁹ de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*.

citizenry.”¹⁰ Given that after the defeat in 2002 the next opportunity for voting in parliamentary elections was far away, the activists resented that while cementing the incumbent’s power, the democratic rules were more a hindrance than a help in making their own strongly held opinions politically consequential. Their discontent was exacerbated by their conviction that the government was busy undermining the checks and balances, which could protect the opposition.

In line with the mindset of activists for whom non-conventional political participation was imperative, Orbán proclaimed “the birth of a new mass-movement with autonomous political profile and will, whose members, representing all social strata, refused to vacate the sphere of public action even after the elections.”¹¹ Adding fuel to the fire, in his foundational speech he also asserted that the members of the movement must not view themselves as a defeated minority in opposition at all.

„Civic Hungary is not one smaller or larger part of this country. It is the whole. [...] Even if our parties and elected representatives might be in opposition in the parliament, we, all those present in this square, will not and cannot be in opposition, because it is impossible for the nation to be in opposition. It is only a government that may end up in opposition to its own people if it abandons acting in the nation’s interest.”¹²

This statement of hegemonic aspirations sheds light on Orbán’s essentially “Gramscian” perspective on civil society as a battlefield of ideologies and organizations.¹³ If it was impossible for the nation to be in opposition, then its true representatives had to strive for hegemony.¹⁴ The related strategy envisaged recruitment of individuals to the Right-wing camp through penetrating and controlling their existing and newly founded organizations. This implies that the movement was to become Janus-faced not only for its ambivalence towards democratic institutions but for its simultaneous civic and hegemonic approach to civil society as well.

On the one hand, in a Tocquevillian tradition as it were, the civic circles played a crucial role in re-organizing and extending the civic Right’s grass-roots networks, associations, and media; rediscovering and reinventing its everyday life-styles, holidays, symbols, and heroes; and mobilizing their members in innovative ways for participation in cultural, educational, charity, and leisure activities.¹⁵ The circles did not have to start “from scratch”. Rather, at a much larger scale though, the movement followed the program and some (but not all) of the practices of the Movement of Hungarian Way Circles, founded in 1993 by writer and politician István Csurka in 1993 with the aim of creating a social-organizational basis for his radical nationalist Party of Hungarian Life and Justice (MIÉP).¹⁶

On the other hand, by superimposing the Gramscian on the Tocquevillian logic, the Civic Circles Movement harnessed civic activism ultimately for political ends.¹⁷ Ample evidence suggests that the activists found the dual strategy appealing even if due to personal skills, temperament and ambitions

¹⁰ Albert O. Hirschman, *Shifting Involvements. Private Interests and Public Action*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982): 106.

¹¹ Cited in *Népszava*, September 3, 2002, from the website of the Alliance for the Nation Civic Circle founded by Orbán.

¹² Orbán Viktor beszéde.

¹³ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

¹⁴ See Szabó Ildikó, „A nemzet fogalmi konstrukciója a Fidesz diskurzusaiban 1998 és 2006 között.” [The Discursive Construction of the Nation by Fidesz in 1998-2006.] *Politikatudományi Szemle* 15, 3 (2007): 129-159, for an analytical overview of the party’s changing concepts of the nation, and the related symbolic practices.

¹⁵ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*.

¹⁶ István Csurka, *Keserű hátszág. Tanulmányok*. [Bitter Hinterland. A Collection of Studies.] (Budapest: Magyar Fórum Könyvek, 1993).

¹⁷ In the distinction between the Tocquevillian and Gramscian approach to civil society I follow David Riley, „Civic Associations and Authoritarian Regimes in Interwar Europe: Italy and Spain in Comparative Perspective.” *American Sociological Review* 70 (288: April 2005): 288-310. Riley used Gramsci’s notion to characterize the Italian Fascist party’s conquest of civil society. By using the notion I do not mean to suggest that Fidesz is a Fascist party.

some were more attracted by civic and others by political involvement, while their majority willingly engaged in both.

Mobilized metropolitan middle-class

In 2002-2006, when its activity peaked, the Civic Circles Movement was militant in pursuing its agendas, middle-class based in terms of social stratification, dominantly metropolitan and urban on the spatial dimension, and massive in terms of membership and activities.

Militancy

Given the activists' dissatisfaction with conventional politics and distrust in the MSZP-SZDSZ government, which made them feel impatient and embattled, and their assertiveness fed by hegemonic aspirations, the circles' frequent turn to contention is no major surprise after all. However, some characteristic features of militancy, such as the temporal dynamics of protest events in comparison with those organized and/or attended by actors on the Left, and the types of protests and contested issues are worthy of analysis.

My earlier study of Hungarian protests, co-authored by Jason Wittenberg, revealed increasing divergence between the frequency of contentious events organized by Right-wing and Left-wing actors.¹⁸ We found that while the Right was more contentious over the whole period of 1995-2011 covered in our analysis, the gap between Rightist and Leftist contention significantly widened after 2002. Importantly, after 2002 the civic circles were frequently mentioned as organizers, sponsors, or participants of protests.

The growing militancy of the Right might be surprising given that the good times of the Fidesz government's "Hungarian Model" of 1998-2002 initially continued under the MSZP-SZDSZ coalition, which implemented Premier Péter Medgyessy's campaign promise of "Transformation with Welfare." Until the middle of the decade economic growth, declining unemployment, the expanding welfare state, and accession to the EU in 2004, all seem to have "conspired" for social peace. In 2002-2006 social problems were relatively rarely reported among the drivers of protest indeed. During the hard times starting in 2007, economic protests partly organized or supported by the Right became more frequent. Interestingly, the Right has continued to rule the streets even after the landslide victory of Fidesz in 2010 – an issue to which I will return below.

For a snapshot of the causes and forms of militancy I rely on the Civic Circles Event Database of 2004. (Table 1.) By this year, the civic circles became a mass-movement with nation-wide presence, created new channels of communication and forms of association, and cooperated with numerous allies in civil society and the political sphere.

¹⁸ Béla Greskovits and Jason Wittenberg, *Civil Society and Democratic Consolidation in Hungary in the 1990s and 2000s*. Budapest and Berkeley: Unpublished Manuscript, February 27, 2016. Our findings rely on empirical evidence on about 4800 protest events in 1989-2011 collected from media sources for the comparative project „The Logic of Civil Society in New Democracies: Hungary, Poland, South Korea, and Taiwan” conducted by Grzegorz Ekiert, Jan Kubik, Michal Wenzel, Jason Wittenberg, Sunhyuk Kim, Chin-en Wu, and myself.

Table 1: Forms of protest and specific issues triggering contention (co)organized or sponsored by civic circles, and/or attended by their members in 2004

	Forms of contention					
Forms	Petitions, open letters, statements, and other forms of „soft protest”			Demonstrations, rallies, marches	Strikes, strike alerts, blockades	
Number of events	72			30	2	
	Issues triggering contention					
Issues	Identity			Rulers’ practices	Media	Socio-economic and environmental
Number of events	52			25	19	19
	National	Christian	Anti-Communist and / or antiliberal			
Number of events	30	13	10	25	19	19

Author’s calculation based on the Event Database 2004. Event numbers in specific categories exceed the total number of contentious events because some events combined several forms of contention, and were triggered by multiple grievances.

In 2004 the civic circles were involved in 100 protests, which accounted for about 7 percent of the events of the year. The bulk of contention was driven by three key issues of Right-wing identity: the national question, Christianity, and anti-Communism merged with anti-liberalism. Outrage about the disagreeable practices of the MSZP-SZDSZ government and misdeeds of Left-Liberal public as well as private commercial media led to protests too. Yet disruptive or violent contention was almost absent. Instead, “graphomaniac” forms of resistance, such as petitions, open letters, and public statements were dominant in the repertoire.

Even so, the Right’s militancy surprised the powerholders. After all, it heralded the end of “patience” hitherto characteristic to Hungary’s capitalist and democratic transformation.¹⁹ Resorting to their earlier rhetoric, the Left and Liberal elites reacted swiftly by demonizing their challengers. Already in 2002, witnessing the heated political conflicts and mass-mobilization around the elections, writer and publicist István Eörsi worried about a spreading “spiritual need for Fascism.”²⁰ But even in the relatively quiet year of 2004 Socialist politicians and media pundits repeatedly talked about Right-wing mobs ruling the streets and terrorizing the peaceful majority. Although protesters tended to use aggressive slogans and strong language indeed, considering the above evidence the terms Fascism and

¹⁹ On the factors of patience see Béla Greskovits, *The Political Economy of Protest and Patience. East European and Latin American Transformations Compared* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1998).

²⁰ Eörsi István, „A fasizmus, mint lelki igény.” [Fascism as a spiritual need.] *Népszabadság*, May 2, 2002.

mob appear as stark exaggerations. Moreover, adding insult to injury, these labels might have been counter-productive, since they provoked new protests.

Social status

In an interview the movement's chief coordinator Csaba Hende tried to refute the demonizing labels by emphasizing the respectable social status and conservative worldview of civic circle members:

„The overwhelming majority of civic circle members is highly educated, well-to-do, conservative intellectual. I suggest you to visit any larger civic circle event, and look at the cars parking around. There is no reason to assume that this is a frustrated, agitated crowd, interested in anarchy or overthrowing the constitutional order.”²¹

Other evidence from the Civic Circles Event Database confirms the educated middle-class character of the movement. The overwhelming majority of activities was non-contentious and had some educational purpose and/or form. These activities included lectures, workshops, conferences, or cultural, charity, entertainment and professional events, as well as educational excursions and youth summer camps. The organizers, performers, and participants were typically „white collar” employees of the state or the private and civil sphere: teachers, lawyers, doctors, students, the clergy, entrepreneurs, journalists, pundits, artists, actors, and politicians. The usual venues – churches, monasteries, church-bound gymnasiums and community centres, clubs, cafés, „national” bookshops, cultural centres, and party offices – were unlikely to attract crowds from the margins of society. Finally, participants were often asked to buy tickets, pay for the services provided, donate to charitable funds, or make in-kind-contributions, such as voluntary work or home-made meals.

Uneven geographical spread

Considering the movement's middle-class features, it is little surprise that most events took place in Budapest and its greater metropolitan area, as well as in the most populous cities of the countryside. After the long decades of Soviet-type socialism, where else could the movement tap on remaining reserves of a Right-wing “*Bildungsbürgertum*” than in the capital or the cultural-administrative centres of the counties?

²¹ Halász Csilla, „Kinek az érdeke?” [Whose interest?] Interjú Hende Csabával. *Heti Válasz*, February 27, 2004.

Table 2: Spatial features of the Civic Circles Movement, 2002-2006

	Metropolitan and urban			
	Budapest metro-area	County capital	Smaller town, village	“Greater Hungary”
% of all events	58	14	29	10
	Center – periphery			
	Top three districts: V., VIII., XII.	Bottom three districts: X., XX., XXI.	Top three counties: Pest, Fejér, Csongrád	Bottom three counties: Nógrád, Zala Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok
% of events in Budapest and counties	41	1	45	5

Author’s calculation based on the Event Database 2002-2006. The sum of percentages of events in specific categories exceed 100 percent, because some events took place in multiple locations within Hungary or by crossing state borders.

The puzzle of remarkable vibrancy of associational life in the capital’s satellite towns and villages is partly solved if we consider that geographical proximity and a functional transport infrastructure made it easy for activists from Budapest to help organize, and invited journalists, professionals, artists and politicians to perform at, the community events in these municipalities. However, a demand-side factor, namely a national-conservative and Anti-Communist spirit rooted in the peculiar social structure of these settlements, might have been even more important. It was here, where many ethnic Hungarians who had fled from the neighbouring states after the First and Second World Wars decided to settle, since due to legal restrictions and prohibitive housing prices they could not afford to live in Budapest where they typically worked. Similar was the case of the “kulak” and peasant masses from the countryside, who, leaving behind their land, livestock and equipment collectivized by the Communists, found new employment in the capital and built through efforts of several generations new homes in the fast-growing satellite villages and towns around it.²² More recently, especially (but not only) the settlements in the Buda-hills became magnets for young middle-class families who left the over-populated and polluted capital and found cheaper but better housing opportunities and quality environment on its outskirts.

Only a fragment of events took place in smaller towns and even less in villages outside the metro-area. Indeed, most of the smaller municipalities, which did host some activities, had distinguishing features: for example, touristic, recreational or cultural attractions. Finally, a sizable number of events happened abroad, mainly but not exclusively in the neighbouring countries with significant ethnic Hungarian minorities, which tells about the movement’s trans-border and transnational expansion.

²² Berkovits György, *Világváros határában*. [Borderlands of a Metropolis.] (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1976).

The uneven distribution of civic activism is even more striking when we consider its high concentration in but a few districts of Budapest and a handful of counties. (Table 2.) The capital's central and/or affluent districts hosted far more events than its peripheral and typically working-class districts. Similarly, while the central and more affluent counties had a vibrant Right-wing civic life, some of the peripheral and poor counties showed a devastated landscape from this viewpoint as well. Geographic proximity notwithstanding, the "internal peripheries" of Budapest were not more accessible for the civic circles than the deep peripheries of the countryside.

This socio-geographical pattern allows propositions on the movement's political mobilization potentials and constraints. Through the circles the Right managed to consolidate and expand its presence in partly "enemy-occupied territories", which hitherto counted among the bulwarks of the MSZP and SZDSZ. In contrast, the working-class neighborhoods of Budapest and the decaying heavy-industrial factory towns of the countryside remained "no-go-areas" for the movement. There, social structural and cultural features continued to work in favour of Left-dominated politics as the only game in town, at least for some time. Finally, the overwhelming majority of Hungarian municipalities was out of reach not just for the civic circles, but for any political or civil organization.

Massive participation

Given that most circles never formally registered as civil association or foundation, we must rely on the perhaps inflated numbers publicly mentioned by Hende and other leaders. They knew about 11 thousand smaller or larger civic circles, which had 163 thousand individual members active in thousand municipalities. This data confirms the impression of a mass-movement, whose strength in numbers was comparable to the combined membership of Hungarian parties (124 thousand in 2008), the net membership of all trade unions (580 thousand in 2005), or the sum of employees and unpaid volunteers of non-profit organizations (537 thousand in 2006).²³

The Event Database reveals that the circles acted in collaboration with hundreds of other, officially registered patriotic, church-bound, professional, cultural, and local-level political organizations, as well as many small and medium-size private businesses, which, whether on grounds of material interest or ideological sympathy or both, aligned with the Right.

Importantly, all these organizations became increasingly "Inter-Networked." In 2003, the Newsletter was sent to about 14 thousand, and in early 2006 about 25 thousand, electronic addresses. The combination of dense and centralized electronic networks with decentralized inter-personal communication channels and newly emerging local, regional, and national media forums goes far explaining the movement's effectivity in informing about and mobilizing for participation in the 4900 events of the 2002-2006 period. What else do we know about the movement's coordination?

Shifting mode of coordination

To be admitted to the movement, the circles had to register with the Democracy Center, originally a watchdog organization that Fidesz established during the 2002 elections to collect reports on and seek remedy for anomalies. The Center functioned as the basic hub of communication among the circles, and between them and a plethora of other aligned associations, foundations, and political parties. The movement's chief coordinator Csaba Hende, originally member of the conservative Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF), reported to Viktor Orbán.

The movement capitalized on other existing resources as well. Parallel to the rapid expansion of the grassroots base, as early as on May 26th, 2002 Orbán founded his own "Alliance for the Nation," the 5000th civic circle. The Alliance was a conglomerate of more than a dozen large religious, patriotic,

²³ Greskovits and Wittenberg, *Civil Society and Democratic Consolidation*, 2016, Table 6.

political, professional, family, women, and youth organizations, founded well before the civic circles, and represented by their leaders or public figures. These organizations included the Committee for Historical Justice (representing revolutionaries and victims of the 1956 Revolution); the Movement for the Peasant Victims of Communism; the Catholic Alliance of Christian Intellectuals, the Hungarian Kolping Association, the Protestant Association for Community Culture, the Alliance for Hungarian Families Association; the Hungarian Civic Women's Forum; the patriotic National Unity Movement, and Action Alliance for Hungary; the conservative intellectuals' Batthyány Circle of Professors; the Association for Hungarian Civic Cooperation; as well as four youth organizations, Fidelitas, the Association of the April Youth (both closely linked to Fidesz), the Right-wing Youth Community (the social movement predecessor of the radical Right-wing Jobbik party), the Alliance of Piarist Students; and the official media outlet of the Alliance for the Nation, also called "Alliance".²⁴

Since many of these organizations disposed of financial resources, buildings and other infrastructure, professional expertise on a variety of subjects, and hundreds of active members of their own, initially they played a key role in consolidating the existence, helping the expansion, setting the agenda, and filling the event calendar of the many smaller and relatively resource-poor circles. Moreover, especially in 2002-2003, the Alliance frequently made public statements, issued directives, or called for participation in contentious and noncontentious activities.

Centralized communication, hierarchical chain of command at the top, and the smaller circles' dependence on a flagship organization that could be dubbed the "mother of all circles", all point to a political and top-heavy mode of coordination. While in perfect match with the Gramscian strategy, the expected gains from political control and the peculiarity of the latter merit further explanation.

The short-term gains can be traced to the situation at the movement's birth. The Fidesz-led coalition of 1998-2002 with the Independent Smallholders' Party (FKGP) and the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) as junior partners, brought about a dramatic restructuring on the Right side of political spectrum. By 2002 only Fidesz got stronger, while all the other Right-wing parties weakened or fell apart. The negative consequences materialized at the 2002 parliamentary elections. Neither FKGP nor the radical Right-wing MIÉP made it to the new parliament, while MDF passed the threshold only thanks to its electoral coalition with Fidesz. This meant that Fidesz, despite its success in getting the largest number of votes, could not form a new governing coalition.

Forced into opposition and facing municipal elections in the Fall of 2002, soon to be followed by a referendum on EU-accession in 2003 and the country's first European parliamentary elections on June 13th, 2004, Fidesz was in bad need of new arrangements to consolidate and expand its own and the Right's constituency. While a strategy aimed to foster collaboration among like-minded parties - and summarized in the slogan "there is one camp there is one flag" - did exist, it had to be adapted to the new circumstances. In 2002, the implosion of their favored parties left hundred-thousands of Right-wing voters without representation and many hundreds of activists without their former "employers."

Tapping into the pool of these "orphaned" activists before political rivals would do so was as urgent as it was complicated. Back in 2002, hardly could the Fidesz apparatus absorb them. The reason was that, as political analyst Gábor Gavra wrote: "within the circles' activist base there were two clearly distinguished groups. Besides Orbán's sizeable young upper-middle class fanclub, no less prominent were the activists of the 1990s' Right-wing parties, socialized in the action-focused world of FKGP and MIÉP mass-rallies and keeping strong reservations about the 'liberal roots' of Fidesz members and leaders."²⁵ They trusted Orbán but distrusted his party. The distrust was mutual. "Old-school" Fidesz apparatchiks, who were blamed for the lost elections, worried that the newcomers were

²⁴ Event Database, 2002.

²⁵ Gavra Gábor, „A Fidesz átalakulása: Véget ért egy fejezet.” [The Transformation of Fidesz. A Chapter is Closed.] *Magyar Narancs*, 2003 (18) 05. 01. Accessed on 2016. november 16. at http://magyarnarancs.hu/belpol/a_fidesz_atalakulasa_veget_ert_egy_fejezet-62613

going to be a threat to their established positions. In the view of the famous architect Imre Makovecz, himself a prominent activist of the movement, their fears were not without base:

“Viktor Orbán invented the Civic Circles Movement to rid local Fidesz organizations of petty politicians merely motivated by their own survival and replace them with people with real interest and involvement in public affairs. I spent three years of my life traveling in the country to help the birth of these Civic Circles.”²⁶

In this situation, when many devoted activists and potential voters were up for grabs, the civic circles seemed to be an optimal albeit temporary gathering place for the dispersed and politically homeless crowds – a first but important step towards their attempted unification under the Fidesz flag that started one year later. Hence the reason for one peculiarity of the movement’s initial mode of coordination: while it was political and top-heavy, this reflected Orbán’s personal leadership rather than institutionalized control by his party.

Precisely because the “civic camp” aimed to gather all ideologically conscious fractions of Hungarian Right, the Christian-national middle-class, the populist-national middle-class, and various groups of the radical Right, and, indeed, it aspired to represent the whole society, it was clear that hardly would the diverse activist groups rally around a single party flag. Hence the political rationale behind Orbán’s claim that the movement would elevate the national cause above the petty world of partisan divisions, skirmishes, and horse-trading in the parliament.

For the same reason, a rigid hierarchical chain of command alone was unlikely to keep the movement in motion. The solution was a “hybrid” pattern of coordination that fostered frequent interactions between the top and the diverse bases of the movement to combine the advantages of hierarchy with relative autonomy, and robustness with flexibility and innovation - in line with what social movement scholars would recommend.²⁷

A complete inventory of the partly horizontally coordinated or fully self-organized activities would easily fill another paper. Let me mention but a few concrete examples. The circles were encouraged to identify and occupy their own niche in civil society. Many circles chose names, and designed their own flag, logo, or even coat of arms. Via the Electronic Newsletter they could advertise and share their “best practices” with others. They participated in competitions to contribute to the visions and activities of the movement. The jury of one competition awarded the first prize a study on “Recapturing the holidays and everyday life”, which, published as a booklet, was then recommended as a manual for civic circle activists. Every other week saw the emergence of new local initiatives for charity, soon expanding in regional, national, and transnational spaces. Notwithstanding their occasional naiveté, small ideas on how to celebrate traditional old or invented new holidays in “civic ways” were picked up by hundreds. Invitations to spend quality time together at educational excursions, tourist trips, pilgrimages, national or local holidays, concerts, food, wine, and art festivals, or balls were circulated. Detailed instructions on how to file effective legal complaints against scandalous media contents, and how to protest the Iraq war or environmental degradation were elaborated, shared, and used to train activists and attract participants at all levels of the movement.

This interactive dimension of coordination was for some time left untouched by the big changes starting in Spring 2003, when Fidesz transformed itself into a catch-all “people’s party”. The party adopted the new name Fidesz–Hungarian Civic Alliance (Fidesz-MPSZ), created a new leadership structure, which concentrated decision making power in Orbán’s hands, and reinvigorated its electoral vote-getting apparatus and strategy. Reform of the functional organs was complemented by adding a

²⁶ Sigmund Bertalan, „Most jött el igazán a Polgári Körök ideje – interjú Makovecz Imrével.” [The Real Moment for Civic Circles Has Just Come – Interview with Imre Makovecz.] 2008. 11. 20. Accessed on 2016. 11. 17. at http://archiv.polgarokhaza.hu/index.php?mode=interju&cikk_id=930

²⁷ Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement. Social Movements and Contentious Politics*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011): 129-131.

layer of new representative bodies through which, as Zsolt Enyedi put it, the party structure was “supposed to mirror the social structure. Sections for workers, women, pensioners, smallholders, intellectuals, and so on, have been established. The leaders of the sections are members of the party leadership.”²⁸

For the civic circles, the changes brought a new era of incorporation of many of their members into the party machinery. Consequently, 1000 local Fidesz-MPSZ organizations came to existence, the party’s membership grew from 5 thousand to 35 thousand, and the influence of local party offices in initiating and coordinating civic activism strengthened. All in all, while the mixture of top-heavy and interactive modes in the movement’s coordination prevailed, the political control was no longer personalistic but rather institutionalized partisan. Accordingly, while one member of Orbán’s Alliance for the Nation Civic Circle joined the party’s leadership as section leader, and many other continued to attend and perform at local events, the Alliance did not hold meetings in 2004. The most ambitious members of the smaller circles joined Fidesz-MPSZ, and continued to organize civic life *from within* the party. But even those who stayed in the circles, turned more often to political activism *for* the party. The evolving pattern of agendas, activities, and alliances, which mirrored the dynamic changes in the local and national political environment, are vividly described by a leading activist of a relatively large civic circle (with 200 members) in one of the county capitals.

„We meet regularly, once every other week. Our relationship with the historical Churches is outstanding, they provided the venue for our meetings. In 2002 our community was forged by organizing protests, boycotts, and celebrating our national holidays. In 2003 we focused more on cooperation with Right-wing civil associations, meetings with prominent experts, well-known politicians and acclaimed artists, building stronger ties with the local Fidesz organization, and joining the new sections of Fidesz-MPSZ. We hosted László Kövér, Annamária Szalai, Csaba Hende, Károly Szita, Imre Schrammel, Ágnes Seszták and Zsolt Bayer. This was also the year when we started to become more visible: by organizing fairs for charitable purposes, distributing gifts (food and toys) to large families on Christmas and Easter, and holding press conferences as well as annual sessions on the state of affairs in Hungary. With guests from other towns we gathered at the Greater Hungary monument in our town to mark the anniversary of the Trianon Treaty with a festive event. Bus excursions to the House of Terror, Herend, Veszprém, to meetings and events in the county and other parts of Hungary, as well as common celebrations of the year’s end and name-days made the atmosphere of our community ever more intimate and family-like. During the 2004 EP election campaign, we contacted many families, visited villages, collected more than 4000 signatures for the National Petition, and were every day on duty in the local Fidesz office. We feel to have played a role in the victory of the Right in our hometown. In future, we want to reach out to high-school students and help them be acquainted with our national traditions, host celebrities and maintain our involvement in charitable activities, and be even more present in the public sphere - all this not least in order to prepare the ground for success in the 2006 elections.”²⁹

As hinted in this miniature „self-study,” in addition to the recruitment of new activists, the Gramscian conquest of civil society paved the way to the accumulation of a wealth of micro-data about the political preferences and attitudes of the electorate. Such data could be collected during elections and referenda, or were the by-product – or, indeed, the real purpose - of frequent petitioning. In turn, an army of devoted local activists with access to names, addresses, and data on political orientations, has allowed canvassing, that is, systematic efforts to approach citizens at home to learn about and influence their electoral preferences. This was crucial, because the party realized that in the Hungarian system the outcome of elections mainly depended on the mandates gained in the 176 single member constituencies. Csaba Hende told the weekly journal *HVG* that during the run-up to the parliamentary

²⁸ Zsolt Enyedi, „The Role of Agency in Cleavage Formation.” *European Journal of Political Research* 44 (2005): 697-720, 709.

²⁹ Event Database, 2004.

elections of 2006 it was up to the party's electoral district bosses to distribute tasks among civic circle activists. He also pointed to the importance of canvassing.

"In the coming year, the key task of civic circle members will be to approach each citizen individually and convince them to vote for the proper candidate' [...] Hende added that Fidesz-MPSZ ought to win over especially those who lacked a clear political identity, since their vote was going to be decisive."³⁰

While the technology of canvassing has been fine-tuned over the decade to follow, the gathering of micro-data has remained closely linked to petitioning. As recently noted by Ákos Hadházy, formerly a member of Fidesz, and currently a leader of the party Politics Can Be Different (LMP):

"The national consultation has no other purpose than collecting names."³¹ Back in time when I was still a Fidesz-MP, I saw the list of persons with a number attached to their name. If the individual signs a petition, his or her number increases accordingly. These personal data are registered and kept in alphabetical order in each municipality. Activists then use the database to decide which voters are to be personally approached."³²

In this respect, it seems significant that Gábor Kubatov, the party's top expert in "total mobilization" (and infamous for his leaked words on the existence of a detailed database on Right-wing constituency), began his career in 2002 as founding member of the Soroksár Civic Circle. He joined Fidesz in 2002 and one year later advanced to the position of the director of the same Budapest district's Fidesz organization. In 2004, he was appointed director of the House of Citizens (Polgárok Háza), the new community and cultural center of the movement, which opened in August 2004. By the 2006 parliamentary elections, he became Fidesz-MPSZ campaign manager responsible for mobilization. Further milestones of his ascendance include memberships in the parliament's Committee on Human Rights, Minorities, Civil Society and Religion, and Committee on Culture and Media; and from 2006 the position of Fidesz-MPSZ's national party director. Subsequently he was the mastermind behind the party's campaign organization before the 2006 municipal elections, the 2008 „social referendum,” and the 2009 EP elections.³³

Expanding the Right's public sphere: spectacles, "deep stories," and large organizations

This paper argues that, in addition to its short-term effects, the "original accumulation" of social capital made an enduring deep impact on the Right's civic associational life and political fortunes, which can be detected even today when the movement no longer exists in its original form. Political leaders were not silent about the circles' lasting effect. In 2014, speaker of the Parliament László Kövér stressed:

„[T]he civic circles and their activists turned politicians played an important role in the march of Fidesz from opposition to a government backed by parliamentary super-majority.”

Tamás László, Chair of the Board of the Alliance for the Nation Foundation added that the civic circles' „spirit” survived and its impact could be felt in:

³⁰ MTI, „Orbán: a polgári körök nélkül Sólyom nem győzött volna.” [Without the Civic Circles Fidesz Could Not Have Won.] *HVG.Hu* 2005. 06. 11. Accessed on 2016. 11. 17 at <http://hvg.hu/itthon/20050611solyomorban>

³¹ The “national consultation” is the Orbán regime's regularly used technique to justify its decisions *ex ante* or *ex post* by “asking the opinion of Hungarians”. In practice, the “consultation” means letters with deceptive and suggestive questions sent to 8 million Hungarian voters, whereby neither the returned documents nor the statistical processing of responses can be accessed by impartial representatives of public scrutiny.

³² Farkas György, „Kubatov listáin mérőszám jelzi, kire számíthat a Fidesz.” [Kubatov's Lists Have a Score to Indicate Who is Likely to Support Fidesz.] *24 óra*, April 11, 2017. Accessed on April 12 at <http://24.hu/belfold/2017/04/11/hadhazy-kubatov-listain-meroszam-jelzi-kire-szamithat-a-fidesz/>

³³ Wikipedia; Event Database 2002-2006.

„the landslide electoral victory, the Peace Marches, Fidesz’s philosophy of society, and the Basic Law [the country’s new constitution from January 1st 2012 – B. G.] [...] The civic circles became ferment in Hungarian society.”³⁴

Some empirical evidence on pro-government protests under Fidesz-MPSZ rule indicates that the civic circles have had an „afterlife” indeed. Starting in 2012, Budapest and some other cities saw six large demonstrations called the “Peace Marches”. A new umbrella organization, the Civil Unity (CÖF), which claims to be the heir of Civic Circles Movement, brought to the streets hundreds of thousands of demonstrators – occasionally including a few thousand brothers-in-arms arriving from Poland - determined to defend the government and the country from “colonialization” by international banks, speculators, and the EU. CÖF is viewed as a Government-Organized NGO (GONGO), generously funded and controlled by the administration.³⁵ Accordingly, critical media tend to depict the peace-marchers as mercenaries: essentially pensioners bribed into contention by a per diem, sandwiches, drinks, and a free bus-trip to Budapest.

While this assessment is not wrong, it may be incomplete. According to the findings of Pál Susánszky, Ákos Kopper and Gergely Tóth, „although participants in the Hungarian PGDs [pro-government demonstrations – B. G.] hardly meet prevailing ideals of the autonomous citizen, it would be wrong to look at them merely as puppets manipulated by the regime. Rather, they are informed and concerned individuals, even though their social networks and media consumption habits differ extensively from those participating in CRD [critical demonstrations – B. G.]”³⁶ The empirical research conducted by these authors found that while both pro-government protesters and their government-critical counterparts are well-informed about Hungarian affairs and tend to value democracy, the former are distinguished from the latter by more trust in the effectivity of their activism, higher frequency of membership in patriotic and religious civil organizations, and stronger reliance on Right-wing media for information on and interpretation of issues and events.

By the second decade of the new Millennium, then, multiple cleavages appeared to be in place to structure the peace-marchers’ world-view and action. Yet, to make a political impact, such cleavages must be formed to begin with. This was especially the case in Hungary, where the socialist system had been an obstacle to expressing attachments to the nation, religion, and to civil activism. It follows that during the postsocialist transformation Hungarians practically had to learn anew how to be patriots, believers, citizens, and Europeans and on these grounds, distinguish themselves from others. As argued by Zsolt Enyedi, in the nascent Hungarian democracy Fidesz proved to be a key agent of cleavage formation along all the above lines.³⁷ My paper substantiates that the party’s success in re-shaping, deepening, and politicizing cleavages hinged on the civic circles’ groundwork for rebuilding the Right’s social base.

As already hinted above, many individuals had reasons to feel that the civic circles gave them the sense of belonging, dignity, importance, and an autonomous voice on the matters crucial for them. In the following, I will demonstrate *how* these sentiments were created and strengthened. I suggest that the strong attachments emerged through the members’ regular encounters with each other and with leading activists, among them patriots, professionals, politicians, priests, and pundits, who, fighting as

³⁴ Both leaders cited in „A polgári körök előre vitték a nemzet életét.” [The Civic Circles Brought About Progress in the Nation’s Life.] 2014. 08. 26. Accessed on 2016. 11. 17. at <http://www.fidesz.hu/hirek/2014-08-26/a-polgari-korok-elobbre-vittek-a-nemzet-eletet/>

³⁵ „Tényleg a Fidesz-alapítvány pénzeli a békemeneteket”. [Does the Fidesz-foundation Finance the Peace Marchers Indeed?] *HVG.hu*. 2013, April 25th. Accessed on 2017 April 18th at http://hvg.hu/itthon/20130425_Tenyleg_Fideszalapitvany_penzeli_a_bekemenete

³⁶ Pál Susánszky, Ákos Kopper and Gergely Tóth, „Pro-government demonstrations in Hungary – citizens’ autonomy and the role of the media.” *East European Politics* 32, no. 1 (2016): 63-80, 64.

³⁷ Enyedi, „The Role of Agency in Cleavage Formation”, 2005.

Gramscian “organic intellectuals” for a hegemonic Right, offered new ways for Hungarians to feel, think, and act as members of “imagined communities.”³⁸ The 2004 events database reveals the importance of versatile nationalism, church-bound activism, and the media, for the expansion of the Right’s “own” public sphere and the formation of related cleavages.

Versatile nationalism

Reflecting the movement’s aim to appeal to diverse and large audiences, many events in the database can be characterized by one or several of four patriotic and/or nationalist frames and sets of collective practices, labeled below „local patriotism”, „Sacral-Medievalism”, „European Hungary”, and the nation of „fifteen million Hungarians”. These nationalisms entailed specific imaginations of Hungarians as a community, were put on the banner of different types of organizations, and had varied political economic backgrounds. At the same time, the four components of versatile nationalism readily combined, and allowed “injustice framing” and “bricolage”, two effective techniques frequently used by social movements for making meanings of „the world out there”, defining the boundary between „us” and „them”, and „doing the emotion work”.³⁹ Table 3 summarizes empirical evidence on the events associated with the four categories.

³⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. (London and New York: Verso, 1991).

³⁹ Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, 2011.

Table 3: Versatile nationalism: events and participating organizations in 2004

Dimensions of versatile nationalism	Local patriotism	Sacral-Medievalism	European Hungary	Fifteen million Hungarians	Total number and % percentage
Imaginations of the community	„the calendar is a model for community building”	“Faith in Fakes”	„Europe is our future, Hungary is our country”	“who share the pain of Trianon”	
Number of events	95	106	135	400	736
% of all events in 2004 (total number=1405)	6.5	7	10	28	51.5
Number of organizations	101	113	270	661	1145

Author’s calculation based on the Event Database 2004. Some events and organizations in specific categories combined several components of versatile nationalism, and the same organizations were participants in multiple events. Even so, this evidence leaves no doubt about the great importance of the „imagined community” and its variants for the mindset of civic circle activists and audiences.

Local patriotism

Interestingly, the events aimed to nurture attachments to the small (real rather than imagined) communities of the neighbourhood, habitat, and locality were the least frequent among the patriotic and/or nationalist events of the year 2004. The number of organizations specializing in local patriotic activities was also the smallest. These typically grass-roots and voluntary associations focused on local culture, maintenance of old or erection of new monuments of local history, publication of local calendars and almanachs, organization of balls, sports events, excursions, family programs, collection of donations for local charitable purposes, and mobilizing for participation in municipal politics. Financial support usually came from voluntary private giving, local businesses, local government sources, or various national programs to foster civil society.

The fact that the events and associations, which came closest to the Tocquevillian model of „civicness” appeared only sporadically is less surprising if we consider that, as mentioned above, by 2004 many of the civic circle activists were offered opportunities for upward political mobility to local

or even higher-level Fidesz-MPSZ organizations, which in turn led to the increasing involvement of the party in events “on the ground.” One example is the workshop that launched the 2005 Calendar of one of Budapest’s districts. The workshop aimed at local development and community building, took place in the House of Citizens, and was coordinated, funded, and attended by a group of partisan, civic, professional and business actors.

„Lectures at the book launch: "Alliance with the people of Budapest for the people of Budapest " [...] Chair of the Budapest Fidesz organization and leader of the Fidesz fraction in the municipal legislative body; "The deficit of urban society" [...] architect, director of the center New Budapest; "Region and community building" [...] electrical engineer, entrepreneur, and main sponsor of the Calendar; "FOTEK – community of consumers and producers" [...] director of Research and Development Group for Innovation in the Countryside, Károli Gáspár Calvinist University; "Spiritual networks" [...] Piarist cleric; "The real word" [...] Director of the House of Citizens; "The calendar – a model for community building" [...] architect, Chair of Fidesz electoral district, and managing editor of the Calendar. We ask you to find a neighbour or acquaintance with whom you never had a word except for greeting each other. Christmas approaching, it’s time to ring their door-bell with a copy of the calendar and a small tray of cookies in your hand.”⁴⁰

A second explanation of the relatively modest number of local patriotic events is that many events of local relevance bore even stronger marks of different notions of nationalism, and were therefore classified as representations of one or another of the three remaining categories.

Sacral-Medievalism

A second type of patriotism/nationalism could be called Sacral-Medievalist because its adherents transcended historical epochs and ritually re-enacted the myths of ancient nation. Organized mainly by traditionalist associations, hobby historians, martial art clubs, or the networks of religious and (far-Right leaning) „national” book-clubs and memorabilia boutiques, the events in this category included lectures on the life and mysteries of Saints, kings and queens, costumed ceremonies of Templars or other medieval knights’ orders, and expert-guided meditative tours to Hungary’s mystic places, such as the Pilis mountain (seen by some as the true centre of the Universe). Thematic summer camps organized for children and the young to make them familiar with the legends of Hunor, Magor, Attila the Hun, as well as the skill of runiform writing or ancient Hungarian martial arts complete the list. Arguably, however, the cult of King Saint Stephen’s *Sacra Corona* stood out for its elaborate spectacles and nation-wide popularity alike.

„With the ceremony, we want to nurture the nation’s dignity. The Sacred Crown is the symbol and embodiment of our nation’s historical continuity and unity [...] The center of events will be a two-meter-high and four-meter-wide replica of the Crown illuminated by candles symbolizing the pearls of the original. Citizens of our district and its neighbourhood will personify the Apostles and Saints depicted on the enamel paintwork of the Sacred Crown. [...], the famous actor, holder of the Kossuth Prize, will be the master of ceremony, and [...] acclaimed singers and choirs will perform in the musical interludes. Everybody is welcome to take a voluntary oath on the Crown, and upon request may get a certificate of participation in the ritual. We also want to leave a trace for future times: A Sacred Crown memorial mound to be built from the soil brought by the participants. We respectfully ask the attendees to bring (in a glass or a small bucket) a handful of soil from their home, and leave a message in the memorial album of the event. Please, come with candles or torches! Posters, program-leaflets, or the oath’s words are provided for preparation and dissemination of information. [...] We recommend visiting the Sacred Crown in the Parliament, and the coronation mantle in the National Museum.”⁴¹

⁴⁰ Event Database, 2004.

⁴¹ Event Database, 2004.

While the premodern Christian/pagan aspects of Sacral-Medievalism seem evident, I believe the postmodern inspiration of these imaginings ought to be taken no less seriously. In this perspective Sacral-Medievalism could be viewed as the local variant of „new Medievalism” analyzed in Umberto Eco’s *Faith in Fakes*.⁴² Accordingly, I risk the hypothesis that the spread of Sacral-Medievalist frames and practices might be no less due to the general popularity of the *Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, *Game of Thrones* and their commercialization in movies, collectibles, and table or computer games, than by genuine fascination with the myths and secrets of Hungary’s ancient history.

Compared to local patriotism and Sacral-Medievalism, which define Hungarians as members of small local or virtually timeless communities, respectively, the two remaining imaginations represent the transborder and transnational dimensions of the Civic Circles Movement. The first concept defines the nation in civic terms and its members as citizens of a European Hungary. In the second frame, the nation is perceived as an ethnic, cultural, and spiritual community of fifteen million Hungarians. The events of the year 2004 seem particularly apt for taking a snapshot of these varieties, because the final phase of preparation for EU accession on May 1st, 2004 raised vexing questions and fueled fears, hopes, and debates about Hungarians’ fate in an enlarged European Union.

European Hungary

The essence of events in this category is best captured by the title of Fidesz-MPSZ’s EU-accession program document: “Europe is our future; Hungary is our country.” In line with the party’s and the civic circles’ somewhat reserved but overall positive stance towards EU-membership, most events offered (oftentimes transnational) forums for learning about the details and political and policy consequences of accession. The needed expertise was provided by European and domestic professionals and politicians. The bulk of funding may have come from EU grants and Hungarian state programs. Far from celebrating the admittance to the EU with unbridled euphoria, the European framing of national issues - or the national framing of European issues - tended to emphasize Hungary’s unique contributions to the EU, and the implied risks (and not only opportunities) of enlargement for the nation, religion, culture, and the economy.

„At the closing event of the third and last day of the Free Europe Youth Festival in Győr, Viktor Orbán and Helmut Kohl shared their thoughts about the EU and the June EP elections. According to the former Chancellor of Germany [...] it is natural that some are afraid of the dramatic changes, but the problem is that such fears can limit the achievements of individuals and peoples. ‘I urge everybody to participate in the elections, because Hungary needs Europe just as much as Europe needs Hungary.’ Viktor Orbán [...] highlighted that Hungarians bring to Europe their enthusiasm about hard work: coming from poverty our attitude differs from that of Western people. Furthermore, we see the EU not only as a free community of citizens, but also as a community of communities. Given our problem that not all the Hungarians can join with us the EU, we are in the position to remind others of the importance of the nation as a community. [...] Orbán warned that by no means is the EU- membership a remedy for everything. If a country’s economy is kept in order and performs well, then joining the EU may bring further improvements. However, since the success of accession depends on the performance of the government, Hungarians have reasons to be afraid and feel insecure.”⁴³

Another, more directly political understanding of the benefits from a European citizenship informed the civic circles’ frequent references to European norms, rules, and standards whenever they framed domestic grievances, and sought remedies at EU-institutions.⁴⁴ This way, EU-accession opened up new opportunities for the civic circles to position themselves as the true representatives of the nation

⁴² Umberto Eco, *Faith in Fakes. Travels in Hyperreality*. (London: Vintage, 1998).

⁴³ Event Database, 2004.

⁴⁴ Supranational framing and „externalization” are well-known tactics of transnational movements. Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, 2011: 252-255.

and of European citizenry simultaneously, in contrast to the Left and Liberal rulers whose visions and practices were permanently criticized for being at odds with both.

Finally, many events within this cluster were part of the campaign before the country's first EP elections on June 13th, 2004, which meant a new chance for the Right to demonstrate its regained strength in political confrontation with its rivals in the electoral arena.

Fifteen million Hungarians

Table 3 shows that the nation as the community of fifteen million Hungarians was the frame for the largest cluster of nationalist events in 2004. Further, the more than 600 smaller or larger patriotic and transborder organizations involved in these events dwarf the number of organizers of all the other nationalist events taken together. Several explanations can be given for the attraction of this Greater Hungarian nationalism.⁴⁵

In my interpretation, the notion of fifteen million Hungarians appealed to sentiments of wide resonance among the members and sympathizers of civic circles by its inherent „deep story”. In the words of Arlie Russell Hochschild, who coined this term to capture the motifs of Tea Party sympathizers in the USA, „[a] deep story is a *feels-as-if* story – it's the story feelings tell, in the language of symbols. It removes judgement. It removes fact. It tells us how things feel. Such a story permits those on both sides of the political spectrum to stand back and explore the subjective prism through which the party on the other side sees the world.”⁴⁶

In our case, the deep story was the suffering brought by the Trianon Treaty signed after the lost First World War in 1920, which forced Hungary to hand over two-thirds of its territory and 60 percent of its population - including millions of ethnic Hungarians - to neighbouring states. According to „the story feelings tell”, Hungarians were those (and only those) „who shared the pain of Trianon.” The civic circles advanced the „emotion work” by activities whose purpose was to remember, mourn, and militate against the loss, celebrate the nation's splendid past, but also to excommunicate, as it were, those who failed appreciate the nation's past greatness, or to feel the pain of Trianon if for nothing else then because they trusted that joining a borderless Europe would eventually heal the nation's historical wounds.

To re-tell the deep story repeatedly, a Trianon museum was established; several TV and movie documentaries about Trianon and its consequences were shot and widely shown; related books and pamphlets were discussed at lectures and workshops; dozens of Trianon monuments were erected and inaugurated all over Hungary; and memorial events were held in numerous places. Old and new grievances of Hungarian minorities in the neighbouring countries were given wide publicity. For some of the atrocities against Hungarian minorities after the Second World War symbolic remedies were sought at EU-level forums. Time and again, the suffering of Trianon's victims was labelled the „Hungarian Holocaust”, and demands for „equal opportunities for remembering” and grief were raised.

Beyond remembering Trianon, the movement tried to „reunite” the fifteen million Hungarians in no less symbol-rich but at the same time more practical ways as well. These efforts included frequent

⁴⁵ An insightful account of the social bases of ethnic-cultural nationalism, the reasons for its popularity, and the frames and symbols of the extended nation's „public history” is offered by Feischmidt Margit, „Populáris emlékezetpolitikák és az újnacionalizmus: a Trianon-kultusz társadalmi alapjai,” [Popular Memory Politics and Neo-Nationalism: Social Bases of the Trianon Cult] in Feischmidt Margit, Glózer Rita, Ilyés Zoltán, Kasznár Veronika Katalin, and Zakariás Ildikó, *Nemzet a mindennapokban. Az újnacionalizmus populáris kultúrája* [The Nation in Everyday Life: The Popular Culture of Neo-Nationalism] (Budapest: MTA Társadalomtudományi Központ, és L'Harmattan Kiadó, 2014. 51-81, as well as by other studies of this excellent volume.

⁴⁶ Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in their Own Land. Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. (New York, London: The New Press, 2016): 135.

crossings of state borders in all directions; building contacts with or even “adopting” individuals, institutions, villages and towns of Hungarian minorities; and attending lectures, conferences, and displays of all-Hungarian treasures of art and literature.

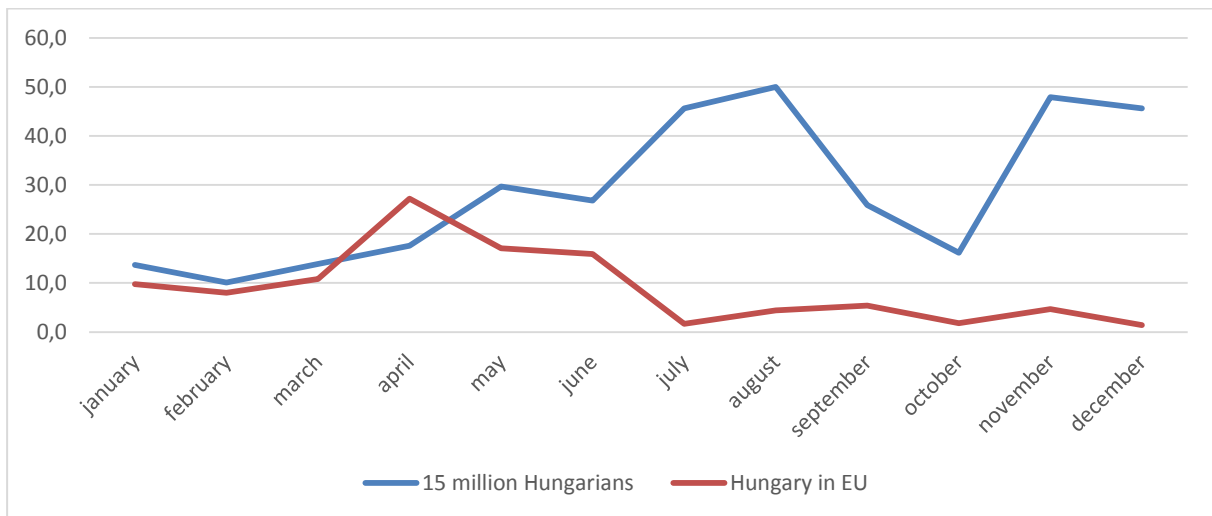
Interestingly, donations and other kinds of help offered to needy persons, groups, and under-funded educational, religious, and social welfare institutions in the neighbouring countries accounted for the bulk of the movement’s charitable activities. It appears that the metropolitan middle-class activists’ faith in the *fraternité* of 15 million Hungarians combined with their peculiar concern about the social and, even more importantly, cultural *égalité* of the 5 million living farthest away from them. Irony of ironies, during the current refugee crisis the Right keeps criticizing the Left and Liberal middle-classes of the country’s capital for their biased and hypocritical solidarity, namely for showing more compassion with migrants coming from the distant places and cultures of the Middle-East and North Africa than for their own compatriots in need within and without Hungary.

Perhaps the most popular way to turn the imagined community into more real implied frequent journeys to former Greater Hungarian territories. To be sure, travels to Transylvania, Southern and Eastern Slovakia, or the Carpathian Ukraine have never been the Right’s monopoly. However, the civic circles’ tourism differed from ordinary excursions in several respects. Dozens of specialist business enterprises offered trips at lower price to civic-circle members, and attracted them with reliable professional guides and in some cases even bus-drivers coming from the movement. The organizers promised authentic Hungarian hospitality and personal encounters with locals who hosted the travelers in their guest-rooms, offered traditional meals of their home-cuisine, and entertained the guests with folklore spectacles. These journeys routinely included stopovers at the very same legendary places of Greater Hungarian history. As revealed by the sometimes exalted “travelogues” in the Event Database, all these features made the adventures at the “headwaters” of national identity more reminiscent of *pilgrimages* to sacred places than of the usual experiences of mass tourism.⁴⁷

Finally, the cause of reuniting fifteen million Hungarians provided the motivation for the circles’ most important political venture. On December 5th, the political year of 2004 culminated in a referendum on granting Hungarian citizenship to the five million ethnic Hungarians living abroad. The civic circles’ campaign slogan “Passport to Europe” was a powerful expression of the organizers’ ambition to include all members of the ethnic-cultural community in the citizenry of European Hungary. Coordinated by the World Alliance of Hungarians (MVSZ), many other patriotic organizations, and the Historical Churches within and without Hungary, as well as by hundreds of smaller circles, the mobilization for the referendum explains the peak of nationalist events in November and December 2004.

⁴⁷ For a thorough political-economic and ethnographic analysis of the pilgrimages to the Transylvanian Csíksomlyó Passion, one of the most popular destinations of the civic circles’ tourism, see Ilyés Zoltán, „Az emlékezés és a turisztikai élmény nemzetiesítése” (Nationalization of Remembering and the Tourism Adventure), in Feischmidt et al. *Nemzet a mindennapokban*, 2014: 290-340.

Figure 1: Events related to „15 million Hungarians”, and „European Hungary” (% of all events, 2004)



Author's calculation based on the Event Database 2004.

Indeed, in terms of the number of events at least, the mobilization was more extensive than the earlier campaigns before EU-enlargement and the EP-elections in April to June 2004. The example below illustrates the emotional, spectacular, and transborder character of the campaign.

„A young group from the Matthew Coronation Church parish [...] will march on november 21th-27th from Nagyvárad [Oradea, Romania – B. G.] to Budapest, to remind the citizens of Hungary of their moral responsibility concerning the coming historical referendum on december 5th, and ask them to offer the chance of Hungarian citizenship also to their brothers and sisters across the border. The purpose of the pilgrimage is to bear witness of cross-border solidarity by bringing home the messages of those, whose fate is at stake in the referendum. [...] While the pilgrims can only contribute their feet, heart and time, they would be honored if [...] they could take back home messages by many ordinary people and luminaries. Please, support our cause with brief written statements, and convince many others to do the same. [...] Addressed „From Hungarian to Hungarian,” the letters should be sent to the Nagyvárad Bishop's Office. [...] Whether coming from Nagyvárad, the Partium, Transylvania, or Székely Land, those who can should attend the holy mass in the Nagyvárad cathedral, and give us their message in person. [...] All those present at the mass are then welcome to walk together with the young group from Budapest and others from Transylvania to the border crossing. Individuals may join the pilgrimage for its whole duration or for a limited time. More information is provided by the Kolozsvár [Cluj-Napoca, Romania – B. G.] office of the Transylvanian Association of the World Alliance of Hungarians (MVSZ).”⁴⁸

Despite all the efforts, the turnout at the referendum remained below the threshold of validity. The 1.5 million “yes” votes barely exceeded the 1.45 million votes for Fidesz-MPSZ at the June 13th EP-elections. The civic circles, the patriotic organizations, and the party blamed each other for the fiasco. For some party leaders, the failure was proof of the movement's limited mobilizing capacity. However, in Csaba Hende's view, the real reason was the insufficient financial and political support given to the movement:

„On december 5th the villages performed very badly indeed. But let us not forget that in most villages neither Fidesz nor the civic circles are present [...] The country has about 3000 municipalities [...] In the past fifteen years the parties managed to reach out to about 500 of them [...] while the rest remained a blank spot for political actors. Even without financial and serious

⁴⁸ Event Database, 2004.

political support, in the past two-and-half years the civic circles managed to “dig” twice as deep [...] I did all I could: I sent written invitations to civic circle members to our campaign events where we asked them to convince their relatives and acquaintances to attend and vote ‘yes’ at the referendum, and tried to help them with arguments on why this was important. But we could not organize 3000 rallies, especially that the small municipalities lacked even public venues to host such events.”⁴⁹

One disappointed member asked, how on earth could one assign responsibility for the great “cause of uniting the nation to the small pensioners living in miserable conditions in socialist housing estates?”⁵⁰ Similarly, Viktor Orbán’s diagnosis stressed social problems.

“Without offering remedies for the precarious conditions of Hungarian life, we will not be able to build more robust support for the national cause [...] All those committed to the future of the nation must now focus on the social question. Therefore, I ask the adherents of radical Right whose utmost priority is national identity to also realize: the most important message of the referendum is that the success in our fight against precarious living conditions is a pre-condition for building a strong nation.”⁵¹

In fact, the party’s more pragmatic and “materialist” political strategy and the movement’s radicalizing identity-based agenda had started to grow apart well before the referendum. As reported by Attila Körömi, an MP for Fidesz-MPSZ who in April 2004 left the party with disillusionment and later joined Jobbik, the Fidesz leaders arrived at a turning point when they started preparations for the 2004 EP-elections. At a fraction meeting on April 5th, 2004, Orbán introduced Árpád Habony, the party’s new campaign boss and architect of its new strategy. Referring to a new large-N opinion poll commissioned by the party Orbán reportedly told:

“The poll shows that Fidesz divided the country [...] To reduce the voters’ aversion, we must win the hearts and minds of those undecided or Left-minded voters, who are dissatisfied with their living standards. The Left-Right division does not make sense anymore. The issues of Hungarian minorities in the neighbouring countries and their declining numbers are less and less useful for defining the terms of political discourse. All in all, we must admit that the Kádár-regime triumphed and proved to be the ultimate winner of transition. Hence the need for cooperation with Left-wing pundits who should be allowed to speak on behalf of Fidesz. Our future task is to focus on economic problems, the difficulties of everyday life, indebtedness, uncertainty, and fear, and hammer in these topics through repeating them.”⁵²

Along these lines, the party’s campaign during the run-up to the EP election centered on a National Petition demanding protective measures in the areas of housing, healthcare, agriculture, and employment to mitigate the expected negative social consequences of EU-accession. Since this petition heralded a new era of social welfare demands, which came to dominate Fidesz-MPSZ’s strategy in the following years, it also led to a deepening divide between the party and the movement. The civic circles were left alone in their pursuit of identity-based national unification. It is telling that while individual circles and the aligned patriotic organizations started their campaign for the dual citizenship already in the Spring of 2004 (or even earlier), the circles headquarter launched its centralized campaign for „Passport to Europe” three weeks, and Fidesz-MPSZ only a single week, before the referendum. The party’s half-hearted and delayed move did not leave much time for using the canvassing weapon.

⁴⁹ Event Database, 2005; www.gondola.hu

⁵⁰ Event Database, 2004.

⁵¹ Event Database, 2004; www.mno.hu

⁵² Körömi Attila, „Polgári társadalom vagy Kádár-rendszer. Az otthonról hozott, majd bennem formálódó értékrend készített cselekvésre.” [Civility Versus the Kádár-regime. Values Originating in My Family and Shaped by My Own Experiences Guided My Action.] *Magyar Nemzet*, April 18, 2017.

The contradiction between the party's materialist electoral and the movement's identity-centered mobilization strategies led to a new, fragmented, mode of coordination. While chief coordinator Hende and his apparatus stayed closely aligned with Fidesz-MPSZ, the mobilization of the circles' rank and file was largely left in the hands of nationalists, whose divisive radicalism sat uneasy with the new agenda of opening towards broader constituencies mainly concerned about social issues. Gone was the time when all the circles and the parties of the Right „moved together.” Henceforth, the Fidesz party's messages were addressed in a new populist fashion to „the people” rather than to „civic Hungary”.⁵³ Conversely, although this way the civic circles gained some autonomy from party control, their emancipation happened at the price of radicalization, fragmentation and declining political significance, which foreshadowed their ultimate demise. (See more on this below in the section on the media.)

Omnipresent Historical Churches

As shown in Table 4 below, the “historical”, that is, first and foremost the Roman Catholic, Reformed Calvinist, and Lutheran Churches within and without Hungary, played a prominent role in hosting, organizing, performing at and shaping the agenda and character of civic circle events.

⁵³ Körömi, „Polgári társadalom vagy Kádár-rendszer”, 2017.

Table 4: Omnipresent “Historical” Churches (% of all, i.e. 1405, events in 2004)

	Venue		Participating individuals / organizations		Theme	
% of all events in 2004	13		15		11	
	Church, monastery, monument	Other Church-bound (mainly high-schools)	Clergy	Other Church-bound	Religious ceremony (e.g. Holy Mass)	Other religion or church-related
% of all events in 2004	6	7	7	9	3	8
	Events with at least one Church-related feature					
% of all events in 2004	23					

Author’s calculation based on the Event Database, 2004. Many events represented the influence of Hungary’s Historical Churches on several of the three main dimensions, and combined multiple venues, participants, and themes.

Several explanations can be given for this. The most obvious of these is ideological affinity, which was a frequent topic of discussion at workshops, lectures, and public statements by members of the clergy, the Christian Democratic parties, and lay civic activists alike.

No less important was the massive infrastructural, ideological, and manpower that the Churches had at their disposal and were willing to offer to the movement. As many as 13 percent of all events in 2004 were hosted by churches, monasteries, the community rooms of parishes, Church-bound primary schools, gymnasiums, universities, healthcare institutions, and care homes for the elderly. It is important to recall, that the restitution of church property culminated under the Fidesz-led government of 1998-2002. The Roman Catholic Church alone was returned the buildings and other property of 300 gymnasiums. 2002 marked the beginning of „payback time”.

Furthermore, 16 percent of the events involved members of the clergy or other Church-bound civic and political organizations and their prominent representatives. Their enthusiasm about the movement is illustrated by the recollection of one priest cited by Enyedi: „When the idea emerged, all the Rosary Societies in my environment turned automatically into civic circles”. According to the Events Database, similar transitions happened in some Church-bound educational institutions.⁵⁴

Finally, the omnipresence of Historical Churches could be motivated by their fear that, unlike the previous conservative administration, the new Left-Liberal government would not grant them the privileged status of quasi „state-Churches.” The Churches might have realized the need for stronger presence in civil society, to mobilize followers and combat adversaries „from below” to protect their ideology, institutions, and interests in public policy and media. Clearly, the Christian spiritual influence and collective action was present in many areas of civic activism, from holidays to entertainment, or politics.

When celebrated by the civic circles, practically all of Hungary’s holidays – whether traditionally Christian or national and/or nonreligious – became imbued with Christian spirit. Hardly any commemoration of the revolutions of 1848 and 1956, or of the heroes and victims of the First and Second World Wars, would take place without a Holy Mass, procession under Christian symbols, or collective prayer in town or across the country. Campaigns were launched to name bridges, streets, professional associations of conservative lawyers, teachers, doctors, and educational and healthcare institutions after Hungarian Saints. Indeed, displaying the Gramscian strategy of recapturing holidays, some civic circles tried to add a dose of religious content to the traditional holidays of the Left, such as the International Workers’ Day.

„On 1st of May, 2004, starting at 10am, the [...] civic association goes maying in honor of Saint Joseph the Laborer at the [...] chapel. The event starts with a Holy Mass celebrated by the main sponsor of the event, bishop [...]. Invited honored guests and speakers are: the acting vice president of Slovakian Hungarian Coalition Miklós Duray, writer and publicist Zsolt Bayer, Member of Parliament Péter Szijjártó, and the President of the city’s Fidesz organization, dr. Csaba András Dézsi. The program includes cultural and sports events, as well as various entertainment for kids. For 850 Forints, the local Candle Lights Restaurant offers beef goulash cooked in red wine, and served with boiled potatoes, pickled peppers and cucumbers, and two slices of bread.”⁵⁵

One of the events to celebrate EU-accession was a highly unconventional soccer game organized by the clergy.

„On 8th, June, 2004 a soccer game of priests will take place in the Ferencváros Stadium, to help the orphanage of Déva [Romania]. The national team of Hungarian priests invited its Slovak counterpart for a brotherly contest in service of a truly serious cause. All the revenue from the match will be offered to help the orphans and other handicapped minors of the Franciscan monastery of Déva. In their appeal, God’s servants stress that they want to enter the European Union through this competition between brothers for a noble cause. The Hungarian team includes two newly inaugurated bishops [...] The stadium could host 40 thousand fans. Let us pray together for a fully packed arena, which would be a great help to Déva’s orphans. Main organizer: father [...]”.⁵⁶

The last example illustrates the role of the clergy in the process of collecting signatures for the referendum on dual citizenship.

„Dénes Kiss, Chair of the Trianon Society and Miklós Patrubby, Chair of the World Organization of Hungarians [...] asked citizens to support the initiative for referendum on dual citizenship with

⁵⁴ Enyedi, „The Role of Agency in Cleavage Formation”, 2005: 709; Event Database, 2004.

⁵⁵ Event Database, 2004.

⁵⁶ Event Database, 2004.

their signature [...]. If we may suggest: a new list of signatures after every Holy Mass. Every priest will help if duly approached.”⁵⁷

Media influence

The Events Database indicates that by 2004 the situation of Right-wing media became consolidated even if the media landscape remained overall imbalanced. Campaigns for fundraising, subscriptions and channeling advertisement to Right-wing media outlets, and reports on launching new media and watchdog organizations were less frequent in 2004 than in previous years. Similarly, even if these issues remained contentious, neither government interference into matters of the media, nor the lies and scandalous contents of Left-Liberal media happened to provoke as many protests as in 2002 or 2003. Instead, most events meant meetings between media pundits and their audiences.

Table 5: Cleavage formation in media consumption. Events in 2004.

	All media-related events	Attack Left-liberal and commercial media & defend Right-wing media	Supporting old Right-wing media (fundraising, subscriptions, advertisement), and launching new Right-wing media & watchdogs	Media pundits meet audience
Number of events	186	25	8	153
% of all events in 2004 (=1405)	13.2	0.2	0.1	11

Author’s calculation based on the Event Database, 2004.

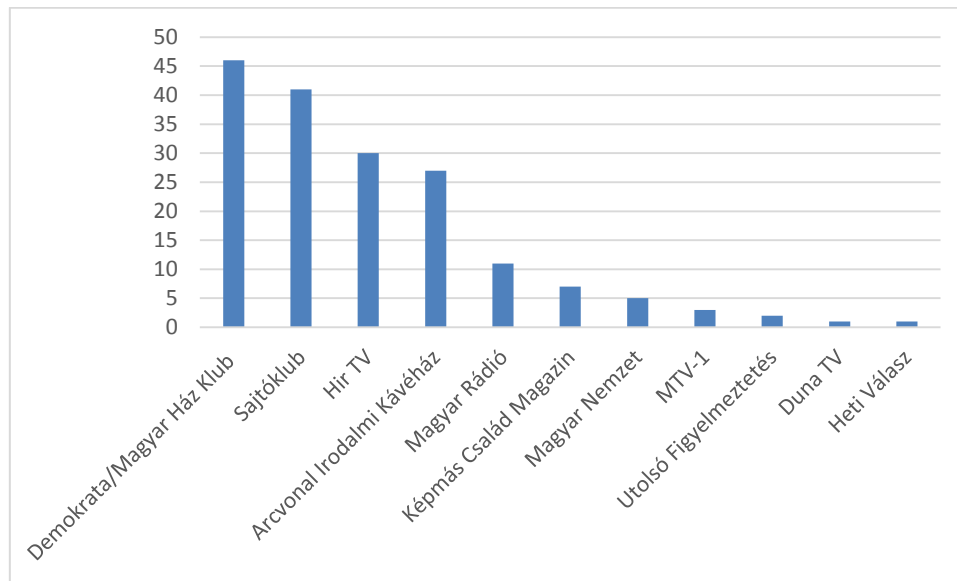
However, the uneven distribution of these meetings across various discussion groups and media clubs points to the increasing divisions and fragmentation within the Right’s public sphere. Rather than „moving together”, different media were more or rather less supportive of the movement’s cause and activities. For example, Csaba Hende complained that,

⁵⁷ Event Database, 2004.

„one weekly allegedly belonging to the national camp has yet to publish a single positive article about the civic circles.”⁵⁸

In contrast, other media outlets were more than willing to influence and amplify the circles’ voices. Specifically, in 2004 a handful of media clubs and forums – (in)famous about the radicalism of their programs, pundits, and audiences - prominently the Magyar Ház Club of the weekly *Magyar Demokrata*, the Sajtóklub, and the Arcvonal Irodalmi Kávéház, hosted most of the media-related events.

Figure 2: Media pundits meet audience. Number of events, 2004



Author’s calculation based on the Event Database, 2004.

István Malgot, originally a prominent member of Orbán’s Alliance for the Nation Civic Circle and editor of its official journal *Szövetség* criticized Fidesz-MPSZ for turning a blind eye to the fact that the increasing influence “volunteer corps” of Far-Right journalists led to the movement’s fragmentation and radicalization.

„The permanent fight needs disciplined soldiers who execute the orders rather than real intellectuals who can use truthful and rational arguments to influence and convince others. This intelligentsia all but left Fidesz. It was replaced by a handful of scribblers from Sajtóklub and Demokrata, a so called radical weekly. This volunteer corps undermined Fidesz’s chances to create a majority behind the national cause. In the last one-and-half year we witnessed the spread of foul, demagogic and unacceptable views in the newspapers, which call themselves radical but are explicitly on the far-Right. Nazi, antisemitic and Hungarist pamphlets are put on sale at our cultural and political events and by our so called national bookshops, making their filthy content acceptable as it were for the new generations. As a consequence, it is the national camp itself that becomes less and less acceptable together with Fidesz, which, while far from being unaware of, remains silent about and turns a blind eye to these developments.”⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Event Database, 2005; www.gondola.hu

⁵⁹ Malgot István, „Véget kell vetnünk a hallgatásnak.” [We Must Stop Being Silent]. Excerpts from his article originally published in *Szövetség. Népszabadság*, 2005 January 19.

Conclusions and questions for further research

Let me summarize my findings on the contributions of the Civic Circle Movement to Hungarian political and civic associational life. As far as the political consequences are concerned, the circles helped build a robust social foundation for the Fidesz-regime, which can partly explain its resilience and characteristic features. The movement was also instrumental in expanding the Right's public sphere, and forging alliances between large organizations – the domestic and transborder nationalist associations, the Historical Churches, and some (but not all) of the political parties - and the smaller civil organizations. Time and again, the movement even managed to bring about tactical ad-hoc cooperation with globalization-critical, environmental, and peace movements, and certain civil and human rights NGOs, despite that they were far from fully sharing the Right's ideological orientation.⁶⁰

Furthermore, the circles proved important for Fidesz-MPSZ's efforts to reform its internal structure, multiply its membership and the number of its local affiliates, recruit and allow upward political mobility of an army of enthusiastic activists. Many of the party's current top leaders came from the circles. All this allowed Fidesz-MPSZ to gradually catch up with the MSZP in using effective electoral campaign technologies, such as canvassing. All in all, Orbán had serious reasons to claim that without the movement Fidesz would have become a medium-size party of meagre importance.

Coming to the impact on civic associational life, today Hungarian civil society cannot be characterized as generally weak. While its Left and Liberal sectors appear to have weakened, its Right sector has grown more robust. Even if the Civic Circles Movement no longer exists, many of its Church-bound, cultural, patriotic, festive and professional activities are likely to continue. The foundations for this were, again, partly laid by the movement, which opened new opportunities for hitherto ignored and/or marginalized individuals to become „organic intellectuals” and opinion makers on the Right and, aligned in the circles, form a powerful intellectual (and not only political) counter-movement against the Left and Liberal pundits' „un-Hungarian” hegemony. Accordingly, after 2010 the Orbán-regime has canonized and generously supported many of the civic circles' early experiments with ideas, narratives, heroes, and symbols. Finally, the movement's activist legacy partially explains the massive participation in the Civil Unity's marches as well.

Nevertheless, I also found that the movement's mobilizing capacity was limited even in its heyday. While the circles helped stabilize and marginally expand Fidesz's core constituency via ever increasing doses of identity politics, they fell short of reaching out to those less or not at all preoccupied with issues of identity. Hence the increasing salience of the social question in Fidesz's strategy, which started to bring fruits when the economic situation deteriorated and the incumbents lost their remaining meagre credibility as advocates of „socially sensitive” policies.

Meanwhile, however, the Right – this time the originally Far-Right Jobbik party – became first mover in giving voice to the grievances of those massive groups of population, which were out of reach for Fidesz-MPSZ and the civic circles alike. Interestingly, when organizing the paramilitary Hungarian Guard to combat „Gypsy crime” on the country's spatial and social peripheries, the Jobbik party's leader Gábor Vona referred to the civic circles as a role model.⁶¹

⁶⁰ On the ascendance of environmental, pro-poor, peace, and life-style-oriented „new social movements” in Hungary, and the reasons for their reluctance to strategically join either the Right or the Left side of political spectrum, see Mikecz Dániel, „A globalizációkritikus mozgalom Magyarországon. Lehetőséstruktúra és mozgalmi innováció. [The Globalization-critical Movement in Hungary. Opportunity Structure and Movement Innovation.” Budapest: Unpublished PhD Dissertation publicly defended at Eötvös Lóránd Tudományegyetem, Állam és Jogtudományi Kar, Politikatudományi Intézet, 2016.

⁶¹ For a recent outstanding political ethnographic analysis of the second phase of rebuilding the Hungarian Right, its political-economic structural conditions, main actors, and the ideologies and symbols used by a new generation of Rightist „organic intellectuals”, see Kristóf Szombati, „The Revolt of the Provinces. Anti-Gypsism and Right-wing Politics in Rural Hungary.” Unpublished PhD Dissertation publicly defended at the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology of Central European University, Budapest, 2017, and honored with best dissertation award of CEU.

Did the Hungarian Left and Liberal parties learn anything from the Civic Circles Movement? I doubt they did. Yet to find out why is a topic for future inquiry. After all, it is quite puzzling that the conquest of civil society occurred, as it were, under the radar of the MSZP-SZDSZ coalition. How to make sense of their weak response to the challenge posed by the Right in civil organization and contention? It would be certainly difficult to argue that the challenge was not new at all, because the Left had always been inferior in terms of social embeddedness. As Ferenc Kőszeg, formerly a leader of democratic opposition against the Kádár regime and later of SZDSZ recalled:

“Despite their shrinking membership, the Socialists are omnipresent. They have enough people on the ground ‘who can distribute red carnations on International Womens’ Day, and propagate the party line in shops, playgrounds, and among pensioners playing cards. Reaching to the roots of society, the Socialists’ campaign [during the 1994 elections – B. G.] proved to be tremendously effective’.”⁶²

Alternative explanations would suggest that during their many years in power the MSZP and SZDSZ did little to prevent their „own” civil sector from withering away. In an earlier article, I suggested an ideological explanation, namely that the dominant liberal and „Third-way socialist” view of democracy equated citizens’ political involvement largely with voting and only very specific forms of civic activism, such as protection of civil rights and the rights of minorities, but barely anything else.

A second reasoning may be political. Within their coalition governments the Left and Liberal parties kept competing for influence over politics and policy making, and their struggle reinforced their mutual ambivalence, sometimes even suspicion and jealousy, towards each other’s organizational bases in society. This was particularly true for the trade unions and professional associations inherited from communist times, which the Liberals tended to view as threats to marketization, sources of unwanted interference with parliamentary democratic representation and decision making, and saw as “natural” allies of the Socialists.⁶³

Finally, and ironically, the lack of a perceived need for civil society backing could be explained by the electoral successes of the Left and Liberal camp. Strength in parliament especially before the MSZP was hit with scandal, might also help to explain that actors on the Left chose to work through formal political channels.⁶⁴

The jury is still out to judge whether the weak response was due to some of the above-mentioned reasons or should rather be traced to deeper structural obstacles to reinvigorating the Left and Liberals’ “own” civic associational life. Whatever the correct answer, the main underlying question is like the one currently posed by Brexit, Donald Trump’s and Jaroslaw Kaczynski’s victory, as well as other manifestations of ascending anti-liberalism: Do Left and Liberal actors still have the skill, will, and the organizational and ideational resources of a vibrant civil society to resist the implementation of illiberal and anti-democratic political programs?

From this, a couple of no less puzzling questions follow: Can those who rally around the rainbow banner of open society’s universalist emancipatory agendas learn from their opponents who put their faith in the imagined communities united by the tricolor or the cross? Since for the time being I have no convincing answer, I end this paper with a few related questions inspired by the Hungarian experience. Is there an alternative „deep story” that would unite „the colors of the rainbow”? Or should such a story be (re)invented and/or better translated into everyday activism and community life at all levels? Will a Tocquevillian strategy suffice to recapture some of the societal space occupied by those who, once in power, turned out to be enemies of open society? Or should the advocates of open

⁶² Kőszeg Ferenc, *Múltunk vége*. [The End of our Past.] (Pozsony: Kalligram, 2017). (Kőszeg refers to the observation of the late Otília Solt, that time a leading politician of SZDSZ).

⁶³ Béla Greskovits, „The Hollowing and Backsliding of Democracy in East Central Europe”. *Global Policy* 6, 51 (June 2015): 28-37.

⁶⁴ Greskovits and Wittenberg, „Civil Society and Democratic Consolidation” 2016, 25.

society turn „Gramscian”, much the way their adversaries have done while in opposition? Are there ways for striking a more up-to-date balance between NGO-professionalism and social movement activism; between focus on the individual and the community; and between the interests and the passions? Finally, how to get „from here to there”? At which level to start rethinking and then reinventing open society: the locality, the nation (however it is imagined), or the European Union?

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