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Rebuilding the Hungarian right through conquering civil society: the Civic Circles Movement

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ABSTRACT

The article analyses the Civic Circles Movement that paved the way for Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party from the opposition to enduring political rule. It is demonstrated that through extending and connecting the right's grassroots networks and hierarchical organisations, reinventing its holidays and heroes, and mobilising followers for contention, the movement has transformed civil society. The article contributes to the recent literature on illiberal parties and leaders by showing that the civic activism of educated middle-class supporters may be as important for their rise and resilience in power as the votes of less educated groups within their constituency.

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Introduction

The article contributes to a better understanding of the worldwide rise of illiberal political leaders and agendas with a study of the road of Viktor Orbán's Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Alliance (Fidesz-MPSZ) from opposition to lasting rule.¹ This case is important as the earliest example of a radicalising centre-right party that in less than a decade transformed a liberal democratic into a competitive authoritarian regime within the European Union (EU). The Orbán regime also deserves attention for its enduring support among the electorate. Starting with its landslide victory at the Spring 2010 national parliamentary election, Fidesz-MPSZ has won more than half a dozen municipal, national, and European parliamentary elections in a row, and has done so without resorting to open repression or large-scale electoral fraud, characteristic of the competitive authoritarianisms of Turkey or Russia.

What explains Fidesz-MPSZ's remarkable political success, both its first landslide electoral triumph and lasting rule? This is the general question that motivated the present research. Searching for an answer, the article critically reflects and builds on three bodies of scholarship: on state capture by ruling parties, electoral mobilisation by populist challenger parties, and extra-parliamentary mobilisation by movement parties.

One strand of literature traces the resilience of illiberal parties to their success in “capturing state institutions and resources and employing them for electoral gain” (Dimitrova

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2018, 262; Innes 2014). Most analyses of Hungary's democratic backsliding adopted a similar perspective. Since 2010, it is argued, backed by legislative super-majority and barely constrained by the fragmented opposition, the Orbán regime undermined media freedom, extended government control over the judiciary, weakened the constitutional protection of minorities, and manipulated electoral law in favour of the incumbent (Bánkuti, Halmai, and Scheppele 2012; Kornai 2015; Kis 2019). NGO's active in the fields of human rights, civil liberties, and control of corruption, as well as universities and research institutes became targets of harassment by the authority. Yet, this destructive process has for long stayed under the radar of the EU not least because it advanced surreptitiously and often via adoption of worldwide existing legal and institutional "worst practices" (Greskovits 2015).

Although this explanation is not wrong, it is incomplete in two respects. On the one hand, the stress on state capture should not make analysts blind to the antiliberal parties' enduring substantial support in public opinion, which in the case of Fidesz-MPSZ frequently exceeds the combined popularity of its rivals. On the other hand, while the referred literature has at least a partial explanation of the resilience of illiberal actors in the political arena, it is of little help in making sense of their first, sometimes sweeping, victories in liberal democracies not yet tailored to the needs of their hold on power. Specifically, argues Dimitrova (2018, 262, 271, en. 5, with critical reference to Innes 2014), the suggestion that the postcommunist left lost "lower income voter support in conditions in which redistributive programmes have been difficult", sits uneasy with the fact that after assuming power both Fidesz-MPSZ and the Polish Law and Justice (PiS) party were able to introduce such programmes while also improving or maintaining their countries' macroeconomic stability.

It is no less puzzling that the latter parties, similar to their counterparts in other countries, won the political conflicts fuelled by a new and increasingly important cultural cleavage, alternatively termed "universalist-anti-universalist" (Bornschiefer and Kriesi 2013), "cosmopolitan liberal-national populist" (Inglehart and Norris 2016), or "transnational" (Hooghe and Marks 2017), which are in the focus of the scholarship on populist electoral mobilisation. Compared to the studies on party state capture, these latter analyses have a more detailed account of the demand side than the supply side of illiberal politics. To date, this literature subsumes the related phenomena under the category of right-wing populism and analyses its ascendance either as a cultural backlash against emancipatory political liberalism or as a consequence of economic insecurities in crisis-prone neoliberal capitalism, or as a combined result of both (Bornschiefer and Kriesi 2013; Kriesi and Pappas 2015; Inglehart and Norris 2016; Gidron and Hall 2017). It is argued that the populist rhetoric resonates with the sentiments of less educated white male manual workers, who perceive a decline of their social status relative to women, non-whites, and ethnic and sexual minorities emancipated in the era of progressive value change in post-war western societies. In addition, it is proposed that, since the eruption of the financial crisis in 2008 and the refugee crisis in 2015, the same groups' discontent with cultural change is combined with their fear of economic deprivation and resentment of migrants who they consider as competitors for jobs and welfare benefits (Inglehart and Norris 2016; Hooghe and Marks 2017). In a similar vein, some studies trace Hungarian "working class populism" to the grievances of those silenced and dispossessed by the neoliberal transformation, and view their anger as a fertile ground for mobilisation by Fidesz-MPSZ in

the name of “the nation” or “the people” against the “luxury left”, “banker government”, and the “coloniser” International Monetary Fund (IMF) or EU (Kalb and Halmai 2011; Halmai 2011).

However, while these explanations based on the demand side of populism are well-established, they are incomplete in the opposite way as those focusing on state capture by populist parties. That is, although the demand-side analyses provide a convincing partial explanation of the vigour of populist electoral breakthrough, they have less to offer when it comes to grasping the factors of populism’s resilience. Hence scholars’ awareness that more research is needed to answer the question: what accounts for the lasting cohesion of the illiberal camp? Conducting such research, however, implies shifting the perspective away from a narrow focus on elections, less educated electorates, leaders’ charisma, and anti-elite demagoguery. After all, “populist support can be highly volatile and erratic over time, if weakly institutionalized parties are unable to replace the charismatic leader and if they lack a strong extra-parliamentary organisational base” (Inglehart and Norris 2016, 23). Preoccupied with the actors and strategies of new cultural cleavage formation, which is also the interest of this article, Hooghe and Marks argue that lasting solidarity that is “more than the expression of the social and occupational location of any set of individuals”, can hardly be forged without recurrent conflicts “rooted in collective identities, grassroots movements and hierarchical organisations” (Hooghe and Marks 2017, 3).

Herein lies the contribution of a small but growing body of scholarship on “movement parties’ ... spurring from the protest arena and translating social movement practices in the arena of party competition” (Pirro 2019, 782; Kitschelt 2006). Specifically, authors analysing the success of Jobbik, Movement for a Better Hungary (Jobbik), have started to fill in the gap by taking “a social movement approach ... and, thus, look beyond developments in the electoral arena” (Pirro and Róna 2019, 604). The present article shares the interest of the movement party literature in that it takes extra-parliamentary mobilisations, as factors of Fidesz-MPSZ’s vigorous electoral breakthrough in 2010 *and* its resilience in power ever since, seriously.

Accordingly, the main contribution of the article is the analysis of a neglected factor of lasting illiberal rule in Hungary, the right-wing conquest of civil society well *before* the landslide victory of Fidesz-MPSZ at the Spring 2010 election.² The analysis is driven by the research questions: *where* (in which political arena), *who* (which actors), have been the key agents of the conquest, and above all *how* (through which contentious and non-contentious activities) could they achieve such tectonic shift in Hungarian civil society?

The brief answer is that during two terms in opposition in 2002–2010, Fidesz-MPSZ and its main ally, the Civic Circles Movement, worked hard to take control of civil society and dislodge the left and liberals, who, due to inherited and newly acquired resources, initially seemed to be better positioned to foster civil society organisation. Further, not denying the role of the *electoral behaviour of less educated groups*, the empirical analysis substantiates the key importance of the *civic activism of the radicalising educated conservative middle class* for the rise and lasting power of illiberals in Hungary and perhaps other countries.

Finally, understandably, the analytic focus of the movement party notion is on *contentious* mobilisations (but see Pirro and Róna 2019 for considering non-contentious activities as well). Yet, as put by Tarrow, movements do other things than but contend, “ranging

from providing ‘selective incentives to members’, to building consensus among current or prospective supporters, to lobbying and negotiating with authorities, to challenging cultural codes through new religious or personal practices” (Tarrow 2011, 10). Since all these activities require ample cultural capital, their prevalence underlines the importance of agency of those endowed with such capital for the ascendance of illiberal politics. Accordingly, the empirical evidence analysed in this article sheds light on a plethora of *non-contentious* actions organised by the key activists of the civic circles: educated conservatives.

The empirical analysis rests on the Civic Circles Event Database (Database) of about 4800 events organised, co-organised or sponsored by the movement and attended by its members in July 2002–April 2006. The data is compiled by the author from the *Electronic Newsletter of Civic Circles* (Newsletter) and other media sources. Originally collected by civic circle members and preserved by Open Society Archives, the Newsletter consists of civic circle messages. The Database does not contain personal, secret or classified data. According to Hungarian and EU law, the messages are anonymised except for those from persons performing public functions about public matters and used solely for historical research. The Database consists of unique and rich information, which helps to answer the research questions, namely how and by whom the Hungarian right was rebuilt.³

The first section of the article highlights the movement’s dual, civic and hegemonic, strategy to transform civil society and characterises the activists as representatives of the reborn “Christian national middle class” – a term originally used in interwar Hungary to denote the native and non-Jewish middle-class, which had been the main support group of Regent Miklós Horthy’s competitive authoritarian regime. The second section focuses on the movement’s importance for Fidesz-MPSZ and shifting mode of coordination. The third section argues that while the movement’s lasting impact stems from its success in fostering strong attachments to Christianity and the nation, its focus on identity politics also provoked tensions with Fidesz-MPSZ. The conclusion summarises the findings and suggests topics for future comparative research on the illiberal challenge.

Mobilising the Christian national middle class

As elaborated in the following, in 2002–2006, when its activity peaked, the Civic Circles Movement combined civic and hegemonic strategies to transform civil society, had a massive membership, was dominantly metropolitan and urban on the spatial dimension, educated middle-class based in terms of social stratification, and militant in pursuing its cause.

The circles were born out of the frustration of the right over the result of the Spring 2002 parliamentary election marginally lost by the incumbent coalition of Fidesz, the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF), and the Independent Smallholder Party (FKgP) to the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) and the liberal Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ), which under the leadership of Premier Péter Medgyessy formed a coalition government. Given that Orbán’s speech at a massive rally after the election is rightly seen as the movement’s founding document, it deserves to be reviewed at some length.

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 organisations, but to get together, join our forces and be

on the alert ... Our force is in our numbers, but it will become real power only if we get organised. Our force becomes real only if we can create and organise the public sphere of civic Hungary ... We need to know about each other to move together when the time comes. (Orbán 2002)⁴

Although in the same speech Orbán conceded his party's electoral defeat, his call for the new movement energised his followers because it promised to help avoid the two dangers political losers usually face: apathy and radicalisation. By creating spaces for grassroots organisation, participation and initiative, the circles offered a medicine against apathy. At the same time, a strong civic associational sphere was seen as effective counterbalance to the MSZP-SZDSZ government, which the civic circle activists viewed as both illegitimate and threatening their freedom and autonomy. Hence the activists' essentially Tocquevillian understanding of the circles as bulwarks of resistance to hostile state intervention through "insulation" of their grassroots communities and "organisational balancing" through alternative centres of power (see Riley 2005, 289 for this interpretation of the Tocquevillian (1990) approach to civil society and its contrast with the Gramscian understanding below). Finally, joining the circles provided an alternative to further radicalisation, which, considering the ongoing campaign of street protests, petitions and lawsuits for recounting the votes, seemed to be an imminent danger.

The return of the "troupes" to still-to-be built "barracks" in civil society was meant to bring about a temporary break before new assaults on the rulers could be launched. Appealing to the mindset of activists for whom non-conventional political participation after the lost election was imperative, Orbán asserted that they must not view themselves as a defeated minority 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 are in opposition in the Parliament, we ... will not and cannot be in opposition, because the country cannot be in opposition. It is only a government that may end up in opposition to its own people if it fails to act in the nation's interest. (Orbán 2002)

Declaring that the country in opposition was an oxymoron, Orbán questioned the power-holders' "true Hungarian" identity and invited everybody else to join the struggle for reclaiming the nation. After all, if the country could not be in opposition, then its true representatives had to strive for hegemony. A related interesting fact is that Orbán had explored the Gramsci (1971) notion of civil society long ago in his master's thesis submitted at Eötvös Loránd University of Budapest in 1987. With ample references to Gramsci, the thesis analyses Polish Solidarity as a mass-movement growing out of the sphere of "everyday life", which Solidarity and other movements started to transform into civil society worth the name. The thesis concludes that, "in contrast to western Europe, where movements usually emerge from civil society, in Poland civil society was created by the movements" (Orbán 1987, 66).

Without making too much of this detail, it is important to note that the cause and means of taking control of civil society through transforming everyday life were often discussed topics in the civic circles. Indeed, the relevant ideas and practices were elaborated in several manuals, such as the widely circulated *The Recapture of Everyday Life and the Holidays. Recommendations for Civic Circles*. The author, a Christian intellectual member of a civic circle in Budapest, defined the task at hand as seizing control of "space, time, and soul" in an

epochal “freedom fight” against foes (László 2002). The large organisations, which aligned with the movement, shared the same spirit. For example, local leaders of the Alliance of Christian Intellectuals (KÉSZ) explained the organisation’s expansion in the Budapest metro-area by the need for new squads of competent and experienced activists, who would be capable of turning the tide of “moral decay and disastrous marginalisation of the values of divine inspiration, the only desirable values for human beings” (Database 2003).

In this vein, to cater for moderate and radical followers alike, the movement adopted a Janus-faced, simultaneously civic and hegemonic, strategy. On the one hand, the circles played a crucial role in re-organising, extending and connecting the right’s grassroots networks, associations, hierarchical organisations, and media; rediscovering and reinventing its everyday life-styles, holidays, symbols, and heroes; and mobilising their members in innovative ways for participation in cultural, educational, charity, leisure, and contentious activities. On the other hand, by superimposing on the Tocquevillian civic logic a Gramscian hegemonic logic, according to which the conquest of civil society is a prelude to the conquest of the state, the “movement party” harnessed civic activism ultimately for political ends. Under certain conditions, this is a situation in which associations may “provide a congenial environment for the construction of authoritarian parties” (Riley 2005, 290).

Given that most circles never formally registered as civic associations or foundations, the article must partly rely on (perhaps somewhat inflated) data mentioned by the movement’s leaders. They knew of 11 thousand civic circles with 163 thousand members active in about thousand municipalities. This confirms the impression of a mass-movement, whose membership exceeded that of all Hungarian parties combined, and bore comparison with the membership of trade unions, or the number of employees and volunteers of non-profit organisations (Greskovits and Wittenberg 2016). The circles cooperated with hundreds of other, officially registered church-bound, patriotic, professional, cultural, and local-level political organisations, and many small and medium-size private businesses.

The spatial distribution of events shows a centre-periphery pattern. Most events took place in Budapest and its greater metropolitan area, and the administrative, economic and cultural centres of the countryside. This is not surprising: where else could the movement tap on remaining reserves of a conservative civic milieu after forty years of communist rule? A minority of events was organised in smaller towns and villages, and the neighbouring countries with significant ethnic Hungarian minorities (Table 1).

Budapest’s central and more affluent districts hosted far more events than its working-class neighbourhoods. Similarly, while the central and wealthier counties had vibrant conservative civic life, some of the peripheral and poor counties showed a devastated landscape from this viewpoint as well. Finally, about two-thirds of Hungarian municipalities

Table 1. Location of events (July 2002–April 2006).

	Number of events	% of total events (N = 4792)
Budapest and metropolitan area	2661	55.5
County capitals and cities in similar administrative status	612	12.8
Smaller towns and villages	759	15.8
Abroad	412	8.6
Unidentified or multiple locations	348	7.3

Note: The Budapest agglomeration is proxied here by Pest county.

Source: author’s calculation from the Database.

were out of reach not just for the circles but other political or civil society organisations too (See Greskovits 2017 for some details).

As to the socio-economic status of activists and followers, in an interview Csaba Hende, originally an MDF politician who became the leading coordinator of the movement, emphasised 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 visit any of their large events 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. (Halász 2004)

The Database has ample evidence to confirm the dominant educated middle-class character of the movement. Most activities had some educational purpose and/or form. The organisers, performers, and participants were typically white-collar employees of the state, civil society organisations or the private sector: teachers, lawyers, doctors, students, members of the clergy, entrepreneurs, journalists, artists, actors, and politicians. The usual venues were churches, monasteries, religious gymnasiums, universities, and community gathering places, clubs, cafés, “national” bookshops, cultural centres, and party offices. Finally, participants were often asked to buy entry tickets, pay for the entertainment or services provided, donate to charitable funds, or make in-kind-contributions, such as voluntary work or home-made meals.

Hegemonic aspirations, the dominant middle-class profile, and the policies of the ruling coalition all left their mark on the civic circles’ pattern of militancy. Their appetite for contention is explained by their disappointment with the outcome of the 2002 election and mistrust in the rulers. Evidence from the Database gives the impression that the right got frequently mobilised even in periods when no local, national or European election was in sight. Such frequency is not readily explained by economic grievances, because the movement’s heyday occurred well before the global financial crisis and recession, and at a time when the Medgyessy government implemented a “Program of Transformation with Welfare”, which also benefited the conservative middle class. Moreover, until the middle of the decade economic growth, declining unemployment, the expanding welfare state, and EU-accession in 2004 would all have given grounds for social peace. Contention provoked by economic insecurity and deprivation, albeit not absent, was indeed less frequent than after 2006. Rather, most protests erupted around issues of identity related to the nation, Christianity, and anti-communism merged with anti-liberalism (Table 2; see also Greskovits and Wittenberg 2016). Rarely were the protests disruptive, let alone violent. Instead, petitions, open letters and public statements dominated the repertoire.

Time and again, the circles acted in tandem with contentious environmental and peace movements, trade unions, farmer associations and civil and human rights NGOs, even if many of these organisations were far from fully sharing the right’s (or, for that matter, the left’s) ideological orientation (Database; Mikecz 2017).

Party and movement: gains from cooperation and modes of coordination

Although the circles claimed to represent all “civic Hungarians” irrespective of their varied party preferences, there is no denying that Fidesz gained the most from aligning with

Table 2. Electoral and protest mobilisation, issues provoking protests, and forms of protests (July 2002–April 2006).

	Number of events	% of total events (N = 4792)
Events of electoral mobilisation (elections and referenda)	415	8.7
Protest events	433	9.0
Issues provoking protests		
(a) Identity	339	7.1
(b) Socio-economic grievances	81	1.7
(c) Both identity and socio-economic grievances	13	0.2
Forms of protest		
(a) Petition, open letter, public statement	340	7.1
(b) Demonstration, rally, march	73	1.5
(c) Strike, boycott, blockade	9	0.2
(d) Multiple forms combined, or forms unknown	11	0.2

Source: author's calculation from the Database.

them. Even if it took almost a decade until the collaboration became a factor of electoral breakthrough, the movement helped Fidesz to forge strategic or *ad hoc* alliances among all fractions of the right and even non-rightist organisations; take deeper roots in civil society; and flexibly respond to challenges of non-conventional and conventional politics alike. These gains marked various periods of the movement's lifetime and required different modes of coordination between the involved actors.

The well-known battle-cry of the time – “There is one flag, there is one camp!” – expressed Orbán's ambition to unite the right after the lost 2002 elections, when the other right-wing parties were weakened or fell apart, and many potential voters and devoted activists were up for grabs. Tapping into this pool before rivals would do so was urgent for Fidesz facing municipal elections in 2002, soon to be followed by a referendum on EU-accession in 2003, and the country's first election of members of European Parliament in 2004. Yet, the mutual distrust between the Fidesz apparatus and the former activists of the FKgP, MDF, and the Party of Hungarian Justice and Life (MIÉP) was a hindrance to absorbing these activists directly into the Fidesz machinery. The party apparatchiks, who were blamed for the lost election, worried about the security of their jobs, while many newcomers kept “strong reservations about the ‘liberal roots’ of Fidesz members and leaders” (Gavra 2003). They trusted Orbán but distrusted his party. In this situation, the civic circles seemed to be an optimal albeit temporary gathering place for the dispersed and politically homeless right-wingers. Hence one reason for the movement's initial mode of coordination: it reflected Orbán's personal leadership rather than institutionalised control by his party.

The newly founded circles had to register with the Democracy Centre, a watchdog organisation established by Fidesz to collect reports on anomalies at the 2002 election, which subsequently served as the hub of communication among the circles, the aligned associations, foundations, and local party bodies. In addition, while at the time mobilising through Facebook or Twitter was not yet possible, all these organisations became increasingly “inter-networked”. In 2003, the Newsletter was sent to about 14 thousand, and in early 2006 about 25 thousand, e-mail addresses. The movement's chief coordinator Hende reported to Orbán.

However, since the “civic camp” aimed to attract all fractions of the right and, indeed, sought to represent the whole society, a hierarchical chain of command and centralised communication would not have been enough to keep the movement in motion.

Neither would it be convincing to credit Orbán's mastermind with the formation and agenda setting of thousands of civil society organisations all over the country – a task that would have been far beyond any single person's ability. Rather, Orbán's role was manoeuvring and balancing among a plethora of different and occasionally contradicting interests. In this endeavour he relied on a hybrid mode of coordination with frequent interactions between the leadership, the aligned large organisations, and the diverse grassroots activities, which combined the advantages of hierarchy with relative autonomy, and robustness with flexibility and innovation, in line with the "winning formula" of social movement organisation (Tarrow 2011).

Part of the mediation among the movement's various sectors and levels was provided by the Alliance for the Nation Civic Circle, founded by Orbán in May 2002. The Alliance was a conglomerate of more than a dozen large religious, patriotic, political, professional, family, women, and youth movements and civil society organisations, represented by their leaders or affiliated public intellectuals. Several members and organisations of this "mother of all circles" had both the professional training and practical expertise to devise forums and programmes for adult education. In addition, since these organisations disposed of money, buildings, competence in relevant subjects, and hundreds of their own active members, initially they played a key role in filling the event calendar of smaller and resource-poor circles. Especially in the first two years of the movement's existence, the Alliance frequently made public statements, issued directives, or urged the circles to participate in activities.

The list of centrally inspired but partly horizontally coordinated or fully self-organised non-contentious activities is extensive. The circles were encouraged to identify and occupy their niche in civil society. Many circles chose a name and designed their logo or coat of arms. Via the Newsletter they shared their "best practices". They participated in competitions aimed to develop new visions and activities for the movement. Every other week saw the emergence of new local initiatives for self-help or charity, soon emulated in regional, national, or transborder contexts. Occasionally even naïve small ideas on how to celebrate traditional or invented new holidays in "civic ways" were picked up by hundreds. Invitations to spend quality time at educational excursions, touristic journeys, pilgrimages, national or local holidays, concerts, food, wine, and art festivals, or balls were circulated. Detailed instructions on how to file legal complaints against scandalous media contents or protest the Iraq war or environmental degradation were elaborated, shared, and used to train activists and attract participants.

While community building through civic associational life was crucial for solidifying and extending the social foundations of right-wing politics, the frequent acts of contention were key to controlling, resisting, and combating Medgyessy's left-liberal government. The alliance with the circles allowed Fidesz to kill two birds with one stone: by encouraging their militancy, Fidesz could adopt the practices of constant campaigning from the far-right movement parties' repertoire (Pirro 2019) without, however, becoming a far-right organisation or giving up cultivation of the skills needed in conventional politics. In the latter, again, the party could rely on the assistance of movement activists.

The ways in which the cooperation of the party and the movement could bring benefits in conventional democratic politics became apparent with the big changes starting in Spring 2003. This was the time when Fidesz transformed itself into a catch-all "people's party", changed its name to Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Alliance (Fidesz-MPSZ), created a

new leadership structure, which concentrated decision making power in Orbán's hands, and reinvigorated its electoral apparatus and strategy. New representative bodies were created, through which 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" (Enyedi 2005, 709).

For the civic circles, the changes brought a new era of incorporation of many of their members into the party machinery. Consequently, hundreds of new local party organisations came to existence, Fidesz-MPSZ's membership grew sevenfold, and the influence of local party offices over civic activism strengthened. Thus, while the mixture of top-heavy and interactive modes in the movement's coordination prevailed, the political control was no longer personalistic but rather institutionalised partisan. The most ambitious members of smaller circles joined the ranks of Fidesz-MPSZ and continued to organise 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 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 about 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 organising protests, boycotts, and celebrating our national holidays. In 2003 we focused more on cooperation with right-wing associations, meetings with prominent experts, well-known politicians and acclaimed artists, building stronger ties with the local Fidesz organisation, and joining the new sections of Fidesz-MPSZ ... This was also the year when we started to become more visible: by organising 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, 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. (Database 2004)

As also hinted in this miniature self-study, the movement's local activists willingly participated in canvassing, that is, systematic efforts to approach citizens at home, to learn about and influence their electoral preferences, and thus helping Fidesz-MPSZ to become more competitive in the democratic arena. While the technology of preparing data for canvassing has been fine-tuned over time, data gathering continued to be linked to political activities that required personal signatures and other information, and their use in campaigns remained reliant on access to plentiful local agency.

Omnipresent Churches, versatile nationalism, and the “half-turn” to welfarism

By the second decade of new millennium, relatively solid cleavages seem to be in place to structure the Hungarian right’s worldview and action. While earlier research has established that Fidesz-MPSZ was a key agent of cleavage formation in that it played a crucial role in “popularisation of conflict perceptions and consolidation of camp identities, the development of a more elaborate and segmented organisational structure” (Enyedi 2005, 697), it is important to note that this process has been complicated by some specificities of the case. Simply put, Hungarian conservatives, like their counterparts elsewhere in the world, turned to civic activism to make their country “great again” (see Skocpol and Williamson 2012 for similarities with Tea Party activists). Yet, because of the long decades of communist repression of religious, patriotic and civic life, the activists had only vague memories of the life and deeds of conservative middle-class life before the Cold War. Other facts they preferred to “forget” as it were because after 1989 few on the Christian national right felt it timely, let alone comfortable, to face and admit their own or their predecessors’ responsibility for some catastrophes of history, such as the country’s role in the Second World War and the local chapter of the Holocaust.

It follows that in the new millennium most members of the “civic camp” have learned almost anew how to conduct life as believers, patriots, citizens and Europeans, what to remember and what to conveniently forget from national history, and how to distinguish themselves on these grounds from others. Below it is argued that the success of strengthening such attachments hinged on the sense of belonging, autonomy and importance that members got from the circles, and on regular encounters with leading activists – patriots, priests, journalists, professionals and politicians – who offered them new ways to feel, think, and act as members of “imagined communities” (Anderson 1991). The Database reveals the importance of church-bound activism and versatile nationalism for the formation and consolidation of cleavages.

Table 3 demonstrates that the so-called historical – first and foremost the Roman Catholic, Reformed Calvinist, and Lutheran – Churches played a prominent role in hosting, organising, performing at and shaping the agenda and character of the movement’s events. In line with the Gramscian strategy of conquering civil society, the Churches’ spiritual influence and practices were extended to holidays, education, entertainment, and politics. Campaigns were launched to name bridges, streets, professional associations and educational and healthcare institutions after Hungarian Saints. When celebrated by the circles, no anniversary of the revolutions of 1848 and 1956 or commemoration of

Table 3. Omnipresent historical churches (July 2002–April 2006).

	Number of events	% of total events (N = 4792)
Events with at least one of the three Church-related features	1331	27.8
Events at a Church-bound venue: church or other church-related institution	746	15.6
Events with Church-related participant: individuals and organisations	858	17.9
Events with a religious theme	700	14.6

Notes: Row 1 presents a conservative measure of the Churches’ impact. Data in rows 2–4 demonstrate that the actual religious influence was more substantial, because many events bore its mark in multiple respects.

Source: author’s calculation from the Database.

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. Indeed, occasionally even the traditional holiday of the left, the International Workers' Day on 1 May, was imbued with Christian spirit (Database 2004).

Several explanations can be given for the omnipresence of Churches. The most obvious of these is ideological affinity, which was frequently discussed at workshops and in statements by members of the clergy, Christian Democratic parties, and lay activists. No less important were infrastructural resources and manpower, which the Churches willingly offered to the movement. As shown above, many events took place in church buildings, monasteries, community rooms of parishes, Church-bound primary schools, gymnasiums, universities, healthcare and senior care institutions. It is important to recall, that the restitution of church property culminated under the Fidesz-led government of 1998–2002. The year 2002, then, marked the beginning of a “payback time”.

The Churches' involvement could, finally, reflect their understanding that to protect their ideology, institutions, and interests in public policy and the media, they needed a more robust presence in civil society. Expansion “at the bottom” was also important because of the relatively modest number of practicing Christians and perhaps the fear that, unlike the previous conservative administration, the left-liberal government would not grant the Churches the privileged status of quasi-state institutions.

Like church-bound activism, the activities strengthening attachments to nationhood contributed to cleavage formation (on this subject see also Szabó 2007; Feischmidt 2014). Reflecting the movement's aim to appeal to diverse and large audiences, many events can be characterised by one or several of four patriotic and/or nationalist frames and sets of collective practices, labelled 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 organisations, and had varied political economic backgrounds. At the same time, these components were versatile in that they readily combined, and allowed “injustice framing” and “bricolage”, two effective techniques used by social movements to interpret “the world out there”, define the boundary between “us” and “them”, and “doing the emotion work” (Tarrow 2011).

Representing the Tocquevillian model of civicness, the local patriotic events nurtured attachments to the neighbourhood, district, town, or village. The typically small grass-roots and voluntary associations involved focused on cultivation of local culture, maintenance of old or erection of new monuments of local history, publication of calendars, almanachs, and other media seen as “models of community building” (Database 2004), organisation of balls, sports events, excursions, family programmes, collection of donations for local charitable purposes, and mobilising for participation in municipal politics. Financial support usually came from voluntary private giving, local businesses, municipal governments, and various national programmes to sponsor civil society organisations.

A second form of attachment to the nation can be labelled sacral-Medievalist on the grounds that its adherents learned about or even re-enacted the myths of ancient nation. Cultivated by traditionalist associations, hobby historians, martial art clubs, or the networks of religious and (often radical-right leaning) “national” book-clubs and memorabilia boutiques, this category included lectures on the life and mysteries of Saints, kings and queens, costumed rituals of Templars and other medieval knights' orders, and

meditative tours to Hungary's mythical places, such as the Pilis mountain seen by some as the true centre of the Universe. Thematic summer camps introduced children and the young to the legends, fables, runiform writing and martial arts of nomadic Hungarian tribes. The cult of King Saint Stephen's Sacra Corona stood out for its elaborate rituals, spectacles and nation-wide popularity alike. In the words of one participant of a spectacle in one of Budapest's hilly districts:

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 and build a Sacred Crown memorial mound from the soil brought by the participants. We respectfully ask them to bring (in a glass or 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. (Database 2004)

Compared to local patriotism and sacral-Medievalism, which characterise Hungarians as members of existing small local or virtually timeless imagined communities, the two remaining imaginations reflect the transborder and transnational dimensions of the movement. The first concept defines the nation in civic terms, its members as citizens of a European Hungary, and the EU as an alliance of sovereign nation states. In the second frame, the nation is perceived as an ethnic, cultural, and spiritual community of fifteen million Hungarians.

European-style civic nationalism is best captured by the title of Fidesz-MPSZ's EU-accession programme document: "Europe is our future, Hungary is our country." In line with the party's and the movement's overall positive albeit somewhat reserved stance towards EU membership, most of the related events offered information on and forums for discussion of the political and policy consequences of accession. The needed expertise was provided by European and domestic professionals and politicians, and funding came from EU and Hungarian grants. Far from celebrating the admittance to the EU with unbridled euphoria, the European framing of national issues (and the national framing of European issues) emphasised Hungary's unique contributions to the EU, and the risks stemming from the alleged incompetence of Medgyessy's government. At the same time, when expressing domestic grievances in the language of EU norms and standards, and seeking remedies at EU institutions, the civic circles adopted the tactics of "externalisation" (Tarrow 2011). Thus, accession to the EU opened new opportunities for the circles to position themselves as true Hungarians and Europeans simultaneously, in contrast to the rulers who were permanently criticised for failing on both accounts.

According to Table 4, the nation was most frequently framed as the community of fifteen million Hungarians also including the ethnic Hungarian minorities of other countries. The related events were promoted by a much larger group of (typically transborder) organisations than was the case of other nationalist events. Greater Hungarian nationalism resonates with popular sentiments by its inherent "deep story". As put by the author

Table 4. Versatile patriotism/nationalism (July 2002–April 2006).

	Number of events	% of total events (N = 4792)
Events matching at least one of the four types of patriotism/nationalism	1802	37.6
Local patriotic events	453	9.4
Sacral-Medieval nationalist events		4.6
Events of European Hungary	452	9.4
Events of the nation of 15 million Hungarians	1010	21.1

Notes: Row 1 presents a conservative measure of the importance of the national cause. Data in rows 2–5 demonstrate that the actual influence of the national issue was larger because many events matched more than one type of patriotism/nationalism simultaneously.

Source: author's calculation from the Database.

of the term, a deep story is “the story feelings tell, in the language of symbols. It removes judgement. It removes fact” (Hochschild 2016, 135). While Hochschild used the phrase to capture the motifs of Tea Party sympathisers, the Hungarian deep story was the suffering brought by the Trianon Treaty signed after the lost First World War in 1920, which forced the country to hand over two-thirds of its territory and 60% of its population to newly founded neighbouring states. In “the story feelings tell”, Hungarians were those who shared the pain of Trianon. The civic circles did the emotion work by organising activities whose purpose was to remember, mourn, and militate against the loss, celebrate the nation's splendid past, but also excommunicate those who were reluctant to share the pain if for nothing else then because they trusted that joining a borderless Europe would ultimately heal the nation's wounds.

To tell the deep story, a Trianon museum was established; several TV and movie documentaries about the treaty and its consequences were directed and widely shown; books of varied scholarly quality were presented and discussed at lectures and workshops; dozens of monuments were erected and inaugurated all over Hungary. Old and new grievances of ethnic Hungarians in the neighbouring countries were given publicity. For some of the atrocities against Hungarian minorities after the Second World War symbolic remedies were sought at EU forums. The suffering of Trianon's victims was sometimes labelled the “Hungarian Holocaust” and demands for “equal rights for remembering” and grief were raised (Database 2003).

Besides, the movement tried to reunite the fifteen million Hungarians by frequent crossings of state borders; establishing 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. Donations to needy persons and under-funded educational and welfare institutions in the neighbouring countries accounted for the bulk of the movement's charitable activities.

Perhaps the most popular way to turn the imagined community into more real implied frequent journeys to former Greater Hungarian territories. Surely, travels to Transylvania, Southern and Eastern Slovakia, or the Carpathian Ukraine have never been the right's monopoly. However, the circles' tourism differed from ordinary excursions in several respects. Dozens of specialist businesses offered trips to civic-circle members at reduced prices or attracted them with guides or even bus-drivers coming from the movement. The organisers promised personal encounters with locals who hosted the travellers, served them authentic meals of their home-cuisine, and entertained them with folklore spectacles. Typically, the journeys included stopovers at the legendary places of Greater

Hungarian history. As revealed by the participants' exalted travelogues, 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 (see also Ilyés 2014).

The cause of reuniting fifteen million Hungarians also provided the motivation for the circles' most important political venture. In December 2004, the political year culminated in a referendum on granting Hungarian citizenship to the five million ethnic Hungarians living abroad. The campaign was coordinated by the World Alliance of Hungarians (MVSZ), many other patriotic organisations, the Churches, and hundreds of civic circles, and resulted in a record number of patriotic/nationalist events in the Autumn of 2004 (Database 2004).

Yet, the participation in the referendum failed to pass the threshold of validity. Indeed, the support for dual citizenship turned out to be barely stronger than the support of Fidesz-MPSZ candidates at the EP election earlier that year. Those most disappointed criticised the circles' poor mobilisation capacity. In contrast, Hende traced the fiasco to the meagre financial and political support the movement could count on. The chief coordinator's view seems to be confirmed by the fact that while some circles and patriotic organisations started campaigning already in Spring 2004, the movement headquarter launched its campaign for "Passport to Europe" three weeks, and Fidesz-MPSZ only a single week, before the referendum (Database 2004). Silent about the possible negative impact of these delays, Orbán's own diagnosis emphasised a deeper social problem.

Everybody who is committed to the future of the nation must now focus on the social question. Therefore, I ask those on the radical right whose utmost priority is national identity to also realize: the most important message of the referendum is that building a strong nation requires first to improve the country's living standards precarious social conditions. (Database 2004)

Orbán's proclamation of the "half-turn" to a more "welfarist" electoral strategy reflected the understanding that the civic circles' mobilising capacity had its limits. The circles helped the right to further consolidate its positions where these were strong anyway and expand its influence in locations where the MSZP and SZDSZ had significant but far from dominant presence. In contrast, the working-class neighbourhoods of Budapest and the decaying heavy-industrial factory towns, where social structural and cultural features conspired to make left-dominated politics the only game in town, remained no-go-areas for the circles (Table 1).

That is, even if the movement managed to strengthen the conservative core electorate's attachments its radicalising identity-political agenda and the party's pragmatic electoral strategy had grown apart. According to anecdotal evidence, during the run-up to the EP election in Spring 2004, an opinion poll indicated that the issue of Hungarian minorities abroad divided the country. Thus, according to Orbán, the new task was to "focus on economic grievances, the difficulties of everyday life, indebtedness, uncertainty, and fear", that is, on social problems, which subsequently even dissident left-wing pundits, illiberal social democrats and trade unionists, could address on behalf of Fidesz-MPSZ (Körömi 2017). In this vein, the party's EP-election campaign centred on a National Petition suggesting remedies for the expected negative social consequences of EU-accession in the areas of housing, healthcare, agriculture, and employment. Even if Fidesz-MPSZ has never given

up identity-based mobilisation, the petition heralded a new era of social welfare demands, which for some time came to dominate its strategy. Henceforth, the party's messages were addressed in a new populist fashion to "the people" rather than the "civic camp".

These developments led to a new, fragmented mode of coordination between the party and the movement. While Hende and the moderate circles were willing to follow the new party line, the leadership of many organisations was left to radicals whose divisive ideas and practices sat uneasy with the pragmatic agenda of opening towards broader constituencies (Malgot 2005). Gone was the time when all the circles and right-wing parties "moved together". Although this way a sizeable group of circles liberated themselves from the Fidesz-MPSZ control and tutelage, and eventually might have joined the ascending new radical-right formation Jobbik, this happened at the price of increasing fragmentation of the movement and a decline of its direct political significance.

Conclusion

This article analysed the contribution of the Civic Circles Movement to the rightward swing of the pendulum in Hungarian politics. Empirical evidence was used to demonstrate that the movement helped Fidesz to establish its foundations in civil society, consolidate its core electorate, reform its organisation, revitalise its apparatus, and catch up with and then outpace the MSZP in using effective campaign technologies, such as canvassing. All this helps to better understand the breakthrough of Fidesz-MPSZ in 2010 and resilience in power ever since.

As to the consequences for civil society, even if the movement no longer exists in its original form and strength, many of its activities are continuing in different organisational contexts. This indicates that the "original accumulation" of social and cultural capital in and by the circles has had a lasting impact on the associational life, public discourse, and political fortunes of the right. It is interesting in this context, that Premier Orbán ascribes to the movement similar features and achievements as the present article does. In a speech delivered at a congress of the Alliance of Christian Intellectuals in 2017, he recalled that the circles had emerged from the Christian intellectual milieu and added that,

it happened in the circles that Hungarians educated themselves in the subject 'what is to be done against the post-communists returning to power?' After 2002, we cultivated our skill to stand united against a returning political leadership hostile to religion, nation and family ... I remember that our meetings and lecture-tours all over the country laid the groundwork for the present situation when the social *Hinterland*, or in socialist parlance embeddedness, of the Christian, national and civic right is much more robust than that of our rivals ... And I remember the year 2009, when we sensed the opportunity for a constitutional revolution. It was this ... intuition that led, through blood, sweat and tears, to our two-third majority in Parliament and eventually the new constitution. (Orbán 2017)

Obviously, politicians sometimes tell things they don't really believe, and Orbán is no exception. Still, the empirical evidence analysed in the article allowed for establishing a link between the rise of the right and its superior social embeddedness achieved through the activism of educated Christian national groups, even if this reasoning ought to complement, not replace, alternative explanations. This speaks for taking Orbán's recollection seriously, on his own terms, without necessarily taking all that he said at face value.

While Orbán's speech at the KÉSZ congress is just one among many examples of the party elite's appreciation of the movement's past services and surviving spirit, evidence on pro-government protests in the Hungarian illiberal state also confirms the circles' after-life. Starting in 2012, Budapest and some other cities have seen several massive demonstrations, the so-called "Peace Marches". A new umbrella organisation, the Civil Unity (CÖF), which claims to be the heir of the movement, brought to the streets hundreds of thousands of demonstrators – even brothers-in-arms from Poland – determined to defend Hungary from "colonialisation" by international banks, speculators, and the EU. In critical media, CÖF is viewed as a Government-Organised NGO funded and controlled by the administration, and the peace-marchers are depicted as pensioners bribed by sandwiches, drinks, and a free bus-trip to Budapest (HVG 2013).

Although not entirely wrong, this assessment seems to be incomplete. According to a recent empirical study at least, the Peace Marchers are not "merely puppets manipulated by the regime", but "informed and concerned individuals", who tend to value democracy (or what they understand by the term) as highly as other protesters critical of the government do. Still, members of the former group differ from the latter in their trust in the effectiveness of their activism, higher frequency of membership in patriotic and religious civil society organisations, and stronger reliance on right-wing media for news and analysis (Susánszky, Kopper, and Tóth 2016, 64).

Even if these and the earlier presented findings speak for the civic circles' deep impact on cleavage formation, the outcome cannot be judged without also considering the ruthless *Kulturkampf* of successive Fidesz-MPSZ governments. On the one hand, the Orbán regime has gone out of its way to canonise and generously support the efforts of reclaiming the nation, recapturing everyday life and the holidays, and extending the right's "own" public sphere, that is, the initiatives originating from the civic circles' milieu. On the other hand, after 2010, the regime has deployed the whole arsenal of state power to restrict and repress civic activism outside the sphere of government influence. Although recently a handful of educated conservatives have voiced discontent with certain aspects of the Orbán regime's radicalisation, their timid criticism is a far cry from effective resistance or offering a political alternative. Accordingly, then, it seems to be the case that the Fidesz-MPSZ governments' efforts to capture and use state power to weaken its political rivals combine with its earlier established strong presence in civil society to buttress its hold on power.

At the same time, the fact that before 2010 the rebuilding of the right and the simultaneous erosion of the left and liberal sectors of civil society occurred under MSZP-SZDSZ rule, raises puzzles for future research. Is the weak response of the powerholders explained by pure negligence, or by postcommunist specificities, such as the difficulties of reinventing the left or importing liberal ideas and movements after long decades of communist rule? Or are we rather witnessing a local manifestation of the worldwide ascendance of actors united by their faith in the national colours and the cross, and the retreat of their opponents rallying around the rainbow banner of respect for diversity and emancipatory agendas?

Finally, as far as the growing body of scholarship on the recent worldwide rise of illiberal political leaders and programmes is concerned, the Hungarian case indicates the need and suggests possibilities for extending the inquiry in promising new directions. While most of the relevant literature has so far emphasised the electoral behaviour of less educated

strata among the factors of illiberal success, thorough studies of the related civic activism of the educated conservative middle class are still in short supply (but see on the Tea Party Skocpol and Williamson 2012). Herein lies the comparative relevance of the Hungarian case: it suggests that the civic activism of educated middle-class supporters may be no less important for the rise and resilience of illiberal authoritarian parties and leaders than the votes of less educated groups within their constituency.

Notes

1. The author thanks to Andrea L. P. Pirro and an anonymous referee for their helpful comments and suggestions.
2. The article draws on an earlier version of analysis in Greskovits (2017).
3. As to the definitions and principles of coding, simple rules of thumb are followed. For an “event” to occur, somebody must do something, somewhere, and at a point or in a period of time. As far as the time dimension is concerned, acts lasting a day or less count as single events, while those that take longer than a day count as many events as the number of days they last.
4. The Hungarian texts cited in the article are translated by the author.

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