Studies

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National student advocacy and societal movementism[1]

In Hungary, we are thirty years after the processes of the change of regime, the period when state socialism was replaced in a bloodless process, through political agreements, by capitalism and a democratic political system. One of the most successful organisations of this 30-year period is the student unions, with a performance that was noteworthy for multiple reasons. In the following study, I wish to present the process through which the student union organisation turned from a rebellious social movement into a professional institution or body with major power-based, infrastructural and financial resources. However, I am not setting out to prepare the life-cycle of the organisation, rather focusing on dilemmas and decisions that established the framework for the long-term existence of the National Union of Students in Hungary.

I feel that in relation to national student advocacy and societal movementism, we can differentiate between two clearly separable stages. In the first – rather short – stage, the national union of students particularly functioned as a social movement. Subsequently, however, the organisation turned into a corporative advocacy organisation – simultaneously to its professionalization – and only periodically displayed movement-like features. Therefore, in this stage it wasn't a classic social movement, but rather it displayed several key features of movementism. In the following study, I wish to present the differentiation of these two stages.

Antecedents – loosening in the policy of the state-socialist dictatorship

By the mid-1980s, the Hungarian state-socialist structure became more open than ever since the post-1945 period or compared to any other neighbouring countries under Soviet influence. Through Radio Free Europe, which was maintained by the government of the United States of

America, as well as acquaintances and relatives who emigrated to Western Europe and other free, democratic countries, a number of western and American cultural products entered Hungary, while a growing number of Hungarians could afford to travel abroad and to western countries (Mikecz–Szabó 2019). The Hungarian university students of the 1980s mostly dressed the same way, listened to same kind of music and watched similar films – albeit with a slight delay – as their western, American peers. The eastern and western student social groups were characterised by the same "urban laidback" style that took shape since 1968, which typically included oversize coats, loose jeans and long, perm hair. This relaxed, seemingly careless youthful sensation paradoxically still contributed to the development of the Hungarian student movement, despite the fact that the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSZMP) led by General Secretary János Kádár remained distrustful towards the youth ever since the 1956 revolution and freedom fight (Oross 2020). Due to their sheer existence, the student movements inherently carry the possibility of initiating major social changes (see 1968 or the American civil rights movements), particularly if they are joined partly or fully by other social groups (Jancsák 2019, 8). The dictatorship was rightfully afraid of the student movement as they still vividly remembered the 23rd of October 1956, when the university students in Budapest basically initiated the most significant anti-establishment event of the Soviet era in Central Europe.[2] The paradox of this laidback attitude was that for the system, it might have seemed like the students no longer posed a major threat and they were no longer interested in politics as they clearly retreated to their own scene. However, this assumption proved to be seriously, fatally flawed.

In 1985, still in the state-party system, Hungary adopted the first piece of legislation that – albeit partially and indirectly – through the communist youth organisation, the Hungarian Young Communist League (KISZ) provided the opportunity for the collective advocacy of university students (Honti et al 2005). To the best of our knowledge, this was the first legal act in the Central European region that conferred rights on the entire student population. The act and the related decree called for the right of consent

for alternative higher education organisations in the case of education organisation decisions affecting all Hungarian higher education institution and faculty regulations (exam days, exam system) (Kucsera–Szabó 2008). Sooner than other political sub-systems, this allowed Hungary to be the first in the region where student organisations independent of the party-state could be gradually established, although initially, only at the local, university or college level (Szabó-Oross 2017).

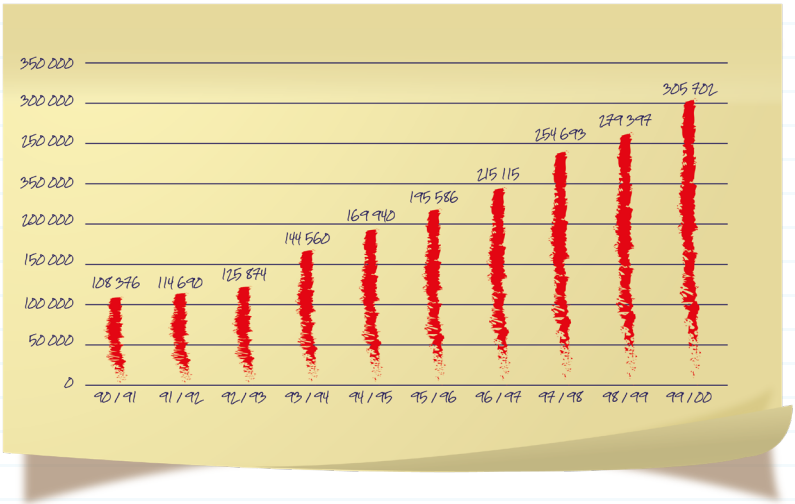
However, the birth of the student movement is not tied to this moment, but rather to the student protests that took place in the autumn of 1988, in one of the traditional university cities of the country, Szeged.[3] Looking back from 2020, this demonstration – which was initially planned to be a one-day event – has a huge, practically incalculable significance. It showed that it was possible to stand up against the oppressive, particularly repressive and inclusive order of state-socialism and "short-cuts" could be identified. Therefore, the student union started as a movement using rebellious, direct democratic tools, yet it was quickly confronted with what still remains as one of the most important dilemmas: should it remain as a movement or turn into an organisation and become professionalised?

The period of the change of the regime

Despite the rapid effectiveness of the large-scale student demonstrations taking place after the events in Szeged that practically spread throughout the country, the matter was also partly decided by the fact that donations were made from the assets of the deteriorating and finally terminating KISZ to local student organisations, which allowed them to head in the direction of bureaucracy. Let us be clear that the establishment of the National Alliance for Higher Education (OFÉSZ), as the first, independent, democratic student organisation since the communist takeover in 1949, took place on the 6th of May 1989 at the Faculty of Humanities of Hungary's largest university, the Eötvös Lóránd University of Sciences (ELTE BTK). According to Tamás Gergely Kucsera, one of the domestic experts on the subject and one of the movement's leaders, the movement

versus organisation issue was already decided by this point, although the discourse on the subject continued for one or two more years (Kucsera 2010).

There were a number of dilemmas behind the problem of student movementism versus professional, bureaucratic, service-provider organisation. From the recollections of György Fábri, the first president of the OFÉSZ, we now know that the direct student support and student base behind the national student movement quickly evaporated (Kucsera–Szabó 2006, 21). Nevertheless, the national student union's relationship, both as a movement and as an organisation, with the opposition parties that were being established was not entirely untroubled at the time. "Although as far as its self-definition was concerned, it distanced itself from party-policy goals and the organisational objectives of party policy, yet its social embeddedness and ability to recruit members due to its operation went against the interests of the opposition parties taking shape at the time – it restricted their 'leverage' towards the young intelligentsia…" (Kucsera–Szabó 2008, 28).
Finally, the third issue was that from the very beginning, the organisation fought for specialised policy objectives that were hard to 'translate' to the language of students. Whilst the initial mobilisations were fundamentally based on financial issues (student grants), the fight for more abstract



goals began at a relatively fast rate. These included student autonomy, advocacy boundaries, positions within the university, student rights etc. When the first Higher Education Act after the change of regime (Act LXXX of 1993 on Higher Education HA) recognised student unions as part of the institutional self-government and the so-called automatic distance, the national student unions operated more as an advocacy group than as a social movement. Therefore, all the students enrolled in the institution automatically became a member of the local student union (HÖK), yet had no option to leave the body. The students became members of the university student community without hardly being aware of this at all, while later on, the students were represented by the faculty and institution-level self-governments in the national organisation. Therefore, from the very beginning, there was tension between wide-ranging student groups and the national student unions, as a result of indirect representation. In order to demonstrate the scale of this "wide-ranging group", let us include a revealing set of data on the expansion of student numbers in the first 10 years after the change of regime (Table no. 1). The data clearly shows that after the initial 100,000 students, by the academic year of 1999/2000, the student union had to represent the interests of over 300,000 students. The representation of a group of this size is undoubtedly rather challenging with a movementism background.

1 no. 1

Evolution of the number of students enrolled in higher education

Source: Based on Kucsera–Szabó 2006, 9, Table no.1

On social movements

By definition, a social movement cannot lastingly remain in existence for decades or years, and is not a part of the institutional political subsystem. The success-oriented leaders of the student movement at the time decided to opt for institutionalization and professionalization, operating it as a corporative youth organisation (Stumpf, 1992). The national student movement turned into an employee-like advocacy group with statutorily guaranteed rights.

The expression social movement appeared in the field of social sciences after the student riots of 1968 precisely because it is broad enough to use it for the identification of the actors of varying social conflicts (Szabó M. 2001; 2007). According to Ruud Koopmans and Dieter Rucht (1996), social movements are the mobilized networks of individuals, groups and organisations which use protest schemes to achieve or prevent fundamental political and social changes (Szabó-Oross 2017). According to Gábor Felkai (2003), social movements are the products of the modern age, as group activities with a minimal level of organisation, striving to modify or change socio-economic or political relations they find to be unacceptable. Hanspeter Kriesi (1992) calls attention to an aspect that has particular significance in relation to our subject: in the establishment of the organisation it is indispensible for it to carry out a series of collective actions against the authorities in an organised manner, for a relatively long period of time. In his view, social movements cannot be organised and continue to operate without a series of protests. Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani (2006) included the concept of the informal network in the definition. Informal networks are arenas and channels that mirror the movement's shared beliefs and mutual solidarity. Finally, it's noteworthy that Charles Tilly (1984) feels that social movements always

confront the existing power with organised challenges over time, yet Jenkins and Klandermans indicate that "these are not merely challenges to power, but are also manifested as the rivals of the existing system of representation, even for other representations of interests or non-governmental organisations" (Jenkins-Klandermans 1995, 5). Finally, another important consideration is that social movements always function and operate outside the established political institutions, i.e. they have no formal representation within the decision-making process (Tilly 1984). In summary, we can consider an organisation a social movement if it satisfies seven interrelated criteria. These include information networking and decentralization; action potential; ingroup-outgroup interaction; the establishment of identity; relatively long-lasting challenge against the power; existence outside of the (institutional) system, as well as temporal and spatial continuity (Szabó-Oross 2017). The student movement of the late 1980s/early 1990s fully adhered to all of these criteria. It appeared at different universities, it made its decisions outside of the centre, it had a high level of action potential (protest potential), it established its boundaries and as indicated, it existed outside of the political system and functioned for a long period of time.

Movementism and movement-like nature

According to Kriesi and co. (1995), based on their action logic, social movements can be identity-based or instrumental in nature, i.e. organised based on internal or external factors (Szabó 2010). Based on this, we can distinguish between instrumental (ecological, peace and solidarity), sub-cultural (sexual orientation, feminism and other ethnic movements) or counter-cultural (land grabbing, national, ethnic) movements. The student movements, including the Hungarian student movement, belong to the so-called instrumental movements.

The most important factors of instrumental movements is that they aren't internally oriented and are not focused internally, on their own membership, but are rather organised for the sake of achieving some external goal and are willing to engage in external conflict for this sake. Instrumental

movements are crucially influenced by the chance of tangible, actual success and fundamentally wish to change existing conditions without any confrontation, yet as indicated, they can still undertake conflicts. That is precisely why instrumental movements have a high protest potential with frequent public mobilization, which can also result in so-called waves of protest.

Social movements, including instrumental movements, have life-cycles (Rammstedt 1978). The life-cycle includes elements that forecast or inhibit the development of a social movement and the dynamics of the movements (quoting Szabó M. 2001, 49).

STAGE	MOVEMENT DEVELOPING	MOVEMENT STALLING
1	REALIZATION OF CRISIS OR PROBLEMS	LACK OF A REALIZATION OF A CRISIS
2	DEVELOPING AN ALTERNATIVE SOLUTION	FAILURE TO DEVELOP AN ALTERNATIVE SOLUTION
3	DEMONSTRATION, CONFLICT	LACK OF DEMONSTRATION AND CONFLICT
4	EXPANSION, IDENTIFICATION	ISOLATION
5	COMPOSING AN IDEOLOGY AND GENETRAL VALUES	FAILURE TO COMPOSE AN IDEOLOGY AND GENETRAL VALUES
6	THE ISSUE OF ORGANISATION AND LEADERSHIP	LEADERSHIP PROBLEMS
7	SUCCESS, ACHIEVEMENT OF GOALS, INSTITUTIONALIZATION	FAILURE, EXCLUSION

1 no. 1

Rammstedt's scheme on the lifecycle of social movements

Source: Based on M Szabó, 2001, 49 self-created chart.

In my view, all 7 considerations of the above-listed scheme were fulfilled in the initial period of the student movementism. It was developed in response to a major, system-level social issue – the crisis of state-socialism – and provided a true alternative to the organisation in possession of

power. It organised acts of demonstration that extended to all major Hungarian universities. It clearly established its own values and thoughts on the interests of students.
The issues that came up were related to items no. 6 and 7. Due to the fact that it turned into a wide-based movement and organisation, it heavily restricted direct communication between the members and leaders of the movement. As a result of the rapid access to results and quick institutionalization, the student movement lost its primary identity and crisis phenomena appeared within the organisation (tracing a rapid evolutionary path, see Jancsák 2014). Nevertheless, the political, economic and social environment of the 1990s didn't support the logic of movementism, due to the formation of parties and particracy over the course of one or two years. Thus the series of changes that took place within the national student union from 1994 to 1995 is a clear and obvious consequence of the crisis phenomena of social movements. At the general assembly celebrating the fifth anniversary of the establishment of OFÉSZ on 18-20th of November, 1994 the establishment of the organisation's legal successor, the National Association of Students Unions (HÖKOSZ) takes place, while two years later, the national student union movement formally establishes its monolith organisation, previously recognised by law, benefitting from significant prerogatives and state subsidies, the National Union of Students in Hungary (HÖOK), which continues to operate to this very day.[4]

From this moment on, the national student organisation ceases to be a movement and becomes a corporative organisation functioning within the framework of the law which, however, continues to display the features of movementism from time to time. Therefore, it is no longer a movement, but rather an organisation with professional, service providing and administrative tasks which – when necessary – can have a movementism "limb". The main differences between the movement and the movementism nature are summarized in the following table (Table no. 2).

	FACTOR	SOCIAL MOVEMENT	MOVEMENTISM NATURE
1	NETWORKING	FUNDAMENTAL INFORMAL NETWORKING	FORMAL AND OCCASION INFORMAL NETWORKING
2	ACTION POTENTIAL	HIGH ACTION POTENTIAL	LOW ACTION POTENTIAL
3	INGROUP–OUTGROUP INTERACTION	ALWAYS SATISFIED	OCCASIONALLY SATISFIED THROUGH A FEW SPECIAL PROBLEMS
4	IDENTITY-SHAPING	STRONG INNER IDENTITY-SHAPING	OCCASIONALLY SATISFIED THROUGH A FEW SPECIAL PROBLEMS
5	RELATIVELY LONG-LASTING CHALLENGE AGAINST THE POWER	PARTLY OR FULLY FULFILLED	OCCASIONAL CHALLENGE AGAINST THE POWER IN THE CASE OF A SPECIFIC INCIDENT
6	EXISTENCE OUTSIDE OF THE (INSTITUTIONAL) SYSTEM	ALWAYS SATISFIED	NOT SATISFIED
7	TEMPORAL AND SPATIAL CONTINUITY	PARTLY OR FULLY FULFILLED	OCCASIONALLY SATISFIED THROUGH A FEW SPECIAL PROBLEMS

2 no. 2

Differences between social movement and movementism nature

The main difference between the two concepts can be evidenced in their existence within or without the system, the lack of a lasting challenge to power and low action potential. The reason for this is that the movementism nature is always triggered by a particular event or problem, normally treating and functioning within the professional boundaries typical of the organisation. However, if a decision is made – mainly on the level of the political sub-system – that goes against student interests, the national student union is capable of reverting to its moventism nature. At this point, the ad hoc informal networking beyond the usual formal network nature commences with identity-shaping and ingroup-outgroup interaction for the specific event in question, along with a challenge to the power. However, this one factor still remains unchanged. Since it is established by law and its legal status, financing and membership is managed by law, the Hungarian national student movement still remains part of the institutional system when displaying its movementism nature towards specific, individual decisions.

There were two main reasons behind the student protests and demonstrations staged over the past 30 years in Hungary: a, some financial reason, changes to tuition, cafeteria fee or other amounts to be paid; b, measures restricting university autonomy, including the restriction of entry options and the mutilation of framework numbers. These demonstrations sometimes spaced across several years were indicative of the movementism nature of the national student organisation. Oddly enough, the choreography and dramaturgy of these demonstrations (fitting inscriptions written on sheets, humorous or mocking signs, provocative chanting, accompanying rock music, sit-ins) would have fit in with other Western European or North American student demonstrations organised in the same period. The reason for this is that these were mainly symbolic, expressive acts, which apart from the significant financial or educational goals to be achieved, could also be interpreted as cultural events and community-building activities (Mikecz-Szabó 2019). The student demonstrations and mobilizations of the mid-1990s and the early 2010s can also be considered as domestic forms of so-called party demonstrations (Mikecz 2015). In these cases, the student movement was shown in a light typical of the protests of any major social movement. However, it's important to underline again that since December 1996, the national student movement has fundamentally been a professional, corporative and service-provider, administrative, information gathering advocacy group that primarily performs the representation of student interests through the means of negotiation, regularly conferring with political figures and with its own positions in the committees and institutions responsible for the management and control of higher education.[5] Additionally, through the local student unions, it has a right to have a say – more precisely, a right to consent – in the organisation of the university scene. In the 2019/2020 academic year, the national student union must represent the interests, values, goals and problems of 285,100 students (of which 203,625 are full-time students) towards society and the public.[6] I feel this task cannot be resolved without a bureaucratic organisation, the National Union of Students in Hungary, which still continues to function to this very day.

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Endnotes

[1] I wish to thank Dr. Dániel Mikecz and Dr. Dániel Oross for consenting to the use of their jointly written studies.

[2] For more details on the role of the student movement in 1956 revolution, see Jancsák 2019.

[3] For more on the movement's life-cycle and history, see Jancsák 2014.

[4] It's worth noting that the HÖOK was established at a symbolic location, the ELTE Faculty of Humanities, the same place where the initial national student organisation, the OFÉSZ was created.

[5] The latest development of this negotiation and agreement-based policy is the so-called Vision for the Future Programme, which the HÖOK announced on the 28th of April 2017. The intention of the programme was to present the issues of Hungarian higher education, through the perspective of the students, to the decision-makers while also providing answers and proposals. The series of forums visited 21 Hungarian, 3 foreign and 2 cross-border sites. Discussions began with decision-makers on the identified problems, as a result of which, the Act on Higher Education was amended and the student per-capita grant was increased by 40% as of 2020.

[6] https://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xftp/idoszaki/oktat/oktatas1920.pdf. Last downloaded: 15.07.2020