CIVIL
MOVEMENTS
in an Illiberal Regime

Political Activism in Hungary

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Essentially, two major popular narratives exist when it comes to social movements and political protest in East Central Europe (ECE). On the one hand, the relatively low level of political participation in ECE justifies the "weakness of civil society" (Howard, 2003) and the "lack of democratic traditions" (Bunce 1995) theses, which also imply that political protest has low or no impact in these countries. On the other hand, opposition movements in ECE are also seen as potent democratic challengers from time to time, such as those involved during the democratic transition in 1989, or the colorful revolutions in various Eastern European countries. Since the early 2010s, Hungary has become a bad example of democratic backsliding and illiberalism. Nevertheless, there have been reactions to the illiberal transformation of the constitutional, legal framework, the political system, and culture of the country. Civil society initiatives, protests, and social movements have been organized by different actors to avoid these transformations, raise awareness to alternative interests, or to express a general criticism of the governments of Viktor Orbán. Civil society organizations were not merely the organizers of such initiatives, but also the target of the illiberal regime's actions as certain Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) were stigmatized as foreign agents.

This book is the result of synthesizing several years of research and analysis on Hungarian social movements and protests. It draws on the literature and theoretical concepts of social movement studies, civil society research, and political participation. The research material used is drawn from a variety of studies on protests, movements, and participatory trends, organized by a typology of

patterns of activism. The foremost aim of the book is to explore the changes that have taken place in the field of civil action and political activism in the 2010s. In the discussed period, in parallel with the loss of electoral support and credibility of left and liberal parties, grassroots initiatives, social and political movements, and NGOs gained increasing importance in public and political will-building. Furthermore, on the governing right, voter mobilization was not limited to election campaigns, but the Fidesz party implemented top-down mobilization through instruments such as the national consultation and the Peace March.

Accordingly, the book is divided into three chapters. The first chapter aims to understand the context of activism in Hungary. It shows how the concept of civil society developed historically and how the civil society concept influenced the idea of protest and social movements. The first chapter also presents the illiberal political opportunity structure, including political culture, the impact of social media, and the sociological background of activists.

The tendencies of political activism in Hungary since 2010, that is since the first supermajority of Viktor Orbán, are discussed in the second chapter of the book. The aim here is to present the post-2010 protest waves and political conflicts between institutionalized political actors and social movements, bottom-up initiatives, and also the institutionalization attempts by political parties and other agents. Their general goal was to channel discontent to gain electoral support, while the low trust in political parties, general party-dealignment, and the anti-political feature of the civil society concept limited the success of these attempts. Moreover, the low level of political participation and the decreasing significance of organizations contributed to the limited success of institutionalization.

The third chapter analyzes the above-mentioned processes, new phenomena, and trends of political activism in Hungary with the help of a typology of activism involving the beneficiaries, the direction of action, the institutional context, and the scope of participation and involvement. Accordingly, the book distinguishes between civil ethos, transactional, experience-oriented, altruistic, exclusive, and populist activism. The book presents each type of activism in detail using empirical data, including questionnaire-based protest

research, public opinion polls, and content analysis. The book thus aims to provide a coherent framework for understanding political activism and the dynamics of protests and social movements in an illiberal regime.

Chapter 2

THE CONTEXT OF ACTIVISM: CIVIL SOCIETY AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN HUNGARY

From Civil Society to Civil Movements

Civil society is an intermediary space between the state and the private, which offers room for interpersonal, yet public interactions, bottom-up initiatives, and oversight of decision makers. Official organizations such as bodies of the state are not part of civil society, neither are kinship or informal personal relationships. Traditionally, business was deemed also part of civil society, but later the two were distinguished. The term not-for-profit expresses this distinction. Furthermore, in many cases, civil society represents citizens' interests vis-à-vis economic organizations and not merely the state. Nevertheless, the liberal concept of a small state is in accordance with the idea of service provider civil society organizations. The concept of civil society is closely related to the idea of the Enlightenment and the emergence of the bourgeois class (Keane and Merkel 2015; Tilly 2004; Tarrow 1993). Such concepts have contributed to the development of civil society as an independent social sphere from the state (John Locke), separation of powers between the state and a social network (Montesquieu), the minimal state (Thomas Paine), civil society as a historical product of civilization processes led by the state (Hegel), and the associations as "schools of democracy" (Tocqueville).

In Hungary, the need for civil society and broader social participation has historically emerged along the lines of modernization efforts in particular. In the Hungarian Jacobin movement and later in the reform era, independence from the state meant independence from the centralized Habsburg monarchy. The driving force behind this development was the liberal, middle-class nobility

(Köpeczi 1989). On the one hand, the counties were used as national self-governing bodies for national aspirations of autonomy, and on the other, the founding of associations, clubs, or the Hungarian Academy of Sciences was supported by magnates such as István Széchenyi. Under dual monarchy, the right of assembly and association was not regulated by law, but by decree, allowing for arbitrary approval procedures that placed these rights under the jurisdiction of the counties. Because of the selective approval process, cultural associations were also used for political activity, for example, by the agricultural proletariat and ethnic minorities. This resulted in the particular popularity of literary associations, which served both to spread literacy and to develop civic consciousness (Gyáni 2010). Legislation was not introduced until 1938, and the practice of arbitrary approval procedures for associations continued in the inter-war period. In the inter-war period, a new phenomenon was the so-called folk movement, which sought national autonomy and the reduce of social inequalities through a specific Hungarian Third Way, which was committed to neither the Nazi nor the Communist regimes (Borbándi 1989).

However, the master frame of civil society is not linked to national autonomy, but to independence from and control of the political sphere, an idea inherited from the democratic transitions in Central and Eastern Europe. Adam Michnik was the first to articulate the need for autonomous organizations and initiatives to challenge the party-state by creating an alternative society to the formal communist structure. According to Michnik, in communist Poland, both revisionist socialists and evolutionists followed the wrong path: the revisionists imagined the humanization and democratization of the system through the communist party on the basis of a revisionist Marxism. While the Catholic pragmatists—or, as Michnik described them, the evolutionists—wanted to gain relative independence for the Catholic Church and the intelligentsia. They wanted to build a movement on this semi-autonomy, which they envisioned as the leading political force after the dissolution of communism. Both ideas looked to political reform from above, aiming to push the communist party into a more liberal position or to persuade them to give greater freedom and autonomy to the non-communist elite (Michnik 1985). Michnik reversed this relationship

when he proposed to turn to the workers rather than the party elite. This different approach, the "new evolutionism" as Michnik put it, was ultimately aimed at forcing political reforms out of the communist system by the working class. The Catholic Church also continued to be an important player, as the gradually transforming Church became an important supporter of civil liberties. At the same time, the strategy, in the prefigurative mode, was oriented towards the present, aiming to build a "framework of democratic socialism," not necessarily an institutionalized, legal structure, but an everyday community, a set of human interactions. This community can be developed through "defiance" (Michnik 1985).

György Konrád, an ardent supporter of Polish Solidarity, described the strategy in terms of anti-politics, which was very similar to the idea of the new evolutionism. Anti-politics refers to everyday activities outside the political sphere. The power of anti-politics derives from the moral and cultural weight of civil society, which can constrain the political sphere and political power (Konrád 1984). In this respect, civil society is the non-institutionalized part of the checks and balances. Konrád's vision went beyond the communist system, as he saw civil society and anti-politics as an important tool for extending democracy, even if the institutional context had already been democratized. Citizens should exercise political participation in the workplace and in the local community. In this sense, Konrád's concept is similar to that of democracy in the new social movements in Western Europe. The actions of anti-politics include various initiatives and experiments, such as starting a new research project, an independent publication, a cultural enterprise, or a business (Konrád 1987). According to Konrád, anti-politics could rely on small producers and economic labor communities within companies, that is, the emerging second economy and the basis of the second public sphere, that of samizdat literature. However, as Elemér Hankiss has noted, the second economy and the second society complemented the formal society by accumulating additional resources into the system and thus satisfying material needs to a certain extent (Hankiss 1988).

In Czechoslovakia, a similar concept emerged, although the communist regime left less room for economic or intellectual autonomy. In his political essay, Václav Havel presents the idea of an existential

revolution, which includes, among other things, the "moral reconstruction of society," the renewal of interpersonal and individual-community relations, and the assumption of responsibility (Havel 1985). The political consequences of the existential revolution are indirect. Through moral renewal, new communities and structures could be developed, supporting interpersonal trust, integrity, and coherence between communities. Semi-institutionalized, short-term, multi-faceted structures and organizations could act to solve particular social problems and alleviate various tensions.

These ideas—later conceptualized as civil society—all refer to autonomous spaces of community interaction, free from the interference of the official, communist system. Barbara Falk argues, with reference to Hegel, Tocqueville, and Arendt, that the concept of civil society can be used to link dissident strategies to Western political and philosophical thought. This also meant that the region could "return to Europe," to the West, where it had always belonged (Falk 2003). The concept of civil society also suggests that action should not be directed towards the state. On the one hand, this strategy prevented involvement in open conflict with the communist regime, which inevitably led to Soviet intervention, as in 1956 and 1968. On the other hand, a civil society more in tune with post-Marxism represents a move away from state-centered Marxism. The concept that a parallel society or a field of autonomous interactions could gradually overthrow the communist system by delegitimizing it has also emerged in academic analysis (Arato and Cohen 1992; Ekiert and Kubik 2001). The concept of civil society thus became a quasi-ideology in 1989. Before political parties could be legally organized, political dissidents in Central and Eastern Europe expressed their critique of the regime through movements and umbrella organizations. In Hungary, a green movement, the Danube Circle, organized against the Gabčíkovo–Nagymaros Dams, and the advanced studies college movement served such a function. At the same time, during the period of regime change, the "age of circles," political round-table discussions, and forums were also held in formal institutions such as the Patriotic Front or the KISZ.

The concept of civil society was also linked to the protection of human rights in the Helsinki process. The US Helsinki Watch, which monitors the implementation of the human rights clauses

of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, was established in 1978. This concept and the human rights discourse eventually became a quasi-ideology in 1989, and the regime changes in Eastern Europe, including the democratic transition in Hungary, helped to reinvent the concept of civil society in the international academic community. One of the results of this was Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato's *Civil Society and Political Theory*. The concept of civil society also signaled that the theoretical and action frameworks developed by Central European dissidents linked them to the Western European tradition (Falk 2003).

In Hungary, political science, which sought to cultivate politics in a scientific manner, free of ideological indoctrination, had appeared already in the 1980s. The study of civil society and social movements began in Hungary in this period as well. The challenge of the era was to learn about Western theories and scientific concepts and to introduce these to a professional audience. However, the lack of a pluralistic democracy and rule of law framework, which would have provided the opportunity to research the likes of electoral behavior or the party system, was a very strong constraint on the pursuit of independent political science research. It was precisely because of the lack of an institutional framework that oppositional political aspirations took the form of movements. However, the opening up of political opportunity structure and increasing protest activity did not result in a spectacular strengthening of movement research within domestic political science. The initiator of social movement studies in this period was almost single-handedly Máté Szabó, who in the 1980s had already written on the results of international movement research on the new green and social movements in the West (1984a, 1984b) and on domestic environmentalist efforts in comparison with Western movements (1989). It is particularly striking that while Attila Ágh writes about the new social movements from a macro-sociological perspective, in terms of the changes affecting Western societies (1987), Máté Szabó analyzed the new social movements in more detail in his response article, using the specific middle-level theories and concepts of movement research (1987). The research of social movements is dealt with by several disciplines, such as political science, sociology, cultural anthropology, social psychology, and economics (Andretta 2013). Thus, the research of

movements is not part of mainstream international political science, which partly explains why it did not become a more dominant research trend and toolbox within domestic political science after the regime change. Other reasons include the legal-institutionalist approach of emerging domestic political science and the influence of international transitology. The institutionalist approach is reflected in the presentations and studies of the 1991 conference on the taxi blockade and its related volume (Csapody 1991).

Public and academic debate about the weakness of civil society in Eastern Europe, including Hungary, and its consequences, also arose from the assumption that an active civil society is a precondition for a stable democracy. In such debates, Ralf Dahrendorf's thesis that six months is enough for constitutional changes, the establishment of new political institutions and of a new electoral system was often quoted. Six years may be enough time to create a functioning economy, but civil society may require sixty years (Dahrendorf 1990). The state's dominant power and civil society's weakness and limited autonomy have appeared in theoretical reflections as early as the 1980s as a consequence of the preeminence of politics over social subsystems in the Luhmannian sense (Pokol 1983) or of insufficient structural differentiation between the political state and society (Ágh 1989). Twenty years after the democratic transition and five years after EU accession, there was a brief discussion in the Hungarian *Political Science Review* about the phenomenon of weak civil society and low political participation in comparison to their international counterparts (Róbert and Szabó 2017). That this period saw also an emergence of disillusionment after EU enlargement and a spectacular strengthening of the Hungarian radical right-wing movement contributed to the pertinence of this debate. The lead article argues that communism did not create a model of *homo sovieticus*, but that the interrupted bourgeois development has led to a strong etatist mentality and a lack of solidarity between social groups, of tolerance, and of the creativity needed for mobilization. Furthermore, the fact that NGOs were basically financed from the public rather than by private sources is not conducive to overcoming etatism (Szabó 2009). Parallel to the institutionalization and NGOization of civil society, research on civil society as a nonprofit sector has emerged within Hungarian

social science. Since the early 1990s, several volumes have been published by the Sociological Research Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the Nonprofit Research Group, dealing with nonprofit management (Harsányi 1997), general characteristics of the nonprofit sector (Kuti 1996, 1998), local social policy (Széman and Harsányi 1999), corporate social responsibility (Kuti 2005), and volunteering and charity (Czike and Kuti 2006).

Autonomous civic action has thus not only influenced the sphere of civil society in public discourse but in academic research also. While nonprofit research depoliticized this sphere, the public discourse that identifies movements as "civic" promotes its confrontation with power precisely on the basis of its strong normative content. Social movements, which are essentially based around conflicts, thus appear in a civil society guise. On the other hand, the Western European concept of movement society, extends movements to civil society, since it considers general interest articulation and protection to be a movement. While movement research is concerned with conflict, civil society research is concerned with the autonomous sphere between state and market (della Porta 2014a). However, since the two concepts are not easily separable—primarily at the level of individuals, but also at the level of organizations and resources—and since the civil legacy of the democratic transition of 1989 is present in both academic and scientific discourse, it is appropriate to examine activism. The fourth chapter of this book will capture and group together the different types of mobilizations presented in the third through an examination of political activism. It should be stressed, therefore, that the book examines civil society not through its formal or informal institutions, but through political action, in this case activism. *Activism* in the literature of social movement studies refers to concrete action itself and includes all the political activities that activists carry out in the movement. It includes protests, decision-making forums, and cultural events associated with the movement (Saunders 2013). Before presenting the ideal types of activism, however, we will take into account the political opportunity structure of the illiberal regime and how social movement mobilization is defined in this context in order to understand trends in political participation.