

Rethinking  
Populism:  
Top-Down  
Mobilization  
and Political  
Actions Beyond  
Institutions  
in Hungary



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While populism in general has neither an elaborated meaning, nor program, in the academic discourse it is regarded as a method of doing politics, according to which a populist politician refers to the common people, without any of their real participation<sup>1</sup>. The democratic backlash and the illiberal tendencies in countries like Hungary, Poland and Slovakia are often characterized with the label of populism. This “new politics” in Central Eastern Europe has introduced a majoritarian model of democracy, where the elected leaders are empowered to fulfill their political agenda. The mirage of authentic action makes this new politics highly attractive for many citizens in CEE. These systems can also forge an electoral coalition of relative majority from the threatened middle class.

**T**he interrelation<sup>1</sup> of democratic participation and populism should be reconsidered according to its roots and social support. The case of Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz in Hungary is a good example how a populist leader and an effective political machine can exploit the new settings in politics. Most importantly, the Fidesz takes advantage of the declining importance of political institutions and effectively uses top-down or “astro turf”<sup>2</sup> mobilization, that is the so-called “movement governance” as Viktor Orbán put it.

#### BEHIND THE POPULARITY OF THE FIDESZ

The migrant crisis gave a new impetus to the Fidesz, which lost many supporters during the internet tax protests. However, it was still surprising, that after the peak of the migrant

crisis in the middle of its second term, the Fidesz is still by far the most popular party (34% of support of the entire population).

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Many observers emphasize the role of the aggressive communication as the main reason for the government’s popularity. Others

<sup>1</sup> Mudde, C. & Rovira Kaltwasser, Cristobal (2013) “Populism” [lin.:] *Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies*. Michael Freeden, L. T. Sargent & M. Stears (eds.) Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 493-512.

<sup>2</sup> Although “astro turf” most commonly refers to a type of artificial turf, in the US academia and journalism it is also used to indicate fake, top-down organized grass-roots initiatives.

blame the supporters of the Fidesz for not seeing what is really going on in the country. Electoral behavior is more rational than one might think and no political marketing can be effective without real social receptivity. Thus the reason of the Fidesz's popularity cannot be simplified to mere manipulation or the lack of information.

The popularity of the Fidesz has more inter-related reasons. The first is rather the deep knowledge and understanding of the Hungarian political culture and voters behavior by the prime minister and his staff. As Péter Tölgyessy, a notable Hungarian lawyer and political analyst noted, Viktor Orbán has the ability to identify the thoughts and fears of the Hungarian people. However, just like in the case of the migrant crisis, he appeals to the negative features of the Hungarian political culture. But the specific nature of Hungarians also determines how politics can be made in Hungary. Due to this distinct nature of Hungarian politics, foreign ideologies cannot be successful as they will always lose to the Hungarian "common sense". Nevertheless, Viktor Orbán, who grew up in a provincial middle-class milieu, can authentically represent and identify himself with the "common people".

A second element of the Fidesz's popularity is representation, which in contemporary societies means more than simple advocacy. The complex image of voters should be represented, namely their values, experiences, appearance and also safe, convenient visual and textual descriptions. The government policy, which prefers vocational training than higher education satisfies not only the industrial demands for a cheap labor force, but meets with the general attitudes of certain social groups. It is in accordance with the elitist opinions about the "massifications" and decreasing quality of higher education. Furthermore, emphasizing the importance of vocational



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training also acknowledges those without a higher education diploma. This message resonates well with blue-collar workers, who believe they deserve recognition in the knowledge-based economy and global competition.

The third and most important factor is the electoral basis, which is closely interrelated with the aforementioned social receptivity. A key interest of political parties is to establish an electoral coalition of different social groups. Sometimes it also involves satisfying conflicting interests at the same time. The Fidesz is not the first party which succeeded in doing so. Back in the 1990s, the Hungarian socialists managed to secure the support of the westernized technocrat

upper middle class and of the lower middle class, which hoped for a social uplift as a result of the European integration. The Fidesz's main instrument to build the electoral basis is to give offices, concessions (e.g. tobacco shops) to the broader clientele and to ensure benefits for the middle-class, which could be acquired and enjoyed individually. Taxation and overhead reduction, supporting housing privileges for the middle class are typical measures. It is all about ensuring opportunities for individual life strategies – needless to say, many Hungarians can easily relate to this.

Apart from the aforementioned traditional instruments, the Fidesz uses such novel strategies, like the "movement governance". The movement governance is the application of different top-down mobilization techniques. Due to its top-down nature, it is frequently accused of being a populist measure.

### **THE FIDESZ'S "MOVEMENT GOVERNANCE"**

At a first glance, the term seems to be a contradiction in itself. The Fidesz repertoire, refers to the continuous mobilization of supporters and proactive communication or – as others put it more directly – using a more aggressive propaganda by the government. The term was used by Viktor Orbán himself in an interview after the Fidesz lost much of its supporters during the internet tax protests (which shall be discussed further in the article). The Prime Minister stated that the party has to return to the "movement governance" as it could have been the means to gain back popularity. Mobilizing voters, supporters on the streets between elections by a government on the basis of emotions and collective experiences is unusual, although there are other examples as well. The Forza Italia movement, the main political vehicle of the charismatic leader Sil-

vio Berlusconi, served the same purpose. This top-down mobilization alone does not endanger democracy, but the permanent mobilization causes an increasing political polarization.

First, it is important to investigate whether movement governance exists at all. Social movements mobilize citizens order to achieve or prevent a certain social/political change. They use different means and forms of collective action, depending on the group of people they want to mobilize and on the kind of impact they intend to achieve. Teachers struggling for higher salaries employ different strategies than guerilla gardeners who wish to claim city spaces for community purposes. Presence on the streets, organizing protests by political parties is rather typical for smaller, younger parties, like green or new right parties, but governments have their own means to achieve political changes.

In order to understand movement governance, it is thus necessary to move away from the rigorous terminology of social sciences. When the Hungarian Prime Minister talked about movement governance, he had mobilizing the sympathizers of the Fidesz in mind in order to back the government's choices. This is not a brand new technique in the repertoire of the Fidesz party and Viktor Orbán. After the defeat in the 2002 elections, Orbán (as the resigning Prime Minister) convinced his supporters to found the so-called Civic Circles. The main role of the Civic Circles was to sustain the engagement of the voters, their willingness to be mobilized. During the 2002 election campaign the national cockade also became a symbol of supporting the Fidesz. Many accused the Fidesz party of dividing the nation by excluding left-wing voters. The gesture of putting the cockade on was a clear demonstration of political prefer-



## TOP-DOWN INITIATIVES AND MOVEMENTS ARE VERY COMMON IN ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACIES – SERVING THE DIRECT INTERESTS OF THE POPULIST LEADERS

ences<sup>3</sup>. After 2006, the Civic Circles lost their significance as the radical right became stronger. As protests were triggered after the leaking of the infamous Öszöd-speech of Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány, the politicians of the Fidesz party also appeared at the radical rightist protest camp by the parliament building.

The main vehicle of the Fidesz for the movement governance was the Peace March<sup>4</sup>, first initiated in 2012 in order to show the popular support for the government to the domestic protesters and the foreign media. Although it was not directly organized by the government, the Peace March is a very

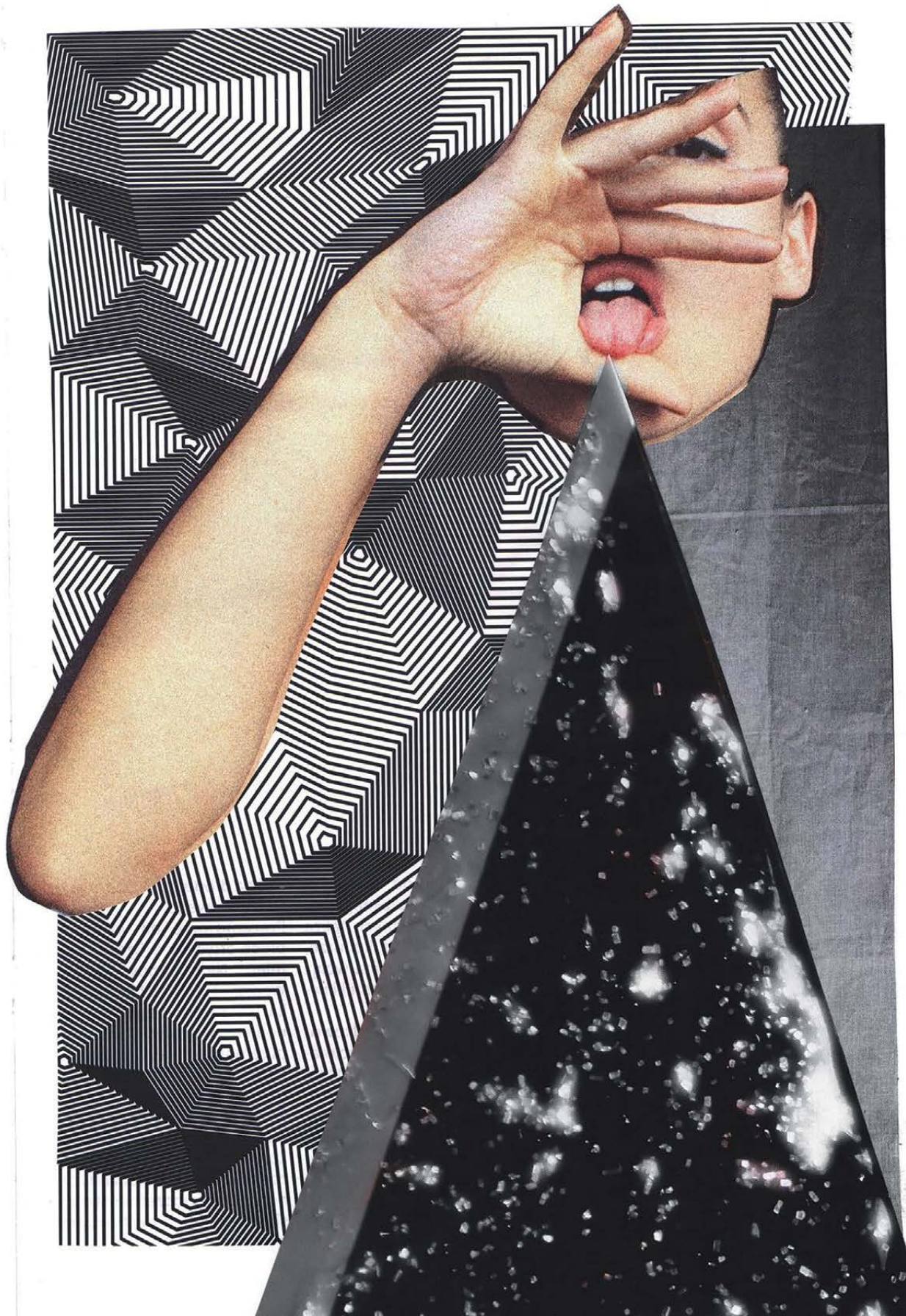
special phenomenon, as such a top-down approach is quite unusual in representative democracies. Before the democratic transition, collective actions of this kind were labelled as pseudo-movements, which had the purpose to work as “transmission belts”, i.e. transmitting the interests and will of the communist party towards the society. The pseudo-movements were for example unions, communist youth and women leagues, the pioneer movement, among others. The contemporary term for such means is the “quasi movement” or (with reference to fake grassroots) the “astro turf”. Top-down initiatives and movements are very common in illiberal democracies – serving the direct interests of the populist leaders.

The Peace March and movement governance in general are aimed at maintaining connections with the voters and strengthening the emotional bonds with the help of collective experiences. This is the program of regaining the “soul” of the Fidesz’s political community, which was a frequent demand during and after the internet tax protests. Movement governance is not necessarily an illiberal, populist political method, if the goal is to build an emotional bond. Experiencing politics collectively, having emotional connections are functions which are becoming more and more important also in Western politics.

The need for such mobilization was demonstrated by the high number of participants at the Peace Marches. The decreasing trust in political institutions, party de-alignment and the growing uncertainty of the future give a higher value to such atypical political instruments like the top-down mobilization. It would not be surprising if more governments would apply these means. The appearance of movement parties like Podemos, Syriza and the growing popularity of populist parties are pointing in this direction.

<sup>3</sup> It is also of significance that the cockade was used by liberal movements of national emancipation in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe.

<sup>4</sup> Metz, R. (2015) “Movement entrepreneurship of an incumbent party”, *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics*, 1 (3): pp. 81-100.



Saving the “soul” is a legitimate program of a governing party, but movement governance has its own hazards. Since it is the case of top-down mobilization, such movements have more resources than grassroots initiatives, which in turn distorts civil society. The impact on protest culture is also unknown. The permanent mobilization can be achieved by drawing sharp us–them boundaries. This kind of political polarization results in a bad political climate and an unpleasant social mood.

### **MOBILIZING AGAINST ORBÁN'S SYSTEM: THE CASE OF THE INTERNET TAX PROTESTS**

The internet tax protest was a wave of several massive protests in Hungary. The wave was triggered by the announcement of a new tax on internet data traffic. The wave began at the end of October 2014 and calmed at the beginning of 2015. If we consider the original internet tax protests (October 26 and 28, 2014) as instrumental actions, then the short-lived movement was successful, since the government later withdrew the plan of the internet tax.

The protests were also successful as expressive actions. Many teenagers and adolescents chanted “Europe! Europe!” at the Hungarian parliament building. It seemed that a new generation just stepped in to politics. The extremely high number of protesters on October 28 and the presence of many young people meant a strong inspiration for the broken left-wing voters after three electoral defeats. Due to this new motivation and the bottom-up nature of the protests, it was obvious that the mobilization will continue. The further mobilization was supported by the US travel ban scandal of the national taxation agencies officials<sup>5</sup>, the crisis in Ukraine and the related

growing influence of Putin’s Russia. With the help of these new and current topics, the protests could be easily re-framed.

An important novelty was that there were no known politicians, public intellectuals or celebrities behind the protests, as was in the case of the “Milla” demonstrations against the Fidesz’s new media law in 2011–2012. This vagueness of the protests made citizens’ engagement and issue identification and independent organization easier. However, at a later stage the lack of coordination led to conflicts between the independent groups. Many organizers quit the scene as a result of these conflicts, which also contributed to the decline of the protest wave.

It is not easy to answer the “What should have had been done?” question retrospectively, because there were many differences in the goals and motivations of various groups. While younger protesters, members of a new-left subculture in Budapest, who were active during the 2012–2013 student protests blamed the entire political class and criticized the entire 25 years after the democratic transition, the disappointed left-wing voters demonstrated rather strictly against the Orbán government<sup>6</sup>. Many people expected further consequences of the protest wave, even the resignation of the government. However, Hungary – already an EU member – was not in the same situation at the end of 2014 as Yugoslavia in 2000 or Ukraine in 2004, thus it was not feasible for it to adopt the recipe used for the color revolutions.

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try due to alleged involvement in corruption in October 2014. According to leaked information, there were several government officials among the banned citizens.

<sup>6</sup> Szabó, A. & D. Mikecz (2015) “After the Orbán-revolution: The awakening of civil society in Hungary?” [In:] Sava, I. N. (ed.) *Social Movements in Central and Eastern Europe*, Bucharest: The Bucharest University Press.

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<sup>5</sup> The United States banned Hungarian citizens from en-

Many commentators noted the lack of any charismatic leader, which shows that the media misinterpreted the protest wave. New figures with new concepts appeared during the mobilization, which seemed useful to give new impulses to the opposition. This does not necessarily mean that a new charismatic leader would appear. The 2014 protests could have formed a political community, which could have been the basis of further mobilization. A good example is the success at a by-election of Zoltán Kész, an independent candidate supported by civil organizations and opposition parties. However, there was not enough willingness and trust in the different political actors to create the basis for future cooperation. It also caused some confusion that the real mobilizing power of the internet tax issue was opaque.

The internet tax was the symbol of intervening into private spaces on the one hand, while the generality of the issue was much as important on the other hand. A very broad part of the society was affected by the proposal. In the case of the internet tax, the previous individual strategies could not have worked. If there are disturbances in the healthcare system, one can still have better treatment with the help of a familiar physician or with parasolvency. Children may be registered into the apartment of grandparents to matriculate into a better public school. The internet tax was general, affected everyone, there was no opportunity to achieve individual solutions.

It is clear that neither the aforementioned new-leftist subculture in Hungary, nor a wider civil community could have sustained the mobilization alone until the 2018 general elections. The examples of the Civic Circles and the Peace March show that parties play a crucial role in fostering, sustaining and widening bottom-up initiatives, even though the political right always



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enjoyed a greater mobilization potential in Hungary. This kind of cooperation was not developed among the contending left-wing opposition parties and the protesters.

One reason for this is the different *credo* and interests of the two sides. While the civil organizations' status is a matter of professional credibility, for the political parties the electoral success is crucial. Moreover, the left-wing activists are less connected to Hungary. Social action and issue advocacy on the political left is not strictly connected to the geographical region. One might leave the country but can still deal with animal rights or gender equality. On the right it is not possible to detach the location from action, it is not feasible to campaign against foreign influence in Hungary from a different country. This also means that political and social activism are very much strongly interrelated, that means parties and civil organizations are standing closer on the right. It also means that apolitical civil action does not have any real significance. This is not exclusively a Hungarian or Central Eastern European



phenomenon – when the disappointed left-wing groups in the USA aimed to symbolically occupy Wall Street back in 2011, the radical wing of the right (the Tea Party Movement) wanted to take over the Republican Party.

The internet tax confirmed that partial success can be achieved by organizing mass protests. The decision makers of Orbán's government might withdraw the internet tax proposal, just like in the case of the 2011-2012 student protests. These small victories are, however, not sufficient for deeper, structural changes. Real political changes can be achieved by electoral victory. This is why the resources as well as organizational and communication capacity of political parties are crucial for civil actors as well. In return for their resources, the political parties can gain more credibility. But civil protesters want to retain their non-partisan image and political parties their power, which are clear limits of a co-operation. This problem could be overcome with institutional innovations – for example, by introducing primary elections.

The internet-tax protests proved that there is a great demand for emotional identification among voters. Those who protested in the last months of 2014 are still potent citizens in Hungary, who might yet again be mobilized for protests or for the elections. However, neither the civil protesters, nor the political parties could build them a stable political home. The internet tax protests have raised an important question of political action. While the government successfully uses top-down mobilization techniques, real changes cannot be achieved without a certain level of institutionalization.

### **DISCUSSION: POLITICAL ACTION BEYOND INSTITUTIONS**

The debate on the crisis of political institutions is not very new – it is actually closely related to the general debate on the crisis of



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democracy. The traditional forms of political participation (such as electoral participation or working for political parties) have lost their significance. At the same time, direct forms and the non-institutionalized political action (like demonstrations, boycotts or conscious consumption) are on the rise. These tendencies are strongly interrelated with the growing importance of internet and the social media. A frequent question is whether the political action beyond political institutions and without the resources granted by institutions can have a significant impact. The problem is that political action could hardly influence politics and thus individual investments do not make any sense, if dissatisfaction and protest cannot be channeled towards a political party by the end of the day.

After the internet tax protests, the organizers experimented with different institutional solutions (establishing a web plat-





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form, starting a referendum campaign), but none of them proved to be successful in maintaining the mobilization. For many observers the mobilization through social media was the main reason why the institutionalization failed. It is risky to rely exclusively on social media, because it does not support the establishment of strong ties but rather only fast mobilization through weak ties instead. In his article on Twitter revolutions, Ivan Krastev wrote<sup>7</sup> that the protesters of the middle-class were misled by the popular belief that political institutions belong to the past, while the future belongs to networks and spontaneous action. The disruption caused by protests in Russia and Turkey did not undermine the regimes, but stabilized the state and the leaders' power. According to Krastev, this could happen because there are not only innovators in societies, but also those who want a peaceful society rather than creative destruction.

Political action beyond political institutions is a characteristic feature not only of Twitter-revolutionaries, but also of those political leaders, like Putin or Erdogan, who Krastev referred to. One important feature of populist politics is that it reinterprets the relations between the society and political leadership. The populist leader can interact with the society indirectly and not through institutions. The problem is that these intermediary institutions, that is the civil society, are granting that kind of structure and knowledge, which are making oversight and control of political decisions by the people possible.

The conscious strategy of populist leader alone is not responsible for the decreasing role of political institutions, as these leaders are just exploiting the changing social-

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<sup>7</sup> Krastev, I. (2015) "Why did the 'Twitter Revolutions' fail?", *The New York Times*, November 11, 2015.

political environment. Also, the plethora of information transferred by the internet gives citizens a feeling of instant empowerment and the belief of participation. Consequently, e-participation contributes indirectly to making political institutions obsolete. Since the new millennium, it also became visible that social media is not necessarily a space for rational deliberation and limitless participation, which contradicts the optimistic assumptions about the internet and the fulfillment of democracy going hand in hand.

The political action of a leader beyond political institutions involves not only ignoring the civil society, but reinterpreting the role of primer political institutions. Viktor Orbán explained in an interview in the midst of the migrant crisis that Europe's problem is the decision making through institutions, which makes the entire process slow and heavy. He would prefer faster decision making by strong-minded leaders. As a matter of fact, as far as the latter is concerned, more sovereignty should be delegated to the supranational level, which contradicts Orbán's idea of the Europe of nations. The abovementioned Civic Circles and the Peace March are good examples of political action beyond institutions. Nevertheless, the checks and balances granted by certain political institutions could also be dismantled with the help of the Fidesz's supermajority. It was therefore possible to transform legal and political institutions according to actual interests.

The changing, decreasing role of institutions is not only a temporary method of governance, but a general social tendency. This phenomenon is even more visible in the economy, especially in the case of sharing-economy and the start-up organizational culture. A basic point of the "sharing economy" is to complement or supersede inflexible, cumbersome institutions.

This has such social consequences as the reinterpretation of "home" or blurring the border between work and private life in time and space. Sharing private resources for community purposes was always a basic idea of non-profit civil organizations. However, it became more and more difficult to distinguish between non- and for-profit activities even within one specific organization.

The significance of political institutions is granted by their constitutional background. Thus, political action could not be fully achieved beyond them. Traditional political institutions did not fully lose their importance, but some of their functions have undergone a change. Effective political action requires recognizing that the old and new forms of political participation exist simultaneously and complementarily.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Fidesz is one of the most effective political machineries in Europe. It is not only a major political party in Hungary and on the European arena, but an entity using a complex set of mobilization techniques. The top-down (or astro turf) mobilization is an important part of making politics in this respect. Between 2002 and 2006 the Fidesz used the Civic Circles and the Peace March during the 2010-14 term to mobilize its sympathizers in order to reinforce political engagement and present popular support. Later, from 2011, the Orbán government introduced national consultations to find out what the policy preferences of the Hungarian society are. However, the unbiasedness of the consultation's questions were not granted and so the entire procedure served more as a means of political marketing rather than political participation. Moreover, on February 24, 2016 Viktor Orbán announced that a referendum on the future compulsory migrant quotas of the European Union shall be held in the



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same year. As the government with a legislative majority has its own means to form politics, the referendum can be seen as a part of the movement governance repertoire.

These various techniques (top-down or astro turf mobilization, biased national consultations, government-initiated referendum) can be useful in the face of the changing nature of political institutions and political participation. Citizens do not see the traditional institutions as the primer and only loci of political participation. Even the Fidesz lost some of its functions as a political party, now the quasi movements or auxiliary organizations became more important instruments of electoral mobilization. Nevertheless, political parties are still the main agents in contemporary representative democracies. While the activists could mobilize the outraged citizens during the internet tax protests, no successful spin-off organizations appeared after the protest wave. The social developments, like party de-alignment, individualized political

participation and growing importance of political action beyond institutions are not unique in Hungary or in CEE, but constitute more general trends in developed democracies. It is important to monitor these phenomena in Hungary in this regard, in order to know more about general social tendencies in developed democracies.

While the government could reach beyond institutionalized politics, the opposition parties, the internet tax protesters and notable NGOs could not find a way to cooperate with each other. The so-called “civilians” do not want to engage in deeper cooperation with the “discredited” political parties. However, without electoral success, it is not possible to change the government, thus some degree of institutionalization is necessary. There is not only disagreement between civil organizations and political parties, but also within the fragmented democratic opposition. Since the new election law makes some kind of coordination necessary, organizational innovations (such as primary elections) should be considered. ●



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