

Hungary's 'Milla' movement shows that social media driven protest movements only succeed when they connect meaningfully with civil society

*The Hungarian Government, led by the Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has made waves for its authoritarian tendencies and stated ambition to create an 'illiberal' democracy. In response to the government's censorship of the press, a protest group named Milla emerged, which had some success in organising campaigns against the government's more nefarious tendencies. However, in the end, it joined a political coalition. **Dr Peter Wilkin** argues that a social media driven protest group can only succeed to the extent that it connects with actors in civil society and builds a grassroots movement willing to support it through concrete actions.*



Budapest (Credit: Moyan Brenn, CC BY 2.0)

Milla (One Million Voices for a Free Press) were set up in Hungary in 2010 in response to the landslide election victory of the right-wing Fidesz party. Its main goal was to [promote the](#) 'reconstruction of the democratic framework and rule of law as well as the strengthening of civic awareness.' The key figure in the founding of Milla was [Peter Juhász](#), an Hungarian entrepreneur who saw Milla as a vehicle for defending the civil liberties established by the transformation from communism to democracy. Juhász acted as the administrator of the Facebook page that was to be the social media platform for Milla's activities. Milla's campaign began with a clear focus on the threat to a free press by the Fidesz government new Media Council, before broadening its platform to include an array of groups opposed to the governments authoritarian and illiberal politics.

Fidesz success in 2010 was shaped significantly by the collapse of the dominant left-liberal alliance between the Hungarian Socialist Party (HSP) – the party set up by the reform communists in 1989-1990, and the Alliance of Free democrats (SZDSZ) a long-standing pro-capitalist and pro-liberal party. Given the absence of any meaningful left parties in the general election the only question in 2010 was how big Fidesz majority would be. As it turned out it was big enough to enable them to rewrite the constitution in a way that would enable the government to extend its power and authority over Hungarian society through selective long-term appointments to institutions ranging from the judiciary to the [Media Council](#). This was part of Fidesz goal to build a new Hungary based around its ethno-nationalist programme with its rhetorical emphasis on family, nation and god. In the aftermath of the election radical liberals like Juhász, Peter Molanr and the other figures behind [Milla](#) saw an urgent need to challenge the agenda of Fidesz and to that end focussed on the central role of a free press in a liberal democracy, hence the title of the social media group, [One Million Voices for a Free Press \(Milla\)](#).

Milla sought to organise its activities through its Facebook page in order to mobilise popular opposition to the Fidesz government. As with many other examples over the past decade, Milla were an experiment with the use of social media as a means of organising social and political protest, with the ambition of undermining the government's authoritarian policies. This took the form of using its Facebook page to provide a platform for news articles that were not easily published in the Hungarian media, which was now subject to new penalties set by the [Fidesz dominated Media Council](#) and rapidly embracing forms of [self-censorship](#) for fear of invoking fines, or worse.

For Milla, Facebook and social media provided an easy and instant way in which to try to mobilise and organise a widespread protest to Fidesz authoritarian agenda and in this respect it provides an important test case for the developing trend of social media driven social movements. It illustrates, in particular, the limits of an over-reliance on social media as a tool for organising and mobilising civil society.

[Fidesz defended these new media laws](#) on the basis that they were similar to those in existence elsewhere in the EU. Fidesz have a point here and it is an added irony that it has largely been the left-liberal agenda in the EU which has tended to push for the laws against hate-speech which Fidesz has seized upon to justify its own attack on free speech. The dangers of undermining free speech on the grounds of arguments about harm or offense could not be more apparent and the UK is no exception to this with its own recent raft of legislation curbing speech relating to [race and religious offense](#). Further, in the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo shootings a meeting of the world's political elite in Paris to defend free speech took place and included [politicians](#) who had shown, at best, a passing interest in the subject until then. Worse, the French Socialist government moved quickly to introduce legislation further [undermining free speech](#) in France, despite claiming to defend it. It is exactly these kinds of contradictions that Fidesz can point to in order to defend their own actions.

In addition to publishing suppressed news stories the Fidesz Facebook page promoted a variety of stunts and activities to embarrass the Fidesz government, including inviting Hungarian citizens to record and post their version of a protest song, 'I don't like the

system'. Success for Milla was to be measured by its ability to turn digital activism into on the ground activities, from the virtual to the real. To this end it organised a series of mass protest rallies in Budapest over the next 4 years which at their peak drew crowds of over 100'000 Hungarians onto the streets. The idea of reviving [the civil society](#) that had overturned communism was central to Milla's ambitions and indeed there have been a diverse array of social movement's and protests both in support of Fidesz and against them over the past decade. What has been lacking is any sort of unifying movement that could turn opposition to Fidesz into a new kind of politics.

Despite gaining many supporters (measured as likes on its Facebook page) and espousing an anti-party political outlook that asserted the need for Milla to remain independent and untainted by failed political elites, in 2014 the group effectively joined the Unity coalition (as part of the Together 2014 Political Party which it had joined in 2012) for the 2014 general election. Why did this happen and what does it tell us about the nature of social media political activism?

Milla faced a number of profound obstacles that illustrate the limitations of a social media-led protest movement. First and foremost it was facing a government with unprecedented power and deeply authoritarian ambitions who were using the state to undermine and intimidate political opposition. This is perhaps the greatest obstacle that Milla faced and despite the fragility of [Fidesz support](#) (it secured 52.73% of the vote in 2010 on a low turnout in the 2nd round of just 46.52%) the government has been able to entrench its transformation of the Hungarian constitution with some success. It is also often overlooked that Fidesz does have committed supporters who themselves have taken to the streets to support the [government in great numbers](#).

The second problem that Milla faced was that its dependence on social media reflected its lack of a nation-wide grassroots appeal and campaign activity – the use of social media was an indication of Milla's limitations, not its modernity. As one member told us in interview, it was a largely Budapest-based group that could be ridiculed by the government as an intellectual and elite driven group who were out of touch with ordinary Hungarians. The use of social media reflected the outlook of the people organising Milla and overlooked the fact that Hungary only [has around 75%](#) internet penetration and 43% Facebook penetration. Those excluded from this are precisely the people that Milla will need to win over, the poorest, most marginalised and dispossessed Hungarian citizens. Without an active grassroots campaign that can address's not only political issues and civil liberties but also the social and economic concerns of Hungarians, this was always going to be difficult.

By contrast the neo-fascist party [Jobbik](#) (Movement for a Better Hungary) have also used social media to help build support across Hungary, proving particularly effective with young and university educated citizens as well as the disaffected voters disillusioned with the capitalist transformation of Hungary. But Jobbik backed its use of social media with a grassroots campaign that sought to organise meetings nation-wide, providing a forum for Hungarians to voice their obvious discontent at the massive failures of the neo-liberal transformation of the country. Milla had nothing like that kind of reach and its appeal was perhaps greater with left-liberal parties across the EU than it was across Hungary. This appeal to the EU to defend democracy in Hungary played into the hands of Fidesz who could use it to show that the Milla were part of an [EU](#)

[system](#) denying Hungarians the right to govern themselves. Given the EUs own problematic relationship to democracy and its continued punishment of [Greek citizens](#) for voting against austerity it is far from clear that in its current form the EU is of any support for even moderate social democratic parties.

Milla were symptomatic of the way in which social media driven opposition have tended, thus far, to build moments rather than movements, as seen with the Arab Spring and the Occupy Movement. This is not to decry the significance of these developments but to note that they have tended to lack a means of organising and sustaining themselves over the long-term, both materially and ideologically. These ongoing experiments with social media and political organisation are, no doubt, the direction of [future politics](#) and will develop in ways we cannot foresee. For the moment they remain exploratory and dramatic moments rather than sustainable movements.

A similar process to that initiated by Milla has been underway in the UK with the grassroots support for [Jeremy Corbyn's](#) campaign for the Labour Party leadership, which has dramatically brought several hundred thousand people into the party political process in support of something that appears to challenge the neo-liberal consensus. Social media has played a prominent part in mobilising this, and whether it will be another social media moment or become a movement of some sort remain to be seen.

Without an effective democratic left-libertarian movement in civil society to build links with (independent trade unions, environmental movement, women's movement) it is difficult to see how Milla could have achieved much more than it did. Ultimately Milla joined a new political party, [Together 2014](#), in 2012 with two other civil society groups which subsequently became part of the [Unity coalition](#), a left-liberal group dominated by the HSP and a commitment to the neo-liberal policies that have proven so damaging in Hungary since 1990. Milla's aim to present a clean break with the failed left-liberal political establishment came full circle. A social media driven protest can only succeed to the extent that it connects with actors in civil society and builds a grassroots movement willing to support it through concrete actions. Milla's experiment with social media illustrates this clearly.