

Back to the grassroots? The shrinking space of environmental activism in illiberal Hungary

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Abstract

This article illustrates the post-euphoric development of the environmental movement in the period since 2010 that was marked through democratic backsliding and the consolidation of “illiberalism” in Hungary. Embedded into a historical perspective that spans over the last three decades we present two case studies of urban environmental mobilisation and identify ‘localization’, i.e. reorientation towards grassroots activism as a new trend driven by the closure of political opportunity structures. This goes together with the alienation of local protests from institutional channels of influence-seeking and the weakening of ties with potential political allies, such as political parties or professionalised NGOs, and the increase of mistrust between the different actors.

1. Introduction

How social movements change – both as organisations and in their strategies – has attracted substantial scholarly attention over the last decades. The social movements literature has highlighted the role political opportunity structures (POS), organisational resources and issue framings play in determining movement’s strategies of action (McAdam *et al.* 1996). Scholars focusing on action repertoires and cycles of contention have repeatedly emphasised the importance of a longitudinal perspective on social movements. However, research on social movements in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) – being naturally attracted to theories initially developed to analyse Western movements – remained dominated by rather short-termist assessments and did only selectively apply these analytical frameworks to understand developments taking place in the region (Tokunaga 2020). With scholars of environmental movement in CEE being interested in the “top-down, bottom-up and outside-in” influences (Waller 2010), only recently has there been more interest in a historically broader perspective that re-focuses on domestic drivers of activism (Harper 2006, Novikau 2015, Fagan and Sircar 2017, Szulecka and Szulecki 2019, Pál 2021) and on new forms of activism in the region (Jacobsson 2015, de Hoop and Jehlička 2017, Dolenc *et al.* 2017, Fagan and Ejodus 2020, Baća 2021). Following these trends in the literature, this contribution traces the development of the Hungarian environmental movement over the last three decades. The longitudinal gaze allows placing recent developments towards an ‘illiberal state’ (see Scheiring 2020; Szelényi and Csillag, 2015; Szelényi, 2016) and its implications for the environmental movement into a broader perspective. We illustrate more recent developments in Hungarian environmental activism through two explorative case studies of urban mobilisation and highlight the growing importance of local re-focusing, the weakness of mobilisational structures established in the previous decades and the dwindling of the environmental movement’s transactional capacities.

The literature on societal mobilisation has often described civil society’s role in the breakdown of state socialist regimes during the late 1980s and finds that it has an important role to play in countering democratic backsliding afterwards (Bernhard *et al.* 2020, Dimitrova and Buzogány 2014). Recent criticism voiced in the ‘post-NGO’ literature (Johnston *et al.* 2013, Jacobsson 2015) and in studies critical of the ‘self-colonisation’ of social mobilisation research in CEE (Gagyí 2015, Gagyí and Ivancheva 2019, Baća 2021) revolve around the overestimation of formal institutions and the assumption of direct comparability of how these

institutions function in Western and Eastern Europe. The literature has also become increasingly doubtful of the overly optimistic expectations made by the early transitologist scholarship regarding the convergence of post-socialist countries with the ‘West’ (Stenning and Hörschelmann 2008, 319-320). Instead, critics of the ‘catching-up’ narrative have called for emphasising power relations and conceptualising post-socialism as a condition for the ‘hybridization’ of the content of global developments through local contexts (Gille 2010). This includes increased attention to ‘global scripts’, such as the one concerning external civil society promotion (Gagyí and Ivancheva 2019), or the increasingly powerful authoritarian anti-liberal counter-script emerging over the last decade aiming, inter alia, to shrink the space available to civil society (Toepler *et al.* 2020, Van der Borgh and Terwindt 2012). Together with CEE civil society’s specific heritage of ‘anti-politics’ (Falk 2003, Mastnak 2005), these global trends have lasting effects also on societal mobilisation in the region (Gille 2010: 14-22). This raises important questions about predispositions and capacities of civil society organisations in liberalising states to act as a counterforce to democratic backsliding and their realignment when confronted with shrinking spaces.

Building on two case studies of urban protest campaigns, our explorative study shows that for the Hungarian environmental movement the rise of the ‘illiberal state’ after 2010 has been marked by the closure of POS and a reorientation towards localised and increasingly depoliticized strategies of contestation. Our main empirical contribution is to provide a closer view on how protest activities unfold or civil societies’ realignment occurs within an increasingly hostile environment marked by a ‘shrinking space’ (Toepler *et al.* 2020, Van der Borgh and Terwindt 2012) and show how they lead to frictions within movements. Conceptually, we offer a combined perspective that weds system-level perspectives with a view on organisational and inter-organizational relations in order to capture the full extent of changes occurring in the field. While our case-study design prevents us from claiming generalizability, we find important parallels to ‘illiberal’ (Szelényi and Csillag, 2015; Szelényi, 2016) developments described in other sectors and countries (Szulecka and Szulecki 2019, Yabancı 2019, Gerő *et al.* 2020, Mikecz 2020, Pirro and Della Porta 2020, Schmalenberger 2020; Fejős and Szikra 2020).

The contribution is organised as follows. The next section presents our theoretical framework which links together different perspectives on social mobilisation. Section 3 offers a succinct overview of the history of the Hungarian environmental movement and highlights important contributions and trends that marked scholarly research about environmental activism over the last three decades. We then focus on ‘illiberalism’ as a new phase in the environmental

movements' history and illustrate this development through two case studies of grassroots mobilisation that are emblematic not only because they represent important contentious cases for the environmental movement, but also because they symbolise important tensions within Hungarian society. Our case studies show that the development of an 'illiberal state' has triggered a renaissance of grassroots politics. While this might be a positive development in itself as it could help the environmental movement to regain its legitimacy, local (urban) grassroots environmentalism in Hungary remains troubled by multiple structural constraints and is limited in its potential to use political opportunity structures and transnational activism. Section five concludes with the discussion of these results.

- **2. Political opportunities, resources and transactional activism**

To understand the development of the Hungarian environmental movement across time we mainly rely on the procedural account of societal activism, the so-called political opportunity structures (POS) perspective. POS-related accounts underline the role of the political system and the strategies adopted by political parties in encouraging or discouraging certain social movement activities, depending on how political processes function and which access points are available for social movements (Kitschelt 1986). The openness of the political system, the stability of political alignments or the presence of allies within the political system can enhance the opportunities of movement actors to further their goals. Thus, open POS are expected to allow movement actors to use insider strategies whereas closed opportunity structures prompt them to adopt outsider strategies. While the literature on environmental movements particularly emphasises the importance of movement allies, such as green or left-wing "movement-parties" (Kitschelt 2006) within the political system, the existence of open legal structures has also been noticed as an influential asset particularly for movements with weaker capacities (Hilson 2002). We expect that in the Hungarian case 'liberalisation' taking place since 2010 is not only marked by the closure of the political system for (some) social movements in terms of potential political allies but also by the closure of available legal opportunities due to the weakening of judiciary independence and more generally the separation of the branches of power (Szelényi and Csillag, 2015). At the same time, it seems plausible from the literature to expect that particularly opposition parties or green movement-parties" with close links to the activists' goals would offer support for environmental activism. This makes close links between parties and grassroots organisations, as often in the Western context, much weaker and highlights the historical and sociological context factors that shape political opportunities.

Another influential stream in social movement research, resource mobilisation theory, argues that whether and how social movement organisations can make use of POS depends on coordinated efforts, resources and organisational capacities of the organisations involved (McCarthy and Zald 1977). Therefore, internal structures of decision-making, formalisation, and professionalisation, but also the availability of resources is crucial to determine the strategies of movement actors. To capture the complexity of social movement organisations or campaigns in action, Rucht (2017) distinguishes between the ‘frontstage’ of protest, which is in the focus of the public view, and the ‘backstage’, which brings in an organisational perspective focused on internal debates, dynamics and conflicts. Focusing on the ‘backstage’ of activism, we expect internal structures of the environmental movement to shape the strategies chosen.

The social movements literature has also become increasingly aware of the different levels mobilizations take place and has repeatedly shown that multi-level dynamics can provide social movements with new political opportunities that might influence them domestically (Imig and Tarrow 2001). This dynamic has been particularly strong in the CEE states where the discussion focused mainly on the effects of transnational linkages, external donors and EU membership on different types of social movements (Andonova and Tuta 2014, Fábíán 2014). While studies of environmental activism showed that some environmental organisations could benefit from the POS opened up by EU accession (Mertens 2013), there was also substantial scepticism whether organisations beyond a small elite will effectively make use of such a leverage at all (Börzel and Buzogány 2010). Based on the observation of a discrepancy between the generally low participation levels and the existence of a surprisingly influential movement-related advocacy sector, Petrova and Tarrow (2016) differentiated between ‘participatory’ and ‘transactional’ forms of political activism. Using the Hungarian environmental movement as an example, they showed that when using diverse transactional ties even weak local groups could successfully mobilise extended support networks of professional NGOs, including international ones. In contrast to both the NGOization literature, which has been critical of donor-driven developments in domestic civil societies (Fagan 2006), and accounts of the external empowerment of CSO’s as a successful strategy (Parau 2009, Císař 2010), Tarrow and Petrova’s (2007) conceptualization reconciled both views by highlighting the complementarity of different forms of activism. Based on this literature, we expect a division of labour between different forms of environmental activism.

In what follows, we analyse the Hungarian environmental movements’ strategies as a reaction to changing POS, resources and transactional opportunities over the last three decades. Our

main focus is on ‘illiberalism’ as a new and current phase characterised by closing POS for movements. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán used the term “illiberalism” first in 2014 to characterise the ideological anti-liberalism of his political leadership. Csillag and Szelényi (2015) highlighted deviation from legal rational authority and the dismantling of the separation of powers to be illiberalism’s central characteristics (ibid., 24-25, see also Scheppele 2013). Using its two-thirds supermajority, the governing coalition government led by Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz party has passed a new constitution, eliminated a large part of checks and balances, weakened parliamentary prerogatives, challenged the independence of the judiciary, and installed a controversial media oversight authority and politicised bureaucracies at all levels of hierarchy (see Scheiring 2020). Changes in electoral rules forced opposition parties to play on survival rather than actually being able to control the government (Várnagy and Ilonszki 2018). Similarly, changes in NGO regulations, accompanied by a governmental discourse portraying organisations receiving external funding as agents of ‘liberal world domination’ were perceived to endanger the very existence of these organisations (Glied and Kákai 2017, Gerő *et al.* 2020). These changes had direct effects not only on the POS but also the available resources and transactional capacities of professional NGOs and opposition parties which became weakened by the ‘closing space’ of administrative constraints.

- **3. From state socialism to illiberalism: A short history of Hungarian environmental movement**

The case of environmental mobilisation takes a distinct place in contemporary accounts of Hungarian democratisation as it is closely related to the emergence of contentious politics and of civil society as an autonomous force during the 1980s (Enyedi and Szirmai 1998, Harper 2006, Kerényi and Szabó 2006, Gille 2007). Upon closer inspection, the narratives used to tell the history of Hungarian environmental activism – including phases such as democratisation, internationalisation or Europeanization – mirror the political trends but also the academic fashions of their times (Gagyí 2015, Buzogány 2016, Tokunaga 2020). In order to situate more recent developments of the environmental movement, this section offers an overview of the main developments taking place over the last three decades. We start with discussing how environmental mobilisation strategies evolved over time. Our aim is showing how and why environmentalism has played such an important role in the history Hungarian democratisation and highlight important stages starting from the emergence of the environmental movement,

the rise of nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) as key movement actors and the recent grassroots renaissance (see Table 1 for an overview). We mainly draw here on the rich historical research carried out over the last decades of studying the Hungarian environmental movement. This includes original archival work on the historical sources of the environmental mobilizations in the 1980s but also material concerning environmental protests in the 2000s (Kerényi and Szabó, 2006) or the impact of European Union (EU) integration on movement actors (Börzel and Buzogány 2010).

Table 1: Development of the Hungarian environmental movement

Period	Context	Political opportunity
(1985-1990)	structures Protest against socialist forced modernization, central planning, non-participation, repression; environmental issues become politicized	closed
(1991-2004)	some international support Institutionalization and professionalization of the movements; Europeanization, internationalization	open
(2003-2010)	networks among environmental organizations; communication channels with state administration, external linkages and funding Dual development of a relatively strong and professional NGO sector and grassroots organizations the industrial-ization of agriculture elected to the parliament	open
(2010-)	Protest against top-down decisions, lack of participation; depoliticization of environmental issues partially closed Shortage of resources Anti-NGO campaigns by the government local level action	closed

Source: own compilation, partially based on Mikecz (2017).

The Danube movement as democratisation's Trojan Horse

Compared to Eastern European standards, Hungarian 'goulash-communism' has opened up for societal demands relatively early. Ecological groups were established in the late 1970–early 1980s, often in a top-down manner (Pál 2017, 2021). While these groups did refrain from openly criticising the incumbent regime, the environmental issue nevertheless became a strong symbolic frame for the whole Hungarian anti-regime opposition. 'Environmental catastrophes' were framed as a strong metaphor for the state's relationship with its citizens and the lack of capacity and willingness to protect the ambient nature and the health of its citizens. The literature has described the emblematic Danube Movement as the democratic opposition's 'Trojan Horse' (Enyedi and Szirmai 1998). The Danube Movement emerged in opposition to plans of the Hungarian and the Czechoslovak government to build the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros Dam on the Danube. The conflict over the Danube was easy to

identify with as it offered manifold interpretative frames ranging from environmental protection, anti-communism to patriotism and could mobilise emotional, traditional and anti-systemic values at the same time. It is important to highlight here that in contrast to many Western European cases, the roots of the Hungarian environmental (proto-)movement were not in the leftist-green political segment, but include substantial conservative elements as well (Harper 2006). Emerging from the grey zone between professionalism and oppositional activities, the Danube Movement's environmentalism resonated not only with calls for professional economic management and scientific progress present within pockets of state administration (Pál 2017), but also with those advocating market liberalism and democracy. Using the lens of the Western European literature on "new" social movements, researchers underlined the importance of closed or half-closed POS for the emergence of the environmental movement and emphasised the role of dense national and international mobilisation and epistemic networks (Láng-Pickvance 1998, Szabó 2001, Neubacher 2019). This secured Hungary a place on the map of social movement studies and contributed to the internalisation of the 'catching-up' narrative that remained present both in the movement's own storyline and among researchers studying social movements (Gagyí 2015, Buzogány 2016).

Consolidation of the non-profit sector

The 1990s were marked by the consolidation of the environmental movement with the Danube Movement remaining an important reference point. At the same time, despite the socialisation of many MPs in the first democratically elected Hungarian Parliament in 1990 in the Danube Movement, environmentalism's influence declined rapidly (Hajba 1994), even if re-emerging periodically as mobilizational frame, e.g. during anti-austerity protests against the socialist-liberal coalition in the late 1990s. During the 1990s, POS became gradually more open for the environmental movement: consecutive governments adopted comprehensive legislation, strengthened institutional frameworks according to international standards and responded to key demands concerning participation, environmental impact assessments and court access (Rose-Ackermann 2005). Environmental NGOs started to become regularly invited into advisory and oversight bodies of relevant ministries and often managed to develop stable working relations with local level administration as well (Móra 2008).

While hundreds of environmental NGOs were established during this phase at the local level, the most visible part of the environmental movement remained the professionalised, mostly Budapest-based core with high levels of specific technical and legal expertise (Mészáros

2001).¹ Lacking large-scale public support, these rights- and expertise-based groups were nevertheless quite successful in achieving their public policy goals by relying on ‘transactional mobilisation’ (Tarrow and Petrova 2007). This development has been described ‘professionalisation’ in the ‘NGOization’ literature highlighting the CEE tradition of apolitical or ‘anti-political’ dissident civil society (Falk 2003, Fagan, 2004). After regime change, however, the non-participation of civil society groups in policy-making became more difficult to defend morally than it was in the 1980s. One important implication of this development was that civil society actors were expected to participate in governance arrangements – something inherently alien for those with roots in the dissident movement (Mastnak 2005). This ‘anti-political’ tradition remained an important tradition of the environmental movement that made “participation” or “deliberation” resonate differently from the way it was framed in Western contexts (Gille, 2010: 22, Harper 2006).

Internal dilemmas of the environmental movement concerning state-society relations were further accentuated when Hungary’s Europeanization process became the main driving force of domestic change in the environmental sector in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The largely administrative and technical process of transposition of EU environmental policies has further accentuated the on-going trend of professionalisation and the emergence of governance-type collaboration between state and non-state actors (Buzogány 2009). Particularly professionalised ENGOs could benefit from the opening of new POS at the EU-level which supplied them with policy-expertise, resources and legitimacy (Börzel and Buzogány 2010). In the meantime, however, driven by an “elitist NGO discourse that downplayed negative local experiences in the post-1989 period” (Gagyi and Ivancheva 2019), Europeanization has also supported the “projectification” of CSOs in a way that was often perceived to contradict long-term organisational development and raised animosities between organisation regarding access to funding and influence. Thus, while EU accession has indeed provided new opportunities and resources for Hungarian environmentalism, from the environmental movements’ perspective many EU norms were regarded as being excessively neoliberal in nature and in conflict with existing sustainable local practices (Scheiring 2004, Gille 2007).

The return of contentious politics and the emergence of ecopolitics

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Examples include the Clean Air Group (focusing on pollution, sustainable transport issues and eco-taxation), Energia Klub (energy-efficiency), Hulladék Munkacsoport (HUMUSZ) (waste policies) or the public interest law organisation Environmental Management and Law Association (EMLA).

Parallel to the consolidation of the Hungarian environmental NGO sector and following international trends and influences, a new wave of so-called ‘ecopolitical’ activism emerged in the mid-2000s. The rise of ecopolitics and the return of contentious politics had its background in the emergence of a ‘second generation’ of environmentalism which leaned towards urban subculture and were strongly influenced by the global justice movement (Mikecz 2017). At the same time, much like the professional NGO sector, alterglobalists have also remained a mainly Budapest-based elite movement, without large membership and with no electoral influence. A handful of new organisations embraced issues such as environmental justice, post-ecology or ethical consumerism or became involved in anti-austerity protests (Mikecz 2018). This period also witnessed the rise of local mobilizations related to the ‘Right to the City’ movement and criticised the privatisation of public utilities or addressed social issues related to housing and homelessness, as well as the very successful rise of the Critical Mass urban cyclist movement, most of all in Budapest and in larger cities (Udvarhelyi 2009, Kerényi 2011, Florea *et al.* 2018). The emergence of such new types of activism has often led to internal clashes between the environmental movement’s traditional and more progressive currents (Petőcz, 2014).

In 2005-2006 a successful protest campaign against a NATO-radar to be built on the Zengő Hill in Southern Hungary became an important turning point for the entire environmental movement. Resonating with what Petrova and Tarrow (2007) termed “transactional activism”, local groups cooperated with domestic networks to successfully mobilise international stakeholders and effectively place pressure on the Hungarian government to change its plans (Kerényi and Szabó 2006, Scheiring 2006). The campaign’s success contributed to the establishment of the country’s first successful green party, Politics Can Be Different (LMP), which initiated a popular presidential campaign in 2006, gained for the first time parliamentary seats in the European Parliament in 2009 and entered the national parliament in 2010. After a promising start, LMP managed to secure representation at three consecutive parliamentary elections (see Fábíán 2010, 2015, Kovarek and Littvay 2019) but numerous conflicts both within the parliamentary party group and at the local level show the difficulties to overcome urban-rural, liberal-conservative as well as generational tensions between different understandings of environmentalism.

The crisis of NGOism

LMP’s electoral success coincided with the landslide electoral victory of the FIDESZ party and the rise of the ‘illiberal state’ under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. This has reinforced the pre-existing structural problems of the Hungarian non-state sector even further (Gerő and

Kopper 2013). After 2010 a series of reforms have weakened the institutional basis of environmental politics in Hungary (OECD 2018). These included not only the abolishment of the Ministry of Environment (which became downgraded through subordination to the agricultural branch) and the Office of the Ombudsman for Future Generations, but also cutting domestic and external funding opportunities for environmental CSOs. In particular, the well-established system of self-governance of the third sector and its institutionalised communication channels with state bodies became restricted, creating a vacuum for the institutional representation of environmental issues (Krasznai Kovács and Pataki 2021). The FIDESZ-led government initiated series of aggressive campaigns against CSOs receiving external funding which affected negatively a large number of environmental CSO and provoked not only financial problems but also moral panic and led to an atmosphere of general distrust within and towards the CSO sector (Glied and Kákai 2017).² At the same time, the question of party positioning vis-à-vis the illiberal regime has led to a split within the LMP with several MPs walking out to establish the new green splinter party *Párbeszéd* (Dialogue) which later joined the centre-left electoral alliance *Együtt 2014* (Together 2014).

Such changes in POS, including funding shortages and decreasing opportunities to influence national policy-making, led to a reorientation of the environmental movement towards grassroots mobilisation and local action. In the following section we discuss this specific process of ‘*grassrootsization*’ as an instance of changing state-society relations through the lens of two case studies. The crack-down on CSOs and the increasingly tedious environment available for civil society has rendered the emergence of a new type of civic activism which is low profile, more locally oriented, organised ad-hoc with a loose network structure. As we will illustrate below, the closure of POS goes well beyond losing resources and networks. The rise of the “illiberal state” means the decreased opportunity of legal and political contestation of power, because the liberal separation of powers as well as the system of checks and balances are increasingly becoming defunct (see Szelényi and Csillag, 2015, Scheppele 2013).

While political rights are becoming constrained, the emerging conflicts between state and local environmental movements concern more than just economic interests and the protection of the environment but relate also to the illiberal system as such. However, contesting illiberalism is weakened by the anti-political attitudes and inner tensions within the environmental movement.

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This includes attacks on Ökotárs, an ENGO managing grants which was accused of political bias in grants distribution.

- **4. Back to the Grassroots? Two Contemporary Case Studies**

The two case studies we present examine two cases of environmental contestation: the mobilisation by the so-called “City Park Protectors” and the conflict around the dam on the ‘Roman Shore’, which are both significant and representative of the current state of the Hungarian environmental mobilisation. Both conflicts have direct and indirect effects on the environment as the City Park and the Roman Shore are among the few remaining green urban spaces in Budapest. At the same time, the importance of both conflicts went beyond the local level and drew on anti-governmental sentiments leading to internal conflicts and strategic dilemmas within the involved groups. In what follows, we briefly describe the two conflicts and then discuss main strategies of contestation used by the participants which we organise following the three analytical lenses – POS, resource mobilisation and transactionalism – that were outlined above. Case studies seem particularly well- placed to understand the conflicts that arise from the changes in POS. We rely on participant observation and on 16 semi-structured interviews with key activists, representatives of political parties and environmental NGOs. In the interviews we asked about perceptions of the situation and the relations maintained by different actors with each other. The interviews were conducted during and after the mobilizations took place between 2015 and 2017; they lasted between 20 minutes and 3 hours. As some of the activists agreed to talk only upon the condition of anonymity, we do not disclose their identities when quoting from the interviews directly. We complemented the material obtained in the interviews with participant observation, accounts of the internal and external communication of the activist groups as well as media reports covering the two cases over several years.

City Park Protectors

The ‘City Park Protectors’ (*CPP - Ligetvédők*) consists of several loosely associated groups joining forces to protect Budapest’s UNESCO World Heritage City Park (‘Liget’) against a public investment megaproject aiming to transform the park into a “Museum Quarter” by concentrating tourism and hospitality industry there. According to the projects’ opponents, this would harm the park’s non-commercial recreational function. The investment project was initiated by the Fidesz government in 2011 and is also related to the plan to move government offices (including the Prime Minister’s Chancellery) to the historical premises of Buda Castle, where some of Budapest’s largest museums are located. The project initially foresaw the construction of five new museum buildings and was planned to be mainly covered from EU

funds. From 2011 to 2015, the project's magnitude has increased drastically from 12 million euros to 490 million euros (Pál 2017). When the construction plans first became public in 2013, mobilisation against the project remained weak. However, three years later the megaproject gained attention as part of larger anti-government protests against radical reforms initiated by the Fidesz government and in March 2016, the construction site was squatted by the protesters. The squatting ended four months later when private security guards displaced activists through the use of force in the presence of a passive riot police. In the following year, the pace of the construction slowed down and the protests intensity eventually faded, with smaller events being organised by different rivalling protest groups that continued squatting several smaller areas of the City Park. After media attention peaked in 2016 the City Park campaign went off the radar in 2017 and has been implemented slowly even if doubts remain whether there will be sufficient funding after the EU made clear that no funding will be available for the project. In 2017, a referendum was initiated to stop the megaproject, but became annulled by the National Electoral Committee.

Save the Trees of the Roman Shore!

Located in Budapest's upmarket third district, the iconic '*Roman Shore*' (*Római part*) is the city's last natural riverbank which has been used for recreation since the early 20th century. However, flood protection has been insufficient and the area between the river and the existing dam is regularly flooded. Following the privatisation of the riverside area, local authorities issued the new owners building permits without taking into consideration the restrictive housing and construction rules applicable in the flood basin. The conflict emerged when the Budapest City Council decided to erect an expensive mobile dam system to prevent flood damage. This would have converted the area into 'regular' urban land instead of maintaining its special status as a flooded area and serve the interests of developers who built unprotected buildings in the flood area violating the building regulations. This happened with the assistance of the district mayor who in 2010 became the Fidesz-backed mayor of Budapest... Opponents of the dam, including small grassroots groups of local citizens and hydrologists, argued that the construction of the mobile dam would destroy the natural riverbank irreversibly and lead to clear-cutting some 400 trees. Instead of the mobile dam, an alternative plan was to heighten the already existing dam and protect the flooded area and its habitats. The *Save the Trees of the Roman Shore!* campaign started in 2016 with demonstrations organised to convince the City Council to revise the construction plan. In 2017 opposition parties initiated a referendum to annul the decree initiating the construction

of the mobile dam. The referendum was rejected in the first instance but was later deemed legal by the Hungarian Constitutional Court. However, when the gathering of signatures in support of the referendum started in October 2017, the Mayor of Budapest unexpectedly withdrew his authorization just to issue another one with the same content only minutes later, forcing the project's opponents to restart the lengthy process of initiating a referendum anew. As described by Scheppele's 'Frankenstate' allegory (Scheppele 2013), such legal tricks are the central to the practice of illiberal governance: on paper everything is legal, but the regulations or the decisions of authorities violate the citizens' political rights to effectively contest state power.

Unused opportunity structures

Building on the POS perspective, our starting point was to assess the openness of opportunity structures available for activists involved in the two cases of contestation. The literature on POS suggests that even if opportunity structures are closed, especially "movement-parties" would help activists by serving as intermediaries (Kitschelt 1986). In contrast to the relatively open opportunity structures that the Hungarian environmental movement could rely on post-1989, the combined effects of institutional reforms taking place after 2010 in the field of environmental policy and the 'shrinking space' available for social movement actors have led to the closure of POS. What is more unexpected, however, is that activists did not seek allies among the parties opposing Fidesz, including the two green parties *LMP* and *Párbeszéd*, but mistrusted them by regarding them as part of the political establishment. As a result, opposition parties, established environmental NGOs and grassroots activists organised their own parallel protests, which further divided attendance at the events. To be sure, the activists were aware of the political relevance of the two conflicts. Both carried elements that would potentially resonate with a larger public and could thus be used by the opposition to incite protests against Fidesz. As one of the activists has put it:

"the story of our protest is the basket case of Hungarian society, carrying all ill symptoms - the arrogance of power, the ignorance of people, the lack of consultations, the violent abuse of power, ...that they produce laws just to justify their acts, that they wouldn't let the police beat us up, pretending to protect us but they wouldn't let us be here either" (Interview 4).

One reason for the neglect of cooperation mentioned in the interviews was the deep mistrust in politicians, claiming that these would “hijack” the protests for egoistic political goals (Interview 1, 3). In the CPP case, the opposition parties were criticised by activists to have claimed ownership of the protests in the media but were in reality unfamiliar with the situation on the site and with the demands of the protestors. Protestors claimed that even if politicians signed up to the internal “alert chain” they never showed up when they were needed nor did they provide any meaningful help with the mobilisation (Interview 2). Politicians were allowed to participate in the protests only in personal capacity. At the same time, reflecting on the high levels of party polarisation in Hungary, activists repeatedly stressed the “apolitical” nature of the protests, because, as one of the interviewed activists has put it, “the ‘*part*’ (river bank) issue shall not become a ‘*párt*’ (party) issue” (Interview 5). While the protests attracted significant public attention, the mobilisation was ultimately unable to reach out to a larger segment of society in a way akin to the Danube Movement of the 1980s or the Zengő movement of 2000s (Scheiring 2008, Kerényi and Szabó 2006). This had much to do with the lack of a well-resonating master frame to which the protest could be linked. The environmental aspect was just one of the possible discursive frames, as the protests could have been framed as Not-in-my-Backyard (NIMBY) conflicts, as question urban space, participation and local politics, as gentrification-related conflict, and last but not least, as an articulation of anti-government mobilisation. However, in the polarised political landscape of Hungarian illiberal democracy activists ‘depoliticized’ both conflicts by rendering them as being of technical nature. Thus, in order to avoid internal conflicts, instead of framing the conflict through the use of anti-government arguments, both campaigns agreed to rather emphasise the recreational value of the sites (Interview 1, Interview 5).

A second point of contention mentioned in the interviews was the unease of some of the activists with the compromise-seeking nature of the solutions opposition parties have put forward. In the CPP case, most activists ruled out any compromise-seeking mediation, arguing that if they would accept the construction plans partially, their cause would be entirely lost. When the Mayor of the adjacent district, a former green politician, proposed mediating between the protest movement and the authorities proposing that the construction project could be accepted if the current size of the park would remain untouched, he immediately lost his credibility among the activists. Similarly, when local councillors from the green LMP party introduced a motion for decree to protect the trees in the park, this was considered by the activists to be far from their actual demands (Interview 2). Difficulties in cooperation with the local protest groups have led opposition parties to refrain from

establishing contacts with the protestors (Interview 1). When the opposition parties realised that the two campaigns deliberately avoided to politicise their contention and to frame them addressing larger national debates, their interest towards providing them flank support has decreased rapidly. From the activist's perspective this could be seen as a result of the closing POS: In an "illiberal" political context where scapegoating CSOs and opposition politicians has become part of the everyday propaganda and the parliamentary process, local issues are rendered as less important for organisations active at the national level (Interview 3).

Alternative ways of contestation highlighted by the POS approach, such as resorting to courts or using referenda were used by both movements but remained in the end equally unsuccessful. Both movements have fought to revise the construction plans via public participation in the zoning process through environmental impact assessment or access to justice requests. The limits of legal mobilisation in an illiberal regime, where the judiciary has lost its independence, became particularly palpable when the Mayor of Budapest simply annulled the referendum regarding the Roman Shore using several administrative tricks. In the case of the Liget Project legal contestation was rendered impossible by the government declaring the case to be of "national importance" and thus invalidated possibilities to seek legal remedies available at the local level.

Resources and internal conflicts

The second analytical perspective, derived from resource mobilisation theory, suggests looking at the "backstage" of movements in order to understand their strategies (Rucht 2017). In both cases, defining movement goals and strategies to use has led to numerous internal conflicts among the activists. In the City Park case, several factions of the movement included anti-capitalist groups involved in squatting and using direct action. More moderate groups, such as the local association 'Civil Zugl6', tried to bargain with the administration and stop the constructions by relying on legal means. In the meantime, the definition of movement goals became strongly contested within both groups and the question whether to use single-issue NIMBY-type activism or anti-government claims was frequently debated internally (Interview 1). From the perspective of the NIMBY-oriented faction politicising the conflict would frighten potential supporters:

"We did not like the Marxist, anti-bourgeois slogans, or phrases like 'gentrification' either. I understand what they mean: if those buildings are built, everything will change. But still, these slogans have a bad connotation from the past, and this is not

something that I can explain to the old ladies and mothers from the neighbourhood, who would want to join us". (Interview 1)

Internal divisions between NIMBY-oriented groups and the groups with an openly anti-government agenda were difficult to mitigate using the movements' internal decision-making structures. This became particularly obvious in the case of the City Park protests, where a hard core of the experienced activists with backgrounds in environmental organisations or the anti-government grassroots student movement. International protest language and symbols of the Occupy or Indignados movements were used during the protests, including plenary sessions with consensual decision-making mechanisms, facilitated by randomly selected group members or the "no-leader" principle (Interview 4). However, in the case of the City Park Protectors, the main body for internal decision-making – 'The Plenary' – soon became a site of conflict itself when activists claimed to be side-lined and marginalised by a core group of activists (Interview 5). Resources, cultural capital, time and capacity to coordinate were unequally distributed among the activists and "mimicking" democratic decision-making has only exacerbated this problem. Thus, using transnational repertoires initially aimed to dissolve existing frictions have actually created new ones because some of the mobilisation strategies were alien to some of the activists. While over time the internal decision-making process became more centralised and dominated by elite activists, internal conflicts have spilled to the outside via the movement's social media channels (Interview 2).

Besides diverging political attitudes, social status and middle-class habits has also divided the movement internally. In the case of the City Park, one of the participating groups has invited homeless people to serve as activists, which led to internal conflicts over the external representation of the movement in the media. These conflicts were rooted in similar structural problems that also led to the fragmentation of the LMP several years ago and concerned the presence of political but also class-based cleavages within the green movement. Similar internal disputes have also contributed to the division of the City Park movement into different groups and camps. While similar conflicts emerged also in the case of the Roman Shore protests, the status differences among the participants were much weaker here given the middle-class character of the residential area.

Tacit transactionalism

While the Hungarian environmental movement has seen important successes of transactional mobilisation in the past (see Kerényi and Szabó 2006; Petrova and Tarrow 2007), similar

strategies remained largely unused in the two cases presented here. In contrast to the expectations of the transactionalist perspective, national-level or international actors were missing from the protests in both cases. In contrast to previous experiences in establishing multi-level support networks to defend local cases, no NGO networks were set up to support the campaigns. Echoing the scepticism and reluctance to use the POS discussed above, transactional activism involving professionalised NGOs has also remained limited.

The main strategic principle both in the CPP and the Roman Shore case was to remain strictly grassroots-based. This meant that not even environmental NGOs or civil networks were allowed to participate at the demonstrations. Perceiving NGO involvement as a source of possible conflict was a consequence of the illiberal political context that has emerged in Hungary since 2010. Since the early days of the new illiberal regime, NGOs acquiring external funding were blackmailed as agents of the liberal world order and this discourse got even harsher following 2015 when Fidesz started a large-scale smear campaign against George Soros (Schmalenberger 2020). Consequently, many supporters of the ruling Fidesz were just as much alienated by the involvement of a liberal and international NGO as by an opposition party. Adding to this, a significant part of older environmental activists had an anti-communist background and regarded “liberal” NGOs with suspicion (Interview 3). In order not to alienate potential supporters, it became a tacit compromise between the protestors and the professional environmental NGOs that the latter should remain invisible. Some NGO activists remained nevertheless active and supported the movement tacitly and in personal capacity. For instance, Greenpeace’s supportive, but largely invisible presence focused on direct but informal support. This position of the Greenpeace in the environmental arena is noteworthy in itself:

“Sometimes people consider us to act as an authority and demand our intervention. Then we explain that this would be the task of the state, and that we would like to function as an NGO” (Interview 3).

Greenpeace’s support both at the City Park and the Roman Shore consisted mainly in providing technology and know-how, such as training in nonviolent resistance and communication or support to prepare banners for demonstrations. At the same time, the intention of the movement to remain local and grassroots-oriented coincided with Greenpeace’s principles, which deliberately aims staying in the background:

“If Greenpeace appears as a big brand, it could be counterproductive for the movements, as there are phases of the organic development of movements, and we do not want to interfere there. We can help the movements build strong, powerful symbols that demonstrate that they are supported by many people, and that it is an important issue. We help them make decisions, but they are autonomous, independent movements.” (Interview 3)

Previously, environmental NGOs were criticised because of their alleged interest in supporting the *status quo* for the sake of their own survival and watering down radical claims of grassroots activists. However, in the illiberal political context emerging in Hungary which is openly hostile against civil society that is not aligned with Fidesz (Gerő and Kopper 2013, Gerő *et al.* 2020), many national level NGOs were regarded by the protestors to be more interested in voicing general political claims against the government than getting involved in local conflicts (Interview 3, 2). At the same time, members and employees of NGOs were well-aware that keeping environmental protests strictly local will not help them to gain back their previous standing (Interview 3). As suggested by activists of the Roman Shore movement, for politically divided grassroots protests a more viable alternative to using the help of professionalised NGOs is adjusting to the realities of a consolidated illiberal regime and to pragmatically seek collaboration with local neo-patrimonial political networks. This kind of “grassrotisation” is therefore not to be seen as step back to the roots of environmental contestation but rather as a sign of limited, locally-focused political representation which is reminiscent of the ‘clientelist reflex’ of the pre-1989 authoritarian socialist regime when protest was voiced within – and not against – the system (Pál 2017).

The further development of the two cases after 2017 and 2018 (when our interviews were made) highlights the lasting pattern of tacit transactionalism and shows the relevance of POS. By the end of 2021, the Liget Project is rapidly approaching finalisation. In the meantime, the activists are regular guests of Hungarian courts, where they face accusations of violent and illegal protests. The predicted gentrification process has also advanced. Despite the pandemic, real estate developers close to Fidesz have started building recreational facilities and hotels in the park area, which was expropriated from the city government. By contrast, in the Roman Shore case the movement opposing the construction of the mobile dam has ultimately reached its goals. The main reason for this relates to changing POS. After in 2019 Fidesz lost the Budapest local elections, the new mayor, an opposition candidate previously involved closely with the Liget case as a district mayor, immediately refrained from the plan.

● 5. Conclusions

The literature on societal mobilisation in CEE usually agrees that civil society has played an important role in eroding the power of state socialist regimes during the late 1980s and that during the 1990s and 2000s external influences relating to transnationalization were the main drivers of change (Tokunaga 2020). Environmental mobilisation in Hungary during and after regime change was often used as an important empirical example in these debates (Kerényi and Szabó 2006, Petrova and Tarrow 2007). The weakening of external influences in the region coincided with the crisis of liberalism and the eventual rise of “illiberalism” in Hungary (Scheiring 2020, Csillag and Szelényi 2015). After discussing the literature on the Hungarian environmental movement, this contribution has engaged in reorienting the research agenda towards a “domestic turn” set out in the Introduction of this Symposium by focusing on recent developments of the Hungarian environmental movement under the changed POS of a consolidating illiberal regime.

Our case studies of two urban protest campaigns show that confronted with the ‘shrinking space’ for civil society organisations, societal activism in Hungary became depoliticized and increasingly reoriented towards localism. Both the City Park and the Roman Shore movements started as thickly layered movements composed of several groups and complex claims concerning participation in urban decision-making and more explicit anti-regime sentiments. The two case studies show that general mistrust and confidence loss in political institutions have led to the distancing from political parties or ‘transactional’ NGOs which could have become important allies to mobilise supporters. Even if both local campaigns have touched upon important issues that could have achieved high societal resonance, the activists chose to depoliticize them out of strategic considerations. Consequently, conflictive voices were silenced and movement goals became narrowed down – while simpler local NIMBY issues have moved to the foreground. As a result, the two local campaigns failed to resonate at the national level and connect with political debates about the illiberal turn or the prevalence of rampant political corruption. This does not mean that the institutional actors were absent – but their participation and their involvement remained invisible and tacit even if they continued to exert influence informally. Such a development might in the long-term strengthen environmentalism by helping environmental organisations – which were criticised for their elitist discourses and for being unresponsive to local issues in the NGOization literature (Fagan 2005) – to (re)gain their grassroots, increase legitimacy and mainstream green ideas. Still, local environmentalism in Hungary is also confronted with constraints unrelated to the mistrust between the movement’s actors incited by the illiberal climate since

2010, but stemming from the anti-political heritage of the environmental movement and the weak societal legitimacy of the organisations active in this sector. These findings question the capacity of civil society to counter democratic backsliding on their own. However, as the Roman Shore case shows, subnational politics has an important role to play here (see also O'Dwyer and Stenberg 2021) and protest activities can become successful in the long term when taken up by new political incumbents.

Going full circle, Hungary's environmental movement faces similarities to the situation experienced in the late 1980s. But in contrast to the experiences of regime change in the 1980s when the oppositional environmental movement has actively politicised the environmental issue against the one party state, acting a multiparty, albeit illiberal, democracy contemporary movements refrain from voicing more general political claims. What also sets the current environmental mobilisation in Hungary apart from previous mobilisation waves is that when faced with an increasingly hostile environment, mobilisation seems to stick to the local level (see Szulecka and Szulecki 2019, this issue) and is unable and unwilling to connect via transactional activism. Overarching framings that include questions related to the political system, democracy or the current authoritarian tendencies are cautiously avoided. What a longitudinal gaze shows, however, is that both localism and transactionalism targeting the central or state-level elites are needed for a movement to succeed.

Interview List

Interview 1: Co-founders of the City Park Protectors movement

Interview 2: Core member of the City Park Protectors movement, lives in the district, no previous experience with mobilisation

Interview 3: long-time Greenpeace activist, now employed by Greenpeace Hungary

Interview 4: Activist supporting the City Park and the Roman Shore movement, lives in another Hungarian city and travels to Budapest to join the protest occasionally

Interview 5: young activist of the Roman Shore movement, lives in the district, first involvement in protests

Acknowledgments

● 6. References

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