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### **Gábor Halmai: The Swamps of Neoliberal Hegemony: Polgári Körök in “Transitional” Hungary**

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## Abstract

The so-called *polgári körök* (civic circles) were “born” after the 2002 electoral defeat of the centre-right government to provide a mass base for the senior coalition partner FIDESZ-MPSZ (*Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége-Magyar Polgári Szövetség*, Alliance of Young Democrats-Hungarian Civic Alliance). They have since evolved into a very vocal and diverse movement that critiques the “Socialist-Liberal” government’s policies, but has also been branded along the conventional lines of a “militant, extreme right-wing horde.” This study investigates how this recent form of Hungarian anti-neoliberal debate has acquired a radical hue in conventional wisdom, and thereby has been disqualified from the political scene. The paper builds on the combination of the theoretical fields of hegemony and social movement studies. Hegemony, often viewed as a totalising gaze, is in this way given an anthropological understanding and refers to a terrain of struggle and contention instead. The relational approach in recent social movement literature helps connect the structural, symbolic and micro levels with concepts such as “social appropriation” and “brokerage.” The methods used reflect the anthropological training of the author. Extended fieldwork was carried out in Újpest and Csepel, two traditional working-class districts of Budapest with a rich history of mobilization. Participant observation in civic circle and party events, political rallies, door-to-door campaigning, and family gatherings was combined with structured and unstructured interviews, as well as discourse analysis, to yield a more comprehensive reading of these people’s vision of reality. Three distinct periods of recent Hungarian history are presented here as recounted by the informants: the late Kádár regime, the “transitional” years of the 1990s, and the years that span the civic circles’ proper existence. The lens of these accounts shows a more diversified and analytically more profound understanding of how recent mobilisation based on anti-neoliberalism merges with deep-rooted “anti-Communist” sentiments in Hungary. The subsequent increasing cries for more participatory politics make the current rounds of structural adjustment much more shaky and vulnerable to public contestation. The potential for critique, however, has been hampered because it is in no elite fraction’s interest to mobilise the voices of those constituencies which have been silenced or “disappeared” politically both as a result of the Kádárist compromise and the change in regime. Although the symbolic overtone of the civic mobilisation has a nationalist tint, *on the ground*, they look more inclusive and communitarian, and certainly much less chauvinistic than the allegedly “liberal” and “democratic” attitude of the governing coalition. The economic programmes of privatisation and liberalisation are thus not swallowed quietly any more. However, the amplifying voices can at most fight the symbolic silencing: the entire political elite’s complicity in the maintenance of the status quo blunts most bottom-up development as slogans of “solidarity” ring hollow when it comes to actual policy making.

## Introduction

*“If we want to drain the swamp, the plebiscite shouldn’t address the frogs!”*  
(Hungarian Economic Minister János Kóka in 2005 on the employee’s outcry regarding his reforms in the ministry)

Hungary had been considered throughout the 1990s as the island of stability in Central and Eastern Europe with its unique regional record of all post-Communist governments serving their full four-year term. As the country was re-inserted into the global capitalist system, neoliberal policies dominated the decision-making agendas of the democratically elected administrations. Nevertheless, the initial tranquillity gave way to loud political mobilisation after the turn of the century, and the critics of the tenets of “good governance,” “privatisation” and “globalisation” came to be labelled “nationalist,” “fascist” and, in the case of the most recent riots in Budapest, simply “football hooligans.” In this paper I chose to focus on the *micro* level of these mostly working-class people’s counter-hegemonic struggle which results in the allegedly extreme right-wing symbolism that has effectively disqualified them from political society. It is at the micro level where ethnographically we can really poke into the cobwebs of power and hierarchy, and analyse how

political groups and categories are in fact “sweated out.” Whereas action is most tangible here, it is also at this level that one can perceive the seeming futility of Hungarian “civil disobedience.”

The so-called *polgári körök* (civic circles) were summoned to life by then Prime Minister Viktor Orbán after his government’s 2002 electoral defeat to provide “flesh” – i.e. a mass base – to the right-wing skeleton of FIDESZ-MPSZ (*Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége-Magyar Polgári Szövetség*, Alliance of Young Democrats-Hungarian Civic Alliance). They have since evolved into a very vocal and diverse movement of 150,000<sup>1</sup> that critiques the “Socialist-Liberal” government’s policies, but has also been branded along the conventional lines of a “militant, extreme right-wing horde.” FIDESZ has extensively used the discourse of “bringing politics back to the streets,” enthusiastically obeyed by the members of the civic circles who have staged various mass demonstrations and reconfigured local communities since 2002. The birth of the *polgári körök* and further petitioning, consultations, “village parliaments,” and referenda may have contributed to shifting the balance slightly to a more participatory democracy in Hungary. However, global and local, external and internal factors of the neoliberal hegemony all featured in the defeat of the “national-civic side” in the 2006 elections. Having consolidated its position, the Socialist-Liberal coalition has initiated the latest round of neoliberal structural reforms despite a very different campaign platform. This time around, however, much of Hungarian society seems to have lost its placid patience.

## Popular Contention in a Neoliberal Hegemony

When applying the concept of hegemony, I fuse macro and micro level understandings of the original Gramscian term.<sup>2</sup> Jessop’s strategic-relational approach introduces the concepts of “accumulation strategy” and “hegemonic project” to understand the national struggle at the state level: political coalitions are built and reshuffled by parties, movements and other organised actors to attain power and secure social backing by “one-nation” or “two-nation” hegemonic strategies.<sup>3</sup> Simultaneously, more anthropological understandings of hegemony as promoted by Roseberry, Gledhill, Ferguson, and Smith theorise about the micro-strategies of resistance.<sup>4</sup> Hegemony should accordingly be viewed as a terrain of struggle and contention instead of a totalising and omnipresent “gaze”. Local movements as counter-hegemonic projects are compromised by global power structures; however, they also very much influence their situated expressions. Hungarians do not live in a structural-ideological vacuum, yet they are able to renegotiate their positions.

As regards social movements, the “relational” approach of McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly has provided the most sophisticated tool to link the micro and macro levels of analysis: it treats “social interaction, social ties, communication, and conversation not merely as expressions of structure, rationality, consciousness, or culture, but as active sites of creation and change.”<sup>5</sup> The cognitive and relational mechanisms of the “collective attribution of threats and opportunities,” “category formation,” “brokerage” or “certification” all

1 There are no concrete numbers about the actual size of the movement: circles were asked to register via the “Democracy Line” in 2002 and reportedly reached 150,000 members in 11,000 cell organizations, yet their number and public activity have visibly floundered in the last few years.

2 Cf. Gramsci, Antonio: *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. New York: International Publishers, 1971; Arrighi, Giovanni and Silver, Beverly J.: *Chaos and Governance in the Modern World System*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999; Chatterjee, Partha: *The Politics of the Governed. Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004; Friedman, Jonathan: “Globalization, Dis-integration, Re-organization,” in: Jonathan Friedman (ed.): *Globalization, the State and Violence*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2003; Harvey, David: *The New Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

3 Jessop, Bob: *State Theory: Putting States in their Place*. Penn State University Press, 1990, p. 211

4 Cf. Roseberry, William: “Hegemony and the Language of Contention” in Gilbert Joseph and Daniel Nugent (eds.): *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico*, Durham: Duke State University Press, 1994; Gledhill, John: *Power and its Disguises: Anthropological Perspectives on Politics*. London: Pluto Press, 2000; Smith, Gavin: *Hegemony: critical interpretations in anthropology and beyond*, in: Focaal – European Journal of Anthropology, 2004, No. 43, pp. 99–120.

5 McAdam, Doug, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly: *Dynamics of Contention*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 22.

factor in this perspective, giving it more dynamism and “grounded-ness” as opposed to merely discursive analyses.

This paper is based on extended fieldwork in Újpest and Csepel (September 2005–August 2006), traditional working-class districts of Budapest with a rich history of mobilisation, and on a string of interviews and less engaged participant observation of control groups in the middle class core of Buda and downtown Pest. Budapest is the undisputed (political) capital of Hungary yet its *panelprolik* (“proletariat of the concrete blocks”) were very much antagonised by the right-wing government of 1998–2002. The attempts by FIDESZ to achieve mass popularity since 2002 have been aimed mostly at this segment of society, the traditionally “Socialist” voters. Through the experiences of the rank-and-file of the “national-civic side,” my research followed the ups and downs of this political process via the analytical framework of neoliberal hegemony.

## The “Sin of Socialism”

Just as structurally and symbolically the previous hegemony of the Kádár regime left its crucial and binding mark on the way any counter-hegemonic struggle could unfold in Hungary, on the micro-political level what is referred to as “Socialism” also comes with a heavy baggage. The central myth of Socialism was that it was a “people’s democracy.” In what ways did the population exactly participate in politics or communal life in general? Individual life stories highlight the different trajectories families labelled as different “classes” – defined top-down – took in that era.

The majority of my interviewees (surprisingly?) come from families who moved to the capital during Socialism. Those who were smallholders vividly remember the stories their parents and grandparents passed onto them of land nationalisation, forceful entries into cooperatives, and the Rákosi-era phenomenon of “sweeping the attic.” Others, whose families were servants and were “liberated” by the regime or who in other aspects benefited from it, do feel nostalgic about the Kádár era, yet after the structural adjustment (Bokros-) package of 1995, if not earlier, turned away from the politicians who were hoping to cash in on that gratitude. The minority of my interviewees identified what is often called a “bourgeois” family background in the pre-war era, and while they seem to have suffered the most discrimination and relative material deprivation, even they concur with the policies that ameliorated the living conditions of millions in the early Kádár era and wish the sense of community that had then existed returned to Hungarian society.

What, however, defines Socialism for most of these people is the way they witnessed preferential treatment, petty gimmicking, networking, covering up and in general “unfairness” and “indecent” among those who were linked to the party. According to these accounts, the Kádárist compromise paved the way to today’s consumer fetishism and lack of national consciousness.

*Those 45 years [of Communism] were killing the soul, not with the oppression but with this compromise: shut your mouth, don’t care about anything, withdraw, steal, cheat, lie! Everything is shared and is everyone’s, so take it home if you can, grab it! Don’t poke your nose into anything, don’t care about public matters, we’ll take care of it for you... it’s deep down in everyone, even me.<sup>6</sup>*

Nevertheless, whenever they were probed on their own or their relatives’ party membership, they always felt insecure about it, needing to justify it in terms of its “functionality.” One of them was even a party secretary in the last years of Kádárism, yet he did not dare share that with his civic circle or local party members. Therefore, while loathing the mentality of the regime, people typically did not seclude themselves from party members and acknowledge friendships with them. Just as a fair share of the FIDESZ elite participated in party life during the Kádár regime, the average man could not totally isolate himself/herself from it, either, and has a hard time coming to grips with that.

6 Viktória, in her 40s, veterinarian, civic circle member. Informants are given pseudonyms in this text. All quotes were translated by the author from the Hungarian original.

Nonetheless, while on the elite level rival groups lined up to populate the “other side” of the Roundtable Talks of 1989, on the ground no counter-culture, much less popular mobilization along the lines of Polish Solidarity, evolved in Hungary, barring the marginal *samizdat*. Trade unions were functional equivalents to party authorities at the workplace, thus demoralising any sort of collective interest representation. The church did act as some sort of safety valve during the Kádár regime: many of my informants disprove conventional wisdom by describing their persistent habit of practicing their religion, and also identify congregations as vital loci of community life. Overt protesting against the regime was more prevalent among the youth, explained as part of the “beat culture” by my informants. The consequent repression by state authorities also appeared in the micro sphere. However, it hardly ever manifested itself in Stalinist-type “disappearings.” Whenever it became visible, these beatings served as key – albeit passive – political experiences for my informants.

In the end, these ambivalent experiences show that what people juxtapose in their current argumentation as moral (national) and immoral (Communist) has been rendered relative in their everyday practice. What they understand today to be an essential part of national citizenship (i.e. participation in the public sphere), they easily explain away during Kádárism as “going against the wall.” The micro-stories of “living through Socialism” are thus indicative of the depoliticising compromise which society made with the regime, thereby “exiting” from any form of “making history.” How did we then get from people placidly confessing to their passive complicity to Socialism to them vocally denouncing its alleged heirs?

## Exit Polls

Even though Central and Eastern Europe was once celebrated for its burgeoning civil society scene, the “anti-political” elite representatives of the regime change quickly rewrote the populace’s dictionaries on what “civil society” meant in times of democracy:

*One has only to look at contemporary Hungary to see the markedly Realpolitik character of the use of civil society in today’s Eastern Europe. A banner for the opposition between 1987 and 1989, the term became, with the fall of the communist regime, a legitimizing device for the new government. The quest for the realization of civil society was, it was argued, fulfilled with an elected Parliament and the Antall government of the Hungarian Democratic Forum. Civil society was realized in—the new State apparatus.<sup>7</sup>*

“Transition” has become the catchword to explain away reality, and “liberal capitalism” was substituted for “Socialism” as the image floating ahead and justifying all the hardship on the road to achieving it. The members of the civic circles are united in their view that “regime change” as such did not occur. In Csepel and Újpest, the pervasive and prevailing old-time networks nullify any such characterisation for them. This continuity is nicely visualized by the anachronistic “Szövetség ABC” (the Kádár era name) sign on the local Csepel grocery store, even though it’s been privatized for a long time.

The two most important “mass political” protest events as recounted by my informants featured SZDSZ (*Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége*, Alliance of Free Democrats) and FIDESZ figures. The 1990 reburial of Imre Nagy – the iconic Prime Minister of 1956 – saw a young, bearded Viktor Orbán, reiterating the Revolution’s goals of national self-determination, demand that the Russian troops be withdrawn from Hungary. Even though many people found it overly radical, this speech is considered the psychological catalyst for the populace to identify with the “regime change.” Although they point to this speech as one of the most memorable events of the fall of Communism, it did not bring sufficient appeal or credibility for them to vote for FIDESZ just yet. Similarly, the other key event of the Taxi Blockade in the autumn of 1990 also mostly spurred negative emotions, understood as a “weak attempt at a coup” by SZDSZ, a purely opportunistic move as opposed to the “justified” political riots that currently characterise Hungarian political reality.

7 Seligman, Adam B: *The Idea of Civil Society*. New York: The Free Press, 1992, p. 7.

The alleged radicalism of civic circles thus does not seem to have originated in either the Kádár era or the early “transitional” times. Accordingly, the 1990–2002 period is characterised by “media parties” that somehow managed to stay afloat in society. Whereas the ex-Communists retained much of their old embedded structures, the “oppositional” parties lacked any sort of mass base. SZDSZ is always cited as the “dwarf party of intellectuals”: its political opportunism and lofty vocabulary have alienated much of their electorate as they slipped from roughly 25% in 1990 to 5% in 2002. FIDESZ, however, also displays similar elitist tendencies in its top echelon. Since 1990, very few people have managed to break the closed circle of leadership within the organisation as the party evolved from not having a president to bestowing him quasi-exclusive authority in decision-making. Only the defeat of 2002 triggered the first wave of attempts to open up to the public, yet as described below, it has been an extremely ambiguous process.

As political participation was confined to electoral polls, ordinary people could not help gaping at their lives becoming ever more insecure. The 1989 rosy clouds of prosperity and freedom were only walked by the small “not-so-nouveau” riche, whilst for the large majority, capitalism ushered in heightened exploitation, overt racketeering, and increasing insecurity. The experience of members of the civic circles of privatisation fits very smoothly into their general image of “Socialists.” This has been the dominating theme of their discourse on the change of regime, and their frustration which is organically linked to the lack of “spring cleaning:”

*The director [of the company] made sure that in case the company doesn't “win the game” he wouldn't come out worse from it. He didn't bribe the “referee” but founded an ltd. for the foreign undertaking, included a few middle-rank leaders though he left me out for some reason. They played around with the bills and were rescuing property from the company. This is how it happened everywhere.<sup>8</sup>*

While privatisation saw public property “robbed,” the 1995 Bokros package wiped out the Kádárist security: this was the most significant “act” of the ex-Communist MSZP (*Magyar Szocialista Párt*, Hungarian Socialist Party) that won the 1994 elections on a landslide, yet shockingly allied with ex-Democratic Opposition SZDSZ to rule by quasi-decree. As a consequence, members of the civic circles redrew the definitions of “Communist” and “conservative.” Although in principle Communism is viewed positively, it is seen as being perverted through “selfishness” and its “community-centrism” has been replaced by “national conservatism.” These characterisations reflect the adequacy of FIDESZ's choice of the new slogan “solidarity” in their 2006 campaign. As one of my young informants erupted:

*Dad always used to scorn the Commies and I didn't know why so I looked it up in the encyclopaedia and didn't understand still what was wrong with it. I guess the ideology has good elements but I only associate negative things with it. I heard lots of stories from Romania, how the Commies destroyed Hungarian villages, how they forced grandpa to join the cooperative (...) now if you call me Commie I'll call you geci [rudest curse word in Hungarian]. (...) Rightwing or national are those who don't go for the 10Ft extra but want what serves the nation, its rise, the community, whereas leftwing are those who would want 1Ft more and don't give a shit about the rest. You can really see it on people – like Orwell's *Animal Farm*, people turning into pigs. A rightwing person has a positive aura, you can see it on the way he looks into your eyes that he's a good person. Whoever is Socialist grows fat and looks like a pig, almost grunting and doesn't give a shit about anything.<sup>9</sup>*

In contrast, the Orbán-years are said to have brought back dignity to people's lives, both in the spiritual and material senses. Since the regime change, therefore, democracy had meant channelling popular discontent into the voter's booth. Hungarians lived up to their reputation as the people “of patience”<sup>10</sup> as they watched

8 Lia, in her 40s, economist, civic circle member.

9 Árpi, in his 20s, FIDESZ public sector worker, youth leader. This is a very apt visual representation of the Socialist voter's image among the FIDESZ constituency: they are either the poor, unambitious, needless plebs or the very rich, carefree, parasitic elite.

10 Cf. Greskovits, Béla: *The Political Economy of Protest and Patience*. Budapest: Central European University Press, 1998.

their goulash turning sour. In 2002, however, a seemingly less material and more spiritual slap in the face propelled hundreds of thousands of people to enter the public sphere through the door left ajar by a struggling party.

## Populist Hegemony

After four years of Orbán’s “reign” in Hungary, there seemed to be plenty of people ready to punish a malignant political elite. It was thus, in my opinion, this MSZP campaign that first (ab)used populism – as the basic contradiction of “the people vs. the powerful” – in Hungary. The FIDESZ leadership was described as an authoritarian small pack of young guys (“*a fiúk*”) who pretend to be royalty and siphon off public wealth for their own circle of friends. At the same time, the nation-building project of FIDESZ – the status law giving ethnic Hungarians easier access to the mother country’s social and economic benefits – was demonised as opening the borders to “23 million Romanians,” once again ignoring the “interests of the people.” As a last straw, the “Nazi” card was played against the coalition, envisioning its future inclusion of MIÉP, the small, extreme right-wing party, always readily available as the looming anti-Semitic, fascist threat to the populace. MSZP, therefore, could pose once again as the emphatic and trustworthy old face which has been there by your side, promising further subsidies and benefits (but ever so quiet on its sources). The actual “face” of their campaign was former Finance Minister Péter Medgyessy, the clumsy aristocratic-looking banker, who seemed weak – hence incorrupt – next to the cocky Orbán.

FIDESZ could not complain about its social support, either. However, the huge masses at the campaign rallies of spring 2002 were yet to be organized and “drawn under” [*behúz*] surveillance. The *polgári körök* (civic circles), however, have proved to be a very ambiguous experiment. They started out with allegedly hundreds of thousands of members all grouped into cells of closer acquaintances, registered by the “independent” Democracy Center. As Orbán stepped down from his party’s presidential position, he gradually became the “spiritual leader” of the now streamlined electoral mass of more than 2 million. Regular open-air speeches and gatherings were held for the members of the civic circles, who were *visibly* most active in the protests against the new government – claiming that the elections had been rigged, denouncing the Communist agent past of the PM, “anti-national” policies etc. – which the media blew up as well to yield their renowned image as an “angry, right-wing mob.”

My experience with the members of the civic circles, on the other hand, has been relatively pleasant. Since 2002, the general Hungarian atmosphere of “trench-digging” [*árokásás*] – i.e. symbolically splitting the populace into two political camps – resulted in estranged families and couples and the breaking of old friendships. The “Othering” process at the same time brought together former strangers or deepened their shallow acquaintance. This FIDESZ move can be understood with McAdam et al.’s term of “social appropriation,” which stands for the “appropriation of existing social space and collective identities in the service of interpretations”.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, the Democracy Centre functioned not only as an organisational hub but also as a censor of the budding movement as it blocked information even from insiders to prevent independent, horizontal organization.

Despite being conscious of doing “coolie work” for the party, the civic circles remain mainly grateful to Orbán for opening up a completely new horizon and restoring some sense of micro-community to their lives. The civic circles namely mean much more on the ground than how the media projects them to be: they bring together likeminded yet critical people, creating a counterweight to the globalised tendency of atomisation, which is all the more present in Hungary via the alienating atmosphere of the concrete blocks. Cleaning up their immediate environment, painting the walls, organising trips to historical towns in neighbouring countries all feature in the activity of a civic circle. However, most importantly, they boost consciousness and participation in public matters by regularly bringing together people to critically “chew on” the massive amount of information that reaches them via the media. Globalisation, therefore, is often

11 McAdam, Doug./Tarrow, Sidney and Tilly, Charles: Dynamics of Contention. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 102.

equated in their discourse with what they fight against: “liberal and globalist values” of selfishness, consumer society, moral laxity, and speculation.

Encouraged by the success of civic circles in terms of party enlargement, Orbán remounted the summit of his party and FIDESZ embarked on new rounds of invitations to people. A lot of voters, still apprehensive about joining a party as such, welcomed the symbolic transformation of FIDESZ into an “Alliance” (*Szövetség*), which incorporated various political organisations and movements of specific voting segments, such as the youth, pensioners, churchgoers, and farmers. As a consequence, the Alliance created its own “departments,” too, allegedly grouping together members of the same everyday experience/expertise, who would work on devising the relevant policies in the FIDESZ-platform of 2006. Nevertheless, while this alliance-formation has generally been welcome as a process, the departments have had a much more ambivalent reception:

*I think the departments are phantom institutions created for the media. I'm compulsorily a member of the Women's and the Youth Department, but in fact not. I don't participate in their work. The policies are worked out in the cabinets.*<sup>12</sup>

Due to the government's recurring “tighten-it” fiscal austerity policy as well as FIDESZ's successful mobilization, its support in the opinion polls indicated a probable victory at the 2006 elections. The only major blunder came on December 5, 2004 at the double plebiscite supported by the Alliance. The two questions dealt with instructing the Parliament to devise a law giving ethnic Hungarians living outside Hungary Hungarian citizenship, and with reversing any previous and prohibiting any future privatisation of hospitals. MSZP constructed an extremely negative “No” campaign, emphasising the menace of 700,000 new competitors in the job (and social security) market. The result was an invalid overall referendum, prompting the representatives of the “Right” to label the day a “national day of mourning,” and speak about “collective guilt.” However, the second issue of privatisation just missed the threshold as 2/3 of those voting supported the protective proposition. The FIDESZ leadership drew the conclusion that the national cause could no longer mobilise efficiently, especially in times when people feel “existential insecurity.” Hence their initial triple slogan for the 2006 elections: *Munka, Otthon, Biztonság* or Work, Home, Safety. Locally in Csepel, strong mobilisation started against the closing of the only hospital on the island, which was a very popular initiative, hampered by the massive majority of the MSZP in the local government.

MSZP's new identity campaign in late 2005 stripped FIDESZ of their “security” slogan which they then substituted for *Család* (“family”), and this seems to have partially sealed their fate. The Socialists' symbolic move was namely coupled with the doling out of massive amounts of cash and tax cuts in the winter of 2005–6 just before the elections. This pulled the ground from underneath FIDESZ's pessimistically toned campaign headlined by “We live worse than four years ago.” Most people did not feel this way any more and could not be won over with the spiralling promises of Orbán, who claimed to have based his new program on the National Consultation, i.e. on the people's wishes. In fact, the entrepreneur-centred promises stemmed much more from the narrow “Economic Consultation” dominated by employer organisations, counterbalanced only by Christian democratic references to family-based taxation, and a very late promise of raising the minimum wage from roughly €250 to €400. This basic miscalculation of the public mood was aggravated by “amateur” campaign flukes such as hacking the Socialists' campaign database, earning the party the label of “petty criminals.”

The liberal media, of course, jumped at possibly the most crucial miscalculation of the “national” machinery: vice-PM candidate Mikola. His candidacy was announced three weeks before the elections, and represented a decisive shift back to the “national solidarity” discourse. He said that victory would enable FIDESZ to give the citizenship (hence voting rights) to the ethnic Hungarians living outside Hungary and thereby “cementing” the national side in government for 20 years. This alone gave ample ammunition to the party's opponents, who cried “fascist” and “populist” at the same time, and mobilised the liberal and Socialist voters who had been apathetic before, and won the elections for the coalition.

12 Csilla, in her 20s, lawyer, FIDESZ youth leader.

The second major defeat was harsher than the one in 2002. There was a huge amount of *local* work invested in the campaign, and people had no spare energy left to animate themselves; this was exacerbated by the demotivating attitude of the party leadership. The most explicit slap in the face for the rank and file members of the party came in Újpest in the decision on the mayoral candidate. The leadership invited everyone who helped in the campaign for an evaluation, where they announced that they would stop supporting the independent mayor and have their own candidate. The members could not raise their own critical voices, nor put another name (i.e. the current mayor's) on the list to vote for. It was essentially an ultimatum, and the local leadership shifted the blame to the written rules of the party and the directive given by the top leadership. The bitter torrent of critique was channelled into a dormant withdrawal, with projections of an outburst of frustration and helplessness.

## Squaring the Circle

The hegemonic struggle around neoliberalism has just heated up in Hungary after a decade-long popular exit and party elitism. Global structural conditions are important but on the next level it seems crucial how the previous regime's hegemonic project and accumulation strategy left its legacy on relations in the next period. The potential for critique in Hungary has been hampered because it was in no elite fraction's interest to mobilise the voices of those constituencies which had been atomised and hence “silenced” (who had politically been “disappeared”) by both the Kádárist compromise and the change of regime. Nevertheless, the increasing tendency to seek mass support and the cries for more participatory politics make the current round of structural adjustment much more shaky and vulnerable to a popular stampede along the lines of the food riots in Latin America in the 1990s.<sup>13</sup> Although the symbolic overtone of these mobilisations has a nationalist tint, *on the ground*, the civic circles look fundamentally inclusive and communitarian, certainly much less chauvinistic than the allegedly “liberal” and “democratic” attitude of the governing coalition and its electorate. The economic programs of privatisation and liberalisation are at least not swallowed quietly. However, the amplifying critiques can at most fight the symbolic silencing: the entire political elite's complicity in the maintenance of the status quo blunts most bottom-up development as slogans of “solidarity” ring hollow when it comes to actual policy-making.

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13 Cf. Walton, John and David Seddon: *Free Markets and Food Riots: the Politics of Global Adjustment*. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994.