


**The Power of Discursive Self-Weakening:  
Mobilizing Texts of Hungarian Pro-Government Peace Marches<sup>1</sup>**

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On the evening of 21<sup>st</sup> January 2012, Andrásy út, the central boulevard of the Hungarian capital, known as the “Champs-Élysées of Budapest”, was lit up across its full width for many hundreds of metres by the torches of marching people. The BBC reported of at least a hundred thousand protesters in the city of two million people, all walking from Heroes’ square (Hősök tere) to the Parliament in support of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his government (BBC 2012). The first row of the so-called Peace March, short for Peace March for Hungary (Békemenet or Békemenet Magyarországért), included conservative journalists Zsolt Bayer and András Bencsik, and media entrepreneur Gábor Széles. They carried a road-wide banner that read “Nem leszünk gyarmat!” along with its English translation (“We will not be a colony!”). The predominantly middle-aged crowd advanced calmly, sang patriotic songs, and carried national flags and banners with messages such as “We’re with you Viktor!” (“Veled Vagyunk, Viktor!”), and “European Union=Soviet Union”. The organisers claimed that this pro-government protest was triggered by the criticism expressed by the European Union regarding some of Orbán’s policies, most notably the media law and the new fundamental law, which replaced the country’s previous constitution.

The months that followed showed that this expression of popular support wasn’t an isolated episode: Pro-Orbán protests, entitled “Peace Marches”, were organised in the country five other times during the same administration. Some were of similar magnitude to the first one (the third, the fifth and the sixth Peace Marches), while others produced smaller turnout rates (a few tens of thousands on the second and a few thousand demonstrators on the fourth occasion). These performances of pro-government support occurred during the turbulent times that followed the 2008 international economic crisis. Thus these spectacular marches backed the Hungarian government during an era when many streets in wider Europe, and also in North America and the Arab world, were loud with the protests of movements of the crisis. “The outraged” blamed national governments and various transnational entities for responding to the crisis with austerity politics and also for their perceived democratic deficiencies (see for example Della Porta and Mattoni 2014

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and Della Porta 2015). A further peculiarity of the Békemenet marches is that these events mobilised huge amounts of people to support a government that, despite a massive decline in governmental support and a line of anti-government demonstrations, still disposed of a previously unseen amount of power.

Why did masses fill Hungarian streets and squares to support a government that was already unquestionably powerful, especially in times characterised internationally by dramatic expressions of popular discontent with political leaders? In this paper I explore a cultural aspect of the rise of Békemenet by focusing on the discursive character work of the conservative mobilization as a reaction to international criticism and the rise of "Milla", the left-liberal social movement platform. I tread on relatively unknown ground in this short, descriptive case study, as while some works on the Hungarian Peace Marches are already available (Metz 2015, Metz 2014, Bene 2014), and there is a rich literature on counter-movements<sup>2</sup>, we are still far from a theory of the relatively rare phenomenon of contemporary pro-government mobilization in democratic regimes.

### **Two-Thirds Supermajority and Illiberal Democracy**

In 2010, about two decades after the democratic transition, the second Orbán Government came into power in Hungary following eight years of socialist-liberal administrations. The conservative Fidesz-KDNP alliance received 46% of the votes and gained a two-third supermajority in the unicameral parliament. It became able not only to pass laws without any collaboration from the opposition parties, but also able to single-handedly amend the constitution. This represented an unprecedented moment since the 1989 transition: no parties of the Third Hungarian Republic had previously been backed by so many votes, and thus a uniquely powerful government was born. The administration that was established in May of 2010 was quick in policymaking, announcing an austerity package in June, and ordering offices of public administration to display the so-called Declaration of National Cooperation (Nemzeti Együttműködés Nyilatkozata) that pronounced the election outcome to be the product of an electoral revolution. The parliament enacted the highly controversial media law in early August and launched the drafting process of the new constitution in the same year.

International and domestic criticism came in all forms and from a wide array of sources, ranging from political actors through popular media to academic articles. For example, the Journal of Democracy published a thematic block in its 2012 July edition with three pieces on "Hungary's Illiberal Turn". It included Rupnik's investigation on "How Things Went Wrong", presenting his account of how Hungary transformed from being a success story of the CEE region's 1989 democratic turn to being the most significant case of reversal (Rupnik 2012). He mentioned that the one-sided, non-consensual new constitution was never publicly debated, nor voted on in a

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<sup>2</sup>Meyer and Staggenborg's work is among the most well-known ones in the field (1996)

public referendum, that none of the opposition parties voted in favour of it, and that it served Fidesz to weaken the democratic checks and balances. “(T)he new basic law and its enabling acts have turned what are supposed to be politically neutral bodies such as the Constitutional Court, the Central Bank and the offices of the Ombudsman and the Public Prosecutor into arms of the ruling party.” (133) Rupnik also stressed that the Hungarian crisis was taking place in the context of the EU's own financial, economic and democratic crisis. Reflecting on this novel situation in an edited volume on the post-'89 Hungarian polity, Köröseyi's analysis concludes that Orbán's 2010 victory meant more than a change in government, but less than a change in the political system (Köröseyi 2015). Accordingly, he writes about an “Orbán regime”, a diffuse entity defined more by the new type of autocratic-style governance than simply by the formal changes in political institutions.

### **Contentious Action: The Rise of Milla**

The classic adversaries of Orbán, the parties on the left-liberal side, headed by the post-communist MSZP, could not channel the rising discontent in the country as they were unpopular. Additionally, they suffered from a post-election crisis, marked by internal struggles that later led to the foundation of multiple splinter parties. Furthermore, the anti-populist, technocratic left-liberal side lacked a living movement-culture at the moment when the new Orbán government came into power. The relative protest-vacuum in the first part of the administration that the established players left opened up the space for new initiatives that became the most internationally covered phenomena of the movement sector, partly because of the popular and media-friendly nature of their protest events. The story of Milla (short for Egymillióan a Magyar Sajtószabadságért – One Million for the Freedom of Press in Hungary) started with highly spontaneous, amateurish protests for media freedom. The first mature, large-scale Milla event took place on the traditionally politically charged National Day of 15<sup>th</sup> March 2011 on Szabad sajtó út (Free Press Road) in Budapest, and focused on perceived governmental attacks on media freedom and the democratic institutions of the country. István Szalai-Szabó, a leading activist shared his memories of the organisation of the 15<sup>th</sup> March protest with journalist György Petőcz:

“The idea was circulating in Milla that we should work on a really big demonstration. Frankly, we did not even have that many ideas other than to continue with this demonstration game. (...) So, instead of doing what we would have wanted, we did what we were able to do. It was dramatic. On the day of the demonstration, we were there at the bridge, anxious. There had been quite a crowd for Orbán's speech that morning. Then came the moment when people started to arrive. The square filled up. We were crying.” (Petőcz 2015: 211).

The main coordinator, Anna Vámos, kicked off the event by announcing that the crowd was the largest in a civil-organised protest since the democratic transition. A major national news portal, Index reported that approximately 30,000 people were present (Király 2011), a surprisingly high

turnout in the national context, especially from the few-month-old, largely informal, Facebook-based group. The protest followed a rather traditional format with intellectuals giving speeches on the stage. Some of the speakers were unaffiliated, others delegated by professional NGOs and by emerging social movement organisations. The headlining speech was given by Adam Michnik, an iconic figure of the region's democratic turn. Further Milla protests followed, some smaller in scale (e.g. Valkai 2011, Magyari 2011), but others lived up to the high expectations that followed the 15<sup>th</sup> of March 2011 event. The 23<sup>rd</sup> October National Day of the same year was louder, with an even larger crowd of tens of thousands protesters in the Hungarian capital (Index 2011). The demonstrators denounced the autocratic tendencies of the government.

Milla seemed to have found a window of opportunity for its protest activities during the stormy times of radical government measures, when the left-liberal side of the organised opposition was weak and lacked trust from the people. Becoming more and more popular, Milla began to lose its single-issue character and grew into a social movement umbrella platform comprising a wide array of sub-groups, from liberals opposing Orbán as the demolisher of the post-transition political status quo to a smaller group of left wingers who were critical of the functioning of post-socialist capitalism as a whole.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, by the end of 2011 the Orbán government was faced with a new and unusual adversary. Although still in formation, and thus uncertain in its goals and direction, Milla started to undermine the image of Orbán as a strong PM with a rock-solid domestic legitimation on which he could base his drastic measures. Milla revitalised masses of leftist and liberal citizens who could not expect much from the established parties, and who were largely inexperienced in street politics. Below this fresh wave of contention there developed a less spectacular but no less salient trend that could worry the government: a severe drop in its popularity. Decreasing support in the first half of new administrations is considered the standard pattern. Still, the fall in Fidesz's popularity from a bit more than 40% in mid-2010 to below 20% at the end of 2012 was to Fidesz troublesomely similar to the numbers of the infamously unpopular Gyurcsány government in the corresponding moment of its cycle (Ténytár 2012), a story that ended with the resignation of Prime Minister Gyurcsány in 2009.

### **Contentious Reaction: The Rise of the Peace Marches**

"Milla is a challenge," admitted Tamás Fricz, conservative journalist (Spirk 2012). Fricz chose a "fight fire with fire" approach to the problem of popular opposition demonstrations: he acted as a chief organiser of the Peace Marches. He and his team had many assets to use in their endeavour,

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<sup>3</sup>Here I have only presented the early phase of Milla, a period that is of great relevance from the point of view of the initiation of the Peace Marches. By the end of the 2010-2014 parliamentary cycle Milla as a movement became captured by the Gordon Bajnai-led fraction (Együtt-PM) of the traditional left-liberal side. It lost its independence and consequently ceased to exist. See Petőcz's account of this trajectory (2015).

as Fidesz's capability for contentious politics has long been well known. It was born as an opposition movement in the late-Kádár regime, and institutionalised, and adapted repertoires of social movements very successfully in subsequent phases of its history. After failing to become a governing force in the 2002 parliamentary elections, they set up Civic Circles ("Polgári körök"), a conservative social movement. The number of their cells reached 11,300 in the first year of the initiative (Népszabadság Online 2010), which was meant to serve as a new interface between the conservative elite and the voters. These circles typically focused on the organisation of small-scale political debates and cultural events, but they occasionally also supported the party's campaign activities. The Civic Circles lost their significance after 2006, but the party's movement-orientation did not disappear, and Fidesz remained embedded in a lively activist culture and infrastructure.

A revival of Fidesz's movement side came in 2012, when the pro-Orbán marches reacted to opposition and EU criticism of the new system of "illiberal democracy". Six pro-government Peace Marches took place until June 2014, the end of the administration. All but the first one finished up by joining a crowd who were listening to Orbán giving a speech. Peace Marches produced the highest turnout rates in the whole contentious scene, occasionally attracting around a hundred thousand participants. While there was no visible responsible organisation behind the first event, the initiative received an institutionalised form later through a range of government-organised non-governmental organisations (GONGOs) like CÖF (Civil Összefogás Fórum – Civil Collaboration Forum), CÖKA (Civil Összefogás Közhasznú Alapítvány – Civil Collaboration Foundation) and Békemenet Magyarországért Egyesület (Peace March for Hungary Association). Metz examined the relation between Fidesz and the main GONGO, CÖF, through four dimensions (*constructing identity, strategic visions, organisational tactics, appropriate and persuading communication*) in order to clarify the type of dependency between the two entities (Metz 2014). He found that Fidesz uses CÖF to strengthen its relationship with civil society in such a non-formalised, but practically very direct way that CÖF functions as an "ancillary organisation", representing the highest control a party can exert on a collateral organisation (following Poguntke's categories (2005)). This judgment coincides with Gerő and Kopper's analysis, which considered the Peace March to be "reminiscent of the socialist parades supporting the party in power" (2013: 371). They claimed that the Peace March constitutes a case of the "fake-civil phenomenon", which rose from the problems of the differentiation of the political and the civil sphere in Hungary and which is not limited to the right side of the spectrum.

These marches were obviously pseudo-civil in terms of their leadership and used a large amount of state resources, for example when transporting participants from the countryside to Budapest on buses paid for through the state-funded GONGOs<sup>4</sup>. Still, Peace Marches were voluntary participation-based events that managed to mobilise spectacular masses. What were the messages that convinced the participants to march in support of the already unquestionably strong

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<sup>4</sup>On the issue of funding see Becker on the investigative civil watchdog site, Átlátszó.blog.hu (2013)

government, and how were they framed?

### **Analysing Mobilising Discourses**

I identified mobilising texts of Békemenet to explore the main conflicts, subject positions and images of “The Other”. The pioneering event in early 2012 that I introduced at the beginning of this article was built upon the following diagnostic frame:

“The people of Hungary have once already come to know the horrible consequences of the world’s antipathy, when as a result of other biased news reports we stood unshielded in front of the judges of the tribunal of Trianon. We do not want that horrible moment to be repeated.”<sup>5</sup> (Bayer *et al.* 2012)

Here a dichotomy is constructed between the strong and uncompassionate international context and Hungary, a victim that historically had to face a lack of understanding and good will from foreign powers. International criticism, and most concretely journalists, are described as agents of misinformation and hatemongering. The Treaty of Trianon, leaving the country with less than a third of its pre-World War I area, is traditionally depicted as the most important national tragedy in conservative discourse, thus this evocation is a powerful way to alert the public to a hazardous situation. This leads us to the appeal for mobilization later in the same text:

“We, Hungarian democrats, thus call for a Peace March on Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> January, at 4 p.m. on Heroes square in Budapest, from where we will walk to the parliament. We ask all Hungarians who agree with our aims, and for whom the independence and rise of our nation is important, and who regard the ideals of civil democracy to be sanctified, to join us and march with us!” (Bayer *et al.* 2012)

Independence and democracy are spelled out as supreme values. They are connected in the wider Fidesz discourse, as the EU’s objections to the Orbán government’s capture of democratic institutions are regarded as irrelevant<sup>6</sup> and antidemocratic in the sense that it is the transnational and non-directly elected actor (often compared to Moscow in the former USSR (e.g. Index 2012)) that pressures a democratically elected government. An antagonism is constructed between the strong international players bullying a small country and the calm, non-violent nature of the reaction of the Peace March. As Bene pointed out in his discourse analysis, this kind of tension is frequently used in pro-government discourse to demonstrate the moral superiority of the Orbán-supporting protesters against its domestic and international opponents (e.g. Bene 2014: 24, 43, 44, 51). The EU and Milla criticism claimed that Orbán was building a semi-dictatorship, and thus he

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<sup>5</sup>All Hungarian quotes in this text were translated into English by the author.

<sup>6</sup>A typical Fidesz response to EU criticism (not spelled out in this mobilizing text) is one that despises the EU for focusing on the bureaucratic criteria of democracy instead of a populist account that would be sceptical of institutions but optimistic about the emerging “will of the people” that made Orbán the prime minister.

was accused of the creation of a vicious system in the country. The reacting counter-frame does not concentrate on the domestic level, but points upwards: the emphasis on the international setting stresses the disparity in power between the omnipotent and occasionally cruel international context, now represented by the “wolf” of the EU, and the small country under attack, whose citizens line up behind their elected leader in “lamb-like” peacefulness.

The pioneering Peace March was followed by two similar events, both again in Budapest and timed to take place on the two National Days of 15<sup>th</sup> March and 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2012 (which commemorate the 1848 and the 1956 Hungarian revolutions, respectively). These dates are not only of symbolic significance. Opposition contention regularly peaked on these two days of the year during the second Orbán administration, therefore organising the pro-government counter-mobilizations on these dates made it possible for the government-supporting events to balance or even “outperform” (as was in fact the case) the critical events in terms of the turnout.

The mobilizing message of the second Peace March, which took place about three months after the first one, was spelled out in the following way:

“Now we have to take to the streets again and show our strength. We are obliged to do so by the tradition of the National Day and by the fact that the unjust, sometimes expressly villainous attacks on the country and the government have only died down temporarily. On 15<sup>th</sup> March the opposition will be on the streets! They want to convince the whole world again that no one backs Viktor Orbán and his government!” (Bayer n.d.)

The main narrative of the depicted conflict remained centred on a small and brave country that decided to stand up for itself against malicious foreign powers. As we saw earlier, the international actors and the popular Milla protests expressed their discontent about the overwhelming power grab of the Fidesz party. The Peace Marches, instead of operating with direct counter-messages, orientate attention towards the international arena, in which the Orbán government can be seen as an underdog punished for its independence, and therefore deserving of compassion and popular support.

Until the second, traditionally political National Day of 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2012 international conflicts were explicitly democracy-themed. Then an additional financial dimension appeared relating to the the repayment of the International Monetary Fund’s 2008 emergency loan and over the desired exit from the EU’s Excessive Deficit Procedure. At the same time, former socialist PM Bajnai seemed to regain salience as a political actor and potential leader for the left-liberal side, and he began approaching Milla.

The mobilization for the third Peace March operated with the following core message:

“Just as 1848 was the year of the revolution, and 1956 that of the popular uprising, 2012 became

the date of us standing up for ourselves. 1956 was a good example for Europe. We dared to be brave and sacrificed the blood of the youth of the country for the freedom of our homeland and the Eastern part of Central Europe. Now we would like to break free from the prison of debt, and even though they may be in a different fashion, we need sacrifices and cooperation again to do so.” (CÖF, CET and Békemenet Egyesület 2012)

The international orientation of the narrative remains, and historical experiences of oppression and uprising are still important reference points. Also, the benefits of the past sacrifices of Hungarian people are extended to Central and Eastern Europe in a relatively direct way, while the symbolic benefit of “a good example” is mentioned with reference to a wider Europe.

The fourth Peace March, the only one in the countryside, was organised in February 2013 in Gyula, as a response to a demonstration opposing a Fidesz parliamentary group meeting there. The essence of the call for participation reads thus:

“Last year on 23rd October we showed clearly to the left lining up behind Gordon Bajnai that we, who firmly believe in the power of love and cooperation, are unstoppable. Let’s defend civil democracy! Let’s defend Hungary!” (Bayer, Bencsik and Csizmadia 2013)

The defensive position is similar to that of the previous events, but with an essential change in the fact that “The Other” became domesticated and the national opposition took over the role of the enemy (replacing international actors). Bene, in his discursive study of Békemenet, which involved the analysis of a much larger corpus, including a wide range of support articles backing the Peace March, also noted this change in direction towards the domestic context (Bene 2014: 50). The reason for this shift is unclear, but one could assume that it is due on one hand to a relative decline in the salience of the issues of Hungary on the international news agenda, and on the other hand to the 2014 parliamentary elections that were already in sight. Thirdly, some of opposition activities provided an excellent opportunity for the government and its support movement to demonstrate their moral superiority, as will be shown below.

The commemoration of the 1956 revolution on the 23<sup>rd</sup> October saw another Peace March in Budapest. It came partly as a response to surprising opposition actions, like the occupation of the Fidesz party headquarters by activists protesting against a constitutional amendment. Another unexpected and controversial event was staged by Szolidaritás, an organisation allied to Milla, and featured the performance of the popular rapper László “Dopeman” Pityinger toppling a Styrofoam Orbán statue that the opposition activists had installed on site. As the Orbán statue fell, its head came off; Pityinger first kicked it, then later carried it publicly to the House of Terror, a museum dedicated to Totalitarian history. Ex-PM Bajnai, leading the recently formed left-liberal Együtt 2014 party, gave a speech at the same protest event, but did not take part in the Orbán statue performance and later distanced himself from it. The fifth pro-government march featured the



evocation and despisement of these events as the core of its mobilizing message:

“It also became obvious that while Együtt 2014 preaches about reconciliation, tolerance and the need for dialogue, it constantly stirs up hatred in Hungarian public life. (...) The Civil Cooperation Forum, most definitely refusing the campaign of hatred run by the left, is organising a Peace March again on 23<sup>rd</sup> October in Budapest. We invite and welcome all Hungarians who love their home country. We have to be many in number as we have to respond effectively to the aggressiveness of the left: they preach violence, we celebrate with dignity.”(CÖF and Békemenet 2013)

In line with the fourth Peace March, the fifth was also mobilised against a domestic adversary, the left-liberal opposition that was accused of acts of aggression. The discursive subject is again that of a calm group of Orbán-supporting citizens responding peacefully to domestic attacks, and thus again demonstrating its moral high ground compared to the fierce character of opposition events.

Finally, the sixth Peace March took place in March 2014, joining the last large-scale Fidesz pre-election gathering, which was headlined by Orbán in Budapest at Heroes' square. Its mobilising narrative was centred around the following main ideas:

“(...) it became obvious that the feeling of love and co-operation can bring, by an order of magnitude, more people onto the streets than anger and protest. (...) it is unacceptable that the left continuously offends Hungary; Gordon Bajnai, for example, spoke about “a lousy country” yesterday. (...) Fidesz-KDNP's large-scale victory brought democracy back, and made it possible, among other things, to create the new basic law and to preserve the country's sovereignty. The goal of the Peace March on 29<sup>th</sup> March, and of the elections on 6<sup>th</sup> April, is therefore to defend democracy.” (Demokrata 2014)

Democracy remains central in the narrative. Building on the discourse of the two previous marches, the movement's main adversary is still the domestic opposition. But as Hungary's sovereignty features among the positive points of reference, the international dimension is briefly brought back into the picture.

### **Discussion and Conclusion: Peace Marches based on Discursive Self-Victimisation**

International criticism and Milla, the highly popular opposition movement platform, depicted the Orbán government as an omnipotent autocratic actor against which the latter called people onto the streets. They performed a rather classic type of movement identity, emphasising the threat “above” to call for resistance from “below”. When Fidesz encountered the potential delegitimising effect of the popular opposition marches, which had the potential to accentuate its loss in popularity at the time, it embarked on a counter-strike. Fidesz aimed to defeat the opposition protesters on their own ground through counter-mobilization. Consequently it faced the collective action dilemma that relates to the power position of the mobilizing agent, and which Jasper

describes in the following way: "Victims attract more sympathy, and perhaps financial donations, but they are also too weak to fight back, to mobilize a movement that can redress the wrongs. Heroes, on the other hand, may not need anyone's help" (Jasper 2014: 57). And how could the Orbán administration aspire to "get help" when it was already in full control of national legislation and of a long list of democratic institutions? It had to find a way to move closer to the position of "victim" in Jasper's typology. The Peace March, as a quasi-counter-movement to Milla, mirrored the latter's discourse: Milla's domestically omnipotent Orbán became the Peace March's internationally oppressed Orbán. Thus the Peace March opposed the mainly domestic threat by concentrating discursively on the government's foreign relations, where it could find the desired movement identity.

Naturally, Fidesz did not "invent" the international pressures, nor did its movement-messages deviate significantly from the party's preceding narratives. It also did not have to create the movement infrastructure from scratch – it had considerable assets to rely on, ones which it further supported financially through the state-funding of its GONGOs. My claim is that the beginning of 2012 saw the coupling of these components with a "victims' rhetoric", and that together this formed the recipe for success of the pro-government protest movement. Later on, a domestic orientation was developed (a pattern also found by Bene on a larger corpus (2014)); the national opposition's protest repertoire, perceived to be aggressive, served as the new negative point of reference that allowed for the sustainment of the defensive position that the pro-government mobilization was built on.

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