

PUBLIC SPHERE AS SOCIAL NETWORK AND THE ADAPTATION STRATEGIES OF GREEN NGOS

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Abstract

In the last 25 years green NGOs played an important role in Hungarian politics, however recently they gradually lost their influence. They struggle to access the public discourse and their relationship with the government is more and more contentious especially since 2010. In my research my goal was to describe the factors influencing access to the public sphere and to understand strategies developed to do so in practice. Jürgen Habermas developed the concept of public sphere which is the main focus of my work, but many other scholars also contributed to the literature. I introduce my own definition of this concept based on relational sociology where I transform its notion from an abstract space into a process. In my theory the emphasis is on how actors access public discourse and how they keep up their position. In my empirical work I describe the resource acquisition strategies of the Hungarian green NGOs and their struggle for being accepted as legitimate public actors. Their strategies determine the internal dynamics of these organizations and also have an influence on their success on the long run. An eminent aspect of their strategies is how they engage in cooperation within and outside of the green movement. My thesis is based on sixteen interviews with Budapest based green NGOs. Besides the interpretation of the content of these conversations, I analyse a social network constructed from their cooperation patterns. I conclude that the public sphere is a process, a resource-sharing network, realized in a relational space.

1. Introduction

Environment protection was an important part of the political agenda during the political changes in Hungary 1989. The green movement started to emerge before the transition and it became an important source of the opposition movement. One of the significant political success stories leading to the regime change was a series of protests and halting the Bős-Nagymaros dam project on the Danube. This success and the democratization of the Hungarian society enabled the birth of the *green movement* as they often call themselves (Berg 1999; Bernhard 1993). My research looked at the same movement 25 years later. Some of the organizations I have met started their career in these old days, others are younger. During the two and a half decades they had a few remarkable success stories, but the movement failed to grow. My informants told me that in the best years more than six hundred people participated in the annual meeting of the movement, but today this number is smaller than three hundred. The largest organization, Birdlife Hungary has around eight thousand members, but the majority of the groups only counts ten to twenty people. Despite this ambivalent track record, when Prime Minister Viktor Orbán announced in 2014 that he signed a contract with the Russian Federation about a new nuclear power plant, I expected the movement to organize large-scale performances and unified action against it. In fact almost nothing happened. A small protest was held on one of the coldest days of the year with around a thousand participants and a few conferences were organized by separate groups. I became curious: once they were one of the big players in the regime change, later they convinced the parliament to elect the candidate of the green NGOs for president¹ and now they are silent. What happened?

¹ President László Sólyom was earlier the first president of the Constitutional Court, elected in 1989. Later he became the member of Védegylet, one of the NGOs I was working with in this research. By the time he was elected (2005), there was no green party at the parliament. The green party today, LMP was also founded by members of Védegylet, among other people.

In my research I was interested in factors influencing actor's access to the public sphere and how do these work in practice. I focused on how Hungarian green NGOs develop strategies, how successful these are and how they cooperate to influence public discourse. Environmental NGOs and their activities offer a case to take a look at the internal dynamics of the Hungarian public sphere, thus my research interest has two levels. First I was interested how organizations develop strategies to achieve their goals, how they adapt to their social environment and how successful. Second, on a theoretical level I offer a new understanding for the notion of public sphere based on relational sociology, which is able to grasp the situation of the organizations I am working with, without oversimplification or too much abstraction. My most important critique to the existing approaches to the public sphere is that they describe it either as an open-access space or an exclusive one but the actual process of accessing it is most of the time downplayed. I will argue that the public sphere is more a process than a space thus the process of accessing it has a crucial importance.

The fact that I was working with the sustainability movement is not at the centre of my interest. I am not going to analyse their success from the perspective of the global ecological crisis which is their specific interest. My focus is more general: how are they able to shape the public sphere as civic organizations. In order to be able to argue on a broader level, I need to clarify two important differences between the greens and other civic groups. First, the green movement is not just a movement in the traditional sociological sense, but it is a well-organized inter-organizational negotiation system. Second, the political messages they express are in many ways more radical than other movements' claims. This makes the tension in the framing of the debates more visible but not fundamentally different from other topics such as transparency or human rights. I will discuss both problems in more detail.

In the next chapter I will discuss the existing theoretical literature of the public sphere starting with Habermas. At the end of this chapter I will outline the theoretical arguments of

my relational approach to the public sphere. In the third chapter, I will introduce my methods and the ethical challenges I faced during my research. In the fourth chapter I will describe the social-political context from the point of view of the NGOs I interviewed. Here my main interest was the process of legitimation, which is required to participate in politics. The fifth chapter discusses the strategies they use for capital accumulation and the effects of these strategies on the organizations themselves. The sixth chapter offers a broader look to the strategies of the organizations: I interpret their cooperation with social network analysis. The seventh chapter describes green NGOs' access to the public sphere: how do they participate in it and why they act on a certain level of publicity. In this chapter I describe Hungarian politics as contentious and discuss the performances and repertoires of the actors based on Tilly's work. Finally in the eighth chapter I conclude with a summary of my theoretical and empirical findings and discuss their relation.

2. Theory: finding and eliminating the Public Sphere

The central concept of my thesis is the public sphere. In this chapter I introduce its origin and the most important pieces of literature criticizing or contributing to the original notion. I also discuss this concept from the point of view of ecological thinking, mainly based on the work of Bruno Latour. He is an important stepping-stone into relational sociology, which is the foundation of my own theoretical framework. At the end of the chapter I outline the theory of the definition I offer for the public sphere. I will summarize this again in the last chapter, after discussing the empirical findings of my research.

The concept of *public sphere* was coined by Jürgen Habermas. In his understanding it is an open-access space, where public issues are discussed by the citizens. It was an important result of historical development and his understanding of the public sphere is a central concept for modernity – he argues. The three most important realm of public sphere are organizations, persons and tradition. Participation is an important prerequisite of the emergence of the public sphere (Habermas, Lennox, and Lennox 1974). Although according to the definition the public sphere is an *open access* space, in his analysis he discusses the problem of exclusion based on class. Here the lower classes' political goal is to get into the public sphere through conflicts. If they are successful accessing the public sphere, they realize the original, bourgeois concept in an idealistic way: it is really inclusive. As opposed to others whom I discuss below, he does not use the concept of *counterpublics* or other forms of fragmentation in the sphere (Habermas 1993). His acceptance of the problem of exclusion and the suggested solution however does not seems to be convincing: as long as classes exists, the very idea of a totally inclusive public sphere is a bourgeois illusion, which is blind to recognize the different forms of capital required to really participate in the discourse.

Several scholars have criticized this concept. Different social and political thinkers developed different alternative models but Habermas was still an important reference point

for them. The critics follow two main directions. Some criticize his concept on a theoretical level and argue that the accessibility and power-equilibrium assumed by Habermas was never reality. Others argue, that the public sphere itself changed over history and this is a major source of difference between Habermas' concept and the reality today.

In the first branch of critique Nancy Fraser argues that gender, class and race are important reasons for exclusion and assuming a common language, a common set of concepts or shared tradition is actually imposing those of the majority to other groups of society. Her critical analysis questions the current western liberal democracy as a non-oppressive political system. She argues that the conceptual notion and political reality of the public sphere is crucial in order to liberate groups of society who are not treated as equals for different reasons (Fraser 1992). If we go deeper in her analysis, it appears that this critique is not just a political critique of the present reality. The diversity of the groups, languages and concerns they represent make it impossible even in theory to imagine a sphere where everybody has an equal voice, and there is a common language in use. Languages are exclusive in themselves – to assume a definite set of expressions reduces reality to one view-point and at this point inclusion leads to confusion: how is it possible to discuss something when the participants agree neither on the object nor the medium of the debate? These tensions between narratives, power and interest groups give rise to *counterpublics*. In Fraser's understanding this fragmentation of the public is necessary for democracy as in one field the rise of a dominant power is unavoidable.

Hannah Arendt described the historical transformations of the public sphere in her book, *The Human Condition*. In her analysis, the political sphere was originally an exclusive discourse of citizens who discussed public issues as equals while in their household others (slaves, children, women) lived in a different realm under different rules. Men's property was thus the basis of his freedom and citizenship. With the emergence of society, the abolition of

slavery and the political equality of all people the private realm of household intruded into the public sphere, and the mass society transformed the public sphere entirely. Private property, labour and the everyday struggle of living became important topics of public debate (Arendt 1958). She describes this transformation as a process where action turns to behaviour and politics turns into a pseudospace of economic interaction of producers, consumers and city dwellers. However if we read other works of Hannah Arendt it turns out that the most important feature of public sphere for her is when “men act together in concert” and “where freedom can appear” even if this is a private dining table, where people read *samizdat*. This freedom is never complete and many times opposed to some form of oppressive power (Benhiabib 1992).

Seyla Benhabib summarizes the liberal understanding of the public sphere as well based on Ackerman’s, Rawls’ and Dworkin’s work. In this political culture the public discourse is inherently neutral, no value is higher than others and those who hold power can always be questioned about their acts. Here in the centre of public discourse the question of legitimacy lies and it is addressed by a rational debate (Benhiabib 1992).

Besides the theoretical debates about the concept, following the second branch of critiques the reality described by the concept also changed over time. Globalisation, technology, the rise of the NGO sector worldwide largely shaped the actual public sphere and the way politics is done. The significance of the nation-state declined and the power of market is one of the most important factors shaping public life (Fabiani 2014). These changes are traceable in the life of the green movement we are concerned with. Fabiani’s argument is well in line with Manuel Castells’ description of the *network society*, who discusses the emergence and the power of the global mass media as the most important medium of power in the present days (Castells 2007).

Michael Warner discusses the nature of *counterpublics*. Subcultures and movements often have their own – somewhat separated – discussion and according to Warner’s notion, public sphere is a discourse organized by discourse. In these groups important axioms are different, they are definitely not part of the mainstream but they are well established as opinion shaping actors in a larger context – in opposition to the public. Publics and counterpublics are self-organizing entities, where participants are related even if they do not know each other. Publics (and counterpublics) emerge through attention. These discourses organized by discourses and attention have not just their own axioms but as a consequence, their own language as well (Warner 2002). This important feature is related to Fraser’s critique to the original idea of Habermas: if language itself is exclusive, a “counter-language” can give rise to counterpublics, where expressions, arguments, symbols and performances which are not accepted by the mainstream are in use. Warner adds, that changes both in publics and counterpublics can happen and sometimes counterpublics can be accepted by the mainstream over time, as it happened in some cases with LGBT groups.

In case of the ecological movement the axiomatic ruptures between the mainstream and the subculture are apparent. The green movement, however diverse it is, in most cases opposed large scale technical solutions, centralization and offered an alternative perspective to globalisation as well (for instance: Naess 1995; Rothenberg 1995; Schumacher 2011). As Bruno Latour summarizes in his book *Politics of Nature*, ecological thinking rejects the classical separation of politics and nature and merges them into the single relational concept of *collective* (Latour 2004). This idea has enormous consequences on the concept in discussion: how are non-human beings part of the public sphere? How is it changing the participation of humans if we agree with political ecology? The alienating nature of modernist institutions in itself questions the possibility of an egalitarian public sphere. If people are not treated as themselves but as defined by power they are already oppressed at start. Even in

progressive democracies, attempts to the inclusion of non-human beings or even future generations² into debates are rarely taken seriously. The *deep ecology movement* in its own counterpublic organizes events, where all beings are represented (Flemming and Macy 1995), but such practices are clearly unacceptable for the current political mainstream. This example may seem to be a serious concern of an extremely small minority even within the green movement, but as we will see in chapter 7, the exclusive framing of the public discourse has much wider consequences.

Boundaries between different publics and counterpublics are not always easy to recognize at the same time – differences might be clear in theory, but in practice both values and practices of groups or individuals can be diverse and incoherent. This phenomena is more important than just to be treated as a methodological question. Public sphere needs to be theorized in a way, which fits empirical data. Our theoretical model has to take into account the coexistence of fragmentation and discourse among the same people, the coexistence of different incompatible languages and arguments and the possibility of constantly emerging and vanishing publics. For instance it is hard to determine who are participants of the discourse and who are not. Important political questions are widely discussed: articles, conferences, discussions and maybe also protests, movies and a wide variety of other performances touch upon the topic in question. Are these all part of the public debate about the topic? Many of them claims to be, others do not. Some of them influence the decisions others do not. Some reach a wide audience, others remain in a small circle, but it is possible that the latter proves to be more important in the actual decision.

I build my theoretical framework on relational sociology scholars' work. Relational sociology offers an approach, where the different ways and levels of organizing the society

² In Hungary between 2008 and 2011 a Parliamentary Commissioner for Future Generations was working after a successful campaign by Védegylet one of the green NGOs among my informants. This office was unique in the World throughout its existence. It was shot down in 2012 by the new Hungarian constitution. For more information see: <http://jno.hu/en/>

can be treated together without forcing the players into categories. Categories and their attributes only exist temporarily and as relations to others. The relational view is not just a structure to describe the context of the agents, but the actors themselves are understood as beings made out of relations (Emirbayer 1997). Latour goes forward: he not just rejects the separate existence of nature and society, but describes the public sphere as a phantom, which claims to be total and present everywhere. But if something is everywhere without interruption and has a constant effect on everything, it hardly leaves any empirical trace of its existence: trace is the appearance of change. In a Latourian perspective, the public sphere is a non-existent phantasy (Latour 2005, 163).

When I construct my idea of the public sphere, I offer a relational understanding of this concept where individual transactions are in the centre both of strategies and successes. Charles Tilly also shared this point of view. In his description the apparently static social boundaries, identities and well defined actions are also made of interpersonal transactions – their stable existence can be explained by the accumulation of these interactions. In his view in social sciences neither unchangeable laws nor individual or collective dispositions exist, relations are the only basis for explanations (Tilly 2005). I would add to this that an important side effect of the process of accumulation is *path-dependency*. In a historical context, individual transactions in the present determine the possible future transactions to an extent. This phenomenon can explain the durability of various social connection patterns. If actors choose a partner from among multiple possible candidates, they also do not choose others, and from another point of view this can also be a transaction: a negative judgment, lack of trust or some other disadvantage. I assume that in the case of green NGOs cooperation those who already cooperated in some ways are more likely to cooperate in the future and some cooperation makes it really hard to establish transactions with others. Especially links to different public bodies, political parties determine the future opportunities of a civic

organization to a large extent. Contention is a really strong element of Hungarian politics, therefore one might argue that my claims are only true in this field. I think this actually proves the opposite. In other states, where the political sphere is more balanced and cooperation is more accepted, path dependency itself stabilizes this acceptance: as everyone had various transactions in the past, a specific cooperation or conflict seems not to be that exceptional and the answer of others is not stigmatization. With other words, the logic of the network is the same, the structure is very different. Transactions are mediated through special forms of communication, language or performances. The emergence of the medium takes time and both ends of the transaction need to learn to understand the other. Not all relations are the same therefore not just past connections, but the ability to engage in a particular new interaction is reinforcing path-dependency. Strategies, skills and flexibility in communication can be developed or learned, but it takes time and needs a conscious effort most of the time.

The second reason of choosing a relational approach to my research, that the core concept of my thesis, public sphere itself also cannot be treated as a well defined whole, not just the involvement of its parts is problematic. In my understanding, the public sphere is not an *object* of study, but a *process* among a group of participating agents. It might be perceived by persons or groups as a static environment having a determining effect, a form of *symbolic violence* over their actions as Pierre Bourdieu would put it (Bourdieu 1997), but in fact, public sphere is also perceived through transactions. Thus not just the acts of participation, but the most passive individual, who might not even follow the events of the public discourse is effected by the public sphere through interactions with other persons or with institutions. In this latter process, the media has an eminent role. In the network society, different platforms of mass communication are important tools for those who want to shape public discourse (Castells 2007).

In my thesis I develop the notion of public sphere as a network of communication and resource acquisitions where information, money and media attention are not open-access, but follow the structure of social connections among persons and organizations. Building or maintaining a link in this network has its costs, therefore those who want to have a larger set of connections need to accumulate capital – using more or less the same network. This approach helps us to overcome both the idealism of the open-access public and the over simplified picture of separate spheres described by different scholars. Emirbayer describes a similar understanding of the public sphere. In his paper, it is indeed a networked structure, however fragmented not just within itself, but he also keeps the separate realms of state, economy and society as independent from each-other (Emirbayer and Sheller 1999). I do not agree with the existence of the independent realms of social life, as in my research interactions between these spheres are clearly visible. Separate publics or counterpublics with clear boundaries also hardly exist. Although the coordination platform for green NGOs would be a good candidate for a more or less separate sphere, boundaries are debated, some of my informants had a hard time to answer the question whether they are part of the movement or not.

Another important question to address is the boundary between the public and private spheres. Political debates often raise topics such as the publicity of certain information, corruption or hidden relations of the power-holders. These debates touch upon the theoretical understanding of the public sphere in practice: what do people claim to be a public issue? Who are public personalities? In other cases publicity is just an illusion, where a form of institutional openness is established to hide another, probably more important process. In practice, spaces of discourses are not shaped by those who are interested, but by those who are involved. Those are involved who are accepted as legitimate by the other stakeholders. Many times this is an intentionally exclusive process. In other cases exclusion is not

intentional, but the desired level of public visibility is much lower for some agents than it is for others. In other words, the process of publicity is not completely exclusive, but inclusion is limited. As Hannah Arendt argued, the private realm conquered the public (Arendt 1958). Private and public are two sides of a coin in some sense today even more than at the time of writing her book. Anything can be a public issue and anybody can be a public personality for fifteen minutes or more. There is no clear boundary between public and private, but a gradual transition between them. This transition is first determined by the intention of the actors: what level of publicity they want to achieve, but as the public sphere is not open access, their capacity to gain and use capital to involve others is also an important limit. Another important consequence is that nobody has a full access to the public sphere, nobody has the capacity to influence every possible stakeholder, including the government.

From an empirical point of view, it still seems to be appropriate to follow the theoretical thread of relational sociology: whatever values and strategies the NGOs and the members have and whatever they think about the public sphere, these values and positions are also represented in their consequences while acting. Focusing on transactions as social ties will help us to unveil the network of symbolic actions, the network of resource-negotiations, the public sphere.

3. Methods and Ethical challenges

I have conducted my research in Budapest, Hungary. I interviewed sixteen environmental NGOs. The sample was created based on the list of potential beneficiaries of income tax 1% donations³ provided by the Hungarian Tax Authority (NAV 2014). I have several personal connections to members of the green movement, I studied environmental sciences and I am deeply committed to the values of ecological thinking, although I am not a member of any NGO at this time. None of my informants were close friends.

The sixteen organizations in my sample represent a wide variety of groups from the largest to the smallest, from expert-groups to eco-political organizations. I conducted semi-structured interviews. The questions covered the topics of mission, identity, resource-management strategies, relations to other NGOs, communication with political bodies and finally cooperation. I wanted to understand how they position themselves in the public discourse, and how they see their peers. Their opinions on each other offered me important reference points for the interpretation of the other interviews as well. I wanted to grasp how they define themselves, how do they see the role of civic society and how they realise these in practice. When they talked about the distance between their ideals and their practice, they also offered me an important reference point for evaluation: I interpreted them successful if they did so.

I counted an interaction as *cooperation* if the two organizations involved in the activity shared significant amount of resources such as a coordinated long-term campaign for the same goal, or applied for a grant together. This part of the data collection and interpretation is discussed in more detail in the network-analysis part.

³ In Hungary every tax-payer is entitled to determine the spending of 2% of her income tax. 1% can be donated to registered religious communities and 1% to an NGO selected from the list provided by the tax authority. A large proportion of Hungarian NGOs are possible recipients.

The boundary between public and private plays an important and sensitive role in this research. I use a two sided approach to the anonymity of my informants. On the one hand they appear in the public sphere and proactively communicate their activities, and as they use many times public money, their accounting is also transparent. Archetypical strategies are many times closely linked to their missions and it would seriously hinder the interpretation of my data if I would hide all traces of their identities. On the other hand, many informants make often personal and sometimes emotional comments on the issues we discussed. In these cases I do my best to hide the identity of my informants. Their interpretation has scientific relevance, and helps the readers grasp how they experience the discussed institutional dynamics, but their identity belongs to their private sphere. I use quotes from all the NGOs interviewed. The interviews were conducted in Hungarian, I translated them into English based on the recorded conversation.

4. NGOs' social environment: legitimation and conflicts

In this chapter I introduce the social environment of civic organizations. This environment is made of relations to other players: supporters, member-organizations and counterparts, including the government. Legitimation is a foundational concept here: it describes how the actors recognize each other as agents in the same field. The most important player of the context is the government due to its power. I also discuss changes in the political climate in this chapter.

In my theoretical frame, I use legitimation as an act of recognition of someone's right to occupy a public position, act in a certain way or to contribute to the discourse. This recognition is not necessarily voluntary, obedience is also a form of legitimation, an expression of not being able to question the other player's power. I use the term *power* in a similar way as Bourdieu does it in his description of different forms of capital. He describes economic, social and cultural capital as accumulated potentials embodied or owned by people. Capital means access: the economic ability to purchase something, the social ability to be part of a certain group or the cultural ability to communicate in a certain way and to be accepted as a communicator. Capital can be acquired and transformed to other forms, however it has sometimes high costs, not just monetary, but time and effort needs to be sacrificed (Bourdieu 1986).

Edwards and McCarty adds that organizational and moral "resources" are also important factors – they add these two to Bourdieu's three types of capital. I think in theory both approaches describe their subject in a similar way, the latter is a more detailed version of the former, which might be useful for empirical work (Edwards and McCarthy 2004).

In politics a specific form of social capital, democratic legitimation, the number of supporting voters plays a central role. Individuals are the ultimate source of legitimation in democratic countries. Their votes, attention, monetary support, presence, silence or voice can

all be expressions of acceptance, legitimation or rejection. Different forms of individual political support can be accumulated. Probably the most common way to do this is to establish organizations. They are hubs in the social network and they accumulate resources from supporters. Having done that, they are able to legitimate others the same way: by negotiating with them, by supporting them, by recognizing them. Legitimation sometimes happens in order to enlarge the number of supporters, for instance when two political bodies form an alliance for a period of time. In other cases the recognition of the counterpart's power happens because it has the ability, to acquire the most precious form of capital in politics: the counterpart's voters, therefore they cannot be ignored any more. Politics is more or less a zero-sum game, the total number of possible voters changes very slowly.

NGOs do not run for political power in most cases, but still, they may have the power to influence the decision of the people or the political discourse, thus they also need to be recognized as legitimate players in public debates. Their means to achieve this can be built on various forms of capital: knowledge, a smaller or bigger number of supporters (members, demonstrators), democratic right to participate in politics, economic power. This process of legitimation is more and more mediated by the mass media in the last decades (Castells 2007).

Currently the first important factor determining the strategies of green NGOs I am concerned with is the change in public discourse in the recent years. There was always some tension between NGOs and the government in the last twenty-five years, most of the successes and failed actions they told me recall serious conflicts, but since 2010, when Fidesz won super-majority in the parliament, the situation of the civic organizations changed instantly as one of my interviewees recalled:

In 2010 many things have changed, the whole context of the NGO world. First, the government started not to take us seriously, and the whole public discourse changed terribly: there are no debates at all. They introduce a bill, they approve it in two days, they change it on the third and put it in the constitution on the fourth – it is impossible

to give a meaningful reaction. Second, state funding decreased significantly. By the way, it is a myth that the Hungarian NGOs are breastfed by the state, if you look at the data, even ten years ago we received much less money than the Western Europeans and now it's even worse.

They do not feel to be treated as legitimate partners by the government. They are not just ignored in the debates, but lack of information makes it very hard to form a counter-argument in many cases. Some of the NGOs question the practice of state-support for civic organizations, they see it as a form of dependence and indeed, one of the smallest NGOs I interviewed is about to finish its operation while blaming the government funding policy. Earlier, especially before Hungary joined the EU, state funding played an important role and the distribution was organized by the civic organizations themselves. Today the state still provides funds for NGOs, but none of my informants were granted in the new system:

And they put *comrade* László Csizmadia as leader, the president of CÖF⁴. Nobody knows how NEA⁵ works, because as opposed to what they say, nobody knows how they make decisions. We have seen a few articles on how they decide in favour of their friends. And now here is the campaign against the NGO sector. The goal is to make them unsustainable. Everybody is struggling, we also had financial problems, and for some groups this is a serious threat.

NEA is a joke. Clearly it became a joke. Before 2010 we got grants even for lobbying, and now: nothing.

Mentioning the president of the fund as *comrade* clearly summarizes how they perceive the system: as if we were back in the communist regime. Still, they are fighting for recognition. Theoretically or legally anyone has the right to access the public sphere, but to be a legitimate player, the organization (or person) has to demonstrate its ability to influence the debate. This is a competitive situation. They perceive the presence of pro-government organizations as a threat against the *real* NGOs: they compete for funding, for members, for media attention. This competition over-uses the means of civic activity, which makes it very hard, to express an independent opinion:

⁴ Civil Összefogás Fórum – Civil Unity Forum is a conservative NGO openly supporting the government. Their funds significantly increased in the last years according to atlatszo.hu an investigative journal.

⁵ Nemzeti Együttműködés Alap – National Cooperation Fund

In today's politics, two hundred thousand people participate on the "peace marches" whereas we can mobilize around six hundred – what does that mean exactly? Even if you manage to mobilize ten thousand: two hundred thousand is still much higher. Protests are too much politicized, it is hard to achieve outrage or any other result. It is more effective with the press.

They do not believe in traditional protests as a tool of political pressure any more. The only exception is "Critical Mass", the crowded bikers' demonstration, which was very popular due to its *apolitical* character – according to the organizers. There are two types of capital which are still more or less accessible for most NGOs: knowledge and international funding. Despite the fact that the government mainly ignores the expertise and arguments of the greens, they see knowledge and expertise as one of the most important tools to achieve their goals:

We need to be very consistent and well prepared to be unquestionable. We can give them a ten page research paper: "have you read it my friend?" and if he still has doubts, we can confront him with their own materials as well. "We are prepared. Are you, my friend?"

International funding opportunities, such as the EU funds, the Norway and Swiss grants and big international foundations are the most important income source for most civic organizations. Although it has great disadvantages, this strategy still gives them an acceptable level of political independence. The NGOs themselves are many times very critical towards this funding strategy, but in fact, almost none of the organizations in this study could keep up its activities without these funding sources. In 2014 a major conflict between the NGO sector and the government was the case of Ökotárs Foundation. They manage the Norway civic grants' distribution. The government claimed right to influence the distribution of these funds and accused Ökotárs of being corrupt. At the same time the Norwegian government was satisfied with their work after detailed examination of the grant distribution process (Norwegian Embassy in Budapest 2015). For now, it seems that the most intense days of this conflict have passed, but the story is far from being over. The NGOs were grateful to the

Norwegian authorities for protecting the fund, and talked about János Lázár⁶, with deep anger and sometimes sarcastic humour.

We struggled so much with the Norway grants in the last year, I cannot tell you. Otherwise, it is a good fund, I am glad the Norwegians were tough enough and did not let János Lázár tear Ökotárs apart.

A human life doesn't matter for [János Lázár]. I was talking about our values... he doesn't care about them. He is a murderer. But we will be here, long time after he will be nowhere anymore.

NGOs are silent today. They reached their goal in this respect.

The capacity to accumulate capital is a matter of survival for the NGOs. If they want to influence public debates, they need to accumulate the necessary amount to be accepted as legitimate and competent counterparts in political discussions. The way Norwegian authorities protected Ökotárs was also an indirect act of legitimation to them and the granted NGOs. Capital accumulation is the result of many transactions. Organizations having a high impact on the public sphere acquired their resources from other, smaller or bigger sources. They are the central hubs in a resource-sharing network. The more capital they accumulate, the more they are able to influence the events of the public sphere.

Hubs in the social network with different size access the public sphere on different levels: this is neither an open access space, nor a set of separate publics but a networked structure, where every player can influence the sphere on its own level – depending on the number and strength of connections. While growing the amount of controlled capital, public legitimation and negotiation power also increases. It is not necessary that public actors see each other as threats, but if they do, they often try to ignore each other. This strategy can be only successful until the point where the other starts to acquire capital from the sources of the opponent.

⁶ János Lázár is the minister heading the Prime Minister's office. The NGOs see him as the political leader responsible for the "attack" against Ökotárs and the NGOs funded by them.

5. Strategies to accumulate capital

In the following chapter I will outline the most common strategies for capital accumulation among NGOs. All of these strategies are possible ways to operate an organization in the long run, however their impact on the organizational culture and its success varies widely. Strategies have an effect on all forms of capital accumulated in the organization, however money acquisition is at the centre of strategies. As Edwards and McCarty discusses, forms of capital are cultivated in order to accumulate money or money is used to mobilize social or cultural capital. In other words, organizations accumulate a form of capital from their network and transform it to another form of capital in order to use that to achieve their goals. Strategies are developed to build up external links and to accumulate capital through these connections. Strategies themselves use a form of capital: organizational knowledge, communication channels or best practices. To sum up, these are forms of communication, in order to convince an audience to support the NGO. Different audiences require different forms of communication: EU funds require administration skills, formal communication, detailed accounting and reporting. Crowd funded groups usually need to give back something to the donors. Non-profit companies need to provide serious, enterprise-like services which are paid by the clients. These strategies not just enable to build new connections, they change the organizations themselves, thus most NGOs are dependent on their own money acquisition strategies (Edwards and McCarthy 2004).

5.1 Grant based funding

The first strategy is used to some extent in almost every organization discussed in this thesis, probably this is the most common strategy to fund NGOs across Europe. NGOs apply for grants, which are provided to support specific activities defined by the donor. The EU is the largest source of funding, but many other international players distribute smaller or bigger amounts of money as well. They support projects which are in line with the goals and

expectations of the donor. The greatest advantage of this strategy is the low *opportunity cost* – I was told. It needs a relatively small financial investment to run for a grant and after gaining some experience, this strategy provides a relatively stable income. However there are also serious disadvantages.

We work based on the opportunities that arise – this, however, changes the organization itself. It is not us, who manage the grant, but the grants manage the organization.

All organizations which are primarily dependent on this type of income admitted that it changed their internal culture and they diverged from their goals. If activities are shaped by calls, they hardly have a clear long-term strategy in practice. Mission statements of the grant-based organizations are more idealistic or broad compared to those who have different strategies. Their goals are like “achieving zero waste” or “fostering sustainable consumption”, while others have goals more limited in space, time and scope. Lower or more specific aspirations are more successful, as they take into account the actual capacities of the organization: “increasing the number of cyclists in tourism and transportation”. If an NGO is operated on grant money, it needs to have a mission broad enough to run for a wide variety of calls. As these are almost completely independent from each other, no long-term social impact is necessary to keep up the strategy. More specific goals and successes however are easier to communicate to the masses: crowd funded organizations optimize themselves for these goals and they need success on the long run to have a stable future.

One of my informants thinks that in theory NGO members should not make their living out of their civic activity, they should be volunteers or work for a small salary besides having a regular job. He thinks that members’ dependence on organizations is the real reason behind the organization’s dependence on donors. Although this is a plausible explanation, others might not agree with it, as they want to offer high prestige jobs and competitive salaries in order to hire the best experts. Another informant described their unsuccessful and partly

successful attempts to secure other income sources, but it turned out that the grant-based strategy tends to have an effect even on independent donations, these are used to support or pre-finance grant applications:

These independent income sources are really important for us to finance our own contributions to the projects.

Most NGOs use grants, and while criticizing the system, they accept it as an imperfect but working solution. Some remarkable failures however show the dangers of the grant-based strategy. An organization was specialized in the environmental funds available for EU member-candidates. After joining the Union in 2004, despite the fact that there were other environmental grants available, their routine was not flexible enough to switch and they started to shrink. This group is close to complete inactivity today. Another association was funded as a large alliance of several organizations with the intention to access a specific type of funding available for NGO networks. Although they were aware of the danger, they failed to diversify their income: 70% of it came from this single source. After a small change in the related policies, they lost access to this source of income. Except for the largest groups, NGOs manage only a few grants at the same time. As they are few in number, the risk of failure is significant. Many small NGOs were dependent on Hungarian state-funds, and after the policies changed, they became unsustainable. A bigger organization which cooperated with them earlier referred to this:

Of course, in the last years the partners we have changed greatly, we saw the environmental NGOs vanish. The grassroots level was practically annihilated.

5.2 Individual donor based funding

Individual donations and membership based funding is an ambivalent strategy. On the one hand, it is providing a palpable connection between the organization and the people supporting it, gives great freedom and requires a low level of administration compared to

grants. On the other hand, all my informants who discussed this form of funding admitted that it requires a significant investment at start.

This membership topic is interesting in Hungary. Who wants to be involved at all? We were not yet able to grasp this. We are not like Birdlife who can use its membership. In Western Europe there are NGOs, who give serious services to their members. It is hard to understand, why anyone would want to be our member? People are more eager to support with Facebook likes, they don't like to pay, as if they were entitled to our work. Nowadays we think it is better if they support our causes [and not the association itself] if they want, as it is really not worth it to develop services.

Membership fees and regular donations are the main forms of being funded by the crowd. 1% donations play a smaller role, in most cases these give around 1% of the total annual budget. The number of 1% donors is an important proxy-variable to trace the public recognition and reputation of the organization at the same time. Every year roughly half of all taxpayers donates to a selected NGO⁷. As almost all civic organizations are eligible for this form of donation and it does not require the taxpayers to sacrifice a single Forint, the received amount depends only on the audience they reach and their reputation compared to others. One of the most successful organizations in this field, the Hungarian Cyclist's Club⁸ takes a radical position in its relation to the supporters:

We do not communicate towards the crowd, we are part of it. We are an expert organization of a mass movement. This is an important responsibility, and the people have great expectations. They want to know everything we do, as they pay our salaries. We take this really seriously: they are our *shareholders*.

By success I mean, 60% of their income comes from membership fees and 14% of their income from 1% donations, both of them are a magnitude higher than the average in my sample. They did not have a dedicated investment during the period of building up their membership of two thousand people, however they do apply for grants sometimes. Other donation-funded organizations are large international institutions, they were probably widely known even before they started to work in Hungary. The only one that is funded by 100%

⁷ Every taxpayer is entitled to donate 1%, but half of them do not give it to anybody.

⁸ Magyar Kerékpárosklub - <http://kereparosklub.hu/english>

individual donations is Greenpeace, which sticks to this policy strictly worldwide. Before having their large number of supporters, they were funded by their international centre. In practice, there are two ways to collect individual donations: by regular external donations and by membership fees. International NGOs make use of their well-known brand, Greenpeace told me that they are the first organization spontaneously recognized as “green” in public opinion polls. Most of their income is acquired by activists, who collect donations on the streets regularly. Among the exclusively Hungarian organizations, two have significant income from membership fees (2000 and 8600 members approximately) and one more has a larger group of supporters (400), however this latter is not enough to entirely change the funding strategy. The Hungarian Cyclists’ Club has the largest share of donations compared to its budget among Hungarians. They position themselves as an advocacy group for cyclists. They consider their success as a consequence of their effort taking very seriously communication with their members and the wider audience. Among my informants, they were the only group who put an emphasis on having a two-way communication: the actions of the association are shaped by the feedbacks they receive through social media.

The second important organization with big membership is Birdlife Hungary⁹, the oldest green NGO in our country. Having around 8600 members, an annual budget more than four times bigger than the second in this row, they are among the biggest Hungarian NGOs. According to a conservative estimation by their representative, they have more than 20.000 individual supporters (both members and donors). Birdlife’s activity is most of the time apolitical: they monitor birds’ activity and population, do fieldwork related to conservation and teach children – the majority of the active members are involved in these activities.

⁹ <http://www.birdlife.org/europe-and-central-asia/partners/mme-birdlife-hungary>

The third in this group is much smaller, the Association of Conscious Consumers¹⁰. They operate a popular website about responsible consumption. According to the publicly available ranking of Alexa¹¹, this website is by far the most popular among Hungarian green NGOs' homepages. The Facebook likes of these organizations are two to twenty times higher than the average of the others. What is common among the three Hungarian associations having a high number of supporters is that all of them offer a very specific and rewarding way to connect to the organization.

A specific form of being supported by donations is partnership with enterprises. This kind of partnership is an ambivalent resource. It is an effective form of support, a significant amount of money without much administration, however among the green movement big companies are often seen suspiciously. Partnerships between multi-national companies and green NGOs are often considered as *green-washing a dirty capitalist enterprise*. Even those who are involved see these partnerships ambivalent:

It always changes how we see them. We get used to it. It takes time to get used to it.

5.3 Think thanks

The third important strategy belongs to the group of experts. Although almost all of my informants told me that a high expertise on their field is very important to them, just a few of them see these skills marketable. None of them works completely as a non-profit company, but some are trying to develop into a completely independent, market based institution:

This is a 'think tank' or rather 'think and do' and not an advocacy organization any more, that fights against everything in the name of truth. We are a research institution and a communication agency committed to certain values. We start working if a stakeholder is interested in it and if their values harmonize with ours... or at least in theory...

¹⁰ Tudatos Vásárlók Egyesülete <http://tudatosvasarlo.hu/english>

¹¹ <http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/tudatosvasarlo.hu>

These groups not just denied to be part of the Hungarian green movement, but also debated their status as being *civic* organizations despite their legal status. For them, the word *civic* expresses a naïve and amateur group of people who are committed, but somewhat incompetent:

And the other problem is the “cardboard civic style”. You know, cardboard, tempera... – No way. After so many years, a civic society cannot afford to be this cute little group, writing something on a piece of paper with grammar errors, and “let’s hope people will understand it”. And then they say that we are competing with Coca Cola... – Of course we are! And we cannot compete with Coca Cola on a piece of cardboard. (...) So something I don’t want my organization to be identified with in any way is the green civic movement. For a long time, they were like this, and as far as I see, some still are. Because “the state is not supporting them”. Of course not. How can you expect the state to pay for you, if you openly fight against its intentions? This is ridiculous.

I have no idea what *civic* means. If I have to define ourselves, we are an expert organization. In English they say *non-governmental* which I understand: we are not a governmental organization clearly. We are an expert organization, a social organization. We want a lot of people to do it together – maybe that’s what *civic* means after all...

Many of my informants had some form of enterprise activity, which means being contracted for expert work, as they understood. Three of the leaders claimed however that because they have a background in business, they have a different approach to management: they are not only focusing on the goals they are working for, but on the organization itself, its efficiency, internal administration, human resources etc. They see themselves being *different*.

It is not only the experts who are important in the life of an organization – if we talk about sustainability all the time... We need someone who can talk to uneducated people, who is able to explain them what is energy efficiency, for instance. We also need a finance manager, a marketing expert, a fundraiser and a back office to keep things running on a low cost...

These organizations are working hard to become comparable to Western European institutions such as the *Wuppertal Institute* in Germany. They try to build up a very high reputation in order to get contracted as experts both by businesses or public authorities. Their partnerships are most successful with municipalities, where they contribute to local development plans, and provide capacity-building programmes, however today some of these

projects are still funded by EU grants. They distance themselves from the green movement, as they want to escape the trap of being in a *subculture* and rather position themselves as the independent leading experts of a very specific topic. They express their values, but they want to be known for their knowledge and services, not for their radicalism and commitment to their own narrow goals.

These three strategies describe the main archetypes among the NGOs I interviewed. In theory other possible income sources and strategies can be worked out, but the organization's dependence on the donor and on the communication process between them remains an important aspect of these relationships. According to my interviews, most NGOs are not using exclusively one of these strategies, however most of the time there is a dominant income-source. If a mainly membership-based organization applies for a grant, it is more likely to supplement or reinforce an already existing activity, or it is supporting a specific project or campaign within a long-term strategy. In other cases, where independent income has a smaller proportion in the budget, it is more likely to be used to support the grant driven activities. Paid services can interact with other activities in similar ways.

6. Cooperation

Cooperation is an important aspect of resource mobilization strategies. As Mario Diani discusses, social movements conduct most of their actions in cooperation with others. In his paper on the environmental movement of Milano he describes how those green organizations manage resources together while maintaining their identities and boundaries (Diani 2012). In case of the Hungarian NGOs, most cooperation represent grant applications together. The green movement represents here wide collection of capabilities, members can easily form coalitions with the necessary skills for grant application.

In the interviews I asked all of my informants about all kinds of cooperation where resources were shared. When talking about other NGOs, I specified this question as “the list of most important partners” and “those you have shared significant resources, such as applying for a grant together”. I studied the patterns of cooperation using UCINET a social network analysis software (Borgatti, Everett, and Freeman 2002).

Social network ties emerge out of discrete decisions between two organizations. In this case the participants can be identified, however the boundaries of the whole network might be more blurred (Diani 2012). The unique coordination system the Hungarian greens introduced several years ago sets clear boundaries around the movement. This may be one of the reasons why is this network so densely connected. The high number of connections also suggests that radical change in management strategies might be hard as the high level of coordination directly connected to the main source of income creates a serious dependency on the status quo. I have asked my informants about who do they see as leaders in the movement. I collected more than ten names from the sixteen respondents, but surprisingly none of them were mentioned twice.

Some organizations have links towards outside organizations as well both on national and international level. These connections may be unique within the movement – this can

reinforce the position and secure the identity of the individual organization within the network. In Diani's description the Milanese environmentalist network is much more centralized than the one we are concerned with (Diani 2012).

The first figure shows the cooperation patterns among the NGOs I interviewed. Thin edges with arrows show connections mentioned by one NGO to the other, while thick edges represent mutual mentioning. Green dots show members of the green movement, pink dots show those who excluded themselves. The size of the dots is proportional to the annual budget of the NGOs. Although there is a node which has a somewhat higher degree than the others, it does not have a clear central position referring to an eminent leadership as none of the others has a similar position. Three organizations are completely separated from the others. The number of incoming edges is also distributed relative evenly among movement members.

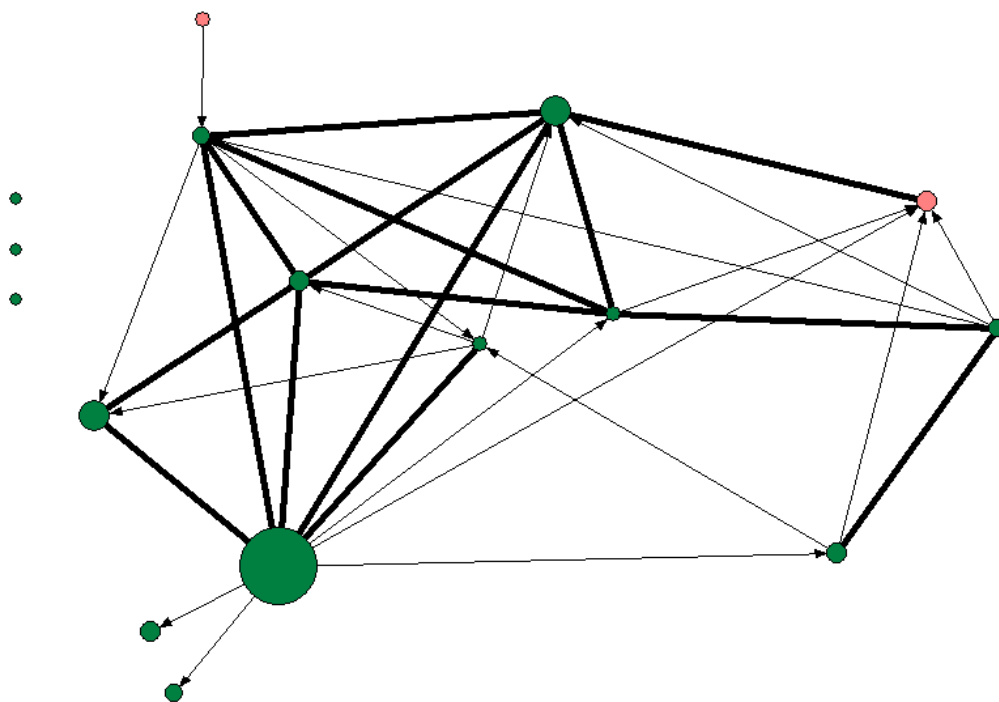


Figure 1.

On the second figure the same layout is completed with those partners which were mentioned but not interviewed. Three of them are without doubt members of the movement thus I have set their colour to green. On this layout the size of the bigger dots is proportional to the number of their member-organizations. These latter groups operate in a network-like structure with a number of institutional members (mainly local groups) across the country. The pink dots represent here a wide variety of organizations: part of them are Hungarian, others are international partners. They include businesses, non-environmental NGOs, and important donors as well.

The two actors who excluded themselves from the movement (compare to Figure 1) have more connections outside of it than inside. Having different kinds of partners and less internal coalition may be the representation of an attempt to re-frame themselves as not being members of a subculture but building up a new strategy for a different audience.

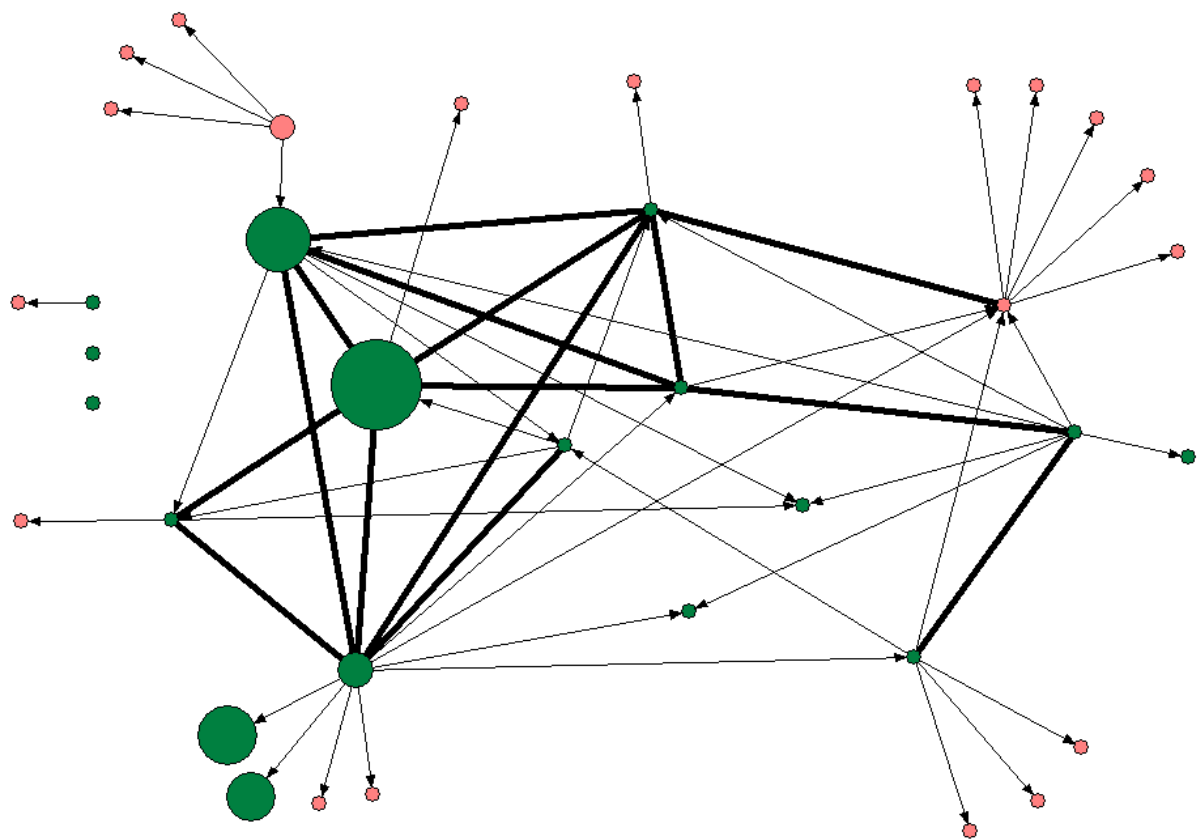


Figure 2.

Cases of political contention are not represented on these figures. In the recent years, if important habitats were threatened, the three big conservation NGOs were the leaders of the campaign to protect them. The campaign against building a new nuclear plant in Paks is mainly organized by two other groups. The third and most intense period of contention was the investigation against Ökotárs Foundation. It is common in these situations that they were all responses to the government's actions. The green NGOs in my study mainly avoid active political engagement nowadays, this is an important reason why they do not cooperate even if they find themselves in the middle of contention.

Today the only organization proactively and intentionally engaging in conflicts is Greenpeace. They do it mainly without partners, but their campaigns are well planned, and their methods use the repertoire of Greenpeace international – they do not see themselves as a separate organization.

The dense structure of cooperation gives another hint to explain the political inactivity of the movement. As Diani described the case of Milanese environmentalist groups, they form different clusters, some of them are openly political and even the green party is part of the movement in that case. In Hungary, none of my informants mentioned LMP as a partner, they saw the separation from politics as an important value of civic life. Diani describes the Italian case as a network with blurred boundaries (Diani 2012). Despite the fact that my sample does not cover all the members of the green movement (not even in Budapest) the inward looking nature of the Hungarian green scene is apparent. Those who actively cooperate with non-environmental groups deliberately excluded themselves from the movement while others had their connections within its borders. Apparently, the coordination system once helped them to act together effectively, turned into a source of rigidity and inefficiency.

7. Strategies to access and navigate the public sphere

In this chapter I will describe how NGOs operate in the situation of contentious politics, and how the government influences them with various repressive measures and performances. Probably the most important and most successful among these measures is framing the public discourse in a way which prevents the movement to express its values.

When NGOs have the necessary resources, they engage with the public in order to achieve their goals. I discussed the question of legitimation in chapter 5. Here, I will broaden this concept. In the context of contentious politics I discuss repertoires of possible actions and framing of the public discourse. In this latter the topics not raised and the arguments not used will be even more telling than the performances actually happening.

Charles Tilly defines contentious politics as a process of claim making where the government is involved as a claimant or the object of the claims. He distinguishes two types of contention. First is contained, when both the actors and the means they use were established before the events in discussion. Second type is transgressive where either an actor is newly self-identified or the action they take is a creative invention which was never used before (Mc Adam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). Claiming is closely related to the question of legitimation: being legitimate means having the political support and the moral ground to claim whatever is claimed. In contentious politics the legitimation of decision makers and other stakeholders is at stake.

Sidney Tarrow describes contentious politics as a cyclical process. In her description during the cycles of contention conflict is heightened across the social system, collective action is increasing, more and more people are involved, but after a while the cycle declines (Tarrow 1994).

Tilly describes the nature of contentious politics as a process where the claim makers apply *repertoires of performances*. In his description the political message is delivered

through well established (or newly but carefully constructed) actions such as petitions, or protests. These tools not just help the claimants to organize the crowd, but express messages in themselves. Repertoires of performances describe the meaning and successive order of these forms of communication in a more or less predictive way (Tilly 2008).

The problem of the NGOs in political debates is not just the changed management of state funding, and the heavy burden of unjust investigations, but the proactive behaviour of the government as a claimant in situations of contention. I quoted earlier when the pro-government “peace marches” were described as events, which are organized in opposition to the opposition: they show how much more supporter (and therefore legitimation) they have than possible others. These deceptive activities change and inflate performances. They are not using traditional means of power to repress civic society, but they engage into contentious politics with their own repertoire of performances thus setting the stage successfully for their opposition, the greens in our case. Tilly discusses three ways governments regulate claims: regulating power, controlling the emergence of claimants and by the means of force such as police (Tilly 2008). Besides using all three ways of repression, their active engagement into NGO funding, protests and other means of civic activity, they create a difficult situation for their counterparts.

It is important to mention, that the government is not just proactive in contentious politics, but they do it in a transgressive way (Mc Adam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). According to a court ruling, the perquisition against Ökotárs foundation broke the law, it stepped behind the line of accepted acts on their part (Horváth 2015). This act was connected to the conflict between Ökotárs and the government about the management and distribution of Norwegian funds. The perquisition had wide publicity in the media. According to Átlátszó an independent investigative journal, police was searching for evidence related to liberal, human-

rights and transparency NGOs supported by the fund (Átlátszó 2014)¹². Other investigations targeted the NGOs supported by this fund, approximately half of the organizations I interviewed were targeted.

More than one of our former leaders have been participating in politics, and as a result, we received a series of different investigations throughout the years.

NGOs are not able to handle this contention on the long run. One of them received seven hundred questions related to the accounting of their Norwegian grant and they also had to turn in their e-mail archive. Compared to the size of their office staff, this is an enormous job. All of the organizations investigated handed in all documents requested, as they believe in their own transparency. Generally the green movement is not so political in Hungary they try to avoid contentious situations not just because they may fail but the members may have different positions on politics.

It is hard when you step out of your comfort zone – which is important to do sometimes – it is easy to get lost outside, and it is just waste of energy. If we concentrate on those issues where we can achieve something, it is more useful.

Important issues are primarily handled by those who are experts on them. If the story escalates, the others may sign petitions, but the majority of the organizations are excluded, some of them even don't give their names. The reasons are diverse. Some are afraid, some try to stay within their own field, others complain about lack of energy.

Mostly lack of time and laziness is the reason why we don't participate. And these issues are sometimes so political that we are afraid. We are afraid to argue as we are not experts on that. Our target group is not interested in these stories, there are others doing it, it's a kind of division of labour. It is also more credible if Energiaklub and Greenpeace are fighting against Paks.

This argument is not so convincing in the light of other stories. When the government introduced internet tax, tens of thousands protested and the plan was abandoned within a few days. For some reason the green movement was never able to organize similar performances,

¹²It is necessary to note, that Átlátszó itself is involved in the conflict, however as they refer to official police documents, I trust this information.

however they see the environment related problems much more serious than the taxation of internet:

Internet-tax and student protests were good examples that if the government faces counterpower, they make gestures, but no environmental example comes into my mind. There was a protest against Paks, but it wasn't very successful, we tried it in winter... Obviously in that case the political interests are so hard... we also objected the reorganization of the land of the national parks, even László Kövér¹³ opposed it, and still, they voted for it, same goes for Kishantos¹⁴. Environmental issues are pushed so much in the background, there is nothing to do.

This leads us to the crisis of the green movement perceived by many of the members. The interviews show that the movement's coordination in political issues represents a general inactivity – the elected representatives participate in different committees, but if they are not taken seriously the movement apparently can't find any other way to work together for common values:

The green movement is clearly in crisis today. Most probably they are tired, they have been working for twenty-five years and it is hard to renew after all. There are new and fresh green organizations, but they don't come to the annual meetings and they don't really care about coordination. They don't want to be part of this *corporatist* scene probably.

To participate in contentious politics is an expensive decision. Many of the NGOs has decided to move on and start projects which are not directly related to everyday politics. They try to influence people (thus consumers, voters) to make different decisions in their everyday life. They hope to have a long-term impact through changing people's attitudes instead of engaging in politics. One of them works in a small community NGO while being employed in the ministry responsible for environmental issues. They accept serious compromises not having the capacity to engage in a conflict:

They are destroying all forms of nature-conservation with my active contribution.

¹³ László Kövér: the president of the parliament, one of the leaders of Fidesz

¹⁴ Kishantos was an organic farm which also provided environmental education for farmers and scholarships for students. Their rented fields were taken by the authorities after the leader of the farm organized protests against the land management of the government. She became an iconic figure of heroic but superfluous fight for values of sustainability.

A bigger organization decided to be less political than they were before. Their current projects involve local groups across Hungary, thus their communication is targeted to them at this moment. They communicate “under the radar” and as “a response to the decline of the public sphere” they put more emphasis on Facebook than traditional forms of mass-communication. Others do not confront politics due to the heterogeneity of the political views of their members.

When a civic organization intentionally leaves contentious politics, the relational nature of the public sphere becomes more traceable. Public sphere is not just political discourse in the narrow sense of the words. If an NGO decides to collect capital and use it to engage into people’s lives they access the public sphere. Public sphere can be local, or detached from power as well. Hannah Arendt stated that people reading samizdat in a closed room are acting in the public sphere (see chapter 2). NGOs communicating in their own networks, shaping consumer behaviour or organizing small-scale events do the same thing as they could do on a national level if they had the necessary capital to do so. As attending a protest is a form of legitimization, attending a little event is also legitimization – on another level. The main differences are the lack of contention (which is not part of the public sphere anyway) and the lower aspirations of the organizer. When NGOs disengage from contentious politics, they give up a large part of their desired level of visibility, they give up collecting large amounts of capital, but they may be successful even with a smaller number of supporting connections.

Cycles of contention appear in exceptional cases, when a serious threat to the environment is approaching. NGOs struggle to raise topics, but sometimes their reactions are reaching the media. Although they know each other well and share information, most contentious cycles fail to escalate. Majority of the organizations avoid contentious politics and although they are really active, the projects they described in the interviews had limited

audience. Majority of them were different forms of networking, education and awareness raising campaigns.

The only group of organizations who has an easy access to public debates are the think-tanks. They have a high reputation for their knowledge and do not have to work much for media attention, they are asked if their expertise is relevant to the topic.

We do not try to ‘get into index.hu¹⁵’. It is obvious that they write about everything we do because we are important. We organize events and the press is coming

Other groups sometimes hold press conferences, but they admitted, journalists are not interested in them. It is interesting, that sometimes success does not reinforce the successful organization. It appeared several times that topics raised by a civic group reach the media, but they are not getting mentioned, some of them even accused media or other partners of plagiarism.

While doing interviews with the green organizations about how they reach out to address issues, it became apparent, how they *do not* argue. In democracy the power originates from the people and it needs to be shared – as it is stated in the Hungarian and many other constitutions. Still most of my informants never used the word *democracy* and never said anything related to it. When they talked about politics, most of them stated that they are apolitical. Those who mentioned democracy as a value were clearly disillusioned:

As I get older, I am more and more cynical. Earlier I thought that civil society has some kind of role in a democratic society...

Védegylet was the only NGO which was funded with clear political intentions. They define themselves as an eco-political group and they claim to have a word to any kind of topic in the name of their political philosophy. An eco-political philosopher funded this exceptional group. They were successful for a few years: they managed to establish an Ombudsman for Future Generations and they run a successful campaign to elect their nominee as President of

¹⁵ One of the most popular news sites in Hungary

Hungary. Two green parties were founded by the members of the association, one of them LMP still exists. Védegylet still has a voice among the greens, but nowadays they are much weaker, they have lost most of their members due to their involvement in contentious situations.

Apolitical tendencies are understandable, but on the long run, they may have even more serious consequences. As an environmental lawyer explained, repertoires of possible actions may vanish after a while, if nobody uses them:

Legal institutions are like an arm: if it is plastered and you don't use it for a long time, it gets thinner. If you never use an opportunity, it disappears after a while. Thus part of our mission is to cultivate the culture of environmental democracy.

To invent new performances needs creativity and courage. In contentious politics contained performances are accepted and well known actions. The government may not welcome them, but all the players know how they work and how they play out. If contained actions are not available or enough, new groups will emerge after a while and new types of actions will happen. Transgressive performances are organized most of the time after the contained ones failed. Creativity is not unlimited, new strategies are developed out of the old ones, radical novelties rarely happen in politics (Mc Adam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001).

The second important topic avoided by the Hungarian green NGOs is *ecological thinking* itself. None of my interviewees gave a single reference to humans' relation to nature, to the wellbeing or pain of nonhuman creatures, the principle of subsidiarity, the inherent value of natural habitats or anything we would call typical eco-philosophy or eco-politics. None of the problems about the future generations or human's relation to nonhumans discussed in chapter 2 were addressed in any way. As if they do not talk about democracy, I do not think they are not democrats, the fact that they do not talk about ecological values, does not prove that they are not even thinking that way.

As I summarized the problems raised by Nancy Fraser in chapter 2, the language of the political discourse is exclusive in itself. If one cannot adapt to the accepted frame of reference she cannot contribute to the debate, but if she adapts she already obeyed. Ecological thinkers and activists may feel the same way: if their hard science, economic models and political performances are rejected, how would be possible to convince politicians with even more unacceptable arguments such as protection of beauty or letting nature self-organize. They may be right to some extent. In contentious politics the framing and language of the debate has a great importance.

Steinberg discusses political dialogues from the point of view of frame theory and dialogic discourse analysis. He describes frames as derivatives of ideologies in themselves. Frames define the meaning of speech and action. I would add, that if we read Tilly's description on repertoires of contention, speech and collective action are very similar in nature to each other. Steinberg examines the problems of constructing truly oppositional symbols. Meaning production and social invention is a relational process, an interaction between actors in the public discourse and their action builds up on the existing repertoire. Hegemonic players try to impose their own interpretation as a general meaning to the discourse. A "*discursive hegemony*" can prevent the establishment of any new meaning in the discussion until it is powerful enough. Therefore the question is how does reinterpretation and reappropriation happens during conflict and how do claimants depict their understanding of justice and order. This process is relational, particular successes and failures shape its evolution as claimants constantly try to innovate and the counterpart constantly re-interprets these innovations. The problem is "*while challengers consciously seek to appropriate and transform hegemonic genres, they are always partly captive to the truths these genres construct*" (Steinberg 1999).

If the green NGOs accept the frame offered by the government, they instantly accept their own point of view as partial. This is the most important aspect of not having an ecological philosophy behind their actions: even among themselves they do not see the alternative but coherent and valid interpretative frame of ecological thinking. Introducing a new language into the public discourse is a hard work and needs a great deal of creativity. Steinberg describes the process when the British mental health movement in the 70s emerged, they first borrowed their language from workers movement thus formed *unions* and acted in *strikes*. Their identity as *mental patients* emerged only later on (Steinberg 1999).

It is not my task to suggest role models for the green movement, but there are a few success stories in the Hungarian discourse which might be useful to analyse. Currently the green movement identifies with the position of marginalized experts whose only and most powerful skill is being *unquestionable*:

We don't want to change the world overnight. We work gradually and professionally, we want to have *unquestionable* statements to communicate.

I did completely different things earlier. When I started, my only goal was to do something extremely professional. [...] Competence, expertise is one of our main principles. You cannot convince anybody if your knowledge does not exceed theirs.

Scientific competence, overwhelming professional expertise is an important resource however building a communication strategy on them potentially offers the implicit idea that they have given up their political right to participate. Experts *support* decisions, politicians and citizens *make* decisions on their own right. Expertise is a modernist, rational value, where science is the ultimate source of truth and ethical values are not part of the discourse. When they accept rational knowledge as the source of legitimation of their position and source of security in political debates, they fail to claim different values taken into account and go into exile instead of claiming anything.

There are multiple strategies for frame alignment and mobilization used by social movements around the world. Snow and his colleagues discuss strategies of frame bridging,

amplification, extension and transformation. These methods transform or enlarge important messages in order to be able to communicate them or to involve more people into the target-group (Snow et al. 1986). All of these methods may be useful to overcome the frustration that “nobody is interested” in the green issues in Hungary. For instance, environmental lawyers use the strategy of frame extension when they address an urban-environmental conflict as an economic, in order to convince the judge:

If I take to court a case where something is too noisy or exceeds the air-pollution thresholds, they don't really care. If I say that the value of a real estate went down, that's serious, they send an expert to see how much money has been lost.

While the green movement fails to make use of these strategies on a larger scale, the government regularly does it. When talking about the scandal related to Ökotárs foundation, they do not talk about environmental or human-rights NGOs, but about foreign agents funded by western governments to undermine Hungarian politics (Bódy 2014). These kinds of tricks are not really surprising or uniquely Hungarian in political communication though.

8. Summary

In this research project I developed my own understanding of the public sphere and analysed how green NGOs in Budapest develop strategies to navigate in it. Green civic organizations played an important role in the regime change in 1989, they also had later a few remarkable success stories. Despite the successful start the green movement became weaker over the years and today they are not able to represent their values in politics.

The central theory of my analysis is public sphere. I started the discussion with Jürgen Habermas who was the first to describe this concept in detail. Later many scholars debated his position. Nancy Fraser criticized the public sphere for being exclusive due to its language among others. Applying her critique together with the works of Snow and Steinberg I showed how the hegemonic discourse framing activity of the government prevents green NGOs from expressing ecological arguments in public debates.

I briefly summarize the work of Fabiani and Castells who describe how the public sphere itself changed over the years since its first description. One of the great changes besides the increasing power of the market and the phenomenon of globalization is the emergence of the NGO sphere globally. Castells' theory of network society and mass communication as a power mediator leads to my theoretical ground: relational sociology.

Using Emirbayer, Latour and Tilly as my main sources, I introduce a different approach to the concept of public sphere. In this perspective abstract objects such as the public sphere do not exist in a sense as Habermas used them. In my understanding, public sphere is a network, a field of relations where links between two actors are acts of resource sharing. The public sphere is a process of capital accumulation and transformation in order to achieve the goals of a smaller or bigger proportion of the network. Individual or institutional supporters accumulate different forms of capital (as Bourdieu would put it) in an organization, which

transforms it and uses for engaging in the public discourse. In my theory legitimation emerges out of these acts of resource sharing.

I identified three different resource accumulation strategies. All of them are characterized by a special kind of connection between the actor and the source of capital, all of these relations have a significant impact both on the recipient. The first group of civic organizations built its existence on grants provided by the EU or another funding organization. These connections require mainly administration skills, but do not necessarily need a close connection to the masses. The second strategy is based on individual donors or membership. In these cases thousands of people support the organization working on a mission which is important to the supporters. They have a strong connection besides the financial support, in typical cases the NGO provides some form of rewarding service or activity to the supporters. The third strategy builds on knowledge. Think tanks try to offer services on the market based on their unique knowledge while also expressing their values as important factors of their work.

All NGOs are dependent on their donors in some sense and this dependence transforms the organizations and the movement as a whole as well. Most of the NGOs interviewed were critical towards the grant based strategy, despite the fact that most of them are involved in it. The other two strategies offer greater success on the long run – if they are managed successfully.

Cooperation patterns among the green civic organizations reveal their wide spread activity connected to grants and their almost complete inactivity related to contentious politics. Apparently there are no leaders or central actors in the network and the cycles of contention that require strong leadership and involvement of a growing coalition are mainly passive responses to the actions of the government. The main reason for this is the proactive behaviour of the state to repress the NGO sphere. The state actively transforms performances

and repertoires of political claims, suspends the support provided for grassroots organizations and most importantly reframes the political discussion in a way that makes impossible to raise effectively ecological or democratic arguments as contained claims.

There are two strategies available for NGOs to have some influence on the public sphere. First is leave the realm of contentious politics and work “under the radar”. Fieldwork, ecological education, networking and similar activities are possible activities to maintain their identity as green NGOs without engaging into conflicts with the government. The second strategy is only available for those who can convince the media that their knowledge and performances are unique and valuable. Those who have access to the mass media are able to raise issues or to contribute to the existing discussion in a meaningful way.

The case of the green NGOs in Budapest clearly shows how hard it is to access public attention and to influence the discourse in practice. The public sphere is not open-access, it is rather a series of transactions in order to build up a network where communication, legitimation and political values can be expressed. I also showed the factors behind path-dependency that makes it hard to change strategies, or develop new repertoires when it is necessary. However there are also successful examples. They can be a source of inspiration and capital to re-frame the identity and re-invent the repertoires of green NGOs in the future.

9. References

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