'What's left to do?': Leftist identity and challenges to the political imagination in the illiberal regime

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I, the undersigned, **Barnabas Beck**, candidate for the MA degree in Sociology and Social Anthropology declare herewith that the present thesis titled "'What's left to do?': Leftist identity and challenges to the political imagination in the illiberal regime" is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography.
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Abstract: In this thesis, I study the position of young self-described leftists in the illiberal regime of Hungary. I ask the question of how the hybridity and hegemony of the regime impacts how people negotiate their self-identification as leftist. Based on digital and offline ethnographic work at anti-government protests, events held by leftist organisations and in leftist spaces, and interviews with members of leftist organisations in Budapest, I show that the schismogenesis and constriction of discursive space by the illiberal regime shifts how young leftists perceive hegemony and boundary in the Hungarian political field. The thesis aims to contribute to the discussion of the functioning of hybrid regimes by shifting focus towards how such a regime impacts the identity and behaviour of its own opposition.

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Introduction

a. <u>Re-framing the left</u>

The original idea for this thesis came about through an ever-present feature of living in Hungary for most of the past five or so years. The 2022 parliamentary elections, the 2024 European Parliamentary and municipal elections, along with the sudden appearance and emergence of Péter Magyar as a challenger to Orbán and Fidesz's rule – not to mention the use of official government communications for political messaging outside of election cycles – has meant that the country has been in a nearly perpetual campaign season in the 2020's. As a consequence, billboards depicting mostly the political opponents of the regime have been a mainstay across Hungary during this period. This is not a particularly surprising or novel phenomenon, however, what was notable to me was a seemingly increased ascription of the label '*the left*' to the collective opposition (barring the radical nationalist party *Mi Hazánk Mozgalom[1])* and an increasingly divorced conceptualization of the term from my understanding of it.

Essentially, the 'left' according to the communications of the government and its affiliated media sector encompasses all political actors which are in opposition to the Orbán-regime, even when such actors describe and align themselves with other traditions as shown by the labeling of Péter Márki-Zay, a self-described conservative who led the unified opposition (a coalition of various parties from liberal to conservative) in the 2022 parliamentary elections and Péter Magyar, who was a member of governing party Fidesz leadership circles up until early 2024.

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[1] 'Our Homeland Movement'

Figure 1. Images from the 2024 European Parliamentary election campaign featuring Péter Magyar (rightmost on the first poster) and Márki-Zay (rightmost on the second poster)
The text on the images read "Stop the pro-war left!" and "The left would take us into the war!" respectively (translated by author).

The political function of constructing this kind of left-right divide has some fairly obvious explanations, such as representing the ruling Fidesz party as being the only entity in the field of conservative political forces and the preservation of the often discussed 'central force field' in which Fidesz positions itself as the central force between the radical (and inconsequential) left- and right-wing parties (Csizmadia, 2021: 188). However, the specific ways in which opposition figures and movements are framed as 'leftist', for example as supposedly being 'pro-war' in connection to the Russia-Ukraine war among other characterizations, is telling of a kind of reframing of what 'left' and 'right' denote in the field of contemporary Hungarian politics. When discussing the opposition as 'the left', Fidesz politicians and affiliated personalities tend to not make claims that would paint these figures as 'leftist' in the traditional sense of the term. It is not views on economic policy and redistribution, socio-economic equality, or certain attitudes towards a capitalist system that earn opposition figures the label, but rather a questioning of their allegiance to the nation and various issues relating broadly to 'national sovereignty'. Tellingly, the two most heavily used slogans which incorporated the label of 'the left' during the 2022 election campaign were in

relation to the Russia-Ukraine war and the phrase 'dollar left' (*dollárbaloldal*), referring to accusations that the opposition is receiving money from foreign actors. In the case of the war, the messaging of Fidesz suggested that the policies of the European Union such as economic sanctions against Russia were harmful to Hungarian citizens and not conducive to reaching 'peace', which the domestic opposition would have blindly followed or worse.

Figures like Márki-Zay and Magyar have repeatedly refused – with varying success – the label of being left-wing or 'on the left', or present themselves as transcending any left-right spectrum. Whether by emphasizing the need and ambition for creating a 'non-corrupt right-center party'[2] or adopting the slogan 'There is no right, there is no left, just Magyar'[34], most nationally visible political figures and forces who were labeled as 'leftists' were quick to refuse and contradict this characterization.

Along this line, I started to question what happens, against this backdrop, to people who do consider themselves to be 'leftists'. As Kallius writes while discussing a similar reframing of the term 'liberal' in Hungary: "The 'liberalism' of my interlocutors ranged from Thatcherism to support of Bernie Sanders. Several of my interlocutors identified explicitly as left-wing. Many were annoyed by my intention to describe them as liberals, but understood with a hint of desperation how they had been cast into this ascribed slot by the illiberal regime" (2023: 16). These 'ascribed slots' of 'liberal' and 'leftist' as assigned by the illiberal regime are in most ways congruent, meaning being in opposition to or in some ways unfriendly with the regime, not representing the interests of the nation (regardless of the truthfulness of this assertion). However, beyond the annoyance of self-described 'leftists' being cast as liberals and conservatives being cast as leftists into this ideological 'melting

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[2] https://www.facebook.com/markizaypeter/posts/sz%C3%BCks%C3%A9g-van-egy-nem-korrupt-jobbk%C3%B6z%C3%A9p-p%C3%A1rtraa-mindenki-magyarorsz%C3%A1ga-mozgalomat-/447470663406078/ (Accessed: 12 May 2025)

[3] https://webshop.magyartisza.hu/products/tisza-part-kapucnis-pulover-csak-magyar (Accessed: 12 May 2025)

[4] 'Nincs jobb, nincs bal, csak Magyar', Magyar, beyond being the surname of Péter Magyar, also means 'Hungarian', hence the wordplay in the slogan.

pot', a simultaneous process also occurs. It is not only the case that people who refuse these descriptions are cast into such 'slots' but also that people who do describe themselves as 'leftist' or 'liberal' suddenly find their own self-definition being applied to people and in ways which are drastically incongruent with what they view as 'left-wing'. In this context, how do people construe and negotiate their own political identity and consequently imagine the boundaries of their own political community, allyship with others, and the prospects of left-wing ideas?

Additionally, the concept of 'left' or 'leftist' in itself introduces some issues. In academic thought, the 'left-right' spectrum and the signifiers within it are widely considered as not being concepts for serious study (Ostrowski, 2023: 3), perhaps mostly because of their prolific and connotatively loaded use in vernacular language (2023: 2) which, as illustrated above, consistently muddies the water on the terms' precise meaning even within a single political context. As such, it is necessary to explicate some of the recent and more immediately relevant political historical context of Hungary.

b. <u>The political context of Hungary</u>

As alluded to earlier, the framing of 'the left' in Hungary has shifted in Fidesz narratives to those who are branded as not representing the interests of the nation but the interests of foreign actors and institutions, rather than along lines of ideological position or policy suggestion. This is quite similar in some ways to the emergence of the anti-colonial framing of 'gender' as found by Korolczuk and Graff (2018). In 'Gender as "Ebola from Brussels"', Korolczuk and Graff make the argument that right-wing political movements in Central and Eastern Europe – as well as some instances in Africa and Latin America – oppose the so-called "gender ideology", particularly a social constructionist framing of gender, as cultural colonisation, as something forced on local culture by 'Western', imperial and often

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transnational forces such as the United Nations or the European Union. As such, the self-positioning of these groups is anti-colonial. 'Antigenderists' make the claim that they are fighting for the protection of local culture against the globalizing neoliberal forces of these institutions who try to 'blackmail' the disenfranchised 'normal' people of the country into abandoning their culture (2018: 797-99). Quite similar framing can be found in government communication regarding other contexts, primarily directed towards the European Union. The oft-used slogan of 'No migration, no gender, no war!' may encapsulate two other issues (besides 'gender') regarding which the government and affiliated groups utilizes the discussion that the European Union is attempting to blackmail the Hungarian people into conformity. In the case of migration, the argument by right-wing groups and leaders has often been made that the EU (or George Soros) is trying to force Hungary to take in migrants through mandated quotas and conform to the Western hegemony of 'multiculturalism'. In a speech in 2022, prime minister Viktor Orbán said that Hungarians are not 'racially mixed' (Orbán, 2022) and drew the juxtaposition between Western Europe, where Europeans mix with non-Europeans, and places such as Hungary, where Europeans may mix with other Europeans. This juxtaposition and the claim that the EU (or 'globalist left', Soros, etc.) is trying to impose the kind of 'mixing' that is already prevalent in Western Europe illustrates well the utilization of the anticolonial framing. Essentially, Orbán argues that the 'West' is trying to impose its 'culture' on the Hungarian people who would lose their own in the process. In the case of 'no war', referring to the Russian-Ukrainian war, the anticolonial framing even goes beyond the realm of culture. In this instance, the government frames its opposition to certain EU measures such as economic sanctions as 'putting Hungarian interests first'. Here, the anticolonial framing moves from 'culture' to 'sovereignty', forming the narrative that outside forces are attempting to deny Hungarians from acting primarily in their

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own interests and subjugate them to the 'pro-war' European standpoint[5]. In these cases, as also illustrated by Figure 1, government communication tends to suggest that 'the left' act as agents or messengers of the 'colonial' EU or puppets to enact EU interests[678].

Korolczuk and Graff connect the emergence of this phenomenon to the 2008 financial crisis. They argue that the becoming apparent of the weakness of the neoliberal economic model and liberal democracy has opened such a position for right-wing groups where they claim to be representatives of true civil society against the alienated elites who care more about banks than their fellow citizens (2018: 799). This connection is not explicated on very thoroughly in Korolczuk and Graff's account, however, examining the period preceding Orbán's coming to power may provide valuable insight and context for how the framing of 'left' and 'right' developed in Hungary and certain issues regarding the position of self-described 'leftists' in the present day.

The political crisis of the government and governing parties did, however, somewhat precede the financial crisis. In September 2006, an audio recording was leaked in which prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsány, leader of the coalition government between the 'Hungarian Socialist Party' (MSZP) and the broadly liberal SZDSZ ('Alliance of Free Democrats'), gave a speech to fellow party members during a private conference of sorts in Balatonőszöd. In his speech, given a month after retaining parliamentary control in the 2006 elections, Gyurcsány infamously stated that his party had been "lying morning, night, and day" and hidden the extent of economic problems the country was facing to win the election (Bozóki, 2009: 398-400). Resulting from this, violent protests broke out across the country (most

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[5]
https://hirtv.hu/hirtvkulfold/osszefogtak-a-haboruparti-erok-varhelyi-oliver-a-magyar-unos-biztosjelolt-ellen-brusszelben-video-2595714 (Accessed: 16 May 2025)
[6] https://fidesz.hu/hirek/magyar-peter-manfred-weber-magyar-hangja (Accessed: 17 May 2025)
[7]
https://fidesz.hu/hirek/azt-kivanom-vegyek-eszre-hogy-brusszel-peter-milyen-ember-ezert-leplezem-le-a-hazugsagait (Accessed: 17 May 2025)
[8] https://www.facebook.com/FideszHU/videos/401246439336560/ (Accessed: 17 May 2025)

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significantly in the capital) along with allegations of disproportionate police response, which further plummeted the support for the governing parties.

Amidst this already unstable political context, Hungary was also affected especially heavily by the 2008 financial crisis – being one of the first countries to turn to the IMF for financial support during the crisis – both due to exogenous and endogenous factors (Andor, 2009: 286-87). The crisis and subsequent loans have led the Hungarian government to impose various and significant austerity measures, which, coupled with other developments, has likely contributed to the breakup of the coalition, the resignation of Gyurcsány in 2009, and the eventual capitulation of the parties of the governing coalition in the 2010 parliamentary elections.

The parties of the coalition, MSZP and SZDSZ, have quite significantly different origin stories but by the 2000's were broadly understood as being on the political 'left'. MSZP formed in 1989 out of the state party of the socialist period, losing the qualification of 'worker' from the name "Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party" (MSZMP). Although MSZP's politics diverged from that of its predecessor, due to it broadly defining itself as social democratic (March and Mudde, 2005: 28) and later as 'left liberal' (Kiss, 2018: 54-55) and its history of origin meant that MSZP retained its position as a 'leftist' party. SZDSZ (*Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége*) was a party originally consisting largely of dissident intellectuals, mainly coming from backgrounds of social science, humanities, and arts (Bozóki and Simon, 2021: 367-368), who have been in opposition – with varying degrees of explicitness – to the socialist regime before the system change. SZDSZ participated in the 'Oppositional Roundtable' preceding the collapse of the socialist regime, representing a markedly anti-communist and liberal ideology. In the first years of post-socialism and arguably throughout its existence, SZDSZ's voter base and especially membership drew heavily from Budapest intelligentsia and were emblematic of the cosmopolitan side on what Trencsényi

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calls the cosmopolitan-ethnonationalist divide in Hungary (2018, 278). In 1990, Bálint

Magyar, former member of the party, said that 'a significant portion of the intelligentsia' are

part of SZDSZ's base (in Szelényi and Szelényi, 1991: 126). In the class analysis of Szelényi

and Szelényi, they also considered the 'liberal field', which included SZDSZ, to draw its

voters from the intelligentsia alongside the emerging entrepreneurial class.

The coalition governments of these two parties from 2002 until (officially) 2008 can

be characterized as representing what Miklós Sebők calls the 'modernising consensus', the

prevailing view in the post-socialist years that Hungary needs to reach a 'fully modernized'

state (and 'catch up' to the West), largely through 'globalization' and European integration

(Sebők, 2016: 47) Sebők makes clear that although the ideals of the modernising consensus

had significant overlap with neoliberal ideals, it is not exactly equitable as some proponents

of 'modernisation' were explicitly critical of neoliberalism and the potential friction between

liberal democracy and 'modernisation' (2016: 52-53). Nevertheless, in terms of the make-up

of personnel in MSZP and SZDSZ, where the representatives of 'modernisation'

consolidated, a telling categorisation of 'moderate social democrats' and 'hardcore

neoliberals' is made by Sebők to outline the division between groups in the parties (2016: 55),

highlighting that the more classical/radical leftist positions have essentially disappeared from

mainstream politics and even social democratic groups were moderate compared to neoliberal

wings. As such, Hungary was a "model pupil of neoliberalism in the region" , but was also

top of the pile in terms of the amount of foreign debt and investment (Andor, 2009: 287-288).

Elsewhere, Gagyi (2016) has framed the defining political divide of the post-socialist years as

between 'democratic antipopulism' and 'antidemocratic populism', coming to be represented

by the 'Socialist-Liberal' (i. e. MSZP and SZDSZ) and 'Conservative' blocks respectively.

Gagyi argues that integration into the uneven development of the global capitalist system has

produced these two mirroring ideological constellations. 'Democratic antipopulism' is in

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some ways quite similar to the modernising consensus, being characterized by an uncritical commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration and marketization from a goal of 'catching up' to the West (2016: 355-356). On the other hand, the response of antidemocratic populism is steeped in the claims of protecting and furthering 'national interests' by building up domestic capital and a domestic bourgeoisie, as well as positioning Hungary and Hungarian identity as just as developed and civilized as the Western 'core', only unfairly rolled back due to various historical events (2016: 358-359).

In this context, the younger leftists in my research also lack much of an ideological genealogy with significant parties or movements commonly considered to be 'on the left' prior to 2010. This is certainly more obvious in the cases of the 'hardcore neoliberals', such as Lajos Bokros' view that modernity – used here as an ideological end-goal rather than in its social scientific sense – can be achieved through the domination of market freedom and capitalism (in Sebők, 2016: 47). However, even the broader goals and ideals which were also essentially accepted by the social democratic wing – such as large-scale privatisation, economic globalisation, and an arguably somewhat idolatrous view of the 'West' (Böröcz, 2006) – are viewed by contemporary self-described leftists much more critically and often ultimately as not leftist.

c. <u>Categorising the regime</u>

A fair question based on the beginning of this paper may be to ask why the use of these concepts while campaigning for elections or political support more generally is significant at all. Certainly, attaching ideological labels disparagingly or framing such labels as being harmful to political opponents is not a novel phenomenon to contemporary Hungary. Arguably, even the incorporation of discourse around national interest or 'sovereignty' into drawing up these divides has appeared in similar fashion both abroad (see Korolczuk and

Graff, 2018) and in not-so-distant domestic history (see Csurka, 1992) – although with a more explicit reference to claims of Jewish conspiracies in the case of the latter.

However, in this case, these phenomena appear alongside the enormous hegemonic power of the regime. The messages and framings presented in the opening of this chapter were inescapable (and similar messages remained so through to the present day). Images depicting the 'pro-war left' seemingly took up the majority of billboards across the country with the same image often appearing again and again in a line alongside major roads. In Budapest, freely distributed newspapers in metro stations produced similar messages. Short advertisements warned of the dangerous plans of 'the left' both on most television channels and on Youtube. These adverts and messages also came not only from the political party in (and striving to remain in) power but as public service announcements by the state or government as a result of the 'colonization' of the state whereby differences between party, government, and state become inconsequential (if not non-existent) through transforming the state to the political liking and image of the governing party (Müller, 2016: 64-65).

Figure 2. Billboards featuring members of the opposition coalition in 2022. The red text reads 'Pro-war advocates'. The black text reads 'The left would take us into war'. (Source: Eötvös Károly Intézet[9])

Viktor Orbán and his party Fidesz have been in power for 15 years as of the writing of this paper. Fidesz won the 2010 parliamentary elections with a two-thirds supermajority after a crisis-laden MSZP-SZDSZ coalition government from 2006[10]. Quite immediately, the newly appointed government – equipped with the legitimation and power of the supermajority – began to make numerous and drastic changes to the constitution (eventually replacing it entirely), to election law (Bánkuti et al, 2012), the jurisdiction of local governments, and so on. However, these processes, often referred to as democratic backsliding (Körösényi et al., 2020: 16; Bernhard, 2021; Scheiring, 2021) have contributed heavily to a consolidation of power and further Fidesz supermajorities in parliamentary elections in 2014, 2018, and 2022. I will refer to this period as the 'illiberal regime' or 'regime' in short throughout this paper for clarity, after Orbán's very own declaration of the kind of state they are 'constructing' in 2014 (Orbán, 2014).

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[9]

https://www.ekint.org/alkotmanyossag/2023-07-26/hatartalan-agymosas-avagy-bun-e-a-ragalmazo-plakatok-atragasztasa-allaspont (Accessed: 16 May 2025)

[10] The 2006-2010 period technically does span two governments as Ferenc Gyurcsány's eventual resignation in 2009 led to a change in premiership to Gordon Bajnai, but for the purposes of this paper this is not highly relevant.

Over the past 15 years, this has inspired a proliferation of interest and literature on the nature of the Hungarian political system in the post-2010 period. Many concepts have been used to describe and classify the illiberal regime, often centering different features of the regime as its most important. The concept 'authoritarian neoliberalism' has been used to describe the illiberal regime among others in the region post-2010 such as Poland, emphasizing the regime's combination of "some of the central tenets of neoliberalism" (Fábry, 2020: 307), exemplified by cutting social spending, implementing more regressive tax systems, and rolling out punitive public work programmes (Lendvai-Bainton and Szelewa, 2019: 564), with "the explicit exclusion and marginalization of subordinate social groups through the constitutionally and legally engineered self-disempowerment of nominally democratic institutions, governments, and parliaments" (Bruff, 2014: 116). Magyar's concept of mafia state, careful to point out that this regime should not be considered a democracy of any sort, asserts that the defining feature of the illiberal regime is the unification and interconnected nature of the concentration of political power and the accumulation of personal and familial wealth, where the replacement of the economic elite is organized from a centralized hierarchy, naming the regime a 'mafia state' (Magyar, 2016). Bozóki and Hegedűs (2018) affirm the scalar approach and the idea that post-2010 Hungary is a hybrid regime, meaning it is somewhere in the 'grey zone' between liberal democracy and dictatorship, contributing that Hungary's case is unique among hybrid regimes because it is not unidirectional. Hungary has hybridized from a liberal democracy rather than democratized from a dictatorship or stagnated in such a transition (1175-76). Krekó (2022) applies the term 'informational autocracy', coined by Guriyev and Treisman (2019), focusing on how the government uses media infrastructure to manipulate information to ensure electoral support.

A common thread that most of these classificatory attempts aim to tackle is the illiberal regime's ambivalent position vis-a-vis common conceptualisations of democracy.

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Discussions on the illiberal regime often take an approach to place the regime somewhere along a scale of democracy-dictatorship (Magyar, 2014; Bozóki and Hegedűs, 2018) or use analysis of the transformations (characterized typically as some sort of 'breakdown' or 'dismantling') of political institutions of democratic control to assess the 'autocraticity' or 'authoritarianism' of the regime (see Lendvai-Bainton and Szelewa, 2019 and Krekó, 2022). This trend has received forceful criticism by Körösényi et al. (2020), who have pointed out that these approaches are overwhelmingly normative in how their view of liberal democracy, presenting an assumption that liberalism and democracy can be combined 'unambiguously' (2020: 24-26). Through this lens, analysis of the regime become structured on the features it lacks or violates as compared to the purported ideal of liberal democracy (2020: 26-27).

This criticism is valid, however, I would argue that the features of this common thread remain significant for more fully understanding the processes of post-2010 Hungarian politics even if normative assumptions are stripped from the analyses of these phenomena. Whether the regime's structure is compared to an ideal of liberal democracy or not, it remains the case that there still exist various institutions within the regime that are at least nominally resembling some form of democratic function. Elections are held where citizens are able to vote anonymously for parties and politicians running against Fidesz, who (normally) proceed to take their seat as representatives in a parliament where they vote on bills. Some media critical of the government is able to exist (although increasingly confined to the online space) and physical violence or overt censorship against such media have been very rare (Bajomi-Lázár, 2019; Griffin, 2020). In short, the illiberal regime contains at least a 'mimicry' of democracy (Guriev and Treisman, 2019: 100-101).

Essentially, the perception of this 'hybridity' or 'mimicry' in the regime is what leads to the interest of this research. Most literature on the illiberal regime is chiefly concerned – understandably so – with the state-restructuring, the rhetoric, and populism of Orbán and

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Fidesz, in short the actions and navigations of those in power. Some research concerning (parliamentary and extra-parliamentary) opposition behaviour does exist, however, these take a view from a relatively macro scale, describing and analysing the behaviour of an 'opposition' taken in its totality (see Ilonszki and Dudzinska, 2021). Alternatively, research takes view of singular, specific strategies with analysis geared towards its efficacy (Musil and Yardimci-Geyikci, 2023) or specific protests (Hinsey, 2012). While such research is valuable in pointing out ways in which opposition behaviour may be constrained by the regime or other paths opened up by its structures, it is also not concerned with the interpretative work and the knowledge production on the ground by opposition actors. This would be important for multiple reasons. Firstly, as outlined in the opening sections, the discursive power of the regime and the (at least) post-socialist political history of Hungary means that the identities, labels, and contradictions within and between sections of a broad conceptualisation of 'the opposition' are more complicated than it is possible to explicate from a bird's eye view and therefore also complicate the strategizing and outlook of various figures and movements within it. For example, Ilonszki and Dudzinska place parties MSZP and DK (*Demokratikus Koalíció*[11]) under the label 'Left' (2021: 609), a suggestion which produced reactions ranging from strong scepticism to outright rejection among virtually all of my interlocutors.

The work of Kallius (2023) does produce important insight about the lived experience of the 'liberal milieu' in the illiberal regime, particularly in her utilisation of the concept of 'schismogenesis', showing how the phenomenon that groups tend to define themselves in opposition to another group which exacerbates the differences between them eventually producing separate logics of truth between those supporting and opposing Orbán. Kallius identifies this creation of difference mainly in the ethnonationalist-cosmopolitan divide, which encompasses a range of antagonistic markers within Hungarian society, such as urban-rural, conservative-liberal, or Christian-secular. In particular, she shows that this

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[11] 'Democratic Coalition'

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process is the foundation of the hegemonic discourse of the regime (2023: 77-81, 277), whereby the regime heightens this schismogenesis to frame discourse into on a pro- and anti-regime schismogenetic axis. Although Kallius is not focused explicitly on a political opposition, her field of the Budapest liberal elite corresponds to Guriev and Treisman's (2019: 119-120) findings that elite groups tend to disapprove of the regime in informational autocracies, which is also confirmed for the Hungarian context by Krekó (2022: 60-61).

In this thesis, I argue that this schismogenetic propaganda and the hybrid nature of the regime – by constricting the space between heterogeneous opposition groups and obfuscating the possibilities of political action – interrelatedly accentuate differences and ultimately produce conflict and fracturing between and among groups in opposition to the regime such as the leftists in my research

Chapter 1. What's Left?

In the past ⅔ years, while living in Budapest as someone who would likely be characterized by Kallius (2023) as broadly belonging to the circles of the liberal intellectual milieu and consuming a borderline unhealthy amount of interviews, discussions, articles, and other content about Hungarian politics, I started to develop an intuition that, beyond the opposition-encompassing ascriptions of regime narratives, the word 'leftist' was used to refer to quite different things by different people. On the one hand, political analysts and journalists sitting in the studios and writing on the pages of the few remaining media unaffiliated with the regime talked of the various options of 'leftist voters' in who they could vote for, of 'leftist governance' when referring to the coalition government of MSZP and SZDSZ preceding the emergence of the illiberal regime, where 'left' is used to contrast with the 'right' of Orbán and Fidesz. On the other hand, I also knew of people, organisations and spaces which I and other young people in Budapest connected to this 'liberal intellectual milieu' around me conceived as a somewhat cohesive 'leftist milieu' which did not seem to have much connection to the left as it was discussed in the former case. I knew of a movement founded in the late 2010's which characterized itself as leftist more forcefully than other well-known parties in opposition and which gained some representation in national politics. I knew of certain pubs, community spaces, and organisations such as an online newspaper which are especially explicit in defining itself as 'leftist'. The self-descriptions of these people, places, and organisations as 'leftist' seemed to be using the term very clearly as an absolute, rather than a relative signifier. They are not 'left-of-something' or 'lean' left or, as it seems to be used in Fidesz communication, 'left' by virtue of being in opposition to the right-wing regime, but "sitting in an entirely separate ideological space to the 'right' and the 'centre'" (Ostrowski, 2023: 4). Through my time at university I also came into contact with

various people who not only strongly identified as leftist but were active in some of these organisations.

In this opening chapter, I will provide some more precise outline of the field I aim to examine, explore how people arrive to this field and how they conceptualise their identification as 'leftists', especially in relation to the broader national political context. I will also consider some ways in which these groups make attempts to avoid regime narratives but also ways in which they engage with them to argue that while the self-described leftists consciously set themselves apart from other opposition actors, this need arises in large part due to the regime's rhetoric.

This section draws on interviews as well as field notes gathered through ethnographic work done at anti-government protests, events held by leftist organisations and at leftist spaces over a 10-month period between August 2024 and May 2025. The events where ethnographic work was conducted took place exclusively in Budapest with the exception of 2 informal meetings held by one activist group, which took place at a cafe in a town neighboring Budapest. Eight (8) interviews were conducted over the same period. I was able to put a call for interviews on the Party's primary online communication channel as well as gaining the contact information of various current and former members of leftists organisations through informal contacts. From initial respondents, I limited the sample to participants under 30 years of age to direct focus on young leftist activists who became politically active after the establishment of the illiberal regime. As differences between the Party and the rest of the 'közeg' are accentuated by questions of the research, I have conducted interviews with an equal number (4) of Party members and non-Party members (see the next section for explanations of 'Party' and 'közeg'). The interviews were semi-structured as an interview guide was used but discussions diverged based on the position (organisation membership and role, social background, etc.) and answers of the interviewees.

Interviews were between 1 and 2 hours long, 6 being in person and 2 online. The audio of all interviews were recorded and transcribed with the permission of the participants.

a. The 'Közeg'

A term that appeared very early as I was starting to formulate this thesis was the 'balos (leftist) közeg' or just simply the 'közeg'. After a class in the Spring of 2024, I was chatting in one of the hallways of CEU with two of my classmates, Péter and Lili, who were both active in self-described leftist Hungarian movements. Péter, originally from a major city in Eastern Hungary, joined the aforementioned Party after he moved to the capital for a Bachelor's programme at a Budapest university, becoming a member of the leadership committee and the communications committee. Lili, a Budapest native, attended a residential college focused on social sciences and operating on a model of collective labour ('the College') while she completed her studies in Budapest. The topic of conversation was an autobiographical novel by a young author from a very prominent Budapest literary family. Péter and Lili were both planning to read it, but as Lili pointed out while laughing, this interest was due to wanting to be up to date on what she called 'közeg' gossip. In this context, the word 'közeg' could be translated most faithfully as either milieu or community. As they continued to discuss the book – particularly the gossip within it that they heard about – it became clear that the 'közeg' in this conversation was referring to the groups and spaces of young Hungarians that were using 'leftist' in this absolute sense.

Three organisations which seem especially important related to the 'közeg' and relevant for this chapter are the 'College', the 'Cooperative', and the 'Party'. The 'College' is a residential college very loosely affiliated with a Budapest university which runs on a model of sustaining itself by the collective labour of its members. The 'College' is also a common entry point for the 'közeg' as well as being the site where many organisations or the initial ideas for their establishment, including the 'Cooperative', originate from. The Cooperative started out as a pub and community space for likeminded people operating on a worker cooperative model whereby members are both owners and workers, meaning membership It

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has also grown to provide offices for various other organisations within the 'közeg'. The 'Party' is perhaps somewhat of a misnomer as it is not technically a party in legal terms and makes a point of specifying that it is a movement rather than a party on its website, however, it is a label that is applied to it quite consistently, likely for two reasons. Firstly, the 'Party' is the sole organisation in the 'közeg' which actively participates in institutional and electoral politics. Also, due to this participation, there is a sense among members that this movement will eventually become a party or that this is at least something which may become an option down the line.

Precisely delineating the 'közeg' is a somewhat difficult task as throughout interviews and discussions in the field, 'közeg' is used by my interlocutors in two slightly different ways. Gábor, who works at the Cooperative and responsible for the maintenance of the offices within it, talks to me about how difficult it is to get into the 'közeg', pointing out that it is "organized through work" which is difficult to access without the necessary social capital and a high level of commitment. Through emphasizing the importance of work as an organizing force, by 'közeg' Gábor is referring specifically to the Cooperative and the various organisations within it, where membership is based on collective labour – the Cooperative – or being employed in organisations housed within it, such as the self-described 'leftist newspaper'. Later in our discussion, he draws an even sharper distinction as he recounts an interview he conducted with the founder of the Party. In it, the founder draws on this as he justifies the founding of the Party, saying that it provides another way for people to be active on the left outside of the exclusively labour-based 'közeg'.

However, others refer to the 'közeg' more as an informal network of leftist people. Patrik, a member of the Party, while talking about his experiences as a 'late-comer' to the 'közeg', uses the example of going to the Cooperative with fellow Party members and seeing that everyone knows everyone else (besides him) – whether they are in the Cooperative or the

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Party. This characterization also corresponds more to how my university classmates talked of a 'leftist közeg' about which gossip is intelligible and highly interesting to them both, despite the apparent differences in their connections to specific types of organisations. In this paper, I will refer to the 'közeg' in the latter sense as the conflicts and questions explored in this paper go beyond more rigid boundaries such as those alluded to by Gábor. Furthermore, such boundaries also do not fully capture the interconnected nature of people and organisations in this young leftist milieu. For example, the aforementioned online newspaper operates from an office in the Cooperative with full-time employees financed fully from microdonations, but one of its founders is now in a high leadership position at the Party. Also, the College, which is identified by Gábor as an important source of the necessary social capital for getting into the work-based 'közeg', is an institution from which people enter a variety of leftist organisations including both the Cooperative and the Party.

The 'közeg', taken as a milieu, can be seen as a subsection of the liberal intelligentsia as described by Kallius (2023). Although, as rightfully pointed out by Péter, the notion that the 'közeg' is made up entirely of the Budapest cultural and intellectual elite is a caricaturistic view, most in the 'közeg' do in some way come to cross into or be connected to it. However, the point in one's life at which this connection happens is varied. At a campaign opening event, I ran accidentally into Olivér, my former high school classmate who, having recently moved back home after completing a program at a highly prestigious private university in the U.S., was in the process of getting involved in the Party. The high school we attended together could broadly be characterized as one among schools which are commonly described as 'elite high schools', schools in Budapest which are generally understood as prestigious, requiring high exam scores for admission and to be attended by many of the children of Budapest intelligentsia. Out of 8 interviewees, 5 have said they attended an 'elite' high school in Budapest. Two out of the other 3 grew up in cities distant from Budapest.

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Six interviewees have attended either Corvinus or ELTE at undergraduate level, two of the top universities in Budapest, especially in social sciences. The two remaining interviewees completed their undergraduate studies in the UK and the United States respectively after graduating from elite high schools.

In other cases, however, interest in (leftist) ideology precedes any connection with the milieu of intelligentsia and 'elite' educational institutions. Patrik, a member of the Party leadership, explained during our interview that he initially became interested in and started reading Marx due to his own experience of wage labour, which eventually led him to enroll in a social science program at one of the top universities in Hungary. In Patrik's case, who attended a vocational school and had to start working at a young age due to the financial hardships of his family, contact with the milieu of Budapest intelligentsia came later and as a result of developing active interest in politics. Nevertheless, belonging to the 'közeg' seems to posit some sort of embedding into the broader Budapest intelligentsia. While we discussed how he experienced interacting with the 'közeg', Patrik pointed out that he still lacks the "social capital" but he is starting to "be socialised into these intellectual circles".

b. <u>Day-to-day politics and resisting the narrative</u>

Throughout my discussions about the meaning of 'left', people seldom even mentioned Orbán or Fidesz, but revolved around capitalist critique, specific philosophies such as Marxism, democratic socialism or social democracy and terms like solidarity. This in itself seemed somewhat surprising due to the 'Orbán-centric' nature of political discourse in Hungary, whereby the narratives and actions of Fidesz and especially Orbán are usually the overwhelming point of reference. Through the reactions (or lack thereof) of the 'közeg' and the broader opposition to a speech by Orbán and a proposed law limiting freedom of assembly, I examine how the 'közeg' and particularly the Party aims to distance themselves from this discourse not only as way to contend with the hegemony of the regime, but also to distance themselves from what they see as the 'typical opposition'.

A highly salient example of this Orbán-centric discourse comes from the events on March 15, a national day of remembrance in Hungary for the revolution of 1848. Each year on this day, various political actors hold events to commemorate the revolution and usually to connect this memory to contemporary politics. In the afternoon of the 15th, I first attended the event organised by the *Magyar Kétfarkú Kutyapárt* ('Hungarian Two-tailed Dog Party') on the Szabadság Bridge, then walked over to Péter Magyar's event held in central Budapest. In the morning of the same day, Viktor Orbán also gave a speech in central Budapest during the official commemoration event, which I watched online as opposed to attending in person as that was tied to prior registration. In any case, the speech given by Orbán created immediate controversy. In it, he compared politicians, journalists, judges, so-called 'fake NGOs', and political activists whom he alleged to operate from 'corrupt dollars' to 'stink bugs' who need to be removed with a 'Spring cleaning' – among other statements that they have a 'scarlet letter on them' and will be awaited in Hell by a 'separate' circle (Orbán, 2025). The speech

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was perhaps shocking due to the comparison of people to bugs to be crushed or swept away, however, it was also not an especially innovative one beyond the element of explicit dehumanization. Claims of foreign, imperial 'corrupt dollars' sent to take down the sovereignty of the Hungarian nation echoes the adoption of anti-colonial rhetoric by the regime as found by Korolczuk and Graff (2018). Orbán begins the second half of his speech with the statement:

"Just as the nation is eternal, empires also do not change. Whether crescent moon [referring to the Ottoman Empire], eagle [Nazi Germany], red or [European] union yellow star, the empire only wants occupation and eternal colonies. Only subordinates and tax-payers, never free Hungarians" (Orbán, 2025).

The identification of so-called 'fake NGOs', activists, and journalists as foreign powers on one side and 'free Hungarians' on the other also alludes quite clearly to Orbán's common utilisation of Hungary's schismogenetic cosmopolitan-ethnopopulist divide (Kallius, 2023: 15-17), as he positions the 'cosmopolitan' NGOs and such as an force outside of the nation, perhaps elevating this divide to one of patriots and traitors.

By the time I arrived at the events of the afternoon, the opposition public and its actors were reacting. The Kutyapárt incorporated jokes about the speech into their own, while people both at their and Magyar's event were holding up images of stink bugs or signs referring to them. As I and some friends entered a cafe near Magyar's rally, we were greeted by the owner who, along with rainbow colors and some other text which was visibly applied some time ago, now also had the sentence "Je suis poloska [stink bug]" written on her white T-shirt. People in the cafe discussed whether their place of employment was a 'stink bug place' and made jokes about themselves being stink bugs. In just a few hours, the word poloska became a synonym for those on the 'wrong' side of the dividing line between those who are pro-Orbán and those who are not. The following day, I was invited to an exhibition of photos

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taken at various protests over the last two decades in Hungary. The invitation came from a civilian activist organisation, more specifically by its vice-chairman, who I knew prior to the research and has also invited me to join this organisation. This activist organisation ('Civilians') advocates on a broad range of issues from child protection to constitutional reform and consists mainly of activists who have previously been – or concurrently are – involved in other movements such as teachers' unions. The organisation describes itself with labels that somewhat overlap with those within the 'közeg' such as solidary or eco-social, however, they avoid self-descriptions as leftist specifically and do not have strong ties to the 'közeg'. Notably, the Civilians also tend to be from older generations, most people I have met at their events being in their 40s or 50s. As such, I decided to accept these invitations as the Civilians presented a valuable contrast to the 'közeg' generationally, self-definitionally and due to having closer ties to opposition parties.

At the exhibition, the stink bug was unavoidable. A woman who came to greet us self-deprecatingly compared it to a 'gathering of stink bugs' and others whispered among themselves about the speech as they looked through the photographs. At a cafe after the exhibition, the vice-chairman of the group who invited me strongly suggested that we – meaning the opposition of the regime – must not start referring to ourselves as stink bugs and should ideally avoid even mentioning it. The reason given for this was that this would only strengthen the exact narrative that Orbán was pushing, trying to 'reclaim' or ironically use the terminology would be walking willingly into a sort of 'trap' where we stay within the confines of the regime's narrative. However, this argument already seemed a little too late despite only about 24 hours having passed between the speech and this moment. When attendees of the rallies as well as simply members of the public unsympathetic to Fidesz were already producing and adopting stink bug signs, almost as a reflex, the warning which came

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the next morning felt more like an evaluation of something which passed rather than direction for the future.

In contrast, the 'stink bug' scandal and similar day-to-day, current political events which were dominant among the 'general public' rarely came up during my discussions with the 'közeg'. Of course, it may be the case that these discussions were of a somewhat different nature than to focus heavily on these types of domestic current events, however, this lack of the need to react to such events could also be gathered during these conversations, particularly on the topic of protesting. In the spring of 2025, a series of protests were held in Budapest against a proposed law to limit the freedom of assembly, most visibly targeting the prospects of holding the yearly Budapest Pride parade[12]. These protests also came to be commonly referred to as 'bridge occupations' (*hídfoglalás*), as most of them ended with protesters taking over and stopping traffic on one or more bridges in Budapest. The most visible organiser of these protests was Ákos Hadházy, independent MP and former member of green party LMP ('Politics can be Different'), as he gave the opening speech at all of the protests, which happened every Tuesday between March 25 and April 22. However, not uncommonly for protests in Budapest, contingents of several movements and parties represent themselves. As I walked from the Pest side of the Erzsébet bridge – normally the initial bridge to be occupied and where planned speeches were performed – while protesters were gathering for the start, coming across people wearing T-shirts with the logo of *Mindenki Magyarországáért Mozgalom* ('Everyone's Hungary Movement'), Márki-Zay's self-described conservative party, or figures like Péter Jakab, leader of *A Nép Pártján* ('On the People's Side') and former member of extreme-right turned conservative party *Jobbik,* fit in just as naturally and without conflict as the people waving trans pride flags just a few meters away. The protests represented very well the sort of dichotomization of the political spectrum, in which politics

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[12] https://kontroll.hu/cikk/belfold/2025/03/18/hidblokaddal-tiltakoztak-a-gyuelekezesi-toerveny-szigoritasa-ellen
(Accessed: 1 June 2025)

are presented as an antagonistic divide between pro- and anti-Orbán sides, the anti-Orbán side of which incorporates progressives and hardline conservatives alike.

Among members of other 'közeg' groups, disillusionment with protests was the norm. Hanna, who works for an organisation at the Cooperative which focuses on projects of providing social housing for marginalized groups, tells me that "No matter how many people and for what reason, I think everyone feels that it has no effect and hasn't since I've been going" as we talk in the 'pub section' of the Cooperative in May. Fanni, a former member of the College, who I was talking with a few weeks after the last of these protests had concluded, said that she attended but more so as a 'disaster tourist', interpreting these protests as attempts by (figuratively) 'dying' opposition politicians to stay somewhat relevant. Despite the variety exhibited at these protests, the Party as an organisation also did not attend. Patrik, who I met at the Party office on the day of the first protest, said that their non-attendance was due to not being informed in time about the protest, meaning they could not mobilise activists. However, while talking more specifically on communicating about 'current events', he circled back to the topic of protests:

> "[I]t can be harmful, but this is also the price of us being able to keep our leftist [character] as opposed to the image of typical opposition. I think it would be a big mistake to do something where we say 'Putin equals Orbán, both are bad, come out at whatever o'clock to protest'. We do not need this. But this has a price that we do not mobilise 5,000 people on a random afternoon. We don't generate 10,000 clicks in a few hours, but we also don't become forced to constantly react to these current political events and [people] can separate us from other opposition."

This kind of protesting is placed as the way the 'typical opposition' operates, which is believed to be done not as a way to pressure the government or similar, but to increase the reach and display the strength of the party organising it, by 'mobilising people' and 'generating clicks'. This discussion also signals a more conscious effort to not get drawn into a constant reaction to the day-to-day political events in Hungary, somewhat similarly to the

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attempt made by the leadership of the Civilians after the stink bug speech. In this case however, my interlocutor goes further to suggest that this is not only to distance themselves from the narratives and framing of the regime, but also from who Patrik sees as the 'typical opposition' and Fanni as 'dying'.

c. 'Libsik' and 'Faskók'

During an early phase of my research in August 2024, I decided to attend an event organized by the Party, described as a sort of 'open day' for both members and the interested public. The event had no more than about 100 people at any point during the day, which may be somewhat explained by its complicated organisation. Described to me by a member there, the event was 'plan C' as they had originally planned to organise a camp lasting multiple days. However, the places – outside of Budapest as a matter of geographical necessity for a camp – they had contacted have all eventually canceled due to pressure from local politicians. As it turned out, this also meant an eventual disruption of even the one-day Budapest event. Due to the short notices and other complications, the Party ended up having to hold their picnic at Népliget, a park in the 9th district of Budapest, on a date which coincided with the first home fixture of Ferencváros, one of Hungary's most successful and popular football teams who happen to play their home games in a stadium directly next to the park.

In the afternoon, when the event was focused on politics, the panels and discussions were not of a character that would elicit particularly strong emotional responses. Discussions held on the two stages included topics such as unionization, solving housing problems in Budapest, and even a reading circle led by a litterateur. The topics and the nature of the discussions reminded more of what Konrád and Szelényi call 'vote-getting machines', whereby parties within a capitalist political system can only claim to represent particular interests and where persuasive power is conferred by the number of votes as opposed to some

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claim of 'total correctness' of a certain ideology (1979: 156-157). Ideological convictions were ever-present as demonstrated by the topics discussed and in certain discussions themselves (e. g. housing as a human right, resistance to worker exploitation), particularly on the smaller stage, but the most prominent panels and approaches were of a political strategizing, such as questions on how to make leftist issues more popular or how to navigate municipal elections effectively under the Orbán-regime.

At around 7:20 p.m., half an hour before the kickoff of the Ferencváros game, we spotted a group of about 8 masked men getting closer to the area of the event while sitting on a folding bench. As the group got closer, dressed in green, white, and black colors (the traditional colors of Ferencváros are green and white), it was becoming increasingly obvious that they were here for the purpose of some sort of disruption of the event that was starting to wind down. At this point, the panel discussions typical of the picnic during the day have ended and been replaced by a performance by a roma music group, the only music act of the day. Most of the attendees were therefore either sitting in the grass or on benches and talking while others were dancing on the stage, including some children. The masked men, after making a maneuver behind the mobile toilets to avoid having to pass by the police van parked on the perimeter, started running towards the patch of grass where a larger group of attendees sat. They stopped about 15 meters from the 'crowd' and proceeded to throw a couple of pieces of pyrotechnics and a few glass bottles of beer into the crowd, followed by some of them extending their arms and inviting the attendees to go and fight them through various phrases. None of the audience took them up on this offer, unlike the members of the police force who have been assigned to secure the event. The band stopped playing when the projectiles started flying, so the only sound coming from the main stage was one of the band members saying "Now the *fradista*[13] have also arrived" in a slightly comical tone. After some running around by officers and the supporters, all or most of them have apparently been

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[13] 'fradista' means supporter of Ferencváros, the team being also colloquially called 'Fradi'.

caught and most of the attendees and I were escorted by some police officers to the nearby tram station that was further away from the stadium.

Although I of course could not talk to any of the masked men to ask them about their motivations, it was quite clear that the reason for the disruption was political. The supporters concealed their face beforehand, carried pyrotechnics and empty bottles, and came from the direction of the stadium, meaning it was not a case of randomly bumping into the event but seeking it out prior to kick-off. However, they did perhaps find a different crowd than from what they had expected as similar leftist groups have been targeted by government-affiliated and other right-wing media with accusations that they were involved with violent 'antifa' actions in the capital. As such, the supporters may have expected to see a very different picture when they arrived at the event, perhaps another group of masked people ready to have a brawl over the appropriateness of remembering Axis soldiers fleeing the capital from the Soviet army. However, they nevertheless carried on with their plan.

Although certainly not an everyday occurrence, these things seemed to happen more frequently than I previously imagined. As I continued attending similar events and talking to members as well as other movements, this and similar incidents were mentioned periodically. Some I heard about from social media such as an attack on an event held by Fáklya – a more radical, revolutionary communist group – or a confrontation in front of Auróra, a bar frequented by members of the 'közeg'. I heard about others through interviews and conversations in the field, particularly stories of being chased or attacked near well-known leftist spaces, particularly in the 8th district. As I arrived at another 'Party' event some months later, an acquaintance from the Party greeted me by saying 'Hopefully we don't get attacked this time!' As I talked to her, Péter, and Patrik, the common label to describe the masked men as well as the perpetrators of other similar attacks was '*faskó*', meaning 'fascist'. Due to the

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reputation of football ultra groups in Hungary and particularly those of Ferencváros (Kossakowski, 2023: 165-166), this assessment might not be an entirely inaccurate one.

What is perhaps more interesting, however, is how people explain and make sense of these events. When discussing the incident at Népliget with the three Party members at this later event, its explanation varied, including the movements targeting the same demographics as these groups (the working class) and the misleading messaging about their connections to the aforementioned 'antifa attacks'. Others – while recounting other incidents in interviews – emphasized how the police spent more time searching them than dealing with the people chasing them. However, these groups were seldom placed in a contrast with who the 'left' are. On the other hand, a relational definition of the left which did continually arise through our discussions over the meaning and position of the left were against the 'liberals' (often referred to as the pejorative 'libsi'), often signalling a quite significant element or step in my interlocutors' self-definition as leftist. As a member of the Party who I met at the campaign opener and later at other Party events said in our interview,

"What was a very big revelation for me was when I could separate the liberals from the leftists and that it is good for me to recognize bigger systems and to think through those and less superficially".

This phenomenon might also show that the government's ascription of opposition actors to the slots of 'liberal' and 'leftist' – used interchangeably in these narratives – is a part of hegemonic communication that, unlike 'current events' narratives, leftist actors are compelled to engage with as elements of their self-definition in absolute terms – anticapitalism, democratic socialism, etc. – seems irreconcilable with the positions represented by 'liberal' actors. Often, liberal appears as a sort of 'standard position' from which one breaks to become a leftist through gaining knowledge. Relatedly, the liberal position came to be associated by some of my interlocutors as an 'easy' position. My

interlocutors have described their younger selves as a 'enthusiastic young liberal intellectual' (Fanni) or as 'not so left-wing, maybe a kind of liberal' (Hanna). Gábor from the Cooperative described his younger self as a 'convinced liberal' and said that he became interested in more leftist thought once his friends from university started talking to him about Bourdieu and he started to understand why he felt uncomfortable in the 'elite school' his middle-class parents 'pushed him into'.

When I ask him about the perception of liberals among the 'közeg', traces it to what he calls a 'liberal hegemony' in the context of the early 2010's, when as he points out many of the organisations of the 'közeg' started as their founders felt that leftist thought was in a 'quarantine' and not taken seriously in Budapest intellectual circles. In this sense, the emergence of 'közeg' organisations can be interpreted as a reaction to the perceived hegemony of the broadly liberal block of the modernising consensus (Sebők, 2016; see also pp. 7-8) within the cosmopolitan intellectual milieu. Clearly, the idea to 'catch up' to and integrate into the Euro-Atlantic capitalist order through largely neoliberal reforms is a position which the 'közeg', as a capitalism-critical milieu, is in sharp opposition to. This idea, along with the sense that this hegemony is not felt to be over, is also echoed by Patrik as we talk about comparisons between the MSZP-SZDSZ coalition and contemporary opposition parties like Momentum. Patrik emphasizes their similarities regarding European integration and atlanticism, saying that these were not "black-and-white deals" even then and something which leftist people might not be able to support completely. Patrik's calls for a more nuanced approach to further integration into the EU illustrate how the creation of dichotomous difference also limits the options of leftist communication. As relations with the EU become a point around which the regime produces antagonistic markers (Kallius, 2023: 42-43) – a supposed side of unquestioningly pro-EU opposition and a government purporting to defend the sovereignty of the nation (Korolczuk and Graff, 2018) – critique of atlanticism runs the

risk of being associated with the regime while opposition which, in Patrik's words, "put up the EU flag every other day" is elevated as a counterpoint of the regime.

As Olivér, my former classmate who I ran into at the campaign opener explained when asked about the distinction between liberal and leftist, "I think it's hard to be a leftist without being very deliberate about it [...] Because you can easily be liberal [...] where it is not a studied opinion, not where you would read political theory and form some idea based on that". As 'liberal' is thought of as a sort of default position – at least among the broad social milieu of most in the 'közeg' – it also comes to be seen as something that is not a position which requires a high amount of effort or reading, at least compared to the leftist position. This sense of choosing the 'easy' path also appears at times in the views over the actual political activity of the 'mainstream' (liberal) opposition as suggested by the sense that 'generating clicks' is easy for these parties through simple, almost reactionary messages ('Orbán equals Putin').

Boundaries, as much as they imply separation, also imply proximity. The 'faskós' are perhaps too distant, both ideologically and in terms of the spaces they frequent or occupy to be a meaningful counterpoint to a leftist self-identification. The separation of the leftist thought and crowd from the fascist one is no ground for 'revelation' as this difference is made obvious by the ubiquitous government propaganda dividing them. In contrast, as the schismogenetic narratives place liberals on the same side of the dichotomy – if not as identical – as 'leftists' despite sharp ideological and historical differences, self-identification as leftist becomes more accentuated along lines of left and liberal due to their proximity in government narratives and social milieu.

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Chapter 2. Boundaries and Political Imagination within the Left

a.   'I am the only leftist' – Boundary maintenance in leftist spaces

As I looked for explicitly leftist spaces where I could the contestation over the boundaries of 'left' and liberal, I remembered that earlier in my research in January, as I was chatting online with Péter attempting to map out spaces which defined themselves as leftist, he sent me a link to a private Facebook group called 'Balmém Girlboss Womentum: Kommunizáljuk-e Magyar Pétert?[14]' (BGW). He explained that this is a group where "a lot of internal tensions come to the fore".

As a private Facebook group, meaning only those who have been approved to join by administrators/moderators can view content posted to BGW and make posts and comments themselves. The nature of this approval process is dependent on the group, some requiring merely ticking a box accepting the rules of the group, while others may require longer answers to demonstrate that you belong to it. The entry process for BGW, a group primarily for sharing left-wing memes, was surprisingly extensive/detailed. Here, as I clicked the request to join button, I was prompted to answer questions in a text box, one of which was inquiring what I thought a state's role was in society. This question stumped me. Of course, I could write a short, incomplete paragraph on this question, were I asked it in a different setting such as a writing exercise at a university course. However, in this case I was completely baffled about what was being asked from me. Did they want an essay? A genuine, albeit short answer about what I thought the state's most important responsibilities ought to be? Or did they want an ironic or otherwise 'jokey' answer, seeing as this is a page for humorous memes after all? Clearly, as this question arose during my request to join the group,

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[14] 'Left-meme Girlboss Womentum: Should we communize Péter Magyar?' – Here, 'Womentum' is a reference to liberal party 'Momentum'. This name has since been changed by admins.

it was to play some significance in the decision over my fate as to whether I will or will not be allowed to be a 'member'. However, it was completely unclear to me what this significance would be, whether this was a test of my ideological alignment, whether I was 'leftist' enough and in the right way to be allowed in, or whether it was to prove that I had a compatible sense of humour with the meme page and its other residents. In the end, I could not make a decision about the type of answer I should give and eventually closed the dialogue box, hoping that maybe I will find groups with more straightforward paths of access.

To my surprise, a few weeks later I received a notification saying that I have been accepted to BGW. The reason for this is unclear. It may be the case that one of the admins who ended up approving my request had a look at my profile and was satisfied despite my lack of answer to the state's role question. I used my personal profile to request membership to the group, which may have meant that some of the publicly available information on my profile, such as my enrolment at CEU or some posts I made critical of the Hungarian government, were deemed enough to let me in. Perhaps I was severely overthinking the significance of the question and its role was simply to make sure I was a 'real person' as opposed to a bot or a troll. The real purpose of the question remains unclear to me even now, however, as I spent more and more time in this group and others like it, one of the potential meanings that came to my mind, whether I was 'leftist enough' to be there, continued to present itself in different ways over and over in these spaces.

Once I joined BGW, the cover photo that greeted me was a collage of images related to socialist and left-wing figures and symbols, in the middle of which was a so-called 'wojack', what seems to be a version of the 'Doomer' variant (Page and Zanin, 2023: 3), with bags under his eyes and a somber expression. The images, true to the traditions of Internet and meme humour, virtually all contain some ironic element, such as a hammer and sickle placed

on a map of 'Greater Hungary'[15], a common symbol of the Hungarian far-right (Kondor and Littler, 2020: 123). As I later found out while reading through the rules of the group, BGW is an 'incubator group' (Kallius and Adriaans, 2022: 686) of the page *Balmém* ('Left-meme'), as a rule specifies that any meme posted there can be 'collectivized to the page without question'. As an incubator group, BGW is meant as a place for the narrower community around Balmém where people can submit their own memes to be posted onto the main page. By virtue of it being a 'page' rather than a (private) group, Balmém only contains posts by the page itself to which likely at most a handful of people have access to. However, posts by Balmém will be accessible to any users on Facebook. As such, content on Balmém (the page) has a much narrower group of content producers – possibly as few as one person – but its audience is 'uncurated'. Despite this, it seems quite clear that the public being addressed both by the page and by posts in the group are the imaginary public – in the sense of being open-ended and not fully knowable, but not without any social basis (Warren, 2002: 73-73) – of 'leftist' Hungarians. Perhaps due to both the page and the group being relatively small and niche (about 3,700 followers for the page and 1,700 members in the group), the potential changes in audience and producers do not seem to result in fundamental differences in the kind of content that is posted in them. As I looked through members after joining, I saw that several of the 'közeg' I became Facebook friends with through the research period were also members. Additionally, under the 'members' tab, certain members were assigned special roles such as 'expert' or 'most active', members among which multiple people working at familiar organisations came up, such as the online newspaper housed in the Cooperative.

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[15] The map of 'Greater Hungary', or *Nagy-Magyarország,* depicts Hungary with its historical borders prior to the signing of the Treaty of Trianon after World War I, which resulted in a great loss of territory by Hungary.
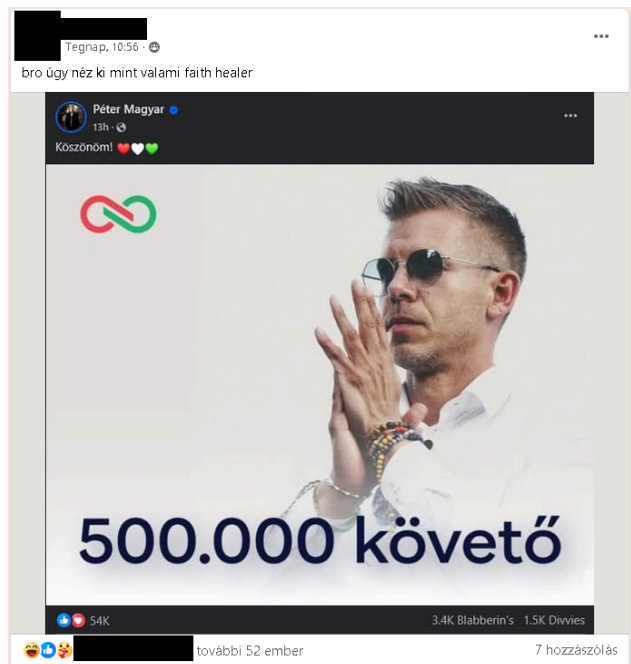
Figure 3. Cover photo of the BGW group

Figure 4. Examples of memes making fun of Péter Magyar and Tisza. Captions:
Image 1 caption: 'bro looks like some sort of faith healer'
Image 2 caption: 'Neo-Fidesz, Vermillion Fidesz, Ex-Fidesz, etc. Just a few words you can use to describe the TISZA party.' The tag on the man in the photo reads 'misled voter'.

In Kallius and Adriaans' work on the role of memes for the young liberal elite, the most prominent subject of these memes are the realm of the regime (2022). Memes comparing Orbán to socialist era leaders, overidentification with government propaganda and its formats,

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and imagined stereotypes of the average Fidesz voter are the tropes which primarily arise in the field. As they point out, the students of her research oriented themselves in the political world through "meme-tinted glasses" (2022: 692), identifying aspects of propaganda – media like the billboards and pro-regime advertisements – as meme-like. Compared to the memes of the liberal intelligentsia, the contrast in what become 'memefied' aspects of the Hungarian political world in BGW and other 'leftist meme' spaces is quite stark. In BGW, there seem to be many more posts and comments making fun of opposition parties and figures than there are about the Orbán or Fidesz.

Particularly, memes about Péter Magyar and his support are prominent, however, opinions on him are surprisingly somewhat consensual. There is broad agreement that Magyar is a less than ideal figure of Hungarian politics and there is much scepticism regarding his politics, especially his origins within Fidesz. Where disagreement appears is whether some support should be given to him anyway or whether any amount of cautious optimism is correct. In comments under these posts, an argument will often form around whether Magyar and his party Tisza are different from Orbán and whether there is a different alternative that can have a chance at defeating Fidesz, especially in the upcoming parliamentary elections in 2026. However, the group also produces memes making fun and critical of figures who belong to or at least come from contexts more similar to the group's identity.

The 'meme-tinted glasses' of the students in Kallius and Adriaans (2022) exist already at a certain scale and within a certain frame, the one of the schismogenetic (Kallius, 2023) relation between 'illiberal', the existing regime referring to itself as such, and 'liberal', the imagined and desired opposite of the status quo (2022: 689). The students incorporate this dichotomy to produce memes or to identify aspects of politics as meme-like such as government billboards, or meme formats through which this dichotomy can be framed. In contrast, BGW and Balmém rarely touch on government propaganda methods, narratives and

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policy (aside from oppositional response to it), focusing much more heavily on various oppositional figures as well as regime-critical media. This phenomenon may be understood when we consider the previous discussion of 'liberal' being conceived as a 'standard' or 'easy' position by activists of the 'közeg'. Essentially, as the illiberal regime is the undesired status quo for the students, liberals are seen as a sort of microcosmic status quo within the frames of the glasses worn by leftist meme-producers.
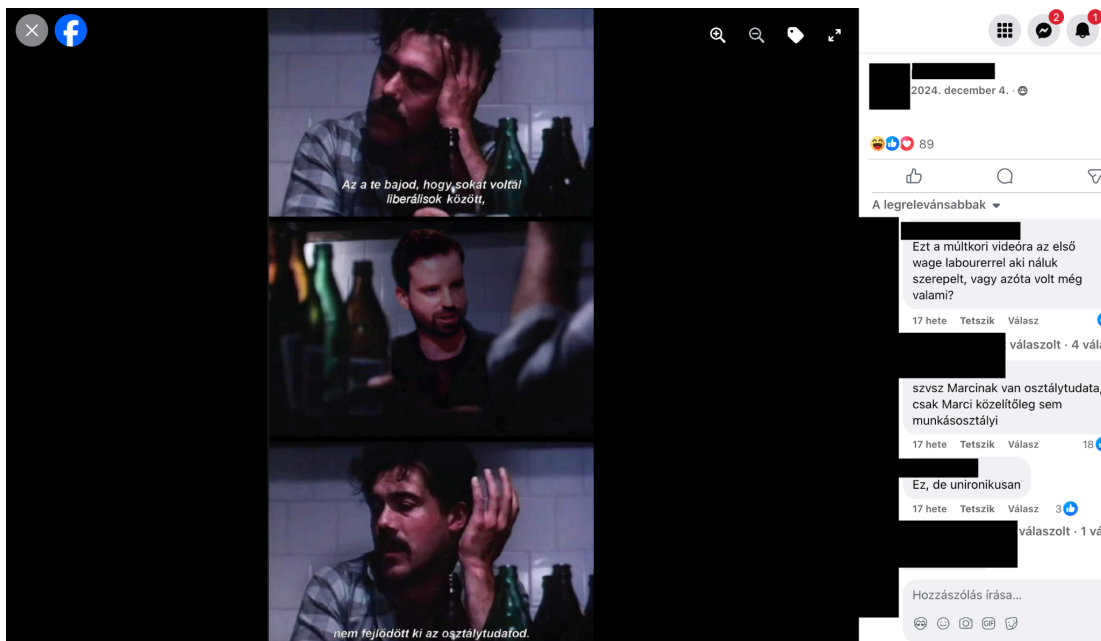

Figure 5. BGW meme depicting Márton Gulyás, founder and face of left-leaning Youtube channel *Partizán*. The text in the panels read 'Your problem is that you've spent too much time among liberals,' and 'Your class consciousness has not developed.' One commenter writes Marci [Gulyás] has class consciousness but not a working-class one, while another writes 'This, but unironically'.

Figure 6. BGW meme depicting András Jámbor, MP and leader of *Szikra,* as a crying 'soyjak' and László Kecskeméti, former Fidesz representative of the city council of Budapest's VIII. district, as a 'Chad', showcasing them as anxious and confident respectively (Godwin et al, 2025: 10-11). The comments are taken from a post by Kecskeméti regarding a minor scandal in the district whereby he had to vacate his council-provided flat from which he proceeded to take various items that Jámbor felt to be unreasonable. Jámbor's comment mentions the bathroom door specifically.

This idea is perhaps most salient in memes focused on Partizán, the above meme depicting its founder and editor-in-chief Márton Gulyás[16], whose 'class consciousness' is called into question because he has spent too much time among liberals. Gulyás and his Youtube channel (and now media company) Partizán has gained great popularity in recent years, often being called the 'real' public broadcasting service in the illiberal regime by opposition circles[17]. Partizán hosts political interviews and panel discussions among other content, even hosting one of the debates between the leaders of EP election party lists in 2024[18]. Notably, Partizán also conducted the initial, over one hour long interview with Péter Magyar to effectively start his career as a prominent public figure. However, changes in

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[16] https://www.partizan.hu/impresszum (Accessed: 4 May 2025)
[17] https://mertek.atlatszo.hu/partizan-az-igazi-kozszolgalati-musor/ (Accessed: 20 May 2025)
[18] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9evSiRUyxfM (Accessed: 20 March 2025)

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content and participants which followed or were followed by Partizán's increasing popularity

has, within online 'leftist' communities, called into question the ideals of the organisation and

especially Gulyás. 'Spending time', i. e. platforming, politicians and other figures of the

mainstream political field has taken some credibility – according to most participating in

discussions in these online communities – from Gulyás as a 'leftist'. On *Balmém*, multiple

memes also center on Partizán, especially its program called *Vétó* and its host Bálint Ruff.

Vétó would seem to be one of the more explicitly 'anti-regime' programs of Partizán as the

political analysis within it is done through the question of how Fidesz can be defeated in

2026. Several core elements remind the audience of this constantly, such as a map in the

center of the studio showcasing the 54 constituencies that the program has identified as

must-win for the opposition – a theoretical challenger to Fidesz at the outset of the show,

increasingly identified with Péter Magyar as he became the most popular opposition actor – to

have a chance of winning sufficient seats to take away governing power from Fidesz. Bálint

Ruff was formerly the chief political advisor of László Botka (Balogh, 2024) who

campaigned with the slogan 'Make the rich pay!' during his short-lived candidacy for prime

ministership in 2017 (Bogatin, 2020). Memes posted about Vétó by Balmém normally mock

Ruff for being overly positive towards Péter Magyar as well as being overly focused on

electoral victory against Fidesz over value judgments on Magyar's politics as alluded to by

the "blood of the újságírók [journalists]"[19].

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[19] Magyar has often been criticized by media and opposition figures for his combative stance towards even independent, regime-critical journalists, most notably calling András Dezső, journalist at HVG a propagandist (Világi, 2024).

Figure 7. Meme by Balmém depicting Bálint Ruff holding a gun towards the audience. The text on the image reads 'I lied, there will be no sex. Now put your clothes back on because we will take benzos and watch all of Péter Magyar's speeches slowed by 1.5x'.

Figure 8. Meme of Bálint Ruff depicted as a cartoon bear (I could not find where this drawing is from in its original context). The caption reads "very" "serious" "political" "analysis", while the text in the image reads '*Government change* Ain't free. The tree of *political bravery* gotta be litterd [sic] with the blood of *journalists*. Ferenc Gyurcsány aka *'SATAN'* is not my *opposition*. he is fidesz's *fake opposition* and probbaly [sic] *the devil himself* :DD. Péter [Magyar] and Marci [Gulyás] not orbán and TÓNI [Antal Rogán, Minister of the Prime Minister's Cabinet Office] ok. péter magyar *impregnate me* pls.' (translated words in italic)

As discussed, the illiberal regime has centralized and captured the majority of media in Hungary over the past 15 years (Krekó, 2022: 63). It is also a rarity for regime politicians to appear in independent media and opposition politicians to appear in pro-regime media. For example, in both the EP election debate and the Budapest mayoral election debates hosted by Partizán, Fidesz candidates did not accept the invitation and did not participate. In the 4 years between the 2018 and 2022 elections, opposition politicians reportedly made 18 appearances on state television in total (Presinszky, 2022). A perhaps less discussed consequence of this

dominant position of pro-regime messages and platforms are the consequences of the relegation of anti-regime sentiments to increasingly constricted spaces (Kallius, 2023: 73). Through the schismogenesis as explained by Kallius, where positions are quite neatly divided along pro- and anti-Fidesz and "virtually any commentary is sharply contested and pressed into one or the other camp" (in Kallius, 2023: 44, 78), these constricted spaces also come to be occupied by the heterogeneous but 'anti-Fidesz' public. The 'liberal intelligentsia', from leftists to Thatcherites (Kallius, 2023:16), are retrenched to the few spaces which are understood as the 'liberal' – here used as an opposite of illiberal – side.

Figure 9. Partizán's Budapest mayoral election debate, showing Gulyás and candidates Dávid Vitézy and Gergely Karácsony from left to right, as well as a vacant pulpit reserved for Fidesz candidate Alexandra Szentkirályi who did not show. (Source: 444.hu)[20]

Within the media environment of Hungary, where the regime has systematically captured or disadvantaged critical and independent outlets and has taken control of most

[20] https://444.hu/2024/06/01/vitezy-lenyomta-karacsonyt (Accessed: 6 June 2025)

media more generally (Krekó, 2022: 62-63), organisations such as Partizán, through its grassroots financing and platforming of voices largely excluded from regime-friendly media, can quite easily be viewed as part of a 'counter-discourse', and against the dominant discourse of the regime (Dahlberg, 2007: 837). Partizán However, within one side of the duality produced by schismogenesis into which ideologically heterogeneous groups are shoved by virtue of their 'anti-regime' designation, this might become less straight-forward. In these groups, Partizán and certain opposition figures/movements are viewed as a part of the hegemonic public that they are in critical opposition to. This is shown in the voices of comparison to Fidesz in the case of Magyar and the emphasis of Partizán's platforming of 'liberals' and other 'mainstream' opposition. As Krekó discusses, Hungary can be fairly characterized as a form of 'informational autocracy' (2022: 59), drawing on the concept as described by Guliev and Treisman (2020). Guliev and Treisman argue that such regimes rarely, if ever, use direct violence or bare political repression to remain in power, instead relying on communicative or informational control in a 'mimicked' democracy. Essentially, Hungary's media landscape is extremely centralized but the remaining independent or oppositional media is not persecuted directly. Although Partizán may be severely disadvantaged by not enjoying the same advertising revenues from state-owned companies (Bicsérdi-Fülöp, 2023; Bátorfy and Urbán, 2020) or funding from dubiously funneled public money (Polyák et al, 2024: 238-239), Márton Gulyás or others in the organisation do not have to fear violent crackdown or direct banning of their platform. Similarly, opposition politicians are fundamentally disadvantaged – e. g. not being invited to or being misrepresented in state media – but are rarely directly barred from the electoral process or similar (Griffen, 2020)[21].

This dual character of the hybrid regime in Hungary – both centralizing and consolidating discursive space but allowing enclaves of dissent to form and (to a degree)

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[21] Research for this paper was conducted prior to a proposal submitted to the Hungarian parliament on May 13, 2025 which could potentially result in heavy further restrictions on independent media. The consequences of this bill, should it be passed, are still unclear at the time of writing.

prosper – may shed some light on how the boundaries between the hegemonic public and counter-hegemonic publics become highly blurred to people in various 'opposition' spaces, especially leftist ones which purport to go beyond a critique of Fidesz to also stand against the capitalist order.

Of course, there is no indication that any of the people in the spaces I have encountered believe that Partizán, Gulyás, Ruff, etc. are part of the dominant discourse in the sense that state propagandists are or that they would be knowingly partaking in furthering the regime. Instead, what these online discussions give the sense of is that participation in 'mainstream' politics and political discourse – such as focusing political analysis on electoral outcomes or interviewing more prominent, non-leftist opposition actors – moves figures and platforms towards or into the regular operation of the regime and therefore into the realm of a hegemonic public discourse. This is perhaps compounded by the trends that this kind of content and discourse also seems to be more popular and reach a wider audience as suggested by the rise of Partizán's viewership and status in the media field. Moreover, alongside entry into the hegemonic public is a potential loss of credibility as 'leftist' in the eyes of the more niche communities such as BGW – as discussed above in relation to Gulyás and Partizán. As such, the perceived boundary between the hegemonic public and the counter-hegemonic public also becomes in discussions a boundary between 'leftist' opposition and 'non-leftist' opposition.
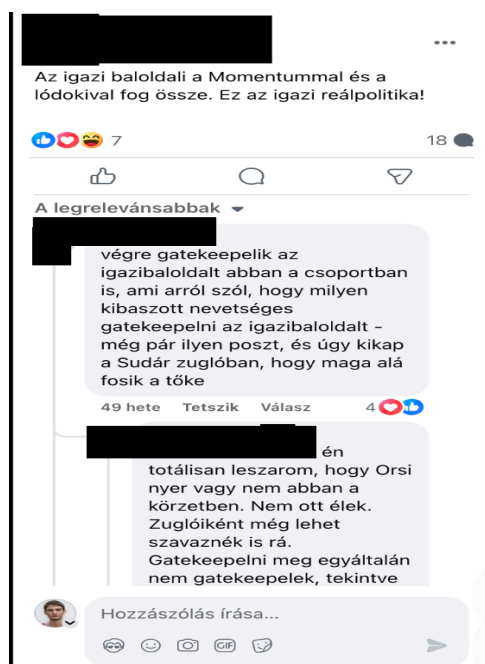
Figure 10. Post from EB. The caption writes 'The real left collaborates with Momentum and the horse doctor [Ákos Hadházy]. This is the true realpolitik!'. The image in the post shows an Instagram post by the candidate of the Party along with the list of supported candidates in the district and has been cropped out to not reveal the identity of the Party.

A post from *ÉN VAGYOK AZ EGYETLEN BALOLDALI* ('I am the only leftist', EB)

illustrates this phenomenon well. EB is a smaller private group (139 members), but one which

overlaps in various ways with BGW and Balmém (the Balmém page posts in the group, some

users are admins or regulars in both BGW and EB). EB is a group where such 'boundary

work' between 'real' and not real leftists and the perceived perpetual fractioning of left-wing

movements is meant to be ridiculed. This is often done by ironic exaggeration such as a post

claiming "There is no such thing as 'comrades' because I am the only real leftist", or posting

political candidates (usually of very small Hungarian parties) making claims about being the

only leftist candidate in their constituency. Somewhat in deviation from this content, the

above post jokingly but genuinely criticizes a now former member of the Party for running in

the council elections in a district of Budapest in collaboration with Momentum and Ákos

Hadházy, independent MP, formerly a member of green party LMP, and veterinarian. All but

one of the comments responded positively to the post, the remainder pointing out that the post

was doing exactly what the group was meant to be making fun of. As the commenter wrote,

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"Finally there is gatekeeping of the 'realleft' in the group about how fucking laughable it is to gatekeep the 'realleft' – a few more posts like this and [she] will lose so hard [...] that capital will shit itself". To this, the author of the post responded that they are not gatekeeping as they are not in a position to, but criticizing, saying "What is the point of building a 'system-critical' leftist organization while collaborating with people we are in ideological and political opposition to (in theory)". Interestingly, in the context of this election, Momentum and the Party were positioning along another divide. Initially, the opposition plan for the election was to hold a primary, the winner of which will run against Fidesz amid claims that MSZP's incumbent mayor was corrupt. However, as the incumbent mayor of the district has refused to participate, Momentum and the Party decided that they would run together against both the incumbent mayor and the Fidesz candidate, dividing constituencies between them so as to not split the vote against the incumbent and the Fidesz candidate.. The Party member who appears in the post lost her constituency to the Fidesz candidate, but the mayoral position was won by Momentum's candidate.

In this and similar posts both on EB and Balmém, boundary maintenance, "how the members of social "groups identify and police the boundaries between themselves and purported outsiders" (Graham, 2019: 6) – in this case how leftists keep the boundaries between themselves and what they see as non-leftist opposition – is performed largely through questions of who various figures associate with rather than appeals and arguments about what leftist ideology is or whether a particular political figure represents those ideals. The original poster, albeit thinly veiled by a layer of irony, posits that cooperation with Momentum, generally thought of as a liberal party, puts the Party's candidate outside of the boundaries of leftism. Similarly to the memes about Partizán, where figures like Gulyás are excluded from leftism based on association with 'liberals' or non-left opposition figures, even members of the Party, which identifies itself fundamentally as a leftist and anti-capitalist one, and even in

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groups meant to ridicule so-called 'gatekeeping', can come under contestation for cooperating with the broader opposition. Particularly, these contests over boundaries tend to occur when the association appears in relation to electoral or party politics. In the case of the Party member, her position as within the bounds of the left becomes questioned due to a – mainly strategic – cooperation with an established liberal party. In the case of Partizán, Gulyás' leftism is questioned for 'spending time' with liberals while Ruff is mocked for his enthusiasm over Magyar's chances.

In online leftist spaces, schismogenesis and the ambiguity of discursive hegemony in the illiberal regime accentuates internal contestation over the boundaries of left and ultimately this boundary maintenance moves to contestation of left and non-left over questions of cooperation in and platforming of electoral politics. This 'antonymization' of 'the left' and electoral politics introduces a potential issue for organisations which nevertheless operate within electoral and other political systems as some cooperation with other opposition actors to gain representation is necessitated by the electoral system as constructed by the regime (Ágh, 2022: 4-5). In the next section, largely drawing from interviews conducted with members of the Party and the broader 'közeg', I show that this divide also appears offline and analyse how it generates conflict between leftist movements.

b. The Party-Workshop Conflict and Political Imagination

As I sat with Fanni at Lumen, a cafe in a nice area of the 8th district of Budapest near Kálvin square, our discussion turned from her experiences at the College to the upcoming parliamentary elections next year. Fanni is someone who fits almost perfectly into an ideal type of the liberal intelligentsia. Growing up in Budapest, she attended an 'elite' high school, going on to study social sciences, completing both a BA and an MA at a top domestic university, during which she joined the College. She tells me of her memories of MSZP rallies

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as a child, explaining that some of her immediate family worked for the socialist party and others continue to be prominent voices in oppositional politics. Despite this embeddedness and continuing keen interest in politics, Fanni surprisingly tells me that she is not sure whether she will even vote next year. She says that she has promised herself after Márki-Zay that she will not vote for someone she does not *want* to vote for anymore. As she says, many of her friends do not vote, calling this "absolutely a leftist strategy". Unlike these friends, Fanni is still somewhat on the fence. What she identifies as most probable is that she will wait to see the participation numbers on election day and if those show that Magyar has a chance to win, she will go. However, she sees this scenario in which this chance would exist as very highly improbable.

This very tentative approach, waiting until election day to decide whether there is even a chance that Fidesz and Orbán can be dethroned diverged very much from the sentiments I experienced outside of the cafe. At the point of this conversation, Magyar's party, Tisza, have taken the lead ahead of Fidesz in most independent polls[22][23]. Although these leads were generally purported to be small, the trend and story of Magyar's meteoric rise, going from practically unknown to leading polls in just over a year after his initial Partizán interview, was hard to ignore and not get somewhat excited about in the broader Budapest intellectual circles. However, at 28 years of age, Fanni has already voted in two elections – 2018 and 2022 – in which hopes turned into Fidesz supermajorities once the votes have been counted, as well as likely already watching from the sidelines in the 2014 reelection of Fidesz, having described herself as being interested in social issues from "the first minute". Conversely, she has not voted in or likely has any memories of parliamentary elections that did not return supermajorities for Fidesz, the last one having happened in 2006. Not voting for who one wants to vote for is also a phenomenon that has been present in the latter two elections at

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[22] https://publicus.hu/blog/partok-tamogatottsaga-2025-aprilis/ (Accessed: 24 May 2025)
[23] https://24.hu/belfold/2025/04/10/21-kutatokozpont-tisza-part-fidesz-kozvelemeny-kutatas/ (Accessed: 24 May 2025

least. In 2018, 'tactical voting', voting not for the preferred candidate but the one most popular out of opposition candidates, was a prominent strategy to vote against Fidesz (Tóka, 2019: 317-8). In 2022, after considerable posturing, competing, and deal-making, most significant opposition parties formed a coalition (MSZP-DK-Momentum-Jobbik-LMP-Párbeszéd[24]) to run a single party-list and coordinate so that there is one clear opposition candidate in every constituency. Additionally, this coalition ran a sort of primary election open to all citizens for choosing the candidate for prime ministership, which was won after two rounds by Péter Márki-Zay, the self-described conservative mayor of Hódmezővásárhely. In the Hungarian context, if viewed as an autocratic regime, not voting despite an active interest in politics is not a contradictory position. The position of Fanni's friends is understandable – not only would they have to vote for candidates they do not really like, under a completely autocratic regime it is also pointless. However, a different question also arises out of this discussion. It's salient why non-voting or ambivalence towards voting may be a logical choice, however, why is it also identified as a particularly 'leftist' strategy? Certainly, viewing the regime as an autocracy is not a perspective limited to those in the 'közeg' or other self-described leftists. Various opposition figures have called Hungary a 'dictatorship'[25][26] throughout the past few years, including even Márki-Zay (albeit after his election defeat)[27]. Rather, what this perspective might indicate is how the phenomenon, as suggested by the online contests of the previous subsection, of the boundary between 'left' and 'liberal' becoming a boundary between 'mainstream' opposition and non-mainstream opposition informs debate and conflict within the 'közeg'. In this section, using largely data from interviews conducted with members of the 'közeg', I examine

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[24] https://vtr.valasztas.hu/ogy2022 (Accessed: 4 June 2025)
[25] https://hirklikk.hu/kozelet/hadhazy-akos-lepesrol-lepesre-lebontjuk-a-diktaturat/444296 (Accessed: 26 May 2025)
[26] https://nepszava.hu/3213902_dk-dobrev-klara-arnyekkormany-ner-orban-viktor-diktatura-valasztas (Accessed: 26 May 2025)
[27] https://telex.hu/belfold/2023/06/22/marki-zay-peter-lazas-janos-hodmezovasarhely-tuntetes (Accessed: 26 May 2025)

through a particularly notable conflict between Hungarian leftist organisations why participation in electoral politics becomes a defining point of contestation, how the structure of the illiberal regime fractures the political imagination of its opposition and how these fractures become marked and solidified as ideological.

A prominent conflict which came up during my research was the one presented to me as the Party-Cooperative conflict. Unfortunately, my research period did not coincide with the origin point of this conflict – if there is such a thing in a clear sense – so the nature of this conflict became salient gradually from mentions of nebulous dichotomies to a clearer picture by the end. My first encounter with the conflict, at the time unknowingly, occured in the office of the Party, where I sat down with Patrik for an interview. When I asked him about why he decided to join the Party specifically, he outlined the two directions he was considering. The direction he ends up going in by joining the Party, he describes as party-like organisations that are 'professionalized' and contain some hierarchical structure. On the other hand, the kind of organisation that he decides against are described as 'acting as if they are civilian' (*civilkedő*) and which are based on the 'myth' of grassroots democracy and bottom-up organising that "makes work impossible". At the point of this conversation, I was not fully aware of the conflictual nature of this distinction. Once I became more familiar with the prominence of this issue and as I read back transcripts of this interview, the tension between 'party politics' and 'movement-building' also became more visible. On a question about whether Fidesz can be defeated 'from the left', he emphasized that defeating Fidesz and building leftism are not mutually exclusive:

"There is a false dichotomy about whether we want to defeat Fidesz or build the left. I think the fundamental consensus or compromise in [the Party] is that defeating Fidesz is one step in building leftism"

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The labelling of the conflict also shifted between conversations. One side of the dichotomy, the Party, was constant, however, which organisation was seen as the other was not. When I initially heard the conflict named, Lili, a former member of the College and current member of the Workshop, called it the Party-Cooperative conflict, designating it as both ideological and personal. The Workshop operates out of the Cooperative (hence the confusion), describing themselves as a group of social scientists aiming to provide a critical leftist analysis for the contemporary Hungarian context which they feel is lacking from Hungarian academia. Fanni, in contrast, was surprised that people were even referring to the Cooperative when they talk about this conflict, saying that the Cooperative had nothing to do with it. Instead, Fanni referred to the issue as the conflict between the Party and the Workshop, tracing it to a formal conversation to which the Workshop invited the Party. This conversation happened sometime in 2019, shortly after the municipal elections in which the Party has achieved what they saw as a successful campaign to elect an independent mayor for a Budapest district, the same one in which the Cooperative is based. The point of this conversation, as recounted by Fanni, was to discourage the Party, which at that point operated less obviously as one, from becoming a party.

At its core, the conflict is based on a difference in the imaginations of what is possible under the illiberal regime. According to members of the Workshop, it was not – and continues to not be – the time and place to do party politics. What this time and place signals echoes very strongly arguments of the informational autocratic nature of Hungary. As Fanni, strongly on the side of the Workshop in this debate, reasons:

"I think the system we live in is not one where the people can really decide who they want to vote for, or even possess any kind of knowledge about the consequences of their decisions [...] I think it is also the case that everyone finds the thing they can believe in"

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The regime obfuscates the capacity of people to make informed choices about who to vote for, or as Guriev and Treisman put it, the regime manipulates information to lead people to 'rational, but incorrect' beliefs about its leaders (2019: 101). According to this view, doing party politics is a useless exercise in the illiberal regime as the information required for informed electoral decision-making is not present and as such, running in elections can only provide very limited 'facade victories' as Fanni calls the municipal electoral success of the Party in 2019. In terms of an electoral defeat of the illiberal regime, she is similarly pessimistic as shown by her approach to voting in the next election. Rather, according to proponents of the Workshop stance, effort should be put towards building movements in the way other parts of the 'közeg' do such as the Cooperative, who aim to expand their cooperative model to an increasing variety of social functions to build leftist, non-capitalist spaces. On the other hand, as Patrik pointed out, the Party's vision is that participation in party politics and a defeat of the illiberal regime is a necessary step for leftist, anti-capitalist forces to be able to grow and prosper.

In this dichotomy, exclusionary definitions of 'left' again bleed heavily into arguments between party politics and 'building movements'. In May, I met Júlia for an interview in a cafe in the 8th district. Júlia is a former member of the College, who, like many others, moved across various organisations within the 'közeg'. When we recorded the interview, she had just left such an organisation, one which aims to provide social housing for various marginalized groups as well as providing policy programmes related to social housing. After talking about her experiences at these various places, I asked her whether she ever considered joining a party. She responded that she never did, explaining the familiar position that they needed to build movements rather than doing party politics. However, Júlia also connected the division between party politics and movement-building to a division between leftism and non-leftism. To her, the Party was becoming less leftist as it adapted to the necessities of party politics,

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which she identified as hierarchization and not being able to think along leftist values, only along party interests. Here, the kind of creation of difference and the maintenance of these boundaries that were visible in the online space are also salient. 'Leftist values' are placed outside of and incompatible with party politics in Hungary as 'true leftism' is seen as inevitably becoming contaminated and diluted when entering party politics.

Action, including political action, requires the ability to "mentally remove ourselves from where we physically are located and *imagine* that things might as well be different from what they actually are" (Arendt, 1972: 5). In the case of the conflict, the difference lies not in the fact of removal, but in where people move themselves to – in this case temporally – from their actual location. This in turn is underpinned by the view of how the regime operates. Fanni projects herself decades into the future – where she imagines the possibility of political change – as she talks about the importance of movement-building over short-term "facade victories" that do not really achieve real change. For Patrik, this projection is not so distant to his actual position of sitting in the Party office in March 2025. As he talks about the prospects of the 'Hungarian left', he imagines a scenario where Magyar wins the election, leading to the crumbling of the opposition 'old guard' and providing a carte blanche, a situation in which leftist politics will not be constrained or tainted by the operation of the current system. This difference in the temporality of the imagined possibility of change is based on the aforementioned ambiguity produced by the regime. The proximity of the possibility of change for Patrik and the Party rests on a belief that a Fidesz election defeat is not a sensational near-impossibility and vice versa in the case of Fanni and the Workshop. The political imagination in this case is therefore not straightforwardly 'creative', an imagination of what could be different, but also constitutive and constituted by beliefs about the illiberal regime, setting the boundaries of the political imagination (Schwartz, 2021: 3330, 3333). However, even in such small social circles as the one studied, this constitutive element

is not shared among people due to the ambiguity created by the mimicry of democracy and elections. In this setting, the electoral defeat of Fidesz exists as a sort of Popperian black swan (Popper, 2002: 4). Inductively, most factors point towards the non-existence of the black swan: Despite previous hopes, young leftists have so far only encountered white ones (supermajority electoral victories for Fidesz), media and economic domination, and an electoral and party system providing extreme favour to Fidesz (Ágh, 2015: 218-221). However, as the theoretical (and potentially real) possibility of the appearance of a black swan is granted by the regime's mimicry of democracy, political imagination is divided by who does and who does not consider such an electoral defeat as within the bounds of realistic possibility.

This division and others like it are also significant beyond perhaps somewhat abstract notions about ideology and leftism. Beyond conflicting accounts in interviews of whether and the extent to which the Party is disallowed from holding events at the Cooperative – I have not come across any events, but stickers promoting the Party are not uncommon around the interior walls of the Cooperative – these organisations also end up competing for limited human resources in and around the 'közeg'.

The elevation of the conflict to the level of leftist versus non-leftist might also obscure the differences even partial victories in electoral politics make for the 'movement-building' projects. Despite convictions that movement-building should be a priority over party politics – although much stronger in Júlia's case – Gábor and Júlia both admit that it is easier to work with institutions led by the opposition. In Gábor and the Cooperative's case, this is at the district level where the independent but opposition-supported mayor and his team are said to frequently cooperate with organisations of the 'közeg'. In the case of Júlia and social housing organisations, this was emphasized at the city council level led by opposition mayor Gergely

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Karácsony, which she identifies as very open and supportive in contrast to the state. Gábor, during our interview at the Cooperative, also specifically mentions how this difference does not only exist between whether they need to work with Fidesz or the opposition, but also that it is easier when that opposition is composed of the Party, at least in part. Seeing the dichotomy as a question of left and non-left, where party politics is seen as a necessarily non-leftist practice by self-identified leftists, produces a contradiction where engaging in party politics is simultaneously considered as not particularly useful, even when the results of that participation are recognized as beneficial.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have asked the question of how young leftists in Hungary negotiate the boundaries of their political identity and the prospects of political action in an illiberal regime which utilises its hegemony to ascribe homogeneity to its heterogeneous opposition and constricts this opposition into increasingly smaller spaces.

Through examining the events unfolding around a controversial speech by Viktor Orbán and protests against a law aimed to limit freedom of assembly, I found that young leftists not only aimed to position themselves against the narrative of the regime, but also against the reactions of more prominent opposition they saw as 'liberals', arguing that as the regime creates schismogenetic, dichotomous difference between themselves and all opposition, young leftists come to define themselves against those who are cast beside them by the regime more markedly than against the regime itself. In the second chapter, I conducted ethnographic work both digitally and offline to show how this boundary between the left and other opposition is contested even internally and how ultimately boundaries of the left come to be defined and negotiated around association with other opposition actors and electoral politics in general. Through analysing the specific discourses and interpretations of a particular conflict within the Budapest leftist milieu, I argue that these discourses are underpinned by the ambiguous, hybrid nature of the regime and have material consequences for the prospects and possibilities of the leftist milieu.

This thesis aims to contribute – albeit tentatively as it is focused on leftism in Hungary, bringing with it potentially contingent factors – to the broader discussion of how hybrid regimes such as the illiberal regime in Hungary stay in power. Although contemporary analysis is abundant, most of it focuses on the actions of the regime such as subtle media control and capturing institutions of polity, by focusing on the lived experience of the

regime's opposition the thesis shows how the opposition's interpretation of this hegemony

shapes and fractures their political imagination and action.

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