

Thesis booklet

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**The Impact of the Party System Under Populism on Civil Society
and the Media.**

A Temporal Social Network Analysis of Civil Society Media and Mass
Media in Post-Communist Hungary (1990–2020)

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This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon
2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-
Curie grant agreement No 765224.

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I. RESEARCH BACKGROUND¹ AND JUSTIFICATION OF THE TOPIC

Hungary has travelled a remarkable political economic trajectory since the transition. It can be described by the term autocratisation (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019) and competitive authoritarianism ((Levitsky and Way 2020, 60). Since 2006, Prime Minister (PM) Viktor ORBÁN's Fidesz has won all elections in Hungary to date, making him the longest-serving head of state or government in the EU and the longest-serving PM in Hungarian history. Fidesz has not only secured constitutional changes and legislative supermajorities more effectively than any other European party or movement but has also maintained a stable, growing economy.

Within a large segment of the political science community, ORBÁN and his Fidesz party are widely regarded as populist. The continued resilience of an EU member state's incumbent populist political leadership, ORBÁN Viktor's prolonged hold on power, sustained electoral mass support, and efficient political survival are all the more puzzling. To understand Hungary's peculiar case, this dissertation analyses the relationship between populism, civil society, and the media due to their primary roles

¹ This research is part of a project that has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement no. 765224. The project is a collective effort of more than a dozen researchers under the name "*FATIGUE — Delayed Transformational Fatigue in Central & Eastern Europe: Responding to the Rise of Illiberalism and Populism*". However, this dissertation is the individual work of the author.

as intermediaries in electoral politics. Hence this dissertation therefore develops the research question:

How has the party system under populism affected civil society and the media in post-communist Hungary?

To explore this question, this dissertation builds a unique theoretical framework. As an almost experimental effort, this research is positioned as an exploratory case study. It investigates the career trajectories and the interpersonal interaction network within a balanced sample of editors-in-chief who served at some of the most prominent civil society media outlets and mass media outlets in Hungary between 2010 and 2020. The interaction network of these chief editors is studied due to their highly influential role in shaping social discourse. Scrutinising their interactions and behaviours can be expected to yield the most significant insights due to their expertise and status as professional elites. Hence this dissertation's findings cannot definitively confirm or refute previous evidence presented on populism in Hungary. However, its results align with a significant body of literature. The analysis finds ample evidence of transformative impacts of the party system on civil society and the media. It conforms to earlier findings that show Fidesz' autocratic trajectory aimed at building hegemony within (and beyond) civil society and the media to maximise its power within the delicate political economy of an EU member state.

However, while the research initially sought to demonstrate the gradual right-wing hegemonisation project within the selected sample, it unexpectedly discovered a different, though not entirely disparate,

phenomenon: the emergence of a somewhat looser left-liberal interpersonal interaction network that quickly disintegrated as the party system under populism started to solidify. While not intended to be a robust confirmation, this dissertation offers important insights for populism research in Hungary and globally.

II. METHODOLOGY

II.1. The single-country explorative case study method

This dissertation is designed as a novel, somewhat experimental (with regards to its epistemic foundations) as well as exploratory case study. As such, this research does not establish testable hypotheses. Complex, abstract concepts are at play that are traced to a unique set of individuals — who, in turn, are not selected for their representativeness, but rather, purposively, for their roles a professional elite to create a balanced sample. While studying and analysing the interpersonal interaction network within this sample can be used to test a theoretical understanding of strategic populism that would seek to reconfigure civil society and the media to connect with large number of followers (based on WEYLAND’s strategic definition of populism (Weyland 2001)), strict, exactly measurable hypotheses are difficult to posit. Finding accurate, quantifiable measures appropriate to this research subject is also theoretically difficult because of the lack of similar studies in this field.

However, the research question and its context give rise to a set of assumptions and expectations regarding the results of the research. It expects to uncover two main phenomena or trends. One, showing also visually, thanks to the applied analytical methods — a populist capture and take-over of the Hungarian civil society and media within the network sample. This expectation is derived from both Hungarian and international academic literature; however, testable hypotheses would be difficult to establish based on it. The exact trends that this dissertation may see arise are also subject to the purposively constructed sample itself. Hence the study turns to the case selection method and sample selection criteria to further precise the construction of the analysis.

II.2. Operationalisation: purposive sample selection, the analytical method and measures

II.2.a. Purposive sample selection

II.2.a: I. The organisational level

To put the most important principles of this research effort into empirical action, a great number of limitations need to be put in place. this dissertation must limit its focus to only the influential parts of civil society and media — select a small, manageable sample whose members can be reasonably well observed. The aim is not to make the findings generalisable. Rather, it is to study the most significant, highly influential interrelationships — and analyse whether the impact of populism can be identified therein.

This necessitates the creation of a balanced sample rather than a representative one. Representativeness is of lesser importance for a piece of exploratory elite research applying social network analysis than for a descriptive or deductive multivariate large-N statistical analysis. This comes with the “usual” sample selection bias problem. However, it can be assumed that if populism impacts interrelationships among the most influential civil society groups and media organisations, the less relevant parts of the public sphere have been affected, too.

The dissertation aims to put *political relevance* on the top of the agenda. To select the most influential organisations from all NGOs in Hungary, this research relies on the metric of *the amount of financial support received from the population* in the time period of the focused investigation, 2010–2020. While an imperfect metric, it is not only a convenient and feasible, but also pertinent, useful category of data; *the amount of financial support received from the population* is a relatively good indicator of how organised, well-established and –managed, –supported, and how well-known an NGO is. After ranking NGOs on the basis of their annual amounts of tax donations received, the research looks for cues of significant, outspokenly national or local political activity, participation, or open dissemination of clearly political information. Within the many hundreds of overwhelmingly charitable, apolitical foundations, groups, and NGOs, a few organisations stand out. Beyond only three human rights, and religious-cultural foundations, throughout the 2010s, it is consistently four *civil society media organisations* that feature prominently on the list:

- *Free Lane! Foundation [Szabad Sávot Alapítvány]* which supports the otherwise commercial Budapest radio station “Club Radio” [Klubrádió];
- *Radio Maria Public Benefit Association [Mária Rádió Közhasznú Egyesület]* which operates nationally the volunteer religious media outlet “Radio Maria” [Mária Rádió];
- *Forbidden Cultural Foundation [Tilos Kulturális Alapítvány]* operating the Budapest local civil society radio station “Forbidden Radio” [Tilos Rádió];
- *TransparentNet Foundation [Átlátszónet Alapítvány]* which supports “Transparent” [Átlátszó], a civil investigative journalism team and online news website.

The dissertation opts to focus on these organisations because taken together, they represent relatively well-known, noteworthy sample composed out of organisations working for different goals and with different ideological leanings and technologies. Yet, they are compatible with and complement the other focus area, the media. Taken together, they provide a suitable baseline to which commercial mass media can be compared to

The dissertation selects the most influential, relevant mass media outlets based on their audience sizes. While the sizes of their audiences have changed over the last decade, it is remarkable that there are also four mass media outlets which consistently reached the largest audiences (each approximately between one and two million people), the two first free access, nationally broadcasted commercial television stations and the two largest online news portals — all outlets launched at the end of the 1990s:

- *RTL Klub*
commercial TV channel launched in 1997. Because of its diverse programming, the study focuses on the organisation of its main prime time news programme, “Newscast” [*Híradó*].
- *TV2*
commercial TV channel launched in 1997. Because of its diverse programming, the study focuses on the organisation of its main prime time news programme, “Facts” [*Tények*].
- *Origo.hu*
online news portal started in 1998;
- *Index.hu*
online news portal started in 1999.

They all add different elements to the sample regarding their organisational and ideological backgrounds, types of media and technologies, and eventful histories in the past decades. Thus, taken together with the selected civil society media organisations, they provide a balanced, diverse elite study.

The individual level

But the focusing and specification of the study cannot end here as the underlying epistemological framework demands a specific focus on human individuals and their interpersonal interactions. This research pinpoints the specific role of the *editor-in-chief* or *chief editor* as the most significant, directly comparable, and relatively transparent unit of observation. Hence this dissertation analyses

- the interpersonal interactions and their networks
 - between 1 January 1990 and 31 December 2020 among
- the editors-in-chief

- who held their positions between 1 January 2010 and 31 December 2020
- of eight Hungarian media organisations
 - out of which is four civil society media outlets selected on the basis of most financial support received from the population (personal income tax donations):
 - Átlátszó,
 - Mária Rádió,
 - Klubrádió, and
 - Tilos Rádió; and
 - four largest mass media outlets based on their audience sizes:
 - Origo
 - Index
 - TV2
 - RTL Klub.

These interpersonal interaction network structures are studied and investigated for the effects of the party system under populism. But the question remains how to operationalise these interpersonal interaction networks. It is logical to select the *professional, collegial interactions* among them in line with the aims of the research. Therefore, it elects to interrelate the selected editors-in-chief on the basis of *shared memberships in the same professional organisations* for at least a year. That is to say, the research assumes interpersonal interactions among two chief editors if they spent at least one year simultaneously as employees (regardless of their professional positions) at the same workplace (usually, media outlets) between 1990 and 2020. Under the circumstances of long-standing polarisation in the Hungarian media system, working and belonging to the same outlet carries a certain degree of mutual understanding and professional (journalistic) as well as

political similarities. Therefore, it is suitable for encapsulating professional interrelationships, dynamic behaviours and strategies, as well as traces of political effects.

II.2.b. The analytical method and measures

The professional careers of 21 chief editors are compared. If in the same year an organisation is featured multiple times under different editors-in-chief, those editors-in-chief are marked as dyads: having strong *chances* of interpersonal interactions for that year (and usually, longer — for as long as the same professional organisation simultaneously features under both actors' records). Based on the database of shared memberships, the dyads and “chains” of dyads, a network is formed among editors-in-chief. The time factor makes this a temporal network: the dynamic changes — establishment and dissolution of dyads, cliques (“sub-networks”) within the network is studied using temporal social network analysis (tSNA).

Software-based tSNA is utilised to treat the compiled dataset. Three packages of the free, open-source statistical software R — and, naturally, their manuals — are used for this purpose: the packages “sna”, “tsna”, and “ndtv”.

II.2.b: I. tSNA and its measures

The animated, dynamic visual representation of the temporal social network development is accompanied by metrics and measurements that are different from that of static SNA. This dissertation uses three *temporal* social network analysis measurements:

- nominal edge *formation* count;

- nominal edge *dissolution* count; and
- network connectedness scores annually.

Nominal edge formation and dissolution counts are very simple metrics: they are simply the total number of how many interrelationships (edges or ties) are formed or dissolved, respectively, within a network over a certain period of time. This analysis will chart annual edge formation and dissolution counts.

Network *connectedness* is a more technical indicator. It is one of the most widely used measures of how cohesive, well-connected a given graph is — including also how much a network resembles archetypal hierarchy. This measure returns a value on a scale of zero (lowest) and one (highest). Zero means that the network is not at all connected, all nodes (actors) unconnected. One indicates that all nodes (actors) are linked — with one node (actor) appearing “higher” in the hierarchy.

II.2.b: II. Static SNA and its measures

Two, the “sna” package serves to construct and analyse simpler, *static* social networks.

Thanks to this, firstly, one static social network is created which encompasses the entire time period of the investigation (1990 – 2020) containing all the observed interrelationships among the selected editors-in-chief. This means that in this “overarching”, complete social network, ties accumulate overtime: even if an interrelationship was established only for a short period of time in the early 1990s, it will stay on and “remain” in the network.

Then, secondly, to better account for these changes — the decomposition of ties, communities, and cliques —, the analysis splits the period of observation into three parts. These three parts cover the three periods of the party system development of post-communist Hungary. This “slicing” of the overarching social network, in practical terms, results in the construction of three separate static social networks. This means that ties in these separate static social networks do not accumulate throughout the entire post-communist (1990–2020) period — rather, only ties established in the same time periods are accounted for, separately. For example, if two chief editors only worked together in the early 1990s, their relationship will not be represented in the social network depicting the 2011–2020 period. All constructed static networks, are analysed using the same methods and basic metrics. Descriptive indicators are applied on two levels: on the network level and on the individual level.

First, on the network level, all the networks are depicted and visually analysed. Regarding their overall structures and cohesion, the *connectedness* metric (the indicator used in tSNA) is only used in the case of the complete (1990–2020) social network. Instead of *connectedness*, the measure *centralisation* is employed and compared across the static social networks in time, taking up values on a scale from 0 (not centralised) to 1 (fully centralised).

Then, the analysis turns to scrutinise individual-level metrics: the centralities of the actors making up the social networks to detect changes in behaviour and the evolution of the social network. Centrality measures pertain to actors in the network (node-level measures), they all capture their “importance” — that is, how central the individual positions of each editor-in-chief are in their collegial social network. This analysis uses

basic SNA indicators, the measures of *degrees*, *stress centrality*, and *betweenness centrality* to assess and compare actors' changing important cross time and social network configurations. All centrality values used in this analysis capture roughly the same phenomenon, but in slightly different manners — they are different “sides” of the same coin.

Degrees are the most intuitive, simplest measure. They indicate the number of ties (collegial interrelationships) of a selected node.

Stress centrality is a slightly more sophisticated method of measurement. This index indicates the number of shortest paths each node, chief editor, is located in the given network. Therefore, the higher the number of the index, the more central a node's or individual's position — i.e. actors with higher *stress centralities* connect more people. If such nodes (the “busiest” points of connection) were removed from the network, its cohesion would decrease immensely.

The third value, *betweenness centrality* scores are also related to the notion of shortest paths and capture how much a node is in-between other nodes of the network; but it is calculated differently; “conceptually, high-betweenness vertices lie on a large number of non-redundant shortest paths between other vertices; they can thus be thought of as ‘bridges’ or ‘boundary spanners.’” (Butts 2020, 15)

Betweenness centrality is used to rank the editors-in-chief centrality in the complete static social network. The notion of non-redundant shortest paths as key connectors within a community can highlight important structural actors — even more important ones than a structural, clique analysis. This latter structural analysis has, in fact, been also carried out, but is not reported in this analysis. This is because the groupings, cliques

that the software analysis produces are — unsurprisingly — by far and large identical to the composition of the selected media outlets. (So, the software virtually recognised the selection criteria, and mostly grouped together the actors by their media outlets.) But *betweenness centrality* goes beyond this. It spotlights the individual actors who have been involved in multiple, differently, and diversely connected communities.

III. MAIN FINDINGS OF THE DISSERTATION

III.1.a. Key empirical findings

1 Overarching findings

- 1.1 The expectation that the analysis would show increasing network centralisation led by, primarily, Fidesz-affiliated actors in Hungarian media within the studied sample is not met. This expectation is drawn from a well-established scholarship.
- 1.2 Instead, the analysis finds a disintegration within the independent and opposition-aligned civil society media and mass media elite network sample.
- 1.2.1 This outcome can be partially attributed to the selection strategy employed in the study. Because the sample selection emphasised balance of political affiliation among the studied outlets — i.e. on the organisational level instead of the individual level — as observed in the late 2010s, it did not take into account the political leanings of their editors-in-

chief prior to the capture of some of these organisations. This distorted the political balance among the units of analysis: individuals with independent or opposition leanings are overrepresented in the sample, while it includes fewer Fidesz-affiliated actors.

- 1.2.2 Among these individuals, the decline of professional connections are shown. Consequently, instead of demonstrating a centralised media landscape, the analysis points to fragmentation and a weakening of collegial ties among those in opposition-affiliated or independent leanings. This, in itself, however, is a valuable finding that shifts perspectives on Hungarian populism in a novel way. The failure of the independent and opposition-affiliated actors to counter or resist populist strategy in Hungary is much less often discussed, researched, and understood.

2 Findings from the preliminary descriptive analysis of the sample

- 2.1 A preliminary analysis can show significant influence of political affiliations on media ownership and editorial policies in Hungary. Several outlets underwent significant ownership changes in the 2010s, often leading to shifts in editorial direction. Changes in ownership often resulted in shifts in the approach to journalism, with some outlets becoming more aligned with government agendas, while others maintained a critical stance.

3 Key findings of the temporal social network analysis

- 3.1 The combined visual and quantitative analyses point to a dynamic of increasing network cohesiveness before 2010, followed by a rapid disintegration during the party system under populism.
- 3.2 The connectedness of the social network, a measure of its hierarchical nature, peaked in 1996. The values remained relatively high from 2004 to 2007 but declined steadily during the third period, reaching almost zero by 2020. The declining connectedness could suggest a movement towards a less hierarchical, potentially “freer” media elite structure. However, the consistently low connectedness values throughout the period indicate that the network was never very hierarchical.
- 3.3 A general trend of increasing network cohesion is observed until around 2008, followed by a decline. Communities that are separate grow their cohesion initially, but fracture over time. The second period (1996–2010) saw a significant increase in the formation of interrelationships among editors, compared to the first period (before 1996). The third period (post-2010) shows a relative decline. Fewer new relationships form while there is a marked increase in dissolving ties, coinciding with populist governance.
- 3.4 The dissertation further analyses the network’s temporal evolution by examining the static networks across different periods, corresponding to changes in Hungarian media laws.

4 Findings from the static social network analysis

4.1 *The complete social network (1990–2020)*

- 4.1.1 The complete static network appears densely connected, contrary to the low connectedness observed in the temporal network, with a connectedness value of 0.905. This is because the transformation from a temporal to a static network overstates the “weight” of short-term relationships. It is also due to the peripheral positions of certain editors-in-chief, particularly from civil society outlets, which accidentally create a hierarchical-like structure.
- 4.1.2 Editors from civil society outlets generally hold peripheral positions, with some being sparsely connected or entirely isolated. This is also due to stable, long-term roles within their organizations, and their lower societal significance.
- 4.1.3 Chief editors with high centrality values often have diverse backgrounds and career changes, reflecting volatility in their professional trajectories. Conversely, low centrality rankings can reflect their long-term stability in career trajectories or dissolving ties to the rest of the network. The most central actors are:
- I. PÁLMAI L. Ákos is the most central actor in this analysis, alleged to have led the transformations of media outlets into pro-government channels.
 - II. WEYER Balázs: ranked second due to his extensive, dual role in civil society and mass media. He played an important bridging and supporting role, demonstrating a certain “civil society strategy” in the face of populist political economic pressures.
 - III. VICSEK Ferenc: somewhat similarly to Weyer, his high ranking reflects a career combining mass media and civil society roles.

- IV. SZOMBATHY Pál and DULL Szabolcs: despite their dissimilarities, they rank high due to their roles in influential media outlets which attest increasing political pressures.

4.2 *The the periodical networks*

4.2.1 *During the tripartite party system (1990–1996)*

4.2.1.1 The elite network of Hungarian media editors-in-chief (1990-1996) is highly centralised (centralisation value of 0.667). This is due to its very limited size and only relatively high connectivity: the network features only seven members divided into two distinct cliques.

4.2.1.2 This period reflects the emergence of a new generation of Hungarian journalist elite. It suggests that most of them were socialized after the transition from socialism to the market economy. These editors-in-chief, already active in the 1990s, worked in media outlets with clear left-wing and liberal leanings, distinct from the communist-era media elites.

4.2.2 *During the two-block party system (1997–2010)*

4.2.2.1 The social network of Hungarian media editors-in-chief between 1997 and 2010 is almost fully connected (with a decreased centralization value of 0.347 reflecting a more distributed and well-connected network with several central individuals rather than a single dominant actor). This contrasts sharply with the sparse network of the previous period. Surprisingly, this network is identical to the complete static network (1990–2020), indicating that all significant

professional relationships among these editors were established during this time.

- 4.2.2.2 The rankings of individual editors-in-chief by centrality metrics in this period mirror those of the full 1990-2020 period, with only nominal differences in stress and betweenness centrality due to the shorter observation period.
- 4.2.2.3 This period marks the formation of the elite community among Hungarian civil society and mass media, with the network becoming well-established and stable by 2010. The dynamic of re-establishing relationships at different media outlets highlights the development of a lasting community among the media elite, rather than a constantly shifting network. For example, the introduction of commercial TV channels in 1997 (TV2 and RTL Klub) led to the recruitment of professionals from public service media, reinforcing existing ties from the earlier period.

4.2.3 *During the dominant party system (2011–2020)*

- 4.2.3.1 The network in the third period becomes much sparser compared to the second period, showing signs of fracturing: the centralisation value of the network decreases to 0.219. It shows that the older, pre-2010 media elite lost significance as their centrality in the network decreased, and many left civil society and mass media. This is in contrast to the individuals assuming their position of editor-in-chief in this period.
- 4.2.3.2 The trend shows a discontinuation of working relationships — especially after stepping down from these roles. Many high-ranking journalists, such as GAZDA, DUDÁS, and

AZURÁK, left journalism temporarily or permanently, contributing to the network's decay. Some individuals become more disconnected or isolated from the rest of the network. The remaining relationships persisted primarily in smaller, less influential media outlets, leading to a decrease in the social significance of these individuals.

- 4.2.3.3 The political context, the emergence of the dominant party system under populism, influenced the disintegration of the network and the departure of several central figures.

III.1.b. Key theoretical findings

- 1 The findings align with existing literature on populism and contribute to understanding the concept as a social movement strategy or model.
- 1.1 The Hungarian government's strategies for controlling civil society mirror populist strategies by applying sector-specific approaches, ranging from exclusion to co-optation (Gerő et al. 2022). Fidesz dominates civil society and media by conveying unified messages across numerous channels, which opposition parties cannot match due to their fragmented nature.
- 1.1.1 The dissertation may also help explain the existence of media outlets with mostly independent editorial policies but pro-government ownership ("gray-zone" media (Polyák, Urbán, and Szávai 2022)) and also the disproportionate relationship between Hungary's centralized media landscape and electoral results.

- 2 The essence of populist strategy is exemplified by the government's aims to create a centrally controlled, cohesive pro-government media ecosystem *while* maintaining a fragmented and incoherent independent and opposition media landscape. The latter is demonstrated by this dissertation research. Most importantly, populist strategies require a constant conflict between a unified, centralized movement (e.g., Fidesz) and a fragmented opposition lacking societal links, organized media, or business support.
- 2.1 A weak, unorganized civil society and fragmented media landscape can therefore favour the rise of populism.
- 2.2 The research supports the strategic conception of populism, showing it is applicable in various institutional, cultural (beyond Latin America, Africa, or Asia), and historical contexts.
- 2.3 Pluralist strategies should be further studied as counterexamples to populism's divisive tactics.
- 3 The dissertation also demonstrates the usefulness of relationalism in social research.

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List and formatting based on the Hungarian Science Bibliography (Magyar Tudományos Művek Tára, MTMT).