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## **Digital Activism and Hungarian Media Reform: The case of Milla**

By Éva Bognár, Lina Dencik and Peter Wilkin

### **Abstract**

This article examines the rise of the internet-based opposition group One Million for the Freedom of the Press in Hungary (or Milla for short) and considers their impact as a form of digital activism in Hungarian political culture. Milla were founded in December 2010 as a Facebook group in response to the newly elected Fidesz government and its fundamental revision of the Hungarian constitution and, in particular, its media laws. Milla are a civil society group, based in Budapest, who saw the Fidesz government as a threat to the democratic freedoms set out in the post-communist settlement in Hungary. They emerged at a time when the mainstream Hungarian opposition parties were in disarray and they took on the role of challenging the legitimacy of Fidesz actions. Milla are an important example of the idea of digital activism and virtual solidarity and their experiences serve to illustrate many of the strengths and weaknesses of these notions. The article sets out the ways in which Milla have sought to generate support for themselves and opposition to the government, how they have organised their activities, and ultimately the specific problems that they face in Hungarian civil society.

### **Keywords**

Media, democracy, civil society, Hungary, digital activism, Milla.

### **Introduction**

The election of the Fidesz government in Hungary in April 2010 has proven to be one of the most profound events in the country since the collapse of Communism in 1989-1990. Fidesz came to power on the back of massive popular disaffection with the previous Socialist Party (MSZP) led coalition government who had become embroiled in deception and corruption scandals (Lendvai, 2012, p. 51). The mixture of hostility and apathy on the part of voters led to an unprecedented outcome in the general election with Fidesz and its subordinate ally the Christian Democratic People's party securing 68.4% of the vote and forming the Government of National Cooperation. Possessing over 2/3 of the seats in Parliament, Fidesz have been able to rewrite the constitution. When the far-right Jobbik party is factored into the electoral outcome the balance of power in Hungary shifted dramatically in 2010 with the right and far-right possessing 70% of the seats in Parliament and what they saw as a

mandate to fundamentally transform Hungary's governing institutions (Kreko, 2012; Holland, 2009). Despite inviting censure by international human rights groups, the US government, the EU, the UN and countless others, leaving aside the criticisms of the opposition within Hungary (Hinsey, 2012), they have undertaken this in rapid and far-reaching manner, claiming that this was the opportunity for what Fidesz call 'a system of national reconciliation' with the creation of a constitution that would finally be free of any link with Hungary's communist past (Szombati, 2011).

In effect Fidesz have brought about profound changes to the governing institutions in Hungary, from the judiciary and parliament to higher education and crucially, the media. The over-riding goal of these policies has been to shift Hungary down a permanent path of right-wing politics that will enable Fidesz to govern through carefully placed appointments to key institutions (legal, political, cultural) regardless of election outcomes. Lendvai, provocatively, describes Hungary as becoming a one-party state (2012, p. 230). As these developments have taken place, so have expressions of concern among the Hungarian public. A significant development among these voices of dissent was the emergence of the internet based opposition group Milla (One million for the Freedom of the Press in Hungary) which first appeared on Facebook on December 22<sup>nd</sup> 2010, one day after the government passed its controversial media reform legislation. The emergence of Milla appeared to be very significant at a time when the formal opposition parties were in disarray and lacked the coherence to provide an effective opposition to the government. Thus, the ongoing transformations that are defining Hungary's current political climate provide an interesting context for exploring the realities and potential for civil society groups to organize and challenge a shift towards an authoritarian government when formal

political opposition parties seem to be unable to do so. In particular, this paper is concerned with the multi-faceted ways in which the media has proved a central focal point for government rule and political struggles as well as civil society mobilization and activism. Conflicts over media reforms have been continuous throughout Hungary's post-Communist transition period and have become key symbols for the inadequacies of Hungarian democracy. At the same time, new media technologies, and especially social media, are providing opportunities for critics to organize and voice opposition to government activities in new and interesting ways away from mainstream media and formal politics. This article will look at the emergence of Milla in reaction to the 2010 elections.

As well as the use of secondary sources and Milla's own internet material this project is based upon 10 interviews carried out over a 6-month period from April to September 2012 with members of Milla occupying a range of different informal roles within the group, Hungarian academics from the Central European University (CEU)<sup>i</sup>, and spokespeople for the think tank Nézőpont Intézet supportive of the Fidesz government. These interviews were carried out in person in English (except for one interview which was carried out in Hungarian) and lasted on average an hour. It is therefore this particular period in the development of Milla as a political group that marks the analysis presented here, rather than its later activities during the elections in April 2014. The article begins by providing a brief overview of the development of the media in Hungary during the transition, with a particular emphasis upon what are often referred to as the 'media wars' that have been almost a continual part of Hungarian democratic politics. The goal of the overview is two-fold: first, we would like to demonstrate that the issue of defending a free press which has been the explicit

mission of Milla has always been critical to and telling about the state of democratic developments in Hungary. Second, we would like to draw attention to the significance of the platform of Milla (mainly Facebook and other social media) by highlighting the media context in which they operate. It then provides an overview of Milla and its activities, setting out how the group has worked in practice, what activities it has been able to generate and undertake as well as the nature of its virtual protest. Milla is an important case for a number of reasons. The state of politics in Hungary is polarized as commentators from all sides of the political spectrum acknowledge. This polarization is usually seen as being based on political and cultural issues rather than economic, with all main political parties embracing a pro-capitalist, free market economic ideology, to a greater or lesser degree (Schöpflin, 2012; Palonen, 2009, p. 32).

The immediate task facing Milla was whether they had the capacity to mobilize and help build a significant opposition in civil society to an authoritarian government in a period when the main political parties were unable to.<sup>ii</sup> There is much to be learned, therefore, from the activities of Milla as a form of virtual solidarity and political opposition. The argument presented here is that the case of Milla illustrates the limitations of virtual solidarity and political protest if it is not actually rooted in significant social forces (civil society groups, trade unions, community groups) and the significant extent to which existing political culture comes to shape the possibilities of digital activism in this regard.

### **Hungarian media in transition: 'Media Wars'**

To make sense of the current media transformation in Hungary it is important to situate it in the context of the longer-term transition in Hungarian society since the end of communism in 1989-90. The transformation to a liberal democratic system was largely constructed through roundtable negotiations in which different sections of Hungary's elites were represented, including representatives from the governing socialist party and leading figures from the major dissident groups in civil society (Agh, 2001; Bajomi-Lazar, 2003, p. 57-58; Lijphart, 1992: 210; Lomax: 1997, p. 45-46; Lendvai, 2012). Hungary was seen to have advantages over other central European states due to its established liberal intellectual culture. As a consequence a compromise solution was reached that allowed the former communists to continue in Hungarian political life as the new Socialist Party, a neo-liberal 'Third Way' style coalition (MSZP), who would compete at elections alongside liberal and conservative parties (Elster, Offe and Preuss, 1998, p. 5; Agh, 2002, p. 276; Szegö, 1997, p. 39). As has been noted in much academic literature on Hungary, there was both a continuation of ruling elites from the old Socialist Party as well as a circulation of new elites who entered politics in the new democracy (Lomax, 1997, p. 47; Nagle and Maher, 1999, p. 202-203). The revised constitution was an attempt to find a compromise that would allow for a peaceful transition from communism to capitalism and democracy, a unique historical event. For Fidesz, in its current guise, this compromise is now portrayed as a hoax on the Hungarian people that in part allowed the old elites to continue in their former roles in the new Hungarian democracy. In short, there is an argument widely shared by Fidesz that the former communist elites transferred their political capital into economic capital as part of the transition and privatization process. It is this belief, shared by neo-fascists in Hungary, that Fidesz

use as a rationale for their current profound constitutional changes (Szôcs, 1998, p. 1099).

Fidesz itself has undergone a remarkable transformation since its founding in 1989 by a group of dissident university students, including the current PM Viktor Orban. Initially founded as a youth party (no members over 35 were allowed) Fidesz was initially held together despite the ideological differences of its members by a unifying commitment to anti-communism. Whilst Fidesz retain that belief today and mobilizes it politically to great effect it was not enough to keep the party together in the 1990s and over the decade Orban began to take control of the party and with his allies shift it towards becoming a conservative-nationalist party, potentially akin to the Christian Democratic Party in Germany. Fidesz now bears the qualities of centre-right parties in Central and Eastern Europe in being anti-communist, nationalist and populist (Hanley, 2004, p. 17). Orban showed himself to be a skilled political actor and opportunist in the manner in which he shifted ideological ground, took control of the party machine and effectively moved it to take the hegemonic centre-right party position in Hungary. These skills have enabled Orban and his allies to shift Fidesz from being an anti-authoritarian, liberal party to an authoritarian and conservative one over the space of five years in the mid to late-1990s (Kiss, 2003; Haraszti, 2002; Magyar, 2012). In its first period of office (1998-2002) Fidesz also sought to manipulate and interfere in the workings of the media, as had previous governments (Agh, 2001, p.101). During this period the internet began to develop in Hungary as medium of alternative news and information with popular sites becoming more trusted by sections of the public than the broadcast media or newspapers (Dányi and Galácz, 2005, p. 230). But at this stage, echoing Putin's attitude in Russia, Fidesz and

their MSZP and SZDSZ successors tended to ignore the internet, regarding it as a medium of relatively less importance than TV, radio and newspapers. This changed significantly when Fidesz returned to power in 2010.

With regard to the ‘media wars’, in the immediate transition period it swiftly became apparent that it was going to be very difficult to form a consensus on questions of ownership, control and media freedom in the new democratic Hungary (Downing, 1996, p. 159). Public service broadcasting, according to Gross, has long been dominated by Socialist Party supporters, an issue which Fidesz have sought to deal with by their new media laws (Gross, 2004, p.116). In addition many Hungarian journalists continue to view their country’s newspapers as being biased and effectively party propaganda (Metykova and Cisarove, 2009, p. 726). The ‘media wars’ swiftly became a symbol of the division between authoritarian and anti-authoritarian forces amongst Hungary’s elites (Downing, 1996; Jakubowicz and Sükösd, 2008, p. 13; Bajomi-Lazar, 2003, p. 31; Lendvai, 2012, p. 46).

The role of the media was seen by many Hungarians who had been dissidents under communism as essential to its transition to democracy and they articulated the need for a free press, something which has proven to be at odds with the practices of all governing political parties since the transition. The media wars began as soon as the first post-communist government led by the Hungarian Democratic Forum Party (MDF) (conservative-nationalist) took office in March 1990 and have been a continual feature of Hungarian democracy. Over the course of the 1990s it became apparent that all of the new political parties saw the media in ways that would have been familiar to the old Communist Party, as a mechanism for social control and as a



means of supporting the government and ultimately for government propaganda. Thus the MDF-led coalition government sought to exert its authority over independent journalists, radio stations and TV broadcasters (public and private) through sackings, fines, removal of licenses and other legal measures. This led to an initial counter from Hungarian civil society groups and opposition parties determined to defend the rights of a free press. The MDF-led Government became mired in corruption scandals and was defeated in the 1994 elections, to be replaced by a coalition of the Socialist Party (MSZP) and the Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ), the latter of whom had been fiercely anti-communist and anti-socialist until that point in time. Although not as overtly hostile towards the press the new coalition government was still able to use their power to promote their own interests through the media. *The Radio and TV Act* (1996) was passed in Parliament with 90% support from MPs and this successfully transferred the 3 public service broadcasters from state to public foundations with an all-party steering committee to control the public media. Nonetheless political intervention in the media in the post-communist period has been the norm, not the exception (Agh, 2001, p. 100; Bajomi-Lazar, 2003). Successive governments (Fidesz 1998-2002; MSZP and SZDSZ 2002-2010) all used their power and authority to pressurize the media both overtly and covertly and what is apparent throughout the period leading up to the re-election of Fidesz in 2010 is that a political culture developed in the post-communist period that viewed the media (public and private) in instrumental terms: it was a medium to be used and controlled rather than there being a cross-party commitment to a free and independent media (Bajomi-Lazar, 2003, p. 29, 98; Gross, 2003, p. 80).

This division amongst competing elites was at the heart of the ‘media wars’ with many committed liberal intellectuals determined to push for a media system that would help to integrate Hungary into the EU norm. The actions of the current Fidesz government to centralize the regulation, oversight and control of the media needs to be understood as part of this elite conflict. As numerous writers have shown, these policies are significantly out of step with the EU norm for press freedom (Brouillette and van Beek, 2012, p. ix). What is important to note, however, is that the new media laws implemented by Fidesz have been the first in a string of key legislature that have been seen to undermine democracy, including constitutional changes that make political culture less tolerant, ensuring that the judiciary remains in the hands of the government, and electoral reforms that have resulted in the disenfranchising of large sections of voters<sup>iii</sup> (Bozoki 2012; Murphy 2012).

The consequences of these reforms for democratic culture in Hungary have been severe, particularly with regard to the independence of the media (The Economist Blog, 2011; Brouillette 2011). In practice they have seen both the public and private media, including the internet, fall under the control of new regulatory institutions that are run by Fidesz appointees and supporters. In turn this has led to journalists being sacked, examples of censorship, and much controversy surrounds the replacement of the main opposition and news intensive radio station Klub Radio by a station geared towards popular music. At the same time many of the private media firms are already owned by Fidesz supporting businesses, which imposes its own pressure on what is printed and broadcast (Lendvai, 2012, p. 219-220).

For many critics these developments in Hungarian media and democracy are seen as being a weakness of its liberal democratic foundations. Whilst the state and the market have clear power and authority, civil society (nominally the third pillar of liberal democracy) has been said by many critics to have withered or never remerged at all from the communist period. Hungarian civil society is often portrayed as an intellectual-led culture, emerging in the 1970s, within which the mass of the population are largely dormant or apathetic, something measured by poor turnout at elections, the resistance on the part of people to join political parties, trade unions, or civic associations of any kind (Frentzel-Zagorska, 1990, p. 760; Bartlett, 1996; Nagle and Maher, 1999, p. 67; Cox, 2007; Jakubowicz and Sükösd, 2008, p. 19). Thus the rise of an authoritarian government in Hungary should not come as a complete surprise as the political culture lacks a sufficiently robust and active civil society that would oppose it. As Peter Molnar (Milla member and a former liberal MP and key figure in the post-communist reform of the media) has observed of Hungary's democratic political culture, it lacks a political class that is willing to show self-restraint when given a democratic mandate, now more than ever under Fidesz (Molnar, 2011). Leaving aside a judgment as to the accuracy of this portrayal of an apathetic Hungarian civil society it is into this apparent void that Milla have stepped as an attempt to provide meaningful opposition to the government's authoritarianism with the hope of stimulating a civil society opposition (Cox, 2007).

### **Milla and the Politics of Virtual Opposition**

The literature on digital activism is now wide-ranging and what it shares in common is the assumption that the internet represents a qualitative change in the way in which solidarity and social movements can be built. As Paul Mason has argued, the

new forms of communication technology, most powerfully the internet and mobile telephony, have fundamentally altered the nature of political organization as evidenced in the wave of social protests taking place around the world in the wake of the financial crises after 2007 (Mason, 2012). Bennett and Segerberg (2012) describe this digitally enabled political protest as a form of ‘connective action’ that stands in juxtaposition to the ‘collective action’ of traditional forms of political organizations such as political parties or trade unions. This ‘connective action’ is marked by personalized, individualized, and technologically organized processes that come to replace the requirement of collective identity framing or formal organizational structures that usually require a lot of resources for membership. As Diani (cited in Bennett and Segerberg, 2012) has noted in this regard, networks are not just precursors or building blocks of collective action: they are in themselves organizational structures that can transcend the elemental units of organizations and individuals. The social movements of recent years, Castells has claimed, can be explained by the material support of digital media technologies that enable a new type of political participation, one that is based on horizontal networks, leaderless organization and borderless solidarity (Castells, 2012). According to some, as ‘liberation technologies’ (Benkler, 2006), they even have the potential to revolutionise societies and overthrow governments as seen in the so-called Arab Spring (Ramdani, 2011; Ghonim, 2012; Castells, 2012). On this reading digital activism is a major threat to authoritarian governments. Inevitably, more critical accounts have accompanied these readings, emphasizing different ‘offline’ elements in understanding contemporary forms of activism, such as historical developments (Curran et al., 2012), the significance of face-to-face interaction in mobilization (Juris, 2012), the prominence of ‘assemblies’, shared physical space and leadership

(Gerbaudo, 2012), as well as the contradictory nature of online technologies for movement practices and development (Barassi and Fenton, 2011; Treré, 2015). In fact, digitally enabled forms of protest tend to be short-lived and temporary, issue or event-focused and subject to increasingly advanced forms of digital state control and surveillance (Fuchs, 2012; Hintz, 2013; Dencik & Wilkin, 2015).

Set up by Peter Juhasz in December 2010 in the immediate aftermath of the new media law, Milla had the clear goal of providing a critical platform to challenge government policy which would provide information on the implications and practical consequences of constitutional reform to Hungarian society. The issue of press freedom was never the sole issue of concern, but rather it was used as a clear symbol of the changes being pursued by the government. As one member explained this was easily communicated to Hungarian society because ‘the freedom of the press is the opposite of censorship, and everybody knows this word: censorship. They know that before 1989 there was censorship...So they understood that...It’s a good word, good call’ (Milla member a, 2012). This speaks to the inclusive aspect of activism that Bennett (2012) has said is a prominent feature of today’s ‘personalisation of politics’ in which ‘personal action frames’ lower barriers to identification. However, it is important to note that Milla was not just about challenging Fidesz, but grew out of long-standing frustration with government politics, including that of previous governments, and the state of the political system. As Peter Juhasz, founder of the group put it in the interview: “(...) for years we had been looking for a cause or an issue that would serve as a basis for mass support, something that would bring together those interested in civic issues, individuals or organizations. Free press turned out to be the one. The Fidesz government brought it to us on a silver platter

(Juhasz, 2012).” As a form of virtual network Milla had no formal leadership or governing body and organized itself through regular meetings and interaction between its key members. The founding figures are all based in Budapest and largely drawn from an intellectual/academic background. This is something that they remain acutely conscious of as it presents problems for Milla in terms of their capacity to reach wider Hungarian society. A Roma Hungarian Milla-member who studies at CEU made this point when she said that ‘the limitations are that it is too intellectual and too much based in Budapest’ (Milla member b, 2012). Fidesz, in turn, have been able to brand Milla as being part of a number of anti-Hungarian groups. Thus bohemian, intellectual, liberal and alien-hearted (a phrase that covers Roma and Jews) are used to describe them by Orban’s supporters. The aim for the government is to isolate and separate these groups from wider Hungarian society.

As an organization Milla described itself from the outset as a multifaceted ‘grassroots movement for activists’ and their goal has been to keep alive a critical voice in Hungary at a time when they see the Hungarian media as falling increasingly under the control of the government and its allies. Thus its Facebook page serves as a wall of critical stories that might otherwise struggle to appear in the Hungarian media and, just as importantly, as a channel to mobilize and generate action. Its main founders claim to have been a heterogeneous and a non-party political group that has been brought together over this specific issue. This non-party political status has been central to their self-understanding and operations to the extent that they deliberately sought to exclude members of political parties. Their two primary goals were to act as a disseminator of critical information about Hungary and to serve as a platform for other protest groups. The idea here is that the Facebook page and the informal

network will help to inspire an active and widening civic movement in opposition to the government. In many respects the aims and declarations of Milla have very much been in keeping with liberal democratic theory. In a list of '12 points' they call for freedom of the press, freedom of religion, democratic elections, distribution of tax burdens, equal opportunities, independent jurisdiction, democratic legislature, transparency, labour rights, public education, sustainable development, and union with Europe (deeper integration into the EU). In particular with regards to the media, they call for the government to review its media laws in line with the need for a free press; for adequate consultation over constitutional changes; to codify specific human rights around free speech; and for an independent editorial service in the public service media. There is, in this sense, nothing controversial or unduly radical about what Milla were calling for and as a report carried out at the Central European University into the government media reforms shows, they are procedures and policies that are normal in most other EU member states (Brouillette, 2011).

As a form of digital activism Milla can, in theory, reach the whole country through the internet (Hungary has internet penetration of 65%, just above the European average of 63% [Internet World Stats, 2012]), so in some respects the possibility of civil society and government opposition taking a national shape is made more possible. In practice, however, it is far from clear that this is the case. As an online network Milla has the appearance of being a horizontal form of organization, as Juris has said is typical of such groups. But nonetheless the actual organization of Milla is firmly Budapest based and driven by a limited number of members (Juris, 2005:191). The inability to reach beyond Budapest, and especially to the countryside, is a conscious concern among the members of the group but one that has proved

difficult to address. The narrowness of the group is made manifest in the way in which issues have primarily been discussed, focusing on rights and identity politics without being able to place these within a framework of broader social and economic issues and of the poverty that is commonplace in much of the Hungarian countryside. As one of the very few non-Budapest based key figures in the movement pointed out, ‘90% of those who are active are from Budapest. And that is why I think issues related to social problems, for example economic problems, are either not reflected on the stage or in our issues, or not reflected to the level which these issues deserve (Milla member b, 2012).’ In this respect, other groups that are situated on the other end of the political spectrum, such as Jobbik, have been far more effective in their attempts to recruit voters in the countryside.

The second contentious area for Milla and Hungarian civil society is raised by the role of Hungary’s youth. How can a largely disaffected body of Hungarian citizens and future citizens be mobilized and energized to take part in the democratic process? To this end Milla have tried to focus on more Facebook-friendly content and light material such as funny pictures and videos. These ‘like-magnets’ have been an important part of what Milla are trying to do as there is now a body of research showing that young people in Hungary are disaffected with mainstream party politics, viewing the parties as a corrupt joke (Bognar and Szakacs 2008). The rise of Jobbik is a reflection of this disaffection and the far-right has been effective in mobilizing support on the web themselves. Indeed, recent statistics show that among university-educated under-25s, 35% would support the Jobbik party (Dunai, 2012). So the impact of Milla in simply attracting the interest and participation of young people is



not insignificant at a time when the polarization of politics in the country has seen the rise of serious far-right political forces.

In terms of the prevalence of critical attitudes towards the government amongst the Hungarian public, it is far from clear what part Milla have played in this. After opening its Facebook page on December 22<sup>nd</sup> 2010, the day after the Hungarian Parliament passed the first of its new Media Laws, Milla very quickly acquired thousands of supporters (40,000 in three days), with a maximum now of 135,000, as yet nowhere near the million figure that it aspires to (Hungarian Spectrum, 2012a). This has also made its name an easy target of mockery for its critics (Rajcsanyi 2012). One member described a ‘virtual ceiling’ on the Facebook page in how content and activity spreads within the social network. The Facebook page very quickly became filled with content critical of the government and its activities. This was eventually converted into a more comprehensive media platform with the launch of ‘Millamedia’, a kind of alternative online news outlet producing both some original content as well as aggregating content from blogs and other sources. But as an informal virtual group, barely a social movement in its initial phase, it was hard to convert this into practical pressure on the government. It was almost as if simply speaking the truth to power, as the Quaker argument holds, was in itself sufficient to force change. Clearly with a government as opportunistic and powerful as Fidesz this strategy had to find a way to convert virtual solidarity into practical politics and to this end Milla organized a series of rallies in Budapest to protest against the government policies. These have been quite successful at times, attracting up to 80,000 people at their height. The rallies that were held were a crucial indication of Milla’s potential strength. Having mass protests of this kind had previously been the

domain of far-right groups (Rajcsanyi 2012). Indeed Milla's success in irritating the Fidesz government can be measured by the strategies put in place to stage pro-government rallies at the same time as those organized by Milla and to have the National Tax and Custom Administration investigate and intimidate two of Milla's main organizers at the beginning of 2012 (Contrarian Hungarian, 2012).

In total 7 rallies against the government have been held, all held in Budapest. There has been an attempt to hold one outside of Budapest, but it was largely a failure with a very small turnout (Rajcsanyi 2012). The fact that such protests took place in the capital is hardly unique to Hungary; such protests generally tend to take place in capital cities throughout Europe. But the problem for Milla has been that the division between Budapest and the rest of the country has been a well recognized part of the critiques of civil society in Hungary. How representative could Milla claim to be if they had no reach outside of the class of supporters that they evidently attracted: the educated, bohemian, liberal, and Budapest-centered? The contradiction embedded in Milla's self-description (on the one hand, they stand up for democratic values and human rights and stress solidarity with the disadvantaged and powerless, on the other, they claim not to represent anyone but to provide a space where groups or individuals may represent themselves which naturally presumes a certain level of self-awareness and self-organisation, something very much lacking in Hungary) is not lost on members of Milla. The recognized need to "go out to the country, find the right people, talk to them and help them organize themselves" (Peter Juhasz) goes way beyond the concept and present capacities of the essentially virtual network. Further, sustaining collective action outside of stage-managed events such as rallies remained limited to contributions to the Facebook page and sister-blogs. It is this issue, turning

the virtual into the real, as Diani describes it, that is the biggest issue confronting digital activism and virtual solidarity networks (Diani, 2000, p. 394).

Turning to forces outside Hungary to mobilize support and intensify pressure on the government has only ever been an ambivalent strategy for the Milla group. They established an English-language Facebook page to provide information that would not be available from mainstream Hungarian media. Beyond this, however, there has been a mixed response as to how much energy should be spent on building networks of solidarity outside Hungary. Various members of the Milla collective have been active in giving interviews to non-Hungarian media, the EU Parliament and Commission and have called for international support to intensify pressure on the Fidesz government. In characteristic fashion they have partly used their virtual status to try to mobilize support globally in a manner that is now common practice (Mason, 2012). However, simultaneously there has been a clear understanding that the issues Milla are addressing are concerned with Hungary and can only be solved by Hungarians. In this regard, interaction with foreign actors would be a distraction and a burden on precious time and resources for something key members of the group find 'not helpful'. However, there has been a consistent appeal to the EU as a safeguard of democratic rights that were seen to be eroding at home. This appeal to the EU is problematic for Milla as is recognized by its members: to what extent do they wish to call upon the EU to deal with the Hungarian government? As a democratic institution the EU has many profound weaknesses of its own that have become increasingly apparent since the Single European Act (1986). These include its determination to ratify a new constitution in the face of mass opposition from European citizens and its extended technocratic control over national fiscal policies. Calling upon the EU to

defend Hungarian democracy may look well intentioned but it would be revealing of two important things: First, Milla's inability to help mobilize and organize opposition to the government within Hungary; second, an inherent idealism and elitism within Milla's outlook that sees it appeal to a non-Hungarian group of political elites to defend Hungarian democracy. Of course, Milla have pointed out that what is happening in Hungary under Fidesz is an exceptional moment, but at a time when the EU is in a system-wide democratic and economic crisis this is not necessarily a compelling argument. Unsurprisingly members of Fidesz have questioned the right of the EU to interfere in Hungarian politics and anti-EU rhetoric is a staple of Fidesz politics (Schöpflin, 2012). Other critics have charged that Hungarian civil society has long been the preserve of intellectuals who hold to an elitist approach to politics, seeking to keep the masses in check whilst an intra-elite competition takes place. In this respect Milla face the danger of perpetuating this division between well-meaning liberal intellectuals and the masses (Lomax, 1997, p. 41).

For the people who were directly involved in the running of Milla in its founding days, there is a strong commitment to civil society and their role within it. From Milla's perspective civil society serves as the realm of free association that acts to advise, challenge and prompt the state into taking appropriate actions. In this respect Milla endorse a liberal democratic view of civil society as a realm of free association that exists in order to articulate and aggregate interests with a view to influencing government policy. Again, in an interview Peter Molnar has stressed that this is not a totalitarian government. They were, after all, elected and have made no moves to end democracy in Hungary (Molnar, 2012a). Nonetheless, democracies can be more or less democratic, more or less plural, tolerant and open societies, and for

Milla the spectrum has shifted dangerously in Hungary towards the authoritarian end of that spectrum. Given the corrupted nature of the political system under the socialist government and the authoritarianism of Fidesz it is hardly surprising that Milla's opposition took the form that it did. Civil society often represents an idealized realm apart from the political system and within which an appeal can be made to ordinary Hungarians to deal with their own government (Kumar, 1993). The problem for Milla was the extent to which the population in general either relates to or believes in their aims. To the extent that civil society is indeed stunted, depoliticized and largely the preserve of an intellectual elite and a section of the educated classes, then popular opposition to the government will be constrained.

By the summer of 2012 Milla's organizers had begun to question the strategy that they had adopted. The limitations of virtual solidarity and political protest in this context came to light as Milla decided to enter formal political life by forming an association by which it could have official members. Although this would still not make it a political party as such and maintain the 'image of civil society' (Molnar 2012b), the aim was to create something with a legal form with the ambitions of participating in politics formally. In addition Milla announced in the protest on October 23<sup>rd</sup> 2012 a joint anti-Orban coalition together with the trade-union movement Solidaritas ('Solidarity') and previous Socialist Prime Minister Gordon Bajnai under the banner Együtt 2014 ('Together 2014'); a decidedly new phase of the Milla story that would see them enter the political election race in April 2014 with disappointing results.

## **Conclusions: The limits to digital activism and virtual solidarity - Evaluating**

### **Milla**

How can we evaluate Milla's activities as a form of digital activism and political protest? Starting from a position of limited time and resources Milla used the internet effectively to promote a critical space to challenge the actions of the Fidesz government. They had 2 specific goals that can be used to gauge their effectiveness as a grassroots network. The first of these was simply to show all politicians that a critically informed public can challenge government authority and actions. This was to be done by the spread of sources of information that could find no outlet in a heavily regulated public media and a self-censoring private press. In this respect Milla were certainly successful in compiling such information and having acquired 135,000 followers a case can be made that they have achieved some success to this end. What is more difficult to gauge is the extent to which they were able to reach a reasonable cross-section of the Hungarian population and to the extent to which they remained a largely Budapest-based network. The rallies that they held also give some evidence in support of their ability to mobilize a critical and concerned civil society as they had hoped. But the limitation of this has been the inability to sustain a continuous pressure on the government aside from these rallies. As is found in many countries, mobilizing a population for a rally does not necessarily create major political problems for a government unless it transforms into something permanent and continuous. Milla's appeal is to the moral integrity and agency of Hungarian citizens and this lends itself to an idealist interpretation of their tactics. Tell people the truth and that will provide the impetus for effective opposition. Indeed, this is a very intellectualist position to take and there is little reason to suppose that it could have been anything more than a limited success without finding a way to mobilize and organize grassroots support in

the very communities that historically have been marginal to Hungarian political culture.

Their second goal was to create a platform for opposition groups in civil society, a free space within which alternate and plural voices could be expressed and heard at a time when the Fidesz government was pursuing policies that encouraged intolerance and a challenge to pluralism. To this end they were successful and the desire of Milla to remain outside party politics may well have been a part of this success. But again this does not translate into a civil society with active opposition groups capable of taking on an authoritarian government. The hope that technology can prove an effective mechanism for bringing about social change is, of course, long-standing and, as outlined above, the internet has generated fierce debates between skeptics and utopians about its potential for just this end. Milla's organizers were well aware of these problems but nonetheless it was the internet that provided the most immediate and easiest way of spreading their ideas. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, this ran into the obvious problem that virtual solidarity and politics must in the end translate into practical activity, the problem facing all such movements. By contrast, for example, the Zapatistas (who have proven to be adept users of the internet as a tool for counter-propaganda) have always used this technology alongside years of community activism, organizing and popular mobilization. A similar story can be found in the development of Jobbik (Wilkin, 2015). Milla had no such strategies or history and was therefore always likely to run into the limitations of existing civil society in Hungary. If there was not an audience of organized and mobilized groups ready to work together to challenge the government then they were unlikely to be created by Milla's activities.

Ironically, perhaps, the denouement to the Milla story saw them move to become a formal political group, convinced that they could achieve their goals without entering the political realm that they had hitherto disparaged. Interestingly the think-tank Nézőpont Intézet ,supporters of Fidesz, said in an interview that they thought the best thing that Milla could do was to become a political party if they wanted their ideas to be taken seriously (Takacs, 2012). The democratic political culture in Hungary is now well established in a way that places pressure on groups like Milla to play that particular game if they wish to be heard. But becoming a political party was a major risk for Milla and a huge step beyond where they began as a loose network of anti-government activists. But it tells us a great deal about the limitations of digital activism and virtual solidarity in Hungary in the current period



## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> CEU is a private university established in 1991 by George Soros' Open Society Institute with the explicit aim of helping the process of transition from dictatorship to democracy in Central Europe and promoting the values of Open Society.

<sup>ii</sup> Kumar makes the point that for many Eastern and Central European intellectuals civil society was viewed in utopian terms as a realm of anti-politics, democratic pluralism and anti-statism (Kumar, 1993: 375)

<sup>iii</sup> In January 2013 The Constitutional Court struck down the law claiming that voter registration would "unreasonably limit voting rights for Hungarians living in Hungary by requiring all voters to register." (Istvan Stumpf).

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