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The Nationalist Turn in Youth Culture: Far-Right Political Sympathies and the Frames of National Belonging among Hungarian Youth

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Abstract

This paper points to an important turn in youth culture which underpins increasing radical-right political sympathies and a propensity to national belonging and dignity-seeking among the youth. Qualitative analysis of 14 focus group interviews conducted in Hungary proves that the desire for political engagement of a significant segment of youth who have positioned themselves in opposition to a globalized youth culture and the apolitical stance of their generation. Inspired by cultural theories in political sociology that are also applied in the study of youth, and working with qualitative methods, this paper investigates the cultural dimension of radical-right politics and youth culture. The paper states that new forms of nationalism play a major role in the radical right turn among the youth by emphasizing the role of a general sense of disempowerment and disillusionment and claims for collective dignity which are framed in a hierarchical and mythical discourse about the nation. The major claim of this paper in this regard is that the renewal of nationalism and the commitment to the far-right in Hungary are closely connected.[1]

Keywords: far-right, political engagement, youth, nationalism, political culture.

1. Introduction

The research which this paper relies on was conducted – as part of a larger project on new forms of identity politics and nationalism – eight years ago, prompted at that time by an alarming increase in support for far-right politics among young Hungarians. This trend had been visible since 2009, the year that the far-right party Jobbik entered the European Parliament. Since then, the political actors on the far right have changed immensely. Nevertheless the lessons of our investigation concerning the social and cultural background of the far-right's support among youth are still relevant.

The aim of the paper is to reveal the discourses which frame far-right views and commitments, as well as to identify the social experiences and cultural perceptions on which these discourses are founded. In other words, it seeks to deconstruct young people's political sympathies with a view to understanding those aspects of their social relations, cultural consumption, social activities, and imaginations that tend to move them in the direction of the far right. More concretely, the paper applies a cultural perspective to understand the political turn of a considerable segment of Hungarian youth, which leans upon the cultural approach in political sociology, as Mabel Berezin (1997; 1999) has defined it.

To answer these questions, the paper starts with a short introduction to the study of youth on the far right, and to cultural theories in political sociology; two approaches which this paper aims to combine. The third section displays the methodology applied for data gathering and analysis. With the description of the composition and the dynamics of the focus group discussions, I aim to provide an introduction to the social and situational circumstances which shaped the discursive interventions that were analyzed. The results section of the paper has three parts. In the first section (4.1), I analyse the influence of peer groups on our young respondents and make a claim for the importance of belonging and tradition, which are opening up new avenues for youth culture that contradict pre-existing individual, consumption-oriented, and globalized trends. Section 4.2 deals with discursive strategies that seek to reclaim the nation in the form of historical nostalgia and racist othering. The last section (4.3) investigates the ways that socioeconomic problems and far-right responses to these problems are perceived and interpreted. I will conclude the paper by specifying the causes why nationalism plays a major role in the radical right turn among the youth by emphasizing the role of a general sense of disempowerment and disillusionment and claims for collective dignity, which are framed in a hierarchical and mythical discourse about the nation.

2. Background

2.1 Youth and the far-right

The sociology of youth proved a long time ago that the global leisure and entertainment industry is playing an overwhelming role in the formation of youth culture and the solidification of sub-cultural groups around the world (Firth, 1996; Futrell, Simi and Gottschalk, 2006). Significantly, this role appeared to be even more preponderant in the post-socialist world, where the global cultural industry has not only been incredibly successful in marketing the commodities of youth culture, but has managed to secure a hegemonic position by distributing the symbolic markers of a westernized middle-class status. Since this gatekeeping role has obviously been dependent on the economic growth – which has provided a growing number of young people with the means of entering the cultural market as consumers – the question what happens when growth stops is warranted and raised in this paper.

This moment, as this paper will show, is related to the disillusionment of the young generation and their succeeding turn toward traditional values and culture, as well as toward the populist far right concerning politics. The empirical investigation was aimed at increasing understanding of this political and cultural turn; more exactly, of the motivations of young people who, in contrast to previous generations and the apolitical mainstream of their generation, have become committed to public matters and are involved in the political and cultural activities of the far-right. Researchers have pointed out that youth are more likely than adults to support far-right-wing parties (Mierina and Koroleva, 2015). But, as Cas Mudde points out, most young people do not vote, hence engagement with the far-right occurs not through formal voting, but through engagement in extreme and radical-right subcultures (Mudde 2014: 5). This is exactly what I try to disclose in the Hungarian context: the transformation of youth culture in a way which opens the door to the new cultural and political entrepreneurs of the far right.

Throughout the previous decades, survey-based studies have shown that the majority of Hungarian youth are indifferent about or suspicious of politics. This is not unique in international comparison. Ø. N. Seippel and Å. Strandbu (2016) also claimed, in a publication about support for the populist radical right among the youth in Norway, that young people are less concerned, less interested, and less involved, and are more apathetic and cynical than previous generations, although trust in government and related institutions is still comparatively high. A different study of young people's political participation in Britain revealed that young people still profess a commitment to the political process, although they consider that there are relatively few opportunities available for them to intervene effectively in formal political life (Henn and Foard, 2013). Apathy in Hungary has been explained either as resulting from disbelief in and estrangement from political institutions (Szabó and Örkény, 1998), or by the inadequacy of the political socialization effectuated by the school system.

Certain interpretations claim, however, that the rejection of politics does not necessarily mean the denial of public concerns generally (Szabó, 2012), and starting in the 2000s the rise of a new 'political generation' was considered possible (Szabó and Kern, 2011). In line with the critique of political apathy thesis in the international literature, which claims that young people are interested in political matters but take part in diverse forms of political action (Norris, 2003; Henn and Foard, 2013), the research project Active Youth in Hungary[2] revealed that alongside a constantly passive majority, youth who are politically active exist at both ends of the ideological spectrum (Szabó and Oross, 2012; Róna and Sőrés, 2012). Other research dating back to the mid-2000s has shown the steady flow of young electorate towards the far right (Krekó, Juhász and Molnár, 2011). It has also been revealed that the most powerful explanatory factor of sympathy for the far-right is age: in other words, generational differences affect to a much greater degree far-right sympathy than social or economic status, or level of education (see, for example, Listening to Radicals, 2011).

2.2 Approaching the far-right from a cultural perspective

Although various studies bring up the role of culture – i.e. culture consumption, the role of subcultures, and new trends in youth culture – hardly any of them have consciously and consequently used culture as a starting point for understanding the change in political attitudes, demands, and visions of the new generation. This is the research gap which this paper aims to address. More concretely, I apply a cultural perspective to understand the political turn of a considerable segment of Hungarian youth, which leans upon the cultural approach in political sociology, as Mabel Berezin (1997; 1999) has defined it. This goes back to the analysis of culture as a symbolic toolkit, and defines political culture as a sub-field which covers 'meanings embodied in expressive symbols, practices and beliefs that constitute ordinary politics in a bounded collectivity' (Berezin, 1997: 265). In relation to the far-right, culture is considered either as part of the cause, meaning that certain cultural preferences, perceptions, and values make the appropriation of far-right – as well as participation in activities associated with the far-right – more probable, or as a special dimension of expressions which can be apprehended in the form of symbols, rituals, or discourses. As Cynthia Miller-Idriss notes, approaching the far right in the cultural space means on the one hand unfolding what attracts youth to the cultural components of the far right (e.g. what attracts them to far-right music, festivals, or consumer products), and on the other paying closer attention to the production and appropriation of symbols, images, and subcultural scenes (Miller-Idriss, 2018b: 13).

Not independently of the new waves of youth culture, a renewed emphasis on collective emotions, like feelings of belonging and a desire for the reinforcement of local communities, has been identified. Our paper reveals how 'Hungarianness' became the narrative frame of these emotions. This is why I focus

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[2] See http://aktivfiatalok.hu/

on performances and discourses and point out how they operate with new forms of nationalism. Concerning nationalism, I follow Banks and Gingrich (2006), who draw attention to the fact that the revitalization of 'national ideas,' although it originated from politics, is fundamentally connected to cultural performances.

A major claim of this paper in this regard is that the renewal of nationalism and the commitment to the far right in Hungary are closely connected. This is similar to what Cynthia Miller-Idriss has found concerning far-right youth in Germany. She claims that redefining national belonging happens in relation to commitment to the far right; consequently, there is a significant generational difference in national feelings in Germany; even a fight between generations. Her book *Blood and Culture* (2009) shows that young Germans who define their resistance and identity in terms of national identity are in fact reclaiming the nation, whereas their parents' generation resist this position because they are convinced that strong national feelings lead inevitably to fascism or Nazism. Her most recent book, *The Extreme Gone Mainstream* (2018), examines the commodification of the far-right scene and claims that far-right engagement is driven by two emotional impulses: the urge to belong and be part of a group, and the desire to rebel and reject mainstream society and its taboos (Miller-Idriss, 2018b: 29).

3. Methods and data

The empirical investigation applied focus group interviews, a method of examining a group of individuals (ideally five to eight in number) about a particular subject using a thematic guide and a set of projective techniques (images, film clips, and collective tasks). The interviews were taped, transcribed, and analyzed with Atlasti software. I am convinced that focus group interviews are especially useful for eliciting the views of young people. This is – as Bagnoli and Clark formulated in a recent methodological paper (2015) – because they enable researchers to recruit interviewees from a variety of backgrounds and foster the collaborative engagement of people who otherwise would be less willing to be participate.

Our focus group interviews followed an interview guide, the themes of which were selected partly for empirical and partly for theoretical reasons. Following two prompts that reminded interviewees of two festivals (one associated with global youth culture, the other with its local nationalist alternative) the discussion began with themes of music and youth culture. This was followed by a discussion about public affairs related to the participants' own activities whereby activities labelled as 'traditional' or 'national' took priority. The third topic was introduced through a short film that reported on a conflict between the Roma and far-right militia in a Hungarian village. This was because, at the time of the interviews, mobilization against the Roma and the poor was common, and had surprising levels of public support. The last part of the interviews dealt with social and economic problems personally affecting the participants and Hungarian youth in general, as well as the ways in which various political actors and especially far-right actors treat these problems.

A core intention of the research was to identify active youth groups in various cultural and political domains and to enter into discussion with their members. 'I'm looking for youth active in public life' – this is what I said at the beginning of my short fieldwork visits effectuated in five localities with the aim of identifying and meeting youth organizations and groups. The proper focus group discussions happened on the occasion of the second or third visit to each locality. The focus groups thus became mixed concerning the organizational affiliations of the participants, but the latter were in certain cases limited to the membership of one or two organizations. Before plunging into the analysis of our interviews, I will provide a brief overview of the fourteen groups and interview situations, mentioning their location, the social background of participants, and the focal points of their interaction. The fieldwork was effectuated in 2012 and 2013, making some details outdated; nevertheless, most of our research findings and – first of all – the ways that nationalism has been mobilized and crystallized in a new set of discourses and beliefs to frame and legitimize the demand for belonging and revolt are rather enduring. Fourteen focus group interviews were organized in five localities in Hungary (Budapest, Dunaújváros, Miskolc, Pécs, and Tamási) plus one in a Hungarian community abroad (in Cluj, Romania) with the participation of 5–8 people each (in total, 84 participants, including women and men in similar proportions).

The first interview (INT1) took place in one of Budapest's traditional working class districts. The president of the local far-right political organization helped us to organize the interview, although as someone reporting from a traditional female position she failed to become an opinion leader. This position was taken by two young men: a skilled worker who drew on his power as a male, and a young university student. Participants of the second group (INT 2) live in Pécs and its surroundings and are involved in youth heritage organizations. Participants of the third group (INT 3) were university students in Miskolc, active partly in the preservation of their school's historical patrimony and partly in the student union. Their discussion was mainly focused on Hungarian history; nevertheless, many participants adopted an exceptive stance vis-à-vis global youth culture. This, however, did not prevent them from following the activities of far-right (amongst them, paramilitary) organizations present in Eastern Hungary and appearing to draw on their discursive repertoire, especially when it came to defining their relations with Roma. Political allegiance was even more important for participants of the fourth group (INT 4). All of the participants were members or sympathizers of a Hungarian youth organization based in Transylvania who were fighting to strengthen the ethnic perception of the nation, which also includes Hungarians living abroad. There were two further focus groups for which participants were recruited from a minority background. While both groups (INT 5 and INT 6) were mainly composed of Roma, they differed according to social status. A crucial factor uniting the two groups was the shared understanding that Roma do not have a place in the imagined community of the Hungarian nation. The seventh interview (INT 7) was conducted among inhabitants of the most disadvantaged neighborhood in Miskolc and included members of a Christian

NGO. INT 8, conducted in Pécs, involved university students and graduates fresh out of university. Participants exhibited individualism combined with political apathy and realism. Importantly, these 'mainstream youths' depicted far-right political actors as responding to real social demands. Two interviews (INT 9 and INT 10) conducted in the former bastion of socialist industry, Dunaújváros, followed a somewhat similar track. One interview was conducted among university students, the other among skilled workers. While both discussions produced polarized debates about issues related to youth culture, history, and politics, they were united by the same kind of hegemonic anti-Gypsyism. INT 11, conducted in Budapest with the involvement of skilled workers and high-school graduates, did not revolve around politics but rather around music, including a debate about global or national rock music. INT 12 was attended by university students and young professionals in Budapest, and was the only interview in which a critical stance towards nationalist and racist discourses emerged. Our youngest focus group interviewees (INT 13) live in a small town in the Transdanubia Region. As in group 10, the opinion leader obtained their position by raising and dominating the discussion of historical topics. The last group (INT 14) differed significantly from the others as it was attended only by two people, but because the latter were leaders of Jobbik's youth wing in the small town, I considered the interview content worthy of closer scrutiny.

To sum up, in this section I have briefly introduced the methods and data which underpin the claims of the following sections. Certainly not all the elements of the interviews are going to be presented; our emphasis will be on those aspects of youth culture which help us to understand far-right political sympathies and the propensity to national belonging and dignity-seeking among Hungarian youth.

4. Results

4.1 Traditionalist moves in youth culture

Researchers who deal with youth culture in Hungary have pointed out that the *Sziget* Festival – one of Europe's biggest music festivals – is the most important reference point for Hungarian youth culture (Gábor, 2000). This, of course, means that the multicultural ambiance radiated by the 300,000 to 500,000 participants who gather every year in Budapest exercises a powerful influence over young people's cultural outlooks and imagination. It is for this reason that I kicked off each focus group interview with a video focusing on the festival, and asked our participants to share their experiences (in the case of those who had already taken part in the event), or their motives (if they had not yet paid a visit to 'The Island'). This discussion was immediately followed by similar probing of modes of relating to another cultural event which has been invented as the nationalist or traditionalist antipode of *Sziget:* the '*Magyar Sziget* Festival.'

Focus group participants who had taken part in the *Sziget* Festival tended to come away with rather positive impressions. The focal point of their experience was what our young participants described as 'euphoria' or as 'a sense of freedom.'

Significantly, these emotions were in some way usually connected to the variegated music and the multicultural ambiance offered by the festival. There is, however, a wholly different mode of relating to the *Sziget* Festival – one that is best described as a moralizing approach, and which was mostly shared by participants who had not attended the event (and probably never would) – and, very importantly, was in evidence in the testimony of the majority of our focus group participants.

Those who most firmly condemned the Sziget Festival tended to simultaneously reject 'individualistic materialism,' thereby valuing community and belonging above individualism, and national heritage above the pursuit of liberty. It is also noteworthy that this resistive stance came in the form of a roughly sketched anti-globalism, of which a critique of cultural liberalism was an explicit-, and anti-capitalism an implicit element. One of the focus group participants put forward precisely the same arguments as were applied in the denial narrative:

> AB: - 'Exhibition of sexual deviancy is also quite common at the Sziget. …'
> CD: - 'There is a FankaDeli song called New Magyar Conquest.[3] One of the verses reads: "*The gathering of Magyar-haters, its name is Sziget Festival, where it's uncool to be Magyar and to say you don't smoke [weed]."* That's it, that's the essence of the Sziget.'
> AB: - 'By the way, the Sziget Festival symbolizes how today's leaders, those who run the world, want to see young people behave and look like….'
> EF: - 'There's a huge difference, because the Magyar Sziget is characterized by sacrality and tradition, whereas the "Zsiget" [a conflation of the word *zsidó* – meaning Jew or Jewish – and the word *Sziget*], 'cause that's how I call it, is exclusively profit-oriented. It's all about the money. I would add one thing to the video. It gives you the impression that everyone is happy, chilled, and behaving in a civilized manner. Well, let me tell you that the reality is something else. You see people stumbling and lying around all over the place. They really do nasty and wicked things, without giving them a thought, out of their minds, and that's, … that's intolerable for any decent person.' (INT 1)

The above passage exemplifies how the refusal of the global music scene operates using enemy images: the enmification of sexual minorities is strongly connected with an anti-Semitic discourse. A dislike of homosexuality and the strong expression of male comradeship leads to the venting of anger against other perceived enemies (the Jews, the elites, the authorities) who in Hungary are somewhat protected by the taboos of mainstream society. Probing the motivations, sensibilities, and fantasies of the critics of globalization, I found cultural values that draw their power from supposed ancient origins and particularity, and which are objectified in national symbols and in collective activities aimed at reinvigorating

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[3] FankaDeli is an entrepreneur in the nationalist music scene who plays rap music with nationalist lyrics.

them. This engagement in national values is grounded in an acute sense of alienation that our young respondents increasingly tend to connect with the workings of unpatriotic elite groups. Cosmopolitan elites are perceived as simultaneously bearing responsibility for the dispossession of working-class people, and the disempowerment of Hungarians – the first being achieved through neoliberal policies, and the second through the denationalization of the social imaginary.

Furthermore, the change in youth culture can be explained not only by a rejection of global culture, as stated above, but also by the creation of an alternative supply of the latter. Miller Idriss found that the growth of an extremist commercial market and the mainstreaming of an extremist sub-cultural style have coincided with one of the most significant waves of far-right popularity in Europe (Miller-Idriss, 2018b: 6). Similarly, in Hungary, national clothing brands (Molnar, 2016) and music (Feischmidt and Pulay, 2017) have created a new nationalistic and far-right popular culture ('*rechtextreme Alltagskultur*,' Langebach and Raabe, 2009).

Although nationalist music[4] was the most commodified form of nationalist pop culture at the time of our interviews, music was not the only and not even the most prevalent reference point of 'the national' in our interviews. Focus groups participants who found refuge in the primacy of belonging and community usually reported their engagement in activities they call 'heritage work.' I quote in the following the introductory part of a focus group discussion when the interviewees introduced themselves in relation to their personal experience with heritage work.

> GH: - 'I am G., and my life is heritage work and the fatherland.'
> IJ: - 'My name is I., I am doing environmental studies. My life is natural medicine, nature, and heritage work.'
> KL: - 'My name is K., my life is also heritage work. (...) The whole thing began when I was nine or ten years old.... It was the first time I had ridden a horse and held a bow in my hands. And that stayed with me. I got hooked on archery....'
> MN: - 'I am M. and I was an awfully depressed youth. My high school kicked the chair out from under my feet with its religion. It was martial arts that saved me from self-pity. This was the first thing that made me feel strong, that showed me some other way than lying on the floor under the influence of some cheap and shitty drug, than lamenting my past. (...) It helped me stand straight, and to show that I have strength.'
> KL: - 'So we respect and nurture this heritage and that's also important. It's a good feeling that we are able to hand over a piece of the past. For instance, we go to schools to hold lectures. We are also going tomorrow. We usually bring an authentic dinner set with us.' (INT 2)

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[4] 'National rock' was born from a fusion of skinhead rock music and folk rock music. Lyrics typically blend radical political critique (anti-establishment, anti-globalism, anti-liberalism) with old national mythology.

So what is heritage work? In practical terms, it means volunteering in historical re-enactment activities, in the revival of 'old' rituals, crafts, and cultural traditions. Importantly, participants do not interpret their activities as leisure, but as collective engagement bent on strengthening social bonds and recreating a sense of community. They characterize themselves as following a 'value-centric' approach that transcends individual desires and which allows them to evade the mistakes of their generation: dishonesty and immoral behavior.

To sum up, this section claims the palpable influence of an emergent discourse that rejects middle-class cultural ideals and the concept of leisure promulgated by the global cultural industry among the participants of our focus groups.[5] If the Hungarian youth sociologist Kálmán Gábor (2008) was correct in stating that there was a generational shift in youth culture in the 1990s (when the norms of the Western European middle-class became entrenched in the post-socialist space), then I may now formulate the claim that there is a similar, albeit opposite move under way in Hungary. As highlighted above, this shift is motivated by the overall rejection of the secular, cosmopolitan and individualistic agenda of globalized elites and promotes a return to the trenches of local community, mostly framed in historical and ethnonational terms. The conservative and collectivist ethos that underpins this reactive tendency appears to us to be part of a wider European trend which anthropologist Douglas Holmes described as an integralist move driven by people's desire to maintain their ethnic identity and solidarity within a globalized world (Holmes, 2000).

4.2 Reclaiming the nation: historical revisionism and the exclusion of perceived enemies

The two issues that most powerfully energized our focus group interviews were the so-called 'Gypsy-question' and so-called 'Trianon-trauma,' both interpreted in relation to 'the nation.' The importance of the latter was immediately manifested as it triggered powerful reactions irrespective of the composition of the focus group. The topic of 'Trianon' opened up the discussion to more general questions concerning the nation; and significantly, those who introduced this issue usually managed to retain a leading position throughout the whole of the discussion, which shows the strength of the topic.

What is Trianon? The term refers to *Grand Trianon,* the palace where the treaty between Hungary and the victors of the First World War was signed on 4 June, 1920. Among our young participants there was a consensus that the treaty, which forced Hungary to give up two-thirds of its former territory, constitutes a 'national tragedy.' In the words of one participant: 'This was a gigantic nation, and they cut off its legs and arms. They left a small piece in the middle to show that there was once such a thing.' (INT 10) The grief caused by this loss is particular in that it possesses significant mobilizational power; its discussion triggers feelings of

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[5] We do not know what focus group participants' cultural consumption patterns actually are, but this was not the focus of interest.

indignation, hatred, revenge, and revolt – emotional responses that are consequently framed in discourses about the nation's enemies (who are responsible for the tragedy) and speculation about the possibility of redressing the injustice. As revealed elsewhere in detail, Trianon and 'Greater Hungary' have been revived by the Hungarian far-right scene (Feischmidt, 2018) with the aim of creating a powerful object of fantasy that could become the cornerstone of a new nationalist discourse. In geographical terms, 'Greater Hungary' refers to the territory of the Hungarian Kingdom before 1920. Far-right actors have spent a great amount of energy infusing this symbolic space with positive meanings that are associated with the country's glorious past, contrasting it with the hated, shameful predicament of today's 'smaller Hungary.'

National myths, as Miller-Idriss (2018a) notes in relation to the reinvigoration of German mythology, filter and reconstruct cultural memory and invoke nostalgia for an imagined past. The cultivation of mythic narratives depends on the 'memory vacuum,' a concept introduced to express the lack of rational discourses about national history (Sik, 2015: 54). Mythical narratives are likely to be more powerful and more appealing to a disenfranchised youth for whom alternative narratives that promise success in the fragmented, modern, rational, globalized economy appear either false or impossible to achieve (Miller-Idriss, 2018b: 101). Stéphanie Dechezelles (2014) argues that the discourse of far-right Italian youth activists includes a 'teleological project concerning the ideal society' that is linked to a historical legendary and a symbolic territory (Dechezelles, 2014: 52–54).

Similarly, our case shows that for those participants who stress the importance of remembering the 'Trianon disaster,' the cultivation of 'Hungarianness' is an avenue for redressing their dignity, which has been undermined by disenfranchisement and uncertainty. This was brought home to us by the frequent mentioning of 'pride,' which our focus group participants described as something that they could establish by learning and teaching Hungarian history; participating in (and in some cases, organizing) commemorative events; wearing or displaying 'ancient' and once repressed historical symbols (the map of Greater Hungary or the Árpád-striped flag); or listening to 'national rock music' disseminated by an emergent cultural industry.

Now I turn my attention to the strategies of othering that are used to delineate the boundaries of the national community. The Roma issue was not only the topic that generated the most intense exchanges in our focus groups, but also the one that mobilized the highest number of participants, involving virtually everybody in discussion. Crucially, the intensity of the exchange was *not* the result of deep disagreements between representatives of different viewpoints, but was rather the outcome of the urge of participants to contribute to one-sided discussions with personal stories. Those who attempted to temper or criticize anti-Roma discourses were quickly marginalized by other participants.[6]

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[6] We note that three of the fourteen groups constituted an exception in that the majority of participants adopted an anti-racist stance. In two of these the majority of participants were Roma. In

Several studies have identified connections between youth engagement with far-right and xenophobic, Islamophobic, or racist attitudes (Mudde 2014: 10), including van der Valk`s (2014) research in the Netherlands which found that ethnic prejudice is more important than political ideas in motivating youth to engage with extreme right-wing movements. Mierina and Koroleva (2015) have shown, based on the MYPLACE dataset of 14 European countries which explored young people's support for the ideas voiced by far-right parties, that there is variability in negative attitudes towards minorities, xenophobia, and welfare chauvinism within Europe: youth from post-socialist settings, along with Greek youth, hold stronger anti-immigrant and xenophobic attitudes compared to the youth of other West European countries.

Our research is not the first to call attention to the existence of a powerful anti-Roma public discourse in Hungary. Numerous studies have highlighted the preponderance of ethnic stereotypes and prejudice in different segments of Hungarian society (Csepeli, Fábián and Sik, 1998) and among supporters of different political parties (Krekó, 2012). What is much less clear is how this anti-Gypsy cultural hegemony emerged in the first place, and what keeps it in place. Concerning this latter crucial point, our knowledge is mostly limited to a few analyses that demonstrated the extreme permeability of mainstream media to negative stereotyping in the field of media studies (Juhász, 2010), and research that emphasized the role of far-right political entrepreneurs in the solidification of the image of the unruly and dangerous Gypsy (Stewart, 2012; Feischmidt and Pulay, 2017; Bíró-Nagy and Róna, 2013). Our own data allow us to make a modest contribution to this line of inquiry by highlighting the existence of a discourse of fear of the Roma amongst those who regard themselves as members of the ethnic majority, the lack of credibility of critical anti-racist discourses, and the current efficiency of historical discourses of Magyar supremacism.

The prevalent attitude of rejection vis-à-vis members of the Roma minority (which, in terms of its objective forms of expression, ranges from avoidance to calls for ethnic cleansing) was legitimized in two ways by our focus group participants: first, by reference to crime statistics and crime events that are widely circulated in mainstream and social media, and second, by reference to minor criminal acts – typically theft, robbery, or bodily harm – disseminated in personal and informal narratives. Most of our participants used these sources of legitimization simultaneously, mixing allusions to 'well-known' facts or events with personal stories to buttress generalized statements. If this combination of collective traumas (such as the lynching of a teacher by members of a frightened Roma family in 2006, or the murder of a handball player in 2009) and personal complaints is explosive, it is because they mutually reinforce each other and generate a climate of fear and paranoia that is upheld by the fantasy image of the 'brutal Gypsy.' The power of this climate is demonstrated by the fact that hate-

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other words, there was only one non-Roma group whose participants successfully countered anti-Roma narratives: this was the group recruited from Budapest's cosmopolitan elite circles.

crime incidents that took place in 2008/9, causing the death of six Roma people, were only mentioned by the Roma participants of our focus groups.

The link between crime and ethno-racial background is of course not something that solidified overnight, or spontaneously for that matter. Since our focus group interviews cannot shed light on this critical process, I will constrain myself to analyzing the effectiveness of strategies aimed at countering the prevalent anti-Gypsy discursive hegemony. I begin by stating that participants who attempted to counter the dominant discourse on Roma by citing positive personal experiences were rebuffed: their experiences were simply shut out and ignored. The few participants who attempted to legitimize their personal positive experiences by recourse to professional expertise were slightly more successful, managing at least to spark a debate. The least successful were those individuals who attempted to argue against racism from a purely ideological position, citing egalitarian principles and universal human rights. This suggests that the interpretation of the Roma / non-Roma divide is being left to those who argue for the existence and salience of biologically or culturally grounded differences and hierarchical relations.

The racist discourse targeting Roma creates a consensus around special policy measures that are presented as 'solutions' to the 'Gypsy-threat' but which in fact serve the function of controlling an inherently 'unruly' and 'inferior' group, as the following discussion from one of our interviews shows:

> MN: - 'It's unmanageable. The solution would be quite drastic, so I won't mention it.'
> OP: - 'Unmanageable. What can you do? Put them in prison?'
> MN: - 'No, because then their number will grow... And anyhow it costs seven to ten thousand forints per day to keep them there. So no way.'
> QR: - 'If you take away those subsidies and support they will steal and rob.'
> ST: - 'They would have to be exterminated, ... seriously. This has to be said. They have to be exterminated.'
> MN: - 'It's not a bloodbath that is needed, but birth control. That would solve the problem in thirty years... I don't specifically care who is a Gypsy. There should be a committee to check whether someone is capable of bringing up a child in Hungary.'
> *Are you thinking of Gypsies or everyone?* (Interlocutor)
> ST: - 'About everyone.'
> MN: - 'It [the policy] should be applied to everyone, so that the Gypsies cannot claim that it's discriminatory.'
> QR: - 'But 95 per cent of inmates are Gypsies anyway.' (INT 10)

As revealed in this quote, those who subscribe to the biological approach did not hesitate to raise the possibility of sterilization, the reintroduction of the death penalty, and even the option of the 'Magyar majority taking justice into its own hands.' This shows that while some of the measures proposed by our radical interviewees are aimed at disciplining the racialized 'other' through the

reorientation of state policies, others go beyond the sphere of modern biopolitical intervention (understood in Foucaultian terms) by raising the possibility of popular justice in relation to a group whose members can be defined as *homo sacer* – as people who can be killed without the killer(s) being regarded as murderer(s).

The 'politics of fear,' characteristic, as Ruth Wodak and her co-authors argue, of far-right discourse, depends on performative strategies which claim victimhood through reporting dramatized and exaggerated events (Wodak et al., 2013). I conclude this analysis by reemphasizing the prevalence of such reports in relation to Roma among our Hungarian respondents. I have argued that the discourse of fear is driven by personal anxieties that are embedded in a culturally and biologically grounded supremacist discourse that shuts out non-congruent aspects of social reality and establishes the racialized image of the unruly 'other' that must be controlled, disciplined, and – according to some – physically persecuted if necessary.

4.3 The nationalist framing of political engagement

The political moment which our research has documented was the rise of the far-right which started in Hungary about ten years ago. I will contextualize our data with a view to its antecedents and consequences, keeping in mind that the main interest was understanding how civic and political engagement has been engineered by a traditionalist shift in youth culture and by the desire to belong, framed in national terms.

In the interviews I offered participants the option to discuss three topics which political parties pursue in characteristically different ways: the Roma issue, the country's relationship with the European Union, and the heritage of state socialism. Since I have already dealt with the first topic, and the third one seemed to be less relevant to our young interviewees, I will concentrate in the following on the second topic. Concerning the relationship to the European Union, which I introduced with a picture documenting the burning of an EU flag by one of Jobbik's leading politicians, I found that while most participants did not share the anger communicated by the act, the majority agreed with the critique. While university students used the occasion to expose in more general terms the negative consequences of Hungary's membership in the EU, workers from Pécs and Dunaújváros related personal stories to reflect on the economic difficulties and social problems that they associate with membership. This shows that criticism of the European Union underscores a broader criticism directed at Hungary's transition to capitalism. In the groups where such systemic issues were raised there was a general consensus that the parties that managed the process of transition are guilty of mismanagement, as well as of silencing voices that criticized the process and outcomes of the transition. The following short quote represents well the consensus that emerged in these groups: 'Jobbik deals with the issues that other parties don't engage with or only pretend to engage with. Criminality, the emigration of young people, multinational companies, agriculture, these are the popular issues they deal with' (INT 1).

While precarity is one of the pillars on which the young generation's collective sensibilities are based, I do not see it as the only one. Fatigue with the consumer lifestyle offered by the global cultural industry is another factor I identified as a key driver. The success of the alternative cultural scene centered around (and feeding) the far-right resides in its protagonists' ability to recognize the new generation's disillusionment with the master narrative of 'freedom' and young people's longing for more stable and durable forms of identification.

Our focus group interviews showed how the success of the far-right lies in its movement-like character which differentiates it from other parties and magnetizes youth who have become disillusioned with the way other political formations engage in the art of politics. The grassroots approach that affiliates the party with other social movements was considered a unique trait that differentiated Jobbik from other parties at the time our interviews were conducted. Jobbik has also capitalized on the social and symbolic capital amassed by local groups that have been involved in 'heritage work' in the last ten years, as well as the emergent 'nationalist subcultures.'

The fact that young people who are interested in cultural and political activity have turned to the far-right and to the subcultures that are within its orbit is not only connected with the attractiveness of what these initiatives have to offer, but also with the lack of alternatives, as one of our focus group participants – a self-identified 'liberal or leftist' – formulated it:

> The main problem with Hungarian public life is that liberal and left-wing thought has not been able to create a youth organization, or rather any kind of organization. It cannot formulate itself in a way that is attractive to anyone. [...] It looks like most of us are liberal or left-wing here. And still, we cannot – none of us can – name an organization or group about which you could say 'I sympathize with this, I will support it.'

Our focus group interviews revealed the social and cultural grounds that complete the political factors which explain the success of far-right mobilization among the Hungarian youth. As I have documented, resentment because of the 'failed transition' and the desire to belong created by manifold actors in the civic and cultural scene in neo-nationalist terms not only precede far-right politics, but have bought into being a sociocultural imaginary which political actors have swiftly picked up on and instrumentalized. The main political player to recognize this potential a couple of years ago was the far-right party *Jobbik*, which nevertheless was replaced by *Fidesz* after the latter party took over the nationalist and xenophobic discourse in 2015.[7] Subsequently, Jobbik lost one-third of all its supporters, and, as a survey-based study about party support from July 2018 shows, the biggest loss was among the youth, besides losses among more educated

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[7] https://www.politico.eu/article/hugary-right-wing-trading-places-fidesz-jobbik/
https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/04/06/how-hungarys-far-right-extremists-became-warm-and-fuzzy/
See also Pirro and Rona (2019) and Grskovits (2020)

social categories.[8] Thus, although political actors change, on the level of collective emotions and social perceptions our focus group interviews revealed quite stable tendencies. Social resentment – including a tendency to social disillusionment, Euroscepticism, antiglobalism, and antielitism – and revolt, as well as a desire for the recovery of collective dignity in terms of a ethno-nationalism that includes historical nostalgia and an exclusionary logic are issues which resonate with many young people, first of all those engaged in public matters. This is part of what Szombati – after an investigation of the rise of anti-Gypsyism within the context of the crisis suffered by the Hungarian rural population as a result of capitalist transformations connected to global economic trends and Hungary's accession to the EU – called the 'making of right-wing hegemony' (Szombati, 2018: 12).

5. Discussion

In agreement with Cynthia Miller-Idriss, who investigated far-right youth in Germany from a cultural perspective, this investigation shows that the public engagement of youth in Hungary is also successfully influenced by far-right political actors, the commodification of the far-right scene, and new forms of nationalism. Hence, this paper points to another explanatory fact too: an important shift in youth culture, which I see as one of the key factors underpinning political sympathies and allegiances. While the 14 focus group interviews are clearly not sufficient to support the making of general statements, I believe that this empirical material allows for the formulation of a few modest claims.

First, one can conclude that certain segments of the 18–30 age group formulated positions against global youth culture, which they perceive as being materialist and individualist and too much centered on the idea of freedom. Some of the focus group interviews featured working class youth who do not have the means to keep up with global youth culture and whose diatribes against cosmopolitan elites, and whose celebration of 'little men' and communities are discursively linked to their own precarious situation. However, similar criticism was encountered from interviewees who also conveyed their strong disillusionment with the master narrative of 'freedom' and expressed a more general sense of alienation, as well a longing for more stable and durable forms of identification. Since I would need more biographical information, as well as an understanding of local histories, to establish evidence-based links between cultural and structural tendencies, I will constrain myself to noting that it appears to be a critique of establishment and a search for respect (and other means of empowerment) that push young people from different social backgrounds to look for an alternative ideology.

I am in agreement with scholars who claimed long before me that the populist radical right is not merely a political option. Its incredible success can be explained by the fact that its political views are embedded in a broader cultural

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[8] http://www.zaveczresearch.hu/lejtmenetben-a-jobbik/

context. Michael Stewart (2012), who led a piece of comparative research into European anti-Gypsy mobilization, formulated the claim – referring back to Douglas Holmes – that what nationalist populism makes remarkable is the reformulation of social solidarity in terms of cultural particularism. The former aims – according to Stewart – to undermine the idea of a cultural diversity supported by transnational political actors, first of all, the European Union. I accept the role of anti-EU aspirations; nevertheless, I argue that the discourse which legitimizes far-right thinking, with its changing political actors among Hungarian youth, is not only a new discourse premised on racialized exclusion but also a discourse about national pride. This, as a reaction to a very general sense of disempowerment and disillusionment, aims to reestablish collective dignity through the construction of a hierarchical and mythical discourse which combines national and race categories.

The outcome of the shared frustration with the mainstream, as I have pointed out, is according to my second statement a traditionalist turn characterized by a celebration of national traditions and a desire for collective activities that re-enact a glorious past in the present, while also allowing participants to build defensive bonds. This is a nationalist turn in youth culture which is characteristic not only of Hungary but which is present throughout the whole region, as comparative studies on far-right movements and their social power have proven. (Pasieka, 2017). Moreover, recent analyses have confirmed that the rise of youth nationalism has also been made possible in Poland due to the entanglement of an anti-establishment and Eurosceptic political discourse with national historical symbols and youth pop culture (Junes, 2016).

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