Creating a New Normal

The Mainstreaming of Far-Right Ideas Through Online
and Offline Action in Hungary

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On 1 February 2011, hundreds of people demonstrated peacefully against
the appointment of a known antisemite as the new Director of the Új Szín-
ház theater in Budapest. Roughly one hundred far-right counter protestors
in paramilitary uniforms from a successor organization of the Hungarian
Guard staged a counter protest, trying to attack the antifascist demon-
strators. Four months later, on 7 July, Jobbik organized a protest march
from the MSZP headquarters to the Fidesz headquarters with the support
of various other far-right groups, marching triumphantly over Budapest's
World Heritage Site, the boulevard Andrássy út. Only one lone counter
demonstrator showed up. The contrasting turnouts of counter-activists at
these two events indicate lots of things, not least the far-right's ability to
mobilize grounded action in Hungary. The far right heavily advertised
these events on the internet and used documentation of their strong show-
ing at both as propaganda afterwards online.

This paper aims to analyze how Jobbik, as Hungary's main opposi-
tion party, mainstreamed far-right ideas through a combination of online
and offline action. As a variety of terms are used in academic and general
media discourses to describe political families with specific sets of cha-
racteristics, the notion of 'the mainstream' is analytically difficult to de-
fine and understand, as demonstrated by Aristotle Kallis (Kallis 2015).
He observes that 'mainstream' and 'extremism' are mutually-dependent
relational terms, as is the case with the left-right-dichotomy that pre-
supposes an inherent center (Bobbio 1997). Using a Gramscian approach,
Bert Cammaerts has most recently examined discursive strategies that
the far right employed in the Netherlands and Belgium to mainstream

its discourse (Cammaerts 2018). He described how a successful war of position, through provocations by far-right leaders, led to media coverage which amplified their message and helped to normalize their ideas. In Hungary the far-right discourse is not only normalized but actually institutionalized, by fences, laws, a new constitution and various other legal practices. Therefore, in the context of this chapter, the process of mainstreaming is understood as getting people to sympathize with a set of ideas so as to mobilize them to act accordingly, in order to institutionalize those ideas through legal or other actions. To put it more bluntly: mainstreaming is the attempt to define what is normal and, at the same time, to make or frame the meaning of events, actions, structures, and institutions at the level of popular political discourse. Every mainstreaming process necessarily involves an attempt to construct a new reality, a new normal. Since mainstreaming processes take place in dynamic and contentious settings, they do not necessarily have to succeed to become influential.

Grounded on ideas developed by Sidney Tarrow and Manuel Castells, I would argue that political mobilization processes (and mainstreaming is the final result of such a mobilization process) have a better chance of being successful when accompanied by interdependent and self-referential online and offline action. Tarrow identified the power of networks and organizations, as well as the power of frames, emotions and collective identities as two of the main "powers in [a] movement" that transform singular claims into actions (Tarrow 2011). Castells examined contemporary revolutionary events and new social movements and concluded that those movements were networked in multiple forms offline and online, they became movements through the appropriation of urban spaces, were highly self-reflective and aimed to change the values of society (Castells 2012). In this vein, this essay details how Jobbik used the internet and social media in synch with offline actions such as its May festivals to turn ethnonationalist obsessions into the new normal in Hungary.

Spreading Ideas and Making Meaning: Jobbik as Avant-Garde on Facebook and Twitter

The internet, and particularly social networking platforms, offer alternative ways to circumvent more established media forums such as newspapers, television and radio, enabling communication with audiences

without the interference of external editors. For example, Castells demonstrated how the internet and social networking sites such as Twitter helped to bypass censorship and the traditional media during the Tunisian uprisings in 2011 (Castells 2012). The potential audiences accessible via these new channels are also larger and more diverse. Crucially, too, they can be interacted with and analyzed at the same time. Barack Obama's election campaigns in 2008 and 2012 were considered ground-breaking in terms of how they used the internet to connect and reinforce support and supporters. But even before that, the Hungarian far right created an online network of websites and the earliest forms of social networking sites in conjunction with the street protests of 2006, which erupted when it became public knowledge that Ferenc Gyurscány, the then socialist Prime Minister, had willingly lied about the national economy. Not only were Jobbik instrumental to this online-offline action, they were also the earliest political party to become regular users of Twitter and Facebook in Hungary. New means of communication can facilitate social change when used appropriately. Therefore it is historically typical for social movements in general, and in some cases particularly for the far right, to become early adopters of new technologies (for example the use of cinema and mass propaganda by Nazi Germany). Referring to the new social movements he observed, Castells says:

"Historically, social movements have been dependent on the existence of specific communication mechanisms [...]. In our time, multimodal, digital networks of horizontal communication are the fastest and most autonomous, interactive, reprogrammable and self-expanding means of communication in history" (Castells 2012: 15).

Whether short messages, videos, clips, gifs or images, Jobbik has come to use everything at its disposal and has been hugely successful in doing so. For example, between June 2013 and June 2014 Jobbik had 142 individual Facebook posts that were either liked or shared by over 1000 users, while the other two major Hungarian parties lagged behind: Fidesz had 140 and MSZP 112. These statistics may now sound small, but for comparison Marine Le Pen's French Front National had merely ten. During the same period, Jobbik posted 67 short videos, 27 event advertisements, and 42 graphs. Fidesz shared 7 videos, 58 event advertisements, 54 graphs and 16 articles from their web page. MSZP posted 23 videos, 23 event advertisements, 49

graphs, and 11 articles from their web page (Karl 2016). To highlight the differences more precisely, one can take a closer look at the posts from 15 March 2014, which is the Hungarian national bank holiday. The differences between the three party's posts are telling. All three used photos, but while Jobbik posted joyful images from the midst of their annual festival, Fidesz posted photos of the renovation of the city square in front of the parliament building and MSZP posted a collage of pictures taken during speeches. In other words, Jobbik conveyed togetherness and included its Facebook users in the event through the lens of a photographer, while Fidesz depicted one governmental achievement and the MSZP post had the character of an official press release.

Jobbik's communication and online strategy is built around five pillars: interconnectedness with other far-right actors at the national level; international ties to parties, groups and associations; interactivity with its online audience; multi-mediality; and cross-mediality. At the national level, Jobbik is constantly interconnected through likes, links, shares and retweets with other far-right actors, be they groups, associations, brands or music bands. This network helps to spread messages across different spheres and so reach wider audiences – not exclusively the political or media spheres, but simultaneously the music, sports, clothing and even food spheres. At the international level, Jobbik's connections to Spanish, French and Italian far-right groups have been mutually supportive, with the communities sharing knowledge about best practice concerning online communication methods and modern styles of formulating political ideas. Via these connections we now know that Hungarian far-right practices have had an international impact. For example, in 2015, the German NPD showed a Facebook banner on its official page thanking Hungary for building the fence at their southern border. While such an act might seem superficial, it is still quite extraordinary.

Alongside these (inter-)national connections, interactivity is another pillar of Jobbik's communication strategy online. The official party accounts occasionally share and post contents from non-party-affiliated sources, and motivates its followers to actively share, retweet and engage through likes and follows. Such strategies have been rare for far-right parties who predominantly just share their own content. Those more traditional parties have a clear top-down approach to the management of social media channels, while Jobbik has a relatively bottom-up approach and interacts with its followers.

Jobbik's social media appearances are neither streamlined nor kept distinct from each other. When content on Youtube, Facebook or Twitter 'works' or 'goes viral' it is shared across the party's other platforms as well. While this is the essence of social network marketing, other political parties have been much slower at using cross-mediality to boost their online performance. This cross-medial approach goes hand-in-hand with multi-mediality. Be it videos, graphs, memes, articles or photos, different kinds of content are tailored by Jobbik to attract different audience types. And while other parties post long videos, Jobbik rarely posts videos that last more than 30 seconds, offering lots of quick content that only require limited bandwidth or small data transfers to access, and short attention spans to consume.

LIKING, LINKING AND APPROPRIATING: A STRATEGIC APPROACH

Those pillars made Jobbik's use of social networking sites efficient and successful. At a time when major parties in Hungary and elsewhere were just starting to form a strategic approach to social networking sites, Jobbik already had more than 300,000 followers on Facebook. Of course, it is not known how many of these users were actually fake profiles but their follower numbers grew at a steady rate from mid-2013. By June 2018, the party had already reached half a million followers, which is a remarkable proportion of the potential audience given that Hungary has only 10 million inhabitants and roughly five million Facebook users.

Donald Trump's successful election campaign is the most famous example of how repetition and echo-chambers can blur messages with facts. His enormous number of Twitter followers made him and his candidacy relevant and set him apart in the first place when vying for the Republican nomination. Although much less famous, Jobbik has also proven itself adept at reinforcing its messages in the simplest forms, beginning with its name. Jobbik is an abbreviation and play-on-words that stands, on the one hand, for 'more on the right' (*job* means right in Hungarian) and, on the other hand, for 'better' (*jobb* means better in Hungarian). The idea that Jobbik is the better right-wing alternative in Hungary is reinforced everytime its name is repeated. In fact, Jobbik had (and maybe still has) a special task force dedicated to communications on Facebook and Twitter

with the goal of making the party appear more likable, young, family-oriented, modern and tech-affine. One telling example was the background image used on the official Facebook page in 2016 of then vice-chairman Előd Novák:

Background image of Előd Novák's official Facebook page.

The picture shows him, his wife (at the time the youngest female member of parliament) and their three kids. The background colors are warm and there is no obvious reference to Jobbik. The slogan on the left means "Hungarian family, Hungarian future". The flowery, ornamental symbols around the slogan, as well as those on the family's t-shirts, are derived from Hungarian folklore. The family of foxes in the background refer to a popular childrens' television series from the communist era called *Vuk*. The appropriation of images and symbols, as well as their synthesized repetition online, are hallmarks of Jobbik's strategy.

Interconnectivity online through links and banners was a major trait of both Jobbik and the Hungarian far right even before the growing influence of social media platforms. Yet on Facebook and Twitter those connections are made visible through likes and follows. Jobbik's official party account maintained a relatively neutral status, but its affiliate regional and youth groups' accounts were evidently connected with paramilitary groups, bands, labels, clothing brands and other organizations of the radical right network. Media sites that belonged to Jobbik, including its Youtube channel, were linked to that network even more strongly, retweeting or sharing content.

Those different platforms are used in slightly altered, reflexive ways. Jobbik's strategy on social networking sites is less concerned with substance – elaborate arguments, fact-based discourse or demonstrations of their goals (for that purpose they had the party manifesto) – but more with style and emotionality. Quite often they actively encourage users to share or retweet, which is a simple but highly efficient method to gain more likes and followers and so reach a wider audience. Real life events such as marches or festivals are advertised through social media. Afterwards, photos and videos from those events are shared with their followers again, creating a loop or connection beyond the temporary offline action.

GETTING TO THE NEW NORMAL THROUGH OFFLINE ACTION: BETWEEN STREET PROTESTS AND HAPPENINGS

Spreading ideas online is highly effective and helps to mainstream them, but online discourse needs to be transferred to the offline sphere for it to become part of everyone's lives. In other words, the threshold for a simple click is quite low but when the sheer number of clicks eventually transfer to votes, participation at events or to steer the topics of everyday discussions then the mainstreaming process has reached a new phase. An essential factor in Jobbik's success has been its use of a diverse set of offline activities that strengthened, defined and ultimately transformed the public image of the party. When it was founded in 2003, Jobbik was known because of its paramilitary sister organizations, such as the Hungarian Guard, and for the public swearing-ins it held at the very central Heroes Square in Budapest. Such ritualistic action created publicity and helped to make Jobbik's presence in Hungarian politics a topic in itself. Meanwhile, the party's symbiotic relationship with nationalist music helped to mainstream its frames and world view to non-political audiences. Jobbik's annual May festivals are central to this. At those festivals, which are open to the general public, not only do nationalistic bands play, co-developing new audiences with Jobbik, but a variety of family games are organized and – since it is officially an event organized by a political party – political speeches are held.

This appears to be in stark contrast to the Hungarian Guard and its various successor organizations who formed the public image of Jobbik and helped to popularize the party's original goal: to dominate the politi-

cal discourse concerning the Roma minority. Then, the party was widely known for martial events and its connection to paramilitary and vigilante groups – thereby appearing to be at the fringes of the political spectrum. While militaristic, authoritarian and Romaphobic forms of offline action dominated the party's public image, they were secondary to building a new extreme discourse around the party's core ideological concern: nationalism and nativism. Therefore, commemorations and the fostering of an image as 'the' national party that defines what is Hungarian and what it is not were integral to developing and maintaining Jobbik's appeal. In many post-Soviet states, as well as many post-Yugoslav states, nationalism has been crucial for the formation of the 'new' state. Jobbik tried to spread a 'positive' message focused on nationalist ideals for the present and future while depicting the other parties – Fidesz and MSZP primarily – as traitors to the nation, corrupt and belonging to the past. While Jobbik wanted to ideologically define 'the national', Fidesz re-appropriated Jobbik's idea of national interest by using its ideas and concrete propositions as the basis for policies, thus pushing Jobbik's ideas from the fringes in to a mainstream reality.

In order to do that, especially in a way that speaks to young tech-savvy people and families, a key technique has been to create a kind of nationalist cool or nationalist spirit that transcends politics and becomes part of everyday life, permeating other spheres of society beyond the political. May festivals provide a good example of exactly how. From 2004 until 2018 the annual Jobbik May festival, dubbed *Nemzeti Majális* (Nationalist May festival), has been the most important far-right event organized by Jobbik each year. Taking place at the Óbudai Sziget in the Danube in Northern Budapest, the festival lasted three days in its peak and featured the leading bands in Hungary's *Nemzeti Rock* (nationalist rock) scene. The bands that played most often at the event represent the two different ideological branches of the far right in Hungary: the former ultra-band, Romantikus Erőszak is a prime example of the more violence-prone, minority-hostile, authoritarian-xenophobic branch; while the soft-rock band, Ismerős Arcok exemplifies the romantic-nationalist branch (Karl 2016). Many of the bands present at the venue are quite popular, closer to the mainstream than the fringes, yet fringe bands were always present as well.

In 2018, the May festival tradition has momentarily come to a pause, officially due to a lack of finance but more probably due to the internal party splits that became apparent because of Vona's resignation and the ongo-

ing successor battle between the party's more moderate faction and its extremist faction. Prior to this, the public adverts for the festival sometimes resembled music festival promotions rather than party political adverts. The picture underneath shows the official advert for Jobbik's May festival in 2016. No party affiliation is mentioned. Apart from the word *nemzeti* (nationalist) and the right-wing Árpád-flag alongside the Hungarian flag on the right edge, it looks more like a mainstream festival than a far-right event: from the font, to the colours, to the plants and trees, it looks young, family friendly and well produced.

Official advert for Jobbik's Nemzeti Majális 2016.

The May festivals helped to attract young people and families to a party once known as militarist and authoritarian, using a blend of music, games and food. It evoked a kind of radical right flower power, a Woodstock-like feeling on the surface. At the event, antisemitic literature, chauvinistic shirts, nationalistic beer and paramilitary outfits (and memberships to the Hungarian Guard's successor organizations) were promoted and sold. Youth culture and subculture, as well as traditionalist and conservative values, were mixed together to appeal to as many people as possible.

First and foremost, the May festivals are political music events. But at the same time they showcase, highlight and define Jobbik's understan-

ding of Hungarian identity. As events aimed at appealing to families, they can be analyzed in a broader context as a means of blurring the boundaries between traditional conservative and far-right values. For example, Jobbik's election manifesto of 2010 defined what types or model of 'the family' Jobbik wants to promote, devising its recipe around the ultimate nationalistic goal of the 'survival of the nation':

"Jobbik's goal is to slow, then halt, then gradually reverse the rate of population decline, through the use of a coherent family and social policy; so that the nation grows. To achieve this will first and foremost require the promotion and protection of the institution of the family, particularly from attacks by a liberalism whose objective is to put the family unit on an equal footing with every conceivable alternative living arrangement or deviant lifestyle."[1]

At the core, far-right parties see the family as the smallest unit of the nation, in particular mothers as they can give birth to new generations (Mudde 2007). However, many of the contemporary and recently formed far-right parties hold a supposedly 'modern traditional' view of women. Jobbik provided a perfect example of this view in its treatment of the aforementioned Dóra Dúro, wife of Előd Novák and mother of their three children, supporting her to gain election to the parliament in 2010, when she became the youngest MP at the age of 23.

FRACTURES AND COUNTERACTIONS

For a decade Jobbik mastered a strong and close relationship with Hungary's far-right subculture, but the more moderate and professional the party became the more it was estranged from that subculture which had made the party visible in the first place. Tarrow described this competition between radicalization and institutionalization as inherent for cycles of contention within political groups (Tarrow 2011). Whether this will trigger the downfall of the party in Jobbik's case remains an open question at the time of writing. So far, the party's leadership has shown creativity and

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1 | Jobbik (2010): Radical Change. A Guide to Jobbik's Parliamentary Electoral Manifesto for National Self-Determination and Social Justice, (https://www.job bik.com/sites/default/files/Jobbik-RADICALCHANGE2010.pdf).

good communication skills with a variety of tools, and might be able to adapt once more to the ever-changing biosphere of the Hungarian political system. With respect to Fidesz and Orbán's policies in recent years, Jobbik's influence cannot be overestimated. The party created an environment in which radical right ideas flourished among large parts of the society and became acceptable across the political spectrum. Their 'nationalist chic' is currently the new normal in Hungary. In any case, it is an important example of how civil society, the media and other political parties should *not* deal with radical right parties – mainstreaming their ideas to compete for their supporters is never the best option. The institutionalized changes altering the constitution, the country's legal framework, its media system and educational landscape will have a lasting effect. The far right will dominate for the coming years in part because they have built a broad social base and continue to enforce their vision on the next generation through illiberal school curricula. Liberal Hungary will come back when it is ready to form a strong inter-party alliance and when it has finally learned its lesson from the disastrous socialist-liberal collaborations that collapsed in 2006.

In Hungary as well as in other countries it is crucial to contradict those that seek to define nationality through an ethnic lens. Put differently, an inclusive and pluralist vision of citizenship should be advocated as a multi- and inter-generational project. In the short term, different measures might help. First, far-right demonstrations or events in the public space need to be countered in those spaces otherwise those demonstrating are allowed to define what 'the public's' pressing concerns are. Second, virtual spaces need to be used for organizational as well as for attentional purposes. Since many traditional media outlets in Hungary provide a very narrow image of the political and social reality, as well as of what it means to be a Hungarian, social networking sites need to be used as counter-channels to contradict those narratives and discourses. Paradoxically, the history of both Fidesz and Jobbik provide an example of how this process might get started. Both parties were initially formed as student organizations. That might be how we begin to challenge the new normal.

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