



Partecipazione e Conflitto

<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>

ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)

ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)

PACO, Issue 17(2) 2024: 490-501

DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v17i2p490

Published 15 July, 2024

Work licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non commercial-Share alike 3.0 Italian License

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Marginalization Techniques of the Governmental Media Targeting Youth Resistance Movements in the Illiberal Political System of Hungary

Eszter Kirs

Corvinus University of Budapest, Department of International Relations, Institute of Global Studies

ABSTRACT: Illiberal, populist political discourse challenges the legitimacy of liberal institutions, civil and political rights, promotes the exclusion of opponents from political participation, and deepens polarization in society. In this context, the present qualitative study explores the governmental media's smear campaigns targeting youth resistance movements in the illiberal regime of Hungary. Governmental, online, written media reports were analyzed with a focus on language questioning the heterogeneous and legitimate identity of protesters, and their credibility through marginalization techniques, in the cases of demonstrations for the CEU in 2018 and against governmental measures violating academic autonomy by the model change of the University of Theatre and Film Arts in 2020. I found that out of the marginalization techniques discussed in illiberalism studies, framing theories, and the protest paradigm, the following four are the ones most frequently applied in the negative campaign targeting youth resistance movements: (1) biased usage of authentic sources, (2) emphasis on the unacceptable behavior of protesters, (3) ridiculing the event, and (4) fake narratives on internal and external enemies of the "real" Hungarian people behind their actions. They depict protesters as non-autonomous individuals (1) serving foreign interests or opposition political parties, (2) behaving aggressively or decadently, and (3) not representing legitimate views of citizens. Through these framing techniques applied by government-dependent media, focus is shifted from the relevant public affair to the identity of protesters presented as a homogenous mass of enemy puppets. The present content-analysis demonstrates that they are able not only to marginalize but also to discredit protesters in the eyes of the public reached by governmental media. Findings can be utilized in further research on civil resistance and the protest paradigm in illiberal regimes.

KEYWORDS: framing theories, illiberal governmental media, marginalization techniques, protest paradigm, youth resistance

Corresponding author(s): eszter.kirs@uni-corvinus.hu

1. Introduction

In the last 14 years of the constantly changing illiberal political system of Hungary, youth has played a significant role in democratic resistance through unconventional methods of political action. Due to the ever-shrinking space for citizens to impact the governmental management of public affairs, peaceful protest became an essential tool to collectively express dissent. Hungarian youth raising their voice in matters of secondary and higher education have demonstrated dedication, courage, and persistent resilience in multiple waves of protests from 2012 on. In 1989 at the reburial of Imre Nagy, Viktor Orbán advocated for the inviolability of freedom while representing Hungarian young people honoring the memories of freedom fighters confronting the communist regime. (Orbán 2022) Political freedom was nurtured by him as a representative of a liberal party at the time of the democratic transition from communism. Today, as a Prime Minister leading an illiberal government, he keeps his distance from the young people protesting in the streets and approves their marginalization by silently supporting pro-government media.

In the present paper, I explore the governmental media's attitude towards the identity of youth protesters. The post-2010 Orbán governments and their media have systematically applied smear campaigns targeting political opposition, independent institutions, and civil society. Youth in resistance have not been exempted from this illiberal practice. From 2010 on, all major student protests against governmental policies were responded to by negative communication campaigns aiming at discrediting protesters in the eyes of the public, thereby deepening societal polarization and hindering protesters in creating space for inclusive and participatory resolution of differences and fostering a culture of open democracy through protests.

I analyzed online pro-governmental written media with a focus on language questioning the heterogeneous and legitimate identity of protesters, and their credibility through diverse marginalization techniques, in the cases of demonstrations for the CEU in 2018 and against governmental measures violating academic autonomy by the model change of the University of Theatre and Film Arts in 2020. (For facts of the two cases and context, see Zontea 2015; Enyedi 2018; Kirs 2023; Pap 2021; Ryder 2022; Kováts and Rónay 2021; Drinóczi 2021; Upor 2024.)

Building on the rich academic discourse on illiberal, populist, and polarizing political rhetoric, and on the protest paradigm and framing theories, I collected the generally applicable marginalization techniques appearing in media coverage of protests and putting emphasis on the protesters' decadent behavior instead of their arguments concerning a public affair. Out of these techniques, I selected those that I assumed would be most likely applied by the government-dependent media of the illiberal political system of Hungary. I used these marginalization techniques to code the text of articles randomly selected from four major print and online written media outlets covering the protests organized by the above two youth resistance movements. My goal was to identify those framing techniques that are most frequently applied in the selected media outlets to test my hypothesis that they compose a toolkit of the current illiberal discourse aimed at discrediting young protesters. (The same discourse analysis was carried out on a broader dataset for my paper covering four youth protest movements under the post-2010 Orbán governments, including the 2012-13 protests organized by the Student Network and the 2023-23 ones of the United Student Front, to demonstrate tendencies of radicalization in tone and language in the context of the maintenance of centralized and illiberal governance. See, Kirs 2024b. The present article provides an in-depth insight into the analysis focused on the CEU and FreeSZFE protests.)

2. Theoretical framework, marginalization techniques targeting protesters

2.1. Enemies in the illiberal governmental rhetoric

While young protesting citizens are exercising their fundamental right to express their opinion by peaceful demonstrations (legitimate political actions in any democracy), they appear as non-authentic citizens in pro-governmental and financially, existentially government-dependent (hereinafter, governmental) media. Their concerns and arguments related to public affairs are not genuinely considered. Instead, their distorted image as drawn by governmental media is put in the forefront and embedded into the narrative about external and internal enemies of the nation.

Creating and using enemy images in the political discourse to enhance social support and trigger group formation is an ancient technique. The rhetoric of political decision-makers about external threats has served the aim to conceal domestic discontent about the management of public affairs. Populists in governing positions frame political adversaries as enemies with multiple objectives, as revealed in the academic discourse: to strengthen in-group identity, to manipulate the public and suggest that there is a need for extraordinary governmental measures, to strengthen the charisma of the leader as the ultimate protector of the people, to facilitate mobilization by the leader (Kopper, Körtvélyesi, Majtényi and Szalai 2020, 217-218, 220; Gerő, Płucienniczak, Kluknavska, Navrátil and Kanellopoulos 2017, 15-18) and to undermine the legitimacy of domestic opponents and thereby limit their opportunity to effectively disseminate views or mobilize against the illiberal power. (Kopper Susánszky, Tóth and Gerő 2017, 109-112) Polarization in society is a discourse-driven process, and politics of polarization aim to disseminate a narrative of “us” versus “them” building on the illusion that social and political groups are homogenous in their members’ worldviews and attitudes. The language of exclusion increases social distance, triggers fears, anxieties, and bias, and denies the need to cooperate with the out-group. (McCoy, Rahman and Somer 2018, 23-26) It has been characterized as Manichean discourse, one of the essential elements of populism, based on the tale of good and evil people (McCoy and Somer 2019, 240-244) to deepen the gap between the leader and their supporters on one side and opposing political groups or targeted social groups on the other.

Illiberal public communication – based on the rejection of pluralistic political views (Körösényi, Illés and Gyulai 2020, 51) – was found to challenge the legitimacy of liberal institutions, including civil and political rights. The right of all to political participation is questioned by the rhetoric of exclusion and non-recognition of certain social groups, including sexual or ethnic minorities (Bennett and Kneuer 2024, 181-186), or groups in dissent advocating for the change of illiberal policies. The aim is to shrink the space of adversaries to impact public discourse, to exclude them from the political community by framing them as illegitimate actors. (Sajó 2021, 137)

In the political discourse maintained by the illiberal Orbán governments, opponents have been framed as enemies of the nation serving the post-communist and international liberal elite’s interests. In this narrative, several domestic and foreign actors have been framed as enemies, such as George Soros, the European Union, migrants, the LGBTQIA+ community, left and liberal opposition political parties, or NGOs (Körösényi, Illés and Gyulai 2020, 59-60; Kopper et al. 2017, 120; Gera 2023, 106-109). Marginalization techniques targeting youth protests and protesters fit into such narratives.

2.2. Protest paradigm in illiberal political systems

I explored academic discourse on the protest paradigm and framing theories to identify potential marginalization techniques applied against protesters by the governmental media. (Kirs 2024b) Various

research has explored how protesters can be delegitimized by the media. Dismissive media coverage, depicting protesters as deviant and threatening the status quo, can undermine the legitimacy of a protesting group in the eyes of the broader public (Shoemaker 1982 cited by Dardis 2006, 119; Chan and Lee 1984, 187). Protesters can disseminate their claims and arguments on public affairs to the broader public through the media. The issue of how they impact public opinion and public discourse largely depends on how media reports frame their causes and attitudes. (Campbell, Chidester, Bell, and Royer 2004, 163; Kyriakidou and Olivás Osuna 2017, 460). Dismissive, marginalizing framing techniques appearing in the media might annihilate their communication and public outreach strategies (Entman 1993, 52, 55; Boyle and Armstrong 2009, 168-169).

In this theoretical framework and the factual context of illiberalism, I consider the maintenance of illiberal governance itself the status quo. Framing techniques suggesting how the audience should think about public affairs (Weaver and Scacco 2013, 63) and appearing in dismissive, pro-governmental media emphasize the identity of protesters instead of the relevant public affairs. They depict dissenting citizens as a mob of decadent individuals. Mass and public media captured by the Hungarian illiberal government frequently use marginalization techniques discussed in research on the protest paradigm. Susánszky, Kopper, and Zsigó (2022) found that pro-government media differs from government-critical media „not in the frequency of reporting on protests (i.e. selection bias) but instead in its use of derogatory language meant to discredit protests and introduce frames of illegitimacy”. Peaceful assemblies are perceived by the illiberal ruler not as a regular tool of democracy, but as an unwanted phenomenon upsetting the power structure. In illiberal political contexts, framing techniques applied by the governmental media go beyond marginalization and aim to discredit protesters and exclude them from the political community (Susánszky, Kopper, and Zsigó 2022, 313-315).

Young protesters with their youthful behavior are perfect subjects of marginalization techniques, which emphasize the protesters' decadent behavior instead of their arguments concerning a public affair, such as the fate of the autonomy of universities. In an illiberal political system with a monopolized media, the hypothesis of Boyle and Armstrong (2009) does not apply, “more modest and nonthreatening tactics” of protesters are not more effective, since they will not result in more favorable news coverage, which would be in fact essential for raising awareness of critical issues while gaining public support (Boyle and Armstrong 2009, 179). Due to the lack of political openness fundamentally characterizing the plebiscitary leader democracy of recent Hungary, protesters cannot directly impact public policies, their only rationalistic goal can be to impact public opinion. The odds are long in this if they are marginalized or even discredited, and their legitimacy is questioned in the governmental media.

In the academic discourse on the protest paradigm and framing theories, a wide range of marginalization techniques have been identified: (1) more frequent usage of official sources (including state authorities' statements) than authentic ones (from the protesters themselves); (2) historical comparison marginalizing protest groups when compared with groups of the past; putting emphasis (3) on unlawful or violent behavior of protesters, including a confrontation with the law enforcement agents, or (4) on counterdemonstrators' perspectives; (5) ridiculing the event; (6) generalization; (7) describing protest treason, anarchy, or (8) the protesters as having limited mental capacities, non-autonomous, immature children or a deviant minority; (9) suggesting that protesters' action is motivated not by legitimate views of dissent but by other actors, such a malicious elite. (Dardis 2006, 121-122; Weaver and Scacco 2013, 69-70; Kyriakidou and Olivás Osuna 2017)

3. The Hungarian media landscape, selection of data, and their analysis

For my qualitative discourse analysis, I collected data from the governmental online media based on a context analysis with particular attention to their economic and political background (Mautner 2008, 33). I selected media existentially dependent on the government and intensely reporting about youth protests. As

Sajó (2021) put it, beneficiaries of the patronage system maintained by the plebiscitary leader democracy are expected to run a pro-government media to serve its interests in gaining public support (Sajó 2021, 110-111). Illiberal governments strive for control over the media to gain efficient tools of mass manipulation. Due to ever-growing ties of financial dependence, government-dependent media ceases to be an actor of the independent public sphere that would ensure the access of the public to balanced information on public affairs or to provide a platform for democratic debate, instead, it is degraded to a tool of “illiberal conditioning”. (Sata and Karolewski 2023, 3-4)

Since I analyzed the discourse regarding two series of specific protests (i.e. the CEU protests and the FreeSZFE movement’s collective actions during the blockade of the University of Theatre and Film Art), I focused on newspaper reports published during these events and directly before or after them (Mautner 2008, 37) in 2017-18 and 2020-21.

Based on the above criteria, I selected the following print and online newspapers: (1) regarding the CEU protests, a political daily launched in 2015, the *Magyar Idők* (Hungarian Times), which received almost all of its advertising revenue from state advertising (Polyák 2019, 294; Bátorfy and Urbán 2020, 54-55), and the pro-government *Pesti Srácok*, which, shortly, is likely channeled into the Central European Press and Media Foundation (abbreviated as KESMA in Hungarian, see explanation below; P.L. 2024); (2) regarding the FreeSZFE movement, Hungary’s leading online news portal, the *Origo.hu*, which was sold in 2015 by the Hungarian Telekom to the son of the president of the Hungarian National Bank who has close ties to the government, and now belongs to the KESMA (Polyák 2019, 292-293); and the county newspapers issued by the KESMA. The latter (KESMA: Közép-Európai Sajtó és Média Alapítvány) was established in 2018 by a famous media figure loyal to PM Orbán, and almost all government-friendly media owners transferred their ownership rights to it without any type of compensation. The foundation’s board was packed with members of the parliament belonging to the governmental party. It aims “to promote those activities of the print, radio, TV and online sections of the Hungarian mass media which serve to build values and strengthen Hungarian national consciousness” (Kovács, Polyák, and Urbán 2021,10) among others through county newspapers in which identical articles appear nation-wide in case of non-local public affairs. I analyzed 78 randomly selected articles from these newspapers available online.

As to the readership of the above governmental media, the *Magyar Idők* or the KESMA county newspapers have not issued any public information about sale numbers (HVG 2019), estimates are published based on surveys and statistics of online reach. In 2021, the *Pesti Srácok* claimed that they reached 17 percent of the adult population of Hungary, while the *Origo* reached 40 percent. (*Pesti Srácok* 2021) Independent survey-based research indicated that county newspapers’ readership has decreased from 2014 through 2020, from 25 percent to 15 percent. (Hann, Megyeri, Polyák, and Urbán 2020, 25) According to an investigative journalist report from 2020, the pro-government media is dominating in the case of county newspapers, while in the case of online news portals, non-governmental media has a broader reach. (Bátorfy and Szabó 2020) Based on the publicly available, sporadic information, it is impossible to draw an overall and reliable picture of the readership of the selected media outlets. Consequently, I refrain from drawing major conclusions on the social impact of these print and online newspapers and the illiberal discourse disseminated by them.

My hypothesis was that marginalization techniques applied by governmental media compose a toolkit of the illiberal discourse aimed at discrediting young protesters. I tested it by adapting the wide range of marginalization techniques explored in the academic discourse to the factual context of the illiberal political system of Hungary. Considering the regular illiberal and populist narratives of the Hungarian government, I assumed that the following marginalization techniques are the most frequently applied ones in the cases of youth protests by the governmental media: (1) biased usage of authentic sources; (2) historical comparison marginalizing protest groups when compared with resistance groups of the past; (3) emphasizing on the

unacceptable behavior of protesters; (4) ridiculing the event; (5) describing protesters as non-autonomous, immature children whose actions are triggered by internal or external enemies of the Hungarian nation/government; and (6) references to unapproving public opinion to enhance in-group perspective. I applied these marginalization techniques to code the text of the randomly selected articles while I was reviewing their full content.

4. Findings, marginalization techniques used by the illiberal governmental media

To explore how governmental media reported on the young protesters advocating for the protection of the Central European University in 2017-2018, I randomly selected 40 articles from the Hungarian Times and the Pesti Srácok. As to the blockade of the building of the University by the FreeSZFE movement in 2020, I analyzed the text of 38 articles from the Origo and the KESMA county newspapers.

Based on an in-depth content analysis of the selected articles, I found that references to unapproving public opinion from an in-group perspective are sporadically applied, and historical comparisons with resistance groups of the past do not appear in any of the analyzed articles. At the same time, the most frequently applied marginalization techniques provide the basis of critical narratives about the young protesters. The image of their young participants is described by biased usage of authentic sources, ridiculing the protest events, emphasizing the protesters' unacceptable behavior instead of reflecting on their arguments of public concern, and through narratives about internal or external enemies of the Hungarian nation manipulating them. These four techniques can not only marginalize young protesters but also discredit their identity in the broader public, as demonstrated by the examples presented below.

4.1. Biased usage of authentic sources

According to the protest paradigm, protesters can be marginalized through the employment of official sources to enhance official narratives about the event (Kyriakidou and Olivas Osuna 2017, 462). This can be balanced by the revelation of the views and arguments of protesters and by reporting about their perspectives. However, the fact that authentic sources (e.g. protesters themselves or their relatives) are referred to does not mean that they balance the marginalizing narratives. They can be distorted; they can be applied in a biased way. For example, media reports can refer to authentic documents issued by the organizers of protests without citing their text but summarizing it in a distorted way to underpin the framing messages, like in the following extract about the Independent Student Parliament contributing to the protests for the CEU.

„The Independent Student Parliament declared what they believed in. Our favorite piece is the Declaration of Students' Rights. It practically supports an education system, that does not have any impact on the cultural identity of students, in which no one needs to comply with any requirements, which does not assess individual achievements according to absolute standards, does not acknowledge the authority of teachers and in general announces a radical form of the principle of equality. This latter element is essential for chaos, but it is not a guarantee of quality education.” (Pesti Srácok, 27 October 2017)

Using authentic sources, such as employees of the university whose building was occupied by the FreeSZFE, in a distorted way, can enhance the message that protesters are irresponsible individuals ignoring other people's existential needs, as was done in the article cited below.

„Two employees of the University of Theatre and Film Arts were interviewed by the Origo about the situation surrounding the institution. Both are afraid that due to the current chaos, they will not get their salaries”. (Origo, 3 October 2020)

4.2. Emphasis on the unacceptable behavior of protesters

Media coverage marginalizing protesters emphasizes the characteristics and behavior of protesters. Especially, when some violence or unlawful acts occur, the primary focus is put on those acts to demonstrate the deviance or unacceptable behavior of protesters. Violence, unlawfulness, and confrontation with law enforcement authorities will be the main subjects that the public's attention is drawn to instead of the protesters' messages of public interest. (Weaver and Scacco 2013, 64; Dardis 2006, 120) In the media captured by illiberal governance in Hungary, discrediting framing is focused on the deviant behavior of peaceful protesters.

„The living shield of the crowd was provided by cameramen and photographers, who were pushed by the middle-aged, seemingly lower-educated core unit of the army. In the very back, stood the young political officers, who made the withdrawal impossible and from time to time, issued the command – “let's go in!” – and started to move forward. Then, the core pushed media workers on the line of police. [...]

Leaving an enormous amount of trash, mostly empty bottles and beer cans behind, they returned to the Oktogon as a location of strategic importance (probably due to its tobacco shop and fast-food restaurants), where the thing finally turned into a party... When a wasted, wine-voiced young person shouted to the rhythm of the techno “EU-RO-PE! EU-RO-PE!”, we were sure that our revolutions had passed. (Pesti Srácok, 12 April 2017)

The articles are filled with derogatory language. Negative feelings triggered by it can result in the rejection of protesters as a group. Depicting opponents as a homogenous mass and referring to them in a generalizing, depersonalized tone, can also easily dehumanize them. (McCoy and Somer (2019), 245)

I found that in the explored pool of articles focusing on the unacceptable behavior of protesters, no reasonable arguments or messages of the protests are discussed. Emphasis is put solely on the deviant behavior of protesters, capable of deterring readers from seeing them as decent citizens, who express legitimate claims and arguments of public concern. In the case of the FreeSZFE, the framing of protesters as irresponsible, immoral individuals was enhanced by messages based on the context of the pandemic.

„The protest organized during the COVID-19 pandemic proved that no prize is too high to pay for the left if they feel that they can get closer to their goals, money, and power, even by an inch. [...] Organizing a protest despite the risk of the pandemic is very dangerous, and they also know it”. (Origo, 22 October 2020)

4.3. Ridiculing the event

The marginalization technique of ridiculing the event is one of the two most frequently applied ones. It can keep the attention of readers due to its “entertaining” character while painting a profile of protesters as immature individuals – instead of autonomous young citizens advocating for change – who are unable to consciously reflect on public affairs, and who are just partying on the streets.

While protesters are characterized as turning public spaces into bars and dance floors, the articles suggest that there are sporadic attempts by organizers to speak up and pretend that a protest is happening.

„All this time, mostly a determined-faced DJ put up good and better sets as a protest against the policies of the Orbán-government. The music was sometimes turned down and then Békés [one of the organizers] tried to entertain and make the crowd shout slogans with a similar efficiency as at the protest at the CEU in April. The youngsters who arrived to attend a disco might have

been surprised that they were supposed to do anything else than dancing”. (Pesti Srácok, 22 May 2017)

Downplaying the goal of protesters to raise legitimate concerns regarding public affairs and advocate for change, the analyzed media reports frequently combined the marginalization technique of depicting protesters as puppets of enemies of the nation with ridiculing events, like the following one.

„We always emphasize it, and it is important to point out again: obviously, they [young protesters] are not responsible neither for being drunk nor swearing or the Fall University blockade itself. Responsible are the once significant theatre artists who manipulated them and who are worried about their power, who for their entire lives were on the margins of an artist’s career and now gained some spotlight and a chance for publicity. [...] They thought it was the greatest opportunity in their lives to participate in this circus”. (Origo, 27 March 2021)

Ridiculing the event and drawing a profile of protesters as decadent, immature, irresponsible people by words is typically also combined with photo illustrations coupled with similarly discrediting comments (e.g. „Once again, the counter-government disco remained simply a disco”. (Pesti Srácok, CEU 2017).

4.4. Describing protesters as puppets of internal or external enemies

Governmental media coverage, as seen in the analyzed articles, is based on one narrative. The protesters’ main goal is not to advocate for the protection of autonomy and appropriate management of higher education affairs, but to change the political system and to remove the Orbán government. According to the narrative presented in the articles, protests were organized with the primary intention of facilitating political agendas of enemies of the nation (e.g. George Soros or leftist opposition political parties). Protesting youth are not presented as autonomous, independent citizens, but puppets of these enemies.

„George Soros has probably realized that through the rule of law-based processes, such as parliamentary elections, individuals preferred by him cannot come to power in Hungary. Therefore, now he wants to overthrow the government with tools beyond legality. [...] In the recent past, there have been multiple examples of outrageous and violent actions, even before the CEU protests, for example, we could taste a bit of the siege of headquarters”. (Hungarian Times, 16 April 2018)

In the governmental media narrative regarding the FreeSZFE, similarly to the articles reporting on the CEU protests, domestic opposition figures and well-known civil society activists in dissent are put behind the young protesters to question the legitimate character of the protests as regular tools of democracy.

„...the head of the communication department of the Theatre University organized a four-day summer university. The subjects of the event are the following: the failure of representative democracy (understood as all rules of democracy can be disregarded), the university blockade, how the blockade was carried out in Zagreb in 2009, how a theatre can become more than just art, and so on. Among the contributors there are Márton Gulyás and Bálint Missetics [well-known civil society figures in opposition] but also a former prison psychologist [...], a loudly dissenting movie director (Szabolcs Hajdú), and the Örkény Theatre supporting the blockade. The leftist statement that university students do everything on their own seems to be untrue”. (Origo, 18 September 2020)

„The boycott of the University of Theatre and Film Arts is an excellent opportunity for extending the actions nationwide, and the Democratic Coalition [leftist opposition political party

led by Ferenc Gyurcsány] can offer the assistance of its units in Budapest and all over the country. – according to certain information [!], among others it was also said at the secret meeting, which had been initiated by Ferenc Gyurcsány, and which was also attended by the mayor of the capital, Gergely Karácsony [member of an opposition political party]”. (KESMA news, 9 September 2020)

Characterizing the protesters as behaving in an unacceptable or even unlawful way is combined with motivation-focused marginalization techniques (like above, where the article connects CEU protests with a separate event where unlawful behavior appeared – the 2014 internet tax protest of which a small group of protesters headed to the Fidesz headquarters after the demonstration had been over and entered the territory, climbed up to the balcony of the building). Ridiculing the event is also frequently applied together with the framing marginalization technique.

„It was interesting that the CEU was mentioned only in a few sentences and when they arrived at the Kossuth Square, one could already hear anti-government speeches”. (Pesti Srácok, 3 April 2017)

De-emphasizing the cause of the protests related to governmental measures in higher education is also served by the specific remark on the lack of CEU-related content in speeches at the demonstration while revealing its real purpose, which is reflected in the anti-government ones.

„Obviously, the students in their twenties are not responsible for all this. They are abandoned or rather manipulated by the left and the professors. The real guilty are Ferenc Gyurcsány who ordered the blockade and professors sticking to their power and decades-long positions”. (Origo, 27 October 2020)

„DO NOT MISS IT! The left is using minors as tools at the protests”. (KESMA news 2020)

Members of both protest communities were depicted as non-autonomous, infantile individuals who were used by domestic and foreign enemies of the nation for their political agenda. This kind of rhetoric not only marginalizes but also discredits them. In contrast, in another research, I found, based on interviews with members of youth resistance movements under post-2010 Orbán governments and their publicly available personal statements, that they were, in fact, self-organizing non-state actors autonomously acting upon their own beliefs aiming to protect their rights and the autonomy of their institution. They were communities heterogenous in worldview, lifestyle, and political ideology committed to political freedoms, academic autonomy, and direct democracy. (Kirs 2024a)

5. Conclusion

In the plebiscitary leader democracy of Hungary (Körösenyi, Illés and Gyulai 2020; Sajó 2021), dictatorship-kind of repression is not detectable, but human rights, individual freedoms, institutional autonomies, rule of law, and democracy are systemically endangered and violated by governmental action. Political openness, the genuine intention of decision-makers to listen to the demands, and critical reflection of citizens (Dalton, Sickle and Weldon 2010, 53) are missing. People protest because they can (Dalton *et al.* 2010, 53-54) and because communicating demands through conventional channels has a limited impact on political decisions. Consequently, media coverage of protests plays an essential role in enhancing or weakening the effective fulfillment of the social function of peaceful assemblies. In this context, marginalization techniques applied by media are tools of social polarization and political exclusion.

In Hungary, the application of the protest paradigm is determined by two contextual factors. First, most mass media, including the public media is monopolized by the government (Polyák 2019; Bátorfy and Urbán 2020; Kovács, Polyák, and Urbán 2021). Second, as a regular tool of populist and illiberal political forces, the government is building its nation-widely disseminated rhetoric on a security- and enemy-focused narrative. Opponents are presented as internal traitors or external enemies to trigger in-group identity, to maintain the illusion of the need for extraordinary measures, to strengthen the charisma of the plebiscitarian leader (in Hungary's case, PM Viktor Orbán), to discredit domestic opponents and to decrease their chances to impact public discourse (Kopper et al. 2017; Kopper et al. 2020; Körösenyi et al. 2020; Sajó 2021). In this context, marginalization techniques – discussed regarding the protest paradigm and framing theories (Chan and Lee 1984; Campbell et al. 2004; Dardis 2006; Weaver and Scacco 2013; Kyriakidou and Olivas Osuna 2017) – targeting peaceful assemblies and protesters can have a devastating impact on the identity and legitimacy of protesters in the eyes of the broader public, and on the ability of protests to fulfill their social function.

Based on a qualitative discourse analysis focused on four governmental online media outlets of illiberal Hungary, I found that out of the marginalization techniques discussed in illiberalism studies, framing theories, and the protest paradigm, the following four are the ones most frequently applied in the smear campaign targeting youth resistance movements: (1) biased usage of authentic sources, (2) emphasis put on the unacceptable behavior of protesters, (3) ridiculing the event, and (4) fake narratives on internal and external enemies of the “real” Hungarian people behind their actions. These four techniques are effective tools not only for marginalization but also for discrediting the identity of protesters in the eyes of the broader public. They depict them as non-autonomous individuals (1) serving foreign interests or political parties trying to overthrow the government, (2) behaving aggressively or decadently, and (3) not representing legitimate views of citizens. Marginalization techniques most frequently appearing in the governmental media compose a toolkit of the illiberal discourse aimed at not only marginalizing but even discrediting protesters. They appear in the analyzed articles as non-autonomous, aggressively, or decadently behaving individuals serving oppositional political parties or foreign interests. This narrative fits into the illiberal, populist, and polarizing discourse about “us” versus “them” in a Manichean framing, aimed at increasing the social distance between supporters and opponents of illiberal governance and decreasing the potential impact of critical messages of youth protesting for the protection of individual and institutional autonomy. Prime Minister Orbán, who once, under the repressive, communist regime, publicly advocated for the inviolability of freedom concerning young freedom fighters, now approves and supports a media practice trumping upon civil liberties and democracy to preserve his political power.

References

- Bátorfy A., K. Szabó (2020), “Grafikonokon és diagramokon mutatjuk, hogyan alakult át a magyar média az elmúlt tíz évben”, *Atlászó* 7 August 2020, Retrieved April 26, 2024
<https://atlatszoz.hu/kozpenz/2020/08/07/grafikonokon-es-diagramokon-mutatjuk-hogyan-alakult-at-a-magyar-media-az-elmult-tiz-evben/>
- Bátorfy A., Á. Urbán (2020), “State advertising as an instrument of transformation of the media market in Hungary”, *East European Politics*, 36(1): 44-65.
- Bennett W.L., Kneuer M. (2024), “Communication and democratic erosion: The rise of illiberal public spheres”, *European Journal of Communication*, 39(2): 177-196.
- Boyle M.P., C.L. Armstrong (2009), “Measuring Level of Deviance: Considering the Distinct Influence of Goals and Tactics on News Treatment of Abortion Protests”, *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, 17: 166-183.
- Campbell Sh., Ph. Chidester, J. Bell, and J. Royer (2004), “Remote Control: How Mass Media Delegitimize Rioting as Social Protest”, *Race, Gender & Class*, 11(1): 158-176.

- Chan J., C.C. Lee (1984), "The journalistic paradigm on civil protests: A case study of Hong Kong", in A. Arno and W. Dissanayake (eds.), *The news media in national and international conflict*, Boulder, CO: Westview, pp. 183-202.
- Dalton R., A.V. Sickle, S. Weldon (2010), "The Individual-Institutional Nexus of Protest Behaviour", *British Journal of Political Science*, 40(1): 51-73.
- Dardis F.E. (2006), "Marginalization Devices in U.S. Press Coverage of Iraq War Protest: A Content Analysis", *Mass Communication & Society*, 9(2): 117-135.
- Drinóczi T. (2021), "Loyalty, Opportunism and Fear – The forced privatization of Hungarian universities" *Verfassungsblog*, <https://verfassungsblog.de/loyalty-opportunism-and-fear/>
- Entman R.M. (1993), "Framing: Towards Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm", *Journal of Communication*, 43(4): 51-58.
- Enyedi Zs. (2018), "Democratic Backsliding and Academic Freedom in Hungary", *Perspectives on Politics* 16(4): 1067-1074.
- Gera M. (2023), "Here, the Hungarian people will decide how to raise our children": Populist rhetoric and social categorization in Viktor Orbán's anti-LGBTQ campaign in Hungary", *New Perspectives*, 31(2): 104-129.
- Gerő M., P.P. Płucienniczak, A. Kluknavska, J. Navrátil, and K. Kanellopoulos (2017), "Understanding Enemy Images in Central and Eastern European Politics: Towards an Interdisciplinary Approach", *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics*, 3(3): 14-40.
- Hann E., K. Megyeri, G. Polyák, and Á. Urbán (2020), *Megfertőzött médiarendszer – A politikai tájékozódás forrásai Magyarországon* Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Retrieved April 26, 2024 https://mertek.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Megfertozott_mediarendszer.pdf
- HVG (2019), "Hiába jönnek állami hirdetések, egyre több olvasó pártol el a kormány kedvenc újságjaitól", *hvg.hu* 8 February 2019, Retrieved April 26, 2024 https://hvg.hu/gazdasag/20190208_Hiaba_jonnek_allami_hirdetesek_egyre_tobb_olvaso_partol_el_a_kormany_kedvenc_ujsagjaitol
- Kirs E. (2023), "Historical reflection as a source of inspiration for youth resistance in illiberal regimes – A qualitative study of the FreeSzfé movement in Hungary", *Journal of Youth Studies*, published online on 27 Sep 2023: 1-23.
- Kirs E. (2024a), "Youth Resistance Movements Under the Post-2010 Orbán Governments in Hungary", in P. Marton, G. Thomasen, Cs. Békés and A. Rácz (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Non-State Actors in East-West Relations*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1-15. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-05750-2_46-1
- Kirs E. (2024b), "Framing of Hungarian Youth Resistance Movements by Pro-Government Media under the Illiberal Orbán Governments", *Journal of Illiberalism Studies* 4(2), Forthcoming in Summer 2024.
- Kopper Á., Zs. Körtvélyesi, B. Majtényi, and A. Szalai (2020), "The 'Insecurity Toolbox' of the Illiberal Regime: Rule by Law and Rule by Exclusion", *Political Anthropological Research on International Social Sciences* 1(2): 216-242.
- Kopper Á., P. Susánszky, G. Tóth, and M. Gerő (2017), "Creating Suspicion and Vigilance. Using Enemy Images to Hinder Mobilization", *Intersections East European Journal of Society and Politics*, 3(3): 108-125.
- Kovács I., G. Polyák, and Á. Urbán (2021), "Media Landscape after a Long Storm – The Hungarian Media Politics since 2010", *Mertek Booklets*, 25: 1-64.
- Kovács G. Z. Rónay (2021), *Academic Freedom in Hungary*, Budapest: CEU
- Körösényi A., G. Illés, and A. Gyulai (2020), *The Orbán Regime. Plebiscitary Leader Democracy in the Making*, London/New York: Routledge.
- Kyriakidou M., J.J. Olivas Osuna (2017), "The Indignados protests in the Spanish and Greek press: Moving beyond the 'protest paradigm'?", *European Journal of Communication*, 32(5): 457-472.
- Mautner G. (2018), "Analyzing Newspapers, Magazines and Other Print Media", in R. Wodak and M. Krzyzanowski (eds.), *Qualitative Discourse Analysis in the Social Sciences*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 30-53.

- McCoy J., T. Rahman, and M. Somer (2018), “Polarization and the Global Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Polities” *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62(1): 16-42.
- McCoy J., M. Somer (2019), “Toward a Theory of Pernicious Polarization and How It Harms Democracies: Comparative Evidence and Possible Remedies”, *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 681(1): 234-271.
- Orbán V. (2022), “Orbán Viktor beszéde Nagy Imre újratemetésén”, Retrieved August 9, 2023 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HFVgl5WgIOM>).
- Pap A. L. (2021), “Academic Freedom: A Test and a Tool for Illiberalism, Neoliberalism, and Liberal Democracy”, *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* xxvi (ii): 2-18.
- Pesti Srácok (2021), “Századvég: élmezőnyben az Origo, feljövőben a Pesti TV, jól teljesít a PestiSrácok.hu a médiapiacón”, *PestiSrácok.hu* 14 May 2021, Retrieved April 26, 2024 <https://pestisracok.hu/szazadveg-elmezonyben-az-origo-feljovoben-a-pesti-tv-jol-teljesit-a-pestisracok-hu-a-mediapiacon/>
- P.L. (2024), “Beolvadhat a KESMÁ-ba a Pesti Srácok” *Népszava* 19 March 2024, Retrieved April 5, 2024 <https://nepszava.hu/3229056-beolvadhat-a-kesma-ba-a-pesti-sracok>
- Polyák G. (2019), “Media in Hungary: three pillars of an illiberal democracy”, in E. Polonska and Ch. Beckett (eds.), *Public Service Broadcasting and Media Systems in Troubled European Democracies*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 279–303.
- Ryder A. (2022), *The Challenge to Academic Freedom in Hungary: A Case Study in Authoritarianism, Culture War and Resistance*, Berlin: De Gruyter
- Sajó A. (2021), *Ruling by Cheating – Governance in Illiberal Democracy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sato R., I.P. Karolewski (2023), “Illiberal spectatorship – the disfigurement of citizenship in Hungary and Poland”, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, published online on 12 Nov 2023: 1-18.
- Susánszky P., Á. Kopper, and F.T. Zsigó (2022), “Media framing of political protests – reporting bias and the discrediting of political activism”, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 38(4): 312-328.
- Upor L. (2024), *Majdnem lehetetlen – Az SZFE autonómia-harcának története*, Budapest: Tea Kiadó.
- Weaver D.A., J.M. Scacco (2013), “Revisiting the Protest Paradigm: The Tea Party as Filtered through Prime-Time Cable News”, *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 18(1): 61-84.
- Zontea A. (2015), “The Hungarian Student Network: A Counterculture in the Making”, in P. Krasztev and J.V. Til (eds.), *The Hungarian Patient: Social Opposition to an Illiberal Democracy*, Budapest: CEU Press, pp. 263-289.

Author’s Information

Eszter Kirs works as an associate professor at the Department of International Relations, Institute of Global Studies - Corvinus University of Budapest. Her research is focused on youth resistance movements and human rights in illiberal political systems. She has been lecturing on international law and human rights at various academic institutions. She was a legal officer of the Hungarian Helsinki Committee in 2013-2021. From 2010 to 2015, she worked for a defense team at the ICTY. She was a Fulbright visiting researcher at the Columbia Law School in 2009-2010 and a visiting lecturer at the University of Minnesota Law School in 2019.