

# CURRENT PERSPECTIVES ON COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA RESEARCH

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# **Mediation opportunity structures in illiberal democracies. Social movement responses to state anti-refugee propaganda in Hungary**

*Zsafia Nagy*

## **Abstract**

The recent rise of illiberal democracies shapes a distinct environment in which social movements emerge and operate. This has challenged social science to offer a more nuanced analysis of the potential of social movements in such contexts. This chapter contributes to this ongoing discussion using the framework of *mediation opportunity structures*. By focusing on the case of Hungary, the chapter argues that understanding the dynamics of protest and social movements in contemporary illiberal contexts demands that we pay attention to three issues: 1) the structural power of the state to dominate the mainstream media discourse, 2) the logic of right-wing populism that sets limits on public discourse and 3) a new re-feudalization of the public sphere where top-bottom, unidirectional propaganda tools aim to replace forms that promote dialogue. The chapter draws on research in 2015-2016 in Hungary, focusing on three different movement responses to government anti-refugee propaganda and politics: 1) a counter-billboard campaign criticising the government, 2) a grassroots humanitarian movement and 3) a local protest movement against a refugee camp. Highlighting the findings of these case studies points to the key potential of the new media environment and to tactical innovations (in mobilization, organization and direct action) facilitated by social media. However, they also show how the effects of these innovations were limited, mostly as a consequence of their ambivalent relationship towards the populist logic of public discourse and structural constraints in mainstream media representation. The findings show that the application of mediation theory to contentious action in illiberal democracies allows for a nuanced and multi-layered understanding of opportunities and constraints of such action.

**Keywords:** social movements, mediation opportunity structures, illiberal democracy

## 1. Introduction

There are two gaps that urgently need to be bridged between media research and the study of social movement organizations. First, the recent evolution of the *media landscape* – notably digitization, the rise of social media and emerging hybridization of the environment – has produced new concepts and theoretical frameworks in these fields, but explicit connections across disciplines are rare. Second, media scholars and social movements also both need to take stock of the changing *political* environment: the rise of the ‘illiberal’ – a context that does not fit the inherited democracy-dictatorship binary.

The framework of *mediation opportunity structures* (Cammaerts, 2012) provides a potential missing link between media and movement scholars in studying such emergent phenomena. Applying this framework to illiberal democracies is also an analytically useful tool to uncover a previously under-researched area: the mediation constraints and opportunities in illiberal democracies. In this chapter I will first outline this theoretical framework and then introduce three case studies carried out in 2015-2017 in Hungary. They focus on different movement responses to government anti-refugee propaganda and politics: 1) the case of the Two-Tailed Dog Party’s counter-billboard campaign that criticized the government, 2) Migration Aid, a grassroots humanitarian movement and 3) a local protest movement in the village of Martonfa against a plan to set up a refugee camp in the neighbourhood. The findings of these case studies point to the potential of the new media environment, showing how tactical innovation appeared and was facilitated by social media. However, they also show how the effects of these innovations were limited, mostly as a consequence of their ambivalent relationship towards the populist logic of public discourse and structural constraints. The application of mediation theory to contentious action in illiberal democracies allows for a more nuanced and multi-layered understanding of opportunities and constraints of such action.

## 2. The academic challenge: bridging media studies and social movements research

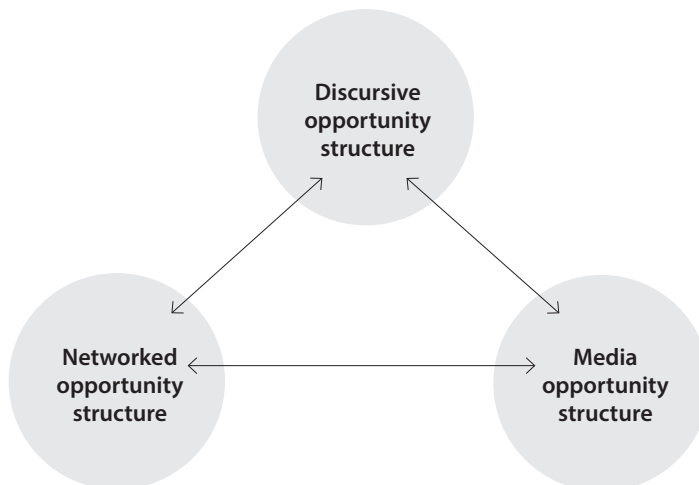
Recent changes – digitization, mediatization, the rise of social media – and their effects on social movements have not gone unnoticed in media research. However, what is lacking from many of the conceptualizations is a connection to social movement research. Hence, we urgently need frameworks that integrate media scholarship and social movement approaches. One such candidate for conceptualization is the notion of *mediation opportunity structures*, put forward by Bart Cammaerts (2012).

The concept of opportunity structures has been established by political process theory within social movement scholarship. In short, political process theory puts the emphasis on political opportunities and threats, mobilizing structures, framing processes, protest cycles and action repertoires. The focus is on the *interaction* between the context and movement characteristics (Ritzer, 2007). Cammaerts has proposed the notion of *mediation of opportunity structures* within this paradigm. The core idea states that 'mediation' is useful as:

It enables us to *link up* various ways in which media and communication are relevant to protest and activism: the framing processes in mainstream media and political elites, the self-representations by activists, the use, appropriation and adaptation of ICTs by activists and citizens to mobilize for and organize direct actions, as well as media and communication practices that constitute mediated resistance in its own right. (Cammaerts, 2012: 118, emphasis added)

Cammaerts (2012) suggests that we think of the mediation opportunity structure through a model that comprises three kinds of constraints and opportunities: in the media, in the discourse and in the networked environment (Fig. 1).

*Figure 1. Mediation opportunity structure (Cammaerts, 2012)*



### 3. The political challenge: illiberal democracies

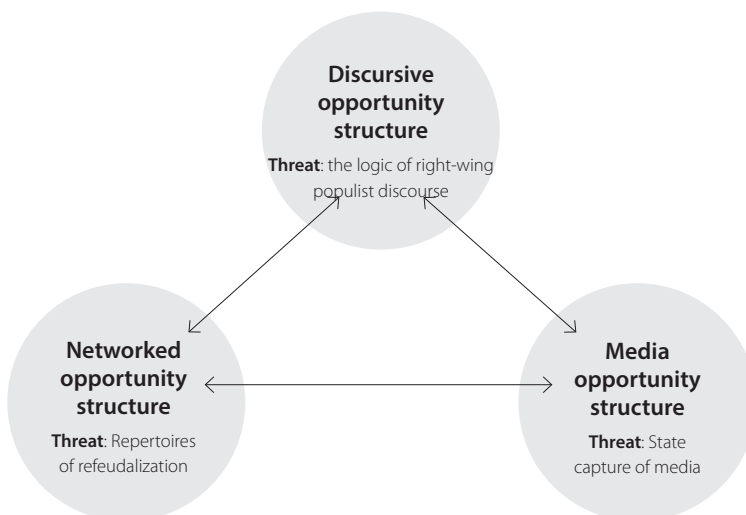
The recent rise of illiberal democracies poses a different kind of challenge to scholars of media and social movements. Existing paradigms and theories in these fields

gravitate clearly towards either liberal democratic or authoritarian states. What is sorely needed today, however, is theoretical and empirical work that addresses the case of illiberal democracies. The recent backslide of previously established liberal democracies to illiberal regimes has been widely documented and led to a blossoming of literature in the political and social sciences.

First, there is a wide-ranging debate on *terminology*. Authors use terms such as ‘autocracies’ (Kornai, 2015) or ‘hybrid regimes’ (Cassani, 2014). In part, this variety also stems from the different foci of researchers. Thus, those focusing on the political economy of such regimes can describe them as ‘neo-patrimonialisms’ (Fukuyama, 2014) or ‘mafia states’ (Naim, 2012). A second question concerns the *root causes* of illiberal democracies. Sheiring (2015) distinguishes between three competing explanations: the role of elites, the significance of social inequality and varieties of capitalism. Third, there is important work aiming to reveal the *consequences* of the illiberal trend (Magyar, 2016).

There has been little reflection on the mediatised nature of the societies within which these developments take place. Research on media policies on the one hand and discursive-ideological issues on the other tend to be disjointed too. What is needed is a comprehensive framework that addresses these gaps. In this respect, the framework of mediation opportunity structures allows us to ask two important questions. 1) How do illiberal tendencies play out and constrain the mediation opportunity structures for social movements? 2) How do social movements perceive and take advantage of this mediation opportunity structure?

**Figure 2. Illiberal threats in the mediation opportunity structure**



Regarding illiberal threats, Figure 2 identifies the key points in the three inter-related dimensions. In the media opportunity structure, it can be conceptualized as the state capture of the media. Since 2010 Hungary has been governed by the right-wing party Fidesz, led by prime minister Viktor Orbán, who was re-elected in 2014 with a two-thirds parliamentary majority (in both terms), allowing for amendment of the country's Constitution and foundational laws singlehandedly. In the case of Hungary, the dynamic building of a right-wing media empire had begun with the help of associated businessmen before Fidesz came to power in 2010, and this work is still ongoing. In 2010, Fidesz began its rule with strategic media positions – daily broadsheets, radio stations and television channels – already controlled by businessmen closely linked to the party. By 2012, this portfolio comprised 15 companies, including the country's biggest outdoor advertisement company. Hungarian oligarch, and close friend of the prime minister, Lőrinc Mészáros personally owns 192 newspapers in Hungary. All regional newspapers are owned by businessmen associated with Fidesz. While advertising revenues in the overall media market dropped by 30 per cent after the global financial crisis, members of the empire continued to enjoy the benefits of state-led advertising campaigns.

State control of the media system did not limit itself to commercial outlets: the public service media landscape was redrawn by legislative changes immediately after Fidesz took power. As the budget allocated to public service media is continually increasing, they have a strong influence on audiences. The new 'media constitution' in 2011 established a central institution called the National Media and Infocommunications Agency. It is responsible, for instance, for granting operation licences and broadcasting frequencies. It also monitors content through the Media Council where the opposition is not represented.<sup>1</sup> Having set up the framework, in recent years Fidesz has been using legislation as a punitive measure. Open attacks against independent outlets have become more prominent over the years and culminated in the infamous closing down of Hungary's largest daily newspaper, *Népszabadság*, in October 2016.

The discursive opportunity structure in Hungary is dominated by the logic of right-wing populist discourse. As discussed by Jan-Werner Müller (2016), populism is a 'particular moralistic imagination of politics'. It is *anti-elitist* in pitting 'ordinary' people against the elites. It is also anti-pluralist in emphasizing the existence of a singular common good and unity of the 'people'. Thus, populism is an

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1 The Council is a 5-member body, within the Agency, responsible for monitoring and enforcing the realization of media laws in private and public media, with the power to impose steep fines on outlets, which can potentially lead to the withdrawal of an outlet's licence. Its president single-handedly appoints the executives to public media outlets. The president of the Agency (who is also the automatic candidate to be the president of the Council) is personally appointed by the prime minister. The opposition is not represented among the members of the Council.



exclusionary form of identity politics.

During the refugee crisis of 2015, the discursive construction of the ‘undeserving and frightening migrant’ was clear and dominant from the beginning. At the level of concrete speech acts, this discourse refused to use the very word ‘refugee’, it forged a power linkage between ‘illegal’ and ‘migrants’ and built a storyline about a ‘state of exception’ by a constant reference to no-go zones and terrorism.

Refugees are forcefully also coupled with conspiracy theories linking this outgroup to hostile elites: the EU-leadership (in general) and George Soros (personally). In 2016 the government initiated a referendum to provide public support for its opposition to the EU’s 2015 relocation scheme. The main message of the campaign showed the EU leadership as an aggressor looking for the ‘forced settlement’ of refugees on Hungarians. This was followed by a campaign attacking Hungarian-born investor and philanthropist George Soros, also reaching well beyond the issue of migration and directed also at Soros-financed NGOs and the Central European University. Billboards around the country were set up claiming that Soros had a detailed plan for settling migrants in the EU.

The networked opportunity structure refers to practices of networking, many-to-many communication and forms of direct action. The illiberal threat to this terrain means practices of surveillance, control or state propaganda through networked technologies. While threats are unquestionably present in some illiberal democracies (such as Russia and Turkey), in Hungary they are not widespread. Rather than relying on many-to-many communication tools, the government’s communication (still) follows a top-bottom logic. Hence, the Hungarian case is an example of the new re-feudalization of the mass media public sphere where unidirectional marketing tools are favoured over the manipulation of dialogue and debate. Thus, since the first half of 2015, Hungary has been in a state of ‘permanent campaigns’ where new waves of billboards hit the streets every few months, followed by their corresponding television, radio and newspaper ads. This marketing logic strategy has a double purpose. On a symbolic level, rather than promoting an ideal of ‘rational-critical’ citizenry, it positions the voters as a passive, unthinking mass audience. On the material level, these state-led advertising campaigns provide substantial sources of income for the Fidesz media empire. However, marketing is only one aspect of the new re-feudalization of public discourse. It runs parallel with a strategy of bracketing out dialogue and debates from political discourse. Governmental politicians refuse to give interviews to independent journalists and newsroom debates have also ceased to exist.<sup>2</sup> Overall, talking points and sound bites have taken the place of interviews and debates. Such practices fit

2 Viktor Orbán has refused to participate in televised election debates since 2006, and the ruling party Fidesz has decided to boycott independent („oppositional”) media in early 2015. Famously, in 2017 Orbán declared the media as its enemy to combat in the future.

well the populist logic of anti-pluralism, where debates are seen as an unnecessary hindrance standing in the way of representing singular common good.

It should be noted that referenda and so-called ‘national consultations’ are also often used by the Hungarian government to gather public support for its policies. To offer a taste of this, the national consultation on migration in 2015 included a question that asked: ‘Do you agree that mistaken immigration policies contribute to the spread of terrorism?’ An open-ended question in the national consultation of 2017 asked: ‘By now it has become clear that, in addition to smugglers, certain international organizations encourage illegal immigrants to commit illegal acts. What do you think Hungary should do?’ Referenda in the hands of populists do not aim to engage citizens in public discussions or deliberation but to claim ownership over the – singular – public will (Müller, 2016).

To sum up this background, the mediation opportunity structure in Hungary faces a set of interrelated illiberal threats: state capture in the media opportunity structure, the logic of right-wing populist discourse in the discursive opportunity structure and a mode of new re-feudalization in the networked opportunity structure (see Fig. 2.) It is within this context that we can make sense of the social movements in Hungary.

#### 4. Methods and approach

In broader research carried out between 2015-2017, I examined three social movements that rose in response to the so-called refugee crisis (and the government’s policies): 1) an alternative billboard-campaign for a mock Hungarian party: the Two-Tailed Dog Party (Nagy, 2016); 2) the birth of a humanitarian grassroots movement: Migration Aid (Dessewffy & Nagy, 2016); and the emergence of a local anti-refugee camp movement in the village of Martonfa (Nagy, 2017). While all cases were situated in the same context, they articulated different relationships to the hegemonic government policy. Each of them challenges parts of the dominant discourse in a different manner – but none provides a radical political opposition nor a fundamental alternative to it.

My analysis of these movements took a threefold approach, combining a *critical perspective* with emphasis on the *context* and *content* of the communication activities of these movements. This approach provided the framework for the methodology as well. A critical approach towards the issue put the emphasis on the mediation opportunity structure heavily shaped by the government’s agenda setting during the ‘refugee crisis’, and I draw here from preliminary research on the mainstream press for an overview of the government’s approach. A focus on context refers to an attempt to develop a multi-sited ethnographical approach to the

movements, looking also at self-created communication content of the movements, both on- and offline, as well as their mainstream media representations. To create an overview of the social movements' activities, a systematic content analysis was conducted (Krippendorff, 1980), which consisted of a close reading of content, notetaking and identifying emergent issues and patterns. To identify the potential reach of social movements, I also conducted a web-link analysis of their websites.

## 5. Lessons from three movements

### 5.2 *The Two-Tailed Dog Party*

Following the January 2015 terrorist attacks on the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, prime minister Viktor Orbán concluded: 'We should not look at economic migration as if it had any use, because it only brings trouble and threats to European people ... Therefore, immigration must be stopped ... We will not allow it, at least as long as I am prime minister and as long as this government is in power' (Reuters, 2015). Following this, political and communication tools were applied to reinforce this message. The government set up a working group to handle the immigration question (Index, 2015). This was followed by a national consultation and a government billboard campaign with three basic slogans:

'If you come to Hungary, you have to respect our culture!'

'If you come to Hungary, you have to respect our laws!'

'If you come to Hungary, you can't take away our jobs!'

When the first billboards hit the streets on 6 June 2015 an outburst of memes followed. On 8 June, the Two-Tailed Dog Party, a satirical political party specializing in urban performances and street art, launched an 'anti-anti-immigrant campaign', soliciting donations from the public. The original goal of the campaign was to set up no more than a few dozen billboards but the initiative soon escalated into a wider protest. Within 10 days donations had reached over 100,000 euros, enabling the creation of more than 900 billboards nationwide. Their content and visuals were also co-created: anyone with an idea could upload their version online, and decisions about which ones would be used were also outsourced to a social media vote. By the end of the campaign, 1,025 governmental billboards were being countered by 900 counter-billboards on the streets. The satirical messages attracted wide coverage in the press and on social media, and successfully altered the direction of public discourse.

The counter-billboard campaign successfully broke the 'spiral of silence' as people with minority opinions were given a platform and visibility in the public eye. On a deeper level the counter-campaign challenged hegemonic views of

public discourse via contrasting messages based on fear with counter-messages relying on humour. It also questioned perceptions about how to address collective action problems in society, replacing a top-down, one-to-many campaign with a participatory alternative. However, the limits of the counter-campaign should not be overlooked. While it managed to become part of the political discourse about migration, it never offered a substantial critique of the government's activities and views (for a more detailed analysis, see Nagy, 2016).

### 5.2 *Migration Aid: a grassroots movement helping refugees*

Established by a previously unknown one-person NGO in June 2015, in a couple of months Migration Aid (MA) built a complex relief infrastructure for refugees, something the government was hesitant to provide. After three months of relief work, MA compiled statistical data about its operations and the efforts undertaken by its members and donators: it had mobilized 500 activists in 70,000 work-hours, helping 111,600 refugees (Migration Aid Számokban, 2015).

An enquiry into how MA operated sheds light on how the concept of connective action (Bennet & Segerberg, 2013) can be applied and developed to understand the specific ways a coherent organization is achieved in digitally born movements. My analysis suggests that new rhizomatic social movements epitomize emerging types of organizations, pointing to four central characteristics of the rhizome (as they appeared in the case of MA). The movement was *non-hierarchical* and lacked fixed start and end points. This characteristic affected the group's *action repertoires* in allowing a wide range of modalities of participation. The group was also an example of a *hybrid* organization where the blurring of lines between online and offline spheres had an important impact. Finally, the existence of a *stitching platform* (its Facebook group) was central to the group's survival. A unique characteristic of the rhizome is its ability to reconfigure itself in both the short and long run. This flexibility, together with the stitching role of Facebook, suggests that the movement developed an 'information thermostat', a self-regulatory system that permanently receives inputs from given surroundings and changes its outputs accordingly (for a more detailed analysis, see Dessewffy & Nagy, 2016).

### 5.3 *Martonfa: an anti-refugee camp movement*

The case study of Martonfa, a small Hungarian village, examined a local social movement opposing the building of a refugee camp. This study aimed to unpack the effects of a perceived threat to this local community. This movement

emerged in August 2015, when locals from Martonfa woke up one morning to the news that the government had announced the opening of a refugee camp on the Martonfa shooting range – without consulting the mayor of the village. On the very same day a Facebook group was established and offline contentious activities began. A group of locals ‘occupied’ the shooting range for 50 days and other events were also organized, often with the aim of creating alliances with a range of actors. The movement ceased its activities after 50 days, when the government withdrew its plan. Nevertheless, the effects of the social movement on the local community reach beyond this period.

The research examined how collective action frames (Benford & Snow, 2000) are being filled with meaning and how inconsistencies within the frames are handled. The movement’s diagnostic frame (what is the problem?) focuses not on the refugee problem but the problem of democratic decision-making. In line with this, the prognostic action frame (what should be done?) contains very few details regarding possible solutions to tackle the refugee issue. The motivational frame (why should we act?) centred on ‘calling to arms’ possible allies and partners. This points to two broader conclusions. First, it seems that the movement – because of the small size of the village – balanced its lack of power by using online tools to address and mobilize possible allies. This need to widen the constituency encouraged the creation of frames – such as injustice frames – that resonate with the wider public. Second this suggests that a cultural approach – such as framing theory – is insufficient for explaining strategies of the movement, as these are often driven by the resources available – or in this case, the lack thereof. In order to enrich cultural approaches in social movement studies a more structural emphasis must be added, even if the analysis focuses on the discourse itself (for a more detailed analysis, see Nagy, 2017).

## 6. Discussion

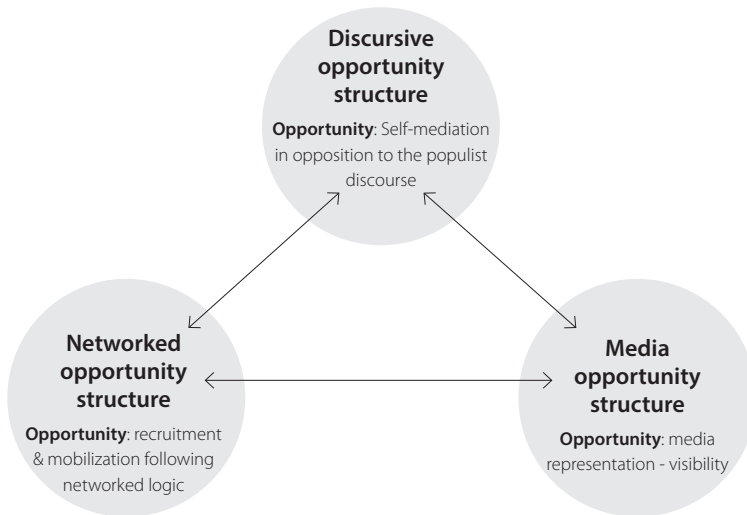
The potential opportunities for the movements studied are summarized in the mediation opportunity structure (Fig. 3). Given the illiberal constraints on the media opportunity structure, social movements in illiberal democracies start off with serious disadvantages. Nevertheless, all three movements were able to achieve considerable media visibility during their operations. In the case of the billboard campaign of the Two-Tailed Dog Party, this visibility was through the use of billboards, but the campaign also generated significant media attention. MA also gained momentum by having strong field experience and often giving expert interviews or taking the role of spokesperson for the refugees during the crisis. These opportunities for visibility thus arose for the movements, although these moments of fame were

limited in both time and reach. They were mostly covered by the ever-shrinking independent media and the effects of this visibility can well be questioned.

A potential opportunity in the discursive opportunity structure is the salience of the chosen issue and self-mediation of this issue in opposition to the hegemonic discourse. This means that while movements apparently cannot compete with the agenda-setting abilities of the government and cannot easily introduce alternative agendas to the discourse, attaching themselves to prominent issues opens up opportunities of mobilization for them. Mean while the movements studied here could not change the hegemonic discourse they successfully utilized to increase their own potential for organization, mobilization and self-mediation.

All three movements utilized affordances in the networked opportunity structure in a manner that led to complex, intensive and hybrid frameworks of action. Complexity can be seen in the structured use of different tools that build on each other in each case. Activities were clearly intensive enough to result in quantitatively significant mobilizations of resources. The movements' communication repertoires were all hybrid – successfully connecting forms of online and offline organization.

**Figure 3. Opportunities in the mediation opportunity structure**



The mediation opportunity structure does not consist of three isolated spheres but rather interconnected dimensions. It is important, therefore, to look at the relationship between these elements. In this sense, the tactical innovations within the networked opportunity structure should not be underestimated. However, in the cases above, such tactical innovations facilitated by social media resulted in

limited effects. This can be best explained by the role played by the *discursive* and *media* opportunity structures. The structural constraints present in media representation – namely the state capture of the media – often result in either no representation or a negative representation of social movements. Inside the discursive opportunity structure, the movements' ambivalent relationship towards the hegemonic discourse is an important factor. As noted above, none of the movements provided a direct and radical opposition or alternative to the hegemonic discourse. The ambition of the Two-Tailed Dog Party was to satirize – not to offer a substantial critique. Even though the context was a politically polarized one, the self-definition of MA strongly stated its non-political nature. The Martonfa movement's relationship to the dominant discourse represents a classic case of NIMBY (Not In My Backyard), where national and European level arguments replicate each other at the local level, verifying the master narrative of securitization. Overall, then, the potential tactical innovation in the networked opportunity structure remained limited, given the constraints and missed opportunities in the two other dimensions.

The rise of illiberal democracies has made social scientists question and re-think long-held assumptions in their respective fields. An upside to the often-worrying trends that play out on a societal level is the blossoming of related and relevant theorizing and research in different disciplines and paradigms. What I believe is necessary is communication and cross-pollination of the different middle-range theories existing across disciplines that are often not aware of each other. My aim here has been to provide an illustration of such an attempt, namely to create connections between the fields of social movement theory, media and communication studies and research on illiberal democracies.

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## Biography

Zsófia Nagy is an assistant lecturer in the Department of Social Psychology at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary. She obtained a degree in sociology and social anthropology at the Central European University. She is currently a doctoral student, focusing on social movements that appeared as a response to the refugee crisis in Hungary during 2015-2017. Her further research interests include: sociology of death, political sociology, digital sociology, sociology of migration.

Email: [nzsofia@gmail.com](mailto:nzsofia@gmail.com)