

**GRASSROOTS ACTIVISM IN BUDAPEST: PARTICIPATORY
POLITICS CHALLENGING URBAN NEOLIBERALISM**

By

Réka Tóth

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Supervisors:

Violetta Zentai

Alexandra Kowalski

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Abstract

The 2019 Hungarian municipal elections signaled a surprising shift in the country's previously stagnant politics. The many, diverse opposition parties cooperated and ran together to defeat the ruling far-right Fidesz party in many main cities, including Budapest. In my thesis I focus on the 8th District of Budapest where an independent candidate from a local grassroots movement won the district mayor's position on a progressive platform, advocating for housing rights, the protection of green spaces, and public cleanliness, designed in dialogue with the community. I analyze the development of the grassroots activist network in the district, unusual for Hungary, and the electoral campaign that led to the conquest of the municipality. In dialogue with the literature on urban neoliberalism and its alternatives - with a particular attention to grassroots urban movements emerging in CEE after 2008 - I consider the opportunities and challenges of this emerging new urban politics in Budapest. In doing so, I focus on the process in which an emancipatory politics came to confront authoritarian neoliberal governance. Through my analysis I argue that locally based, everyday forms of struggle can challenge previously stable political practices, but in doing so they also must face many serious challenges.

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Introduction

Since the far-right Fidesz party's landslide victory in 2010, there has been little sign of serious opposition as Hungary's other political parties have squabbled amongst themselves. Then came a signal shift in this year's October municipal elections. In Budapest, several opposition parties formed a broad coalition and won most districts in the city as well as the Budapest mayoral seat. Although the state administration is highly centralized in Hungary, Fidesz has not yet fully coopted municipal governance. City and district mayors are elected through local elections that still hold some authority and thus municipalities can still be primary sites of resistance against the Orbán regime. Most unique among these newly won districts is the poorest area in the inner city, Budapest's 8th District. Here, András Pikó, a member of the civil society organization C8 - Civilek Józsefvárosért (C8 - Civilians for Józsefváros, in short C8) won the district mayoral seat, supported unanimously by all the opposition parties. From the beginning of the electoral campaign his team embraced a leftist platform and his participatory election program was based on interviews and focus groups conducted with 8th District locals. His final program was very progressive, focusing on fighting poor housing conditions in the district as well as remedying the lack of clean and accessible public spaces (Pikó, 2019).

This major election upset came as a surprise in a country that many assumed was on a one-way track towards authoritarianism under the Orbán regime. It raises many questions about the possibilities and difficulties in finding alternatives to neoliberalism in Central Eastern Europe (CEE). In this thesis, I focus on the main people and practices that brought about this political shift in the 8th District, following the development of the network of grassroots political organizations in the 8th District, the electoral victory of C8, and the challenges that such a victory carries. I aim to provide a sharper understanding of how this radical urban

politics emerged in a post-socialist environment and how it provides alternatives to neoliberal urban governance.

Fidesz consolidated its power beginning in 2010 during a wave of satisfaction with the previous social democratic government. Both regimes were and are neoliberal, but the 2008 economic crisis shifted the country towards an authoritarian form of neoliberalism, which crystallized in Fidesz's new regime. (Kennett & Lendvai-Bainton, 2017) Placing my own work in this context, my research speaks to the literature on social movements in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis, when intense austerity measures were introduced in many regions around the world (Peck et al., 2013). The austerity measures affected countries differently, but there was a general trend of cutting back on welfare programs and municipal budgets, the privatization of public space, and the commodification of public services. Since cities are the most significant sites of neoliberal development, many critical authors argued that they are the sites where political alternatives will appear too (Harvey, 2012; Peck, 2015). And indeed, following 2008 there was a wave of protests that invoked ideas about the "right to the city" (Lefebvre, 1996) or "rebel cities" (Harvey, 2012) in reaction to the austerity programs, which were eventually picked up by new forms of radical urban politics such as new municipalism in Spain.

As Dikeç and Swyngedouw (2017) argue, urban theory scholars urgently need to focus their attention on urban political movements in a way that sees the city as an "immanent site for nurturing political subjectivation, mediating political encounter, staging interruption and experimentally producing new forms of democratization that prefigure radical imaginaries of what urban democratic being-in-common might be all about" (p. 3). Following a similar approach, in this research, I show how the urban scale becomes of primary importance in building an alternative to the current authoritarian neoliberal regime in Hungary. Through the

analysis of the forming and the electoral success of C8 I focus on three key questions: (a) What type of urban democracy do they envision and how does it confront urban neoliberalism? (b) How did a grassroots urban movement come to the decision to engage in formal politics? (c) What kind of challenges does the movement have to face once institutionalized actors in urban politics? In answering these questions, I rely on the literature on urban neoliberalism and urban movements, particularly on the emerging new literature on grassroots movements in CEE.

In Hungary, the previous social democratic government had already introduced austerity measurements years before the onset of the global economic crisis which led to mass protests and to the strengthening of the right-wing parties (Beissinger et al., 2014). Reflecting this particular trajectory of neoliberalism in Hungary, my research aims to investigate this new form of radical, grassroots urban politics within the broader trajectory of Hungary's transition from socialism, entrance into the EU (Gerócs & Jelinek, 2018), and turn toward neo-authoritarianism (Fabry & Sandback, 2018). This history largely determined the development of Hungarian civil society institutions and contributed to a low citizen participation in politics. However, instead of comparing urban social movements to Western standards and highlighting the "weak civil society" in post-socialist countries, I follow Jacobsson and Korolczuk's (2019) approach, contextualizing my research among the small-scale grassroots activism that has appeared in CEE.

The focus of my research is the 8th District of Budapest both because that is where many of the political and socio-economic tensions in Hungary are most observable and because this new form of grassroots activism was most successful there. The 8th District always had a ethnically mixed population, but growing gentrification enabled by the neoliberal urban government in the area is pushing out the mostly poor Roma population, while an influx of new working-class immigrants has changed the district as well. Since the electoral victory of

Fidesz in 2010, a new revanchist urban policy that targets the poor and Roma population of the district became dominant, which also served as an experimental laboratory for the government's broader social policy in Hungary. The Fidesz-led city government resorted to means of intimidation and displacement rather than helping the local population: banning homelessness, increasing the number of evictions (The City is for All, 2015), and big, new development projects that pushed out many residents. It also constantly undermined the work of local activist organizations (eg: Blue Dot Foundation, Auróra community space), but still the leftist activist base in the district slowly grew, with a particularly strong interest in housing activism.

The electoral victory of C8 and András Pikó in 2019 was not only the result of the hard work of C8 members but also the success of these diverse activist organizations who had many years of experience in organizing bottom-up grassroots projects in the district. As such the 8th District provides an excellent opportunity to analyze what conditions help the emergence of radical urban politics and can also demonstrate what challenges grassroots initiatives face once they achieve electoral power. Though not unique to the example of the 8th District, I also use it as an example to point out the multilevel struggles that movements must fight and the importance of building a supralocal and international coalition of new municipalist initiatives.

I begin the first chapter by introducing theories of neoliberal urban governance and its political alternatives, framing their analytical relevance of the main research questions. I start with a general framework to describe the neoliberal governance on a global and local scale. In a second theoretical section, I summarize some influential ideas regarding grassroots urban activism in the region, which leads to the introduction of my case study. In this chapter, I also present the data and the methods I used for my research. In the following two chapters I provide an analysis of my case study on the 8th District of Budapest, focusing on the emergence, the

agenda, and the institutionalization of C8. The analytical part contextualizes the opportunities and the limits of radical urban politics, while in the conclusion I discuss the broader theoretical and political significance of such efforts.

1. Neoliberal Urban Governance and its alternatives

Following the 2008 economic crisis, debates about the nature of neoliberalism reawakened after a long period of what seemed to many like a global neoliberal consensus (Harvey, 2009; Peck & Theodore, 2019). With the worldwide rise of authoritarian right-wing governments, the very nature of neoliberalism has started to be called into question. Is this new era the end of neoliberalism or another mutation of an ever-changing but fundamentally stable system? Instead of treating neoliberalism as a solid concept that is universally applicable, Brenner et al. (2010) stress the “variegated” character of neoliberalism globally and argue for attention to its “path dependency,” which accounts for the different outcomes of the same neoliberal efforts in various local contexts. Their approach also stresses that neoliberalism cannot be reduced to a set of economic policies, but rather we should recognize “the *political rationality* that both organizes these policies and reaches beyond the market” and thus the fact that neoliberalism “is compatible with, and sometimes even productive of, authoritarian, despotic, paramilitaristic, and/or corrupt state forms and agents within civil society” (Brown, 2003, p. 2).

Counter to claims that the state and the market economy are oppositional forces, it is crucial to see how states are becoming main forces in the implementation of neoliberal policies and abandoning their responsibilities in providing basic welfare services. This process has become evident with the rise of authoritarian neoliberalism that followed the 2008 crisis. As Clewer (2019) argues, the “crisis has opened the space for the rise of right-wing populism which, far from addressing the causes of the crisis, is mobilising discontent and resentment by directing hatred toward those constructed as enemies of the people (ethnic minorities, immigrants, political elites, etc.)” (p. 490). This tendency is clear in Hungary, where the Fidesz regime implemented neoliberal policies that disproportionately favor the wealthier, while at the

same time employed a rhetoric that separates the society into “deserving” and “undeserving” (Stubbs & Lendvai-Bainton, 2020).

Since the mid-1980s neoliberalism had become the dominant ideology in the globalized capitalist world-system, penetrating all levels of governance. As Smith (2002) argues, the urban scale has been just as drastically affected by this ideological shift as the global. He explains that the “new concentration of urban functions and activities vis-à-vis the national and the global changes not only the make-up of the city but the very definition of what constitutes—literally—the urban scale” (p. 431). As such, the urban scale closely follows the broader economic and political restructuring under neoliberalism, in which production and finance capital become of primary importance at the cost of social reproduction. In these efforts, the role of the state transformed and built a partnership with private capital in rebuilding urban areas. David Harvey (2017) points out how inflowing capital investment shapes the physical environment and creates uneven development on different scales, where some places are more privileged than others. In global capitalism, these processes cause inequalities between the core, the semi-periphery, and peripheral countries (Wallerstein, 1974), but uneven development is also apparent on the regional and urban level as well, noticeably in the divide between the urban and the rural, and between different areas of an urban locale.

On the urban scale, uneven development is often connected to gentrification. As Smith (2002) explains, “gentrification had evolved by the 1990s into a crucial urban strategy for city governments in consort with private capital in cities around the world” (p. 404). The political-economic perspective on urban development connects the urban processes to wider economic restructuring and focuses on the theory of “rent gap” by Neil Smith (1987). The “rent gap” theory argues that the main cause of gentrification in the affected areas is that the potential rent price (for which the land could be used) is far above the actual rent paid by its users. The need

for capitalist investment to conquer new territories results on the one hand in (emphasis in original) “the *equalization of conditions and levels of development* and, on the other, *their differentiation*” (Smith, 1982, p. 142). On the urban scale, like the global, the process of differentiation involves a division of labor that centralizes capital in certain areas, while others are left with low wages, poor housing conditions, and low-quality transportation. This functional separation is accompanied by social separation which is usually based on class and race (p. 146). According to this view on gentrification, the process of gentrification is mostly lead by actors like the government, housings speculators, and other investors. For Smith (2002) the language of urban rehabilitation represents the “ideological victory for neoliberal visions of the city” when in reality, urban regeneration is just “the next wave of gentrification, planned and financed on an unprecedented scale“ (p. 446). This is clearly evident in the 8th District where various urban regeneration projects over the past few decades have done little but accelerate the area’s gentrification causing the displacement of the most deprived and made some residents wary and not optimistic toward new revitalization efforts.

Analyzing urban neoliberalism through the scaling approach (Brenner, 2015; Swyngedouw, 1997), which emphasizes the interconnectedness of different scales, is well-suited to grasp the way geographical scales are socially produced and governed. This approach argues that the meaning of scales such as “global,” “national,” “regional,” “urban,” and “local” is likely to differ qualitatively depending on the historically specific scalar morphologies associated with the distinctive social processes or institutional forms to which they refer” (Brenner, 2015, p. 33). Moreover, theories of rescaling also imply some form of path-dependency, since the processes of rescaling never simply replace the previous configurations, but always interact with them. Early in his career, Lefebvre wrote about cities (1996, 2003) in a similar manner, in which the “right to the city” politics are connected to supralocal scales, leading to “intensified political struggles which are not merely territorialized within scalar

hierarchies but oriented directly towards their reorganization, reconfiguration and even transcendence” (Brenner, 2000, p. 374). Thus, the interconnectedness of scales provides both opportunities and challenges for urban movements to scale-up to higher levels of governance. As such, according to this approach, grassroots movements, like the one in the 8th District might, also be able to induce broader political changes on other scales of governance.

Following the wave of protests after the 2008 economic crisis, social movements started to shift back their attention to local forms of resistance (Voss & Williams, 2012). Many times, as in the case of new municipalist approaches, the city is seen as the sphere where transformative politics could take place. This shift is apparent in the field of social sciences too, where there is a growing literature focusing on the question of citizenship. Eizaguirre et al. (2017) define citizenship “as a method of inclusion at the local scale and as an expression of social and political participation involving the formulation of new claims as well as the defense of existing rights” (Eizaguirre et al., 2017, p. 426). As such, urban citizenship practices strive for increased citizen participation through local democracy, while at the same time fight for social justice through redistributive policies. Although the two claims often go together, there is still a question of how successfully social movements can perform both. Following the successful elections, C8 - and András Pikó as the district mayor – also have to face these challenges.

1.1. “Weak” civil society and grassroots activism in CEE

While the social movements that emerged following 2008 in Western Europe and North America started to organize along leftist lines of critiques, invoking ideas of “right to the city” (Lefebvre, 1996) or “rebel cities” (Harvey, 2012), in the CEE region it was much more difficult to organize along the same leftist critiques of neoliberalism and globalization. As Gagyí (2015) describes, there is an overarching bias in social movement theory towards the Western context,

which “feeds into a broader tradition of understanding ECE [East Central European] forms of social organization as late, backward and pathological versions of Western history” (p. 27). She also highlights that “the crisis of the democratic capitalism” framework that became dominant after 2008 hides “the experience of Eastern European member states, where similarly harsh measures of austerity have been the condition of post-socialist transition and EU accession” (p. 22).

Since the fall of socialism, there have been many debates about the weakness of civil society in the post-socialist region. Under state socialism, the activities of civil society organizations were heavily restricted. Though this changed after 1989, there is still less political participation, lack of trust, and a general disillusionment in politics, which some interpret as a historical legacy of state-socialism (Howard, 2003; Petrova & Tarrow, 2007). Although civil society organizations started blossoming after the regime change, they soon became professionalized and dependent on state and EU funding (Jacobsson & Saxonberg, 2015). Due to this tendency, they often withdraw from public critical engagement and rarely promote social and political participation (Udvarhelyi, 2020).

Considering these approaches, Jacobsson and Korolczuk (2019) argue that civic activism in the CEE region is defined both by general trends under the neoliberal world-order and by the region’s unique historical trajectory. They argue that even though CEE is not a singular entity and that the countries in the region had been differently affected by the post-socialist transformation, there are still overarching similarities. All these countries went through a fast, far-reaching privatization, leading to a lack of public housing and poor-quality housing conditions, increasing rent prices, followed by gentrification and the commercialization of public spaces (p. 3).

In parallel to the global rise of social movement following 2008, in CEE too, new activist movements started protesting gentrification, the commercialization of public spaces, and the lack of sustainable housing (Floreau et al., 2018). As Mayer explains, the rise of austerity measurements led to new collaborations of people that brought “together austerity victims and other groups of urban ‘outcasts’ with (frequently middle-class-based) radical activists, allowing both to acknowledge their differences” (Mayer, 2013, p. 5). As such, in the past decades there is an increasing number of critical groups in CEE who have started organizing on the local level and are resisting professionalization, promoting new forms of citizens’ participation such as The City is for All in Budapest (A Város Mindenkié) and the Romanian Common Front for Housing Rights (Floreau et al., 2018). As I will show later, the City is For All is among the most important grassroots organization in the 8th District fighting for political empowerment and increased citizen participation in politics. Their work has also been essential for building a network of grassroots organizations and thus largely contributed to the success of the municipal elections.

In the context of CEE social movements, Jacobsson and Korulczuk (2019) argue that we should focus on everyday forms of activism rather than big protest movements. Everyday activism, they explain, “appears as a distinct form of activist citizenship—albeit less radical and more long-term than engagement in either NGOs or social movements—in contexts where other forms of activism appear unsatisfactory or ineffective” (p. 4). According to them, instead of pursuing spectacular forms of activism, these initiatives often form self-help groups or are engaged in fighting local authorities. This way, they claim, “activists not only oppose specific policies but also propose new ways of doing democracy on the local and sometimes the national level” (p. 5). They also emphasize that these everyday practices are even more important in countries where citizens distrust or fear the local governments, such as in Poland and Hungary.

Everyday activism is a broad concept under which many diverse activities can be found, from opening second-hand bookstores that provide community space for activists (Goldstein, 2017) to neighborhood groups that provide legal support for families facing eviction (Udvarhelyi, 2019). These small-scale forms of activism are often neglected in social movement research, implicitly deeming them apolitical. However, as Greene (2014) shows, many neighborhood projects start because of a shared sense of discontent around a communal issue and later develop broader political claims on the local or national level. Due to the general trend of disillusionment in politics, social movements in the CEE region often distance themselves from party politics, and instead pursue a local, everyday activism that focuses on the “real” problems of the people (Jacobsson & Korolczuk, 2019, p. 8).

The 8th District in the past decades has become a center for civic associations and activist groups. There are two main community centers (Auróra and Gólya) that host these initiatives, in addition to concerts and lectures, and in the evenings function as bars. Most of these civic initiatives in the 8th District operate informally with non-hierarchical structures. They organize themselves around issues of housing, migration, Roma exclusion, feminism, LGBTQ rights, and so on, making them prime targets of the FIDESZ government. As a consequence, the community centers have to constantly fight for their existence. Some activist groups have been pushed out of the district, like Kék Pont Alapítvány (Blue Point Foundation), which runs a needle exchange program for drug users. In an urban environment shaped by the Fidesz government and previous municipal leadership’s revanchist politics, the work of these groups is extremely important, however, mostly inefficient. That is why the members of C8 have decided to nominate a candidate for the municipal elections, hoping that the municipality’s most important office, the district mayor, would be able to affect deeper societal change.

In the CEE region there have been many similar examples of former activists running for municipal offices, for instance in Croatia (Cepic & Kovacic, 2015), the Czech Republic (Pixova, 2018), and Poland (Domaradzka, 2017). The most significant influence on the C8 movement was the Spanish Barcelona en Comú, and the municipalist movement which they started. The Spanish is also where C8 got their inspiration from, to follow their lead and “try to win where it is possible”. In her work on Czech “activists in politics” Pixová (2018) shows that the decision to engage in municipal politics is often met with disapproval by those demanding radical changes. However, she argues that in countries where it is challenging to achieve wide support for radical demands, more moderate approaches have a higher potential to influence the local democratic deficit. As she explains, the power of this approach comes from the fact that “reformist demands are less controversial and less prone to resistance and counterattacks” while at the same time “they require changes on a smaller scale which can easily be effectuated from within the existing system and usually do not challenge the existing legislative and economic relations” (p. 680). Domaradzka (2017) makes a similar point, when she emphasizes that grassroots movement might only be effective in achieving small urban policy changes but those, however, can affect the locals’ life considerably. At the same time – both as a grassroots movement and as one in power – these approaches can have a significant effect in involving previously passive citizens into decision-making processes.

The C8 activists follow a similar approach too: even though they pursue a significantly new way of doing politics and criticize neoliberal urban policies, they nevertheless remain focused on small-scale problems that concern the everyday life of the local people. This approach, however, holds some contradictions that are easier to ignore in the electoral campaign than once in power, and as such, it remains to be seen how C8 will deal with these arising challenges. In the following section I introduce the methodology I used in exploring the emergence, the practices, and the institutionalization of C8.

1.2. Methodology

This study draws on the extended case method described by Burawoy (1991, 1998). The extended case method follows the reflexive model of science and examines the relationship between the observer, data, and theory. As Burawoy explains, reflexive science “starts out from dialogue, virtual or real, between observer and participants, embeds such dialogue within a second dialogue between local processes and extralocal forces that in turn can only be comprehended through a third, expanding dialogue of theory with itself” (Burawoy, 1998, p. 5). As such, instead of searching for generic explanations and invariable laws, the extended case method gives an approach that is sensitive to contextual embeddedness and historically specific constellations. Nevertheless, as Burawoy stresses, the extended case method seeks to move from micro to macroanalysis and so it takes the “social situation as a starting point of empirical examination and works with general concepts and laws about states, economies, legal order, and like to understand how those micro situations are shaped by wider structures” (Burawoy, 1991, p. 282). Following Burawoy, my research aims to analyze the development of grassroots activism in the 8th District through an approach that considers the specific historical trajectory of Hungary but also takes into account the broader structures that shape these local constellations.

In terms of research design, my original plan was conducting a month of ethnographic research in the 8th District. In this time, I would have visited the public hearings and forums and I was planning to interview members of C8 and people in position in the newly formed municipality. The ethnographic research and interviews would have given me more insight into their personal perspectives, and I would have been able to explore the institutionalization process in more detail. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic I had to rethink my research methodology. In Hungary, a state of emergency was announced on the 11th of March and while

these periods usually last for 15 days, there was soon an act passed that made the state of emergency indefinite and thus allowed Prime Minister Orbán to rule by decree (Walker & Rankin, March 30th, 2020). For the duration of the state of emergency all events and gatherings were suspended and all public events organized by the municipality were postponed as well. As such, I did not have a possibility to attend these events during my research and due to ethical considerations, I decided to omit the interviews as well and instead rely on a combination of approaches.

Although the past few months I did not have an opportunity to conduct fieldwork I already had a personal knowledge of the field and previous research experience in the 8th District. Through my institutional and personal network, I also have access to insider narratives about the leftist activism field in the 8th District. In addition to my background knowledge and the personal observations, I rely on publicly accessible data, such as movement documents including interviews, news, Facebook posts, slogans, campaigns, and programs. The sources I use were published online between 2015 and 2020, starting from the foundation of the group Közöd (the predecessor to C8) until half a year after the municipal elections of October 2019. Through the analysis of the forming and the electoral success of C8 I focus on three key questions: (a) What type of urban democracy do they envision and how does it confront urban neoliberalism? (b) How did a grassroots urban movement come to the decision to engage in formal politics? (c) What kind of challenges does the movement have to face once institutionalized actors in urban politics? In answering these questions, I follow a historical and contextual analysis as described by Burawoy and rely on the critical discourse analysis of the above-mentioned documents.

Fairclough (2001, 2010) describes how critical discourse analysis is interested in the relationships between semiosis (including language) and other forms of social practices. As he

explains, “its particular concern is with the radical changes that are taking place in contemporary social life, with how semiosis figures within processes of change, and with shifts in the relationship between semiosis and other social elements within networks of practices” (Fairclough, 2001, p. 123). My interest lies in the way discourses can represent imaginations of social practices and the possibility of enacting these imaginations. According to Fairclough, “imaginaries may be enacted as actual (networks of) practices — imagined activities, subjects, social relations etc. can become real activities, subjects, social relations, etc.” (Fairclough, 2010, p. 208). Correspondingly, this study examines how a grassroots movement creates discursive representations of a new radical politics that challenges the hegemonic neoliberal discourses.

First, I analyze what led to local activists’ decision to engage in formal politics and I point out how already at the emergence of the movement they were confronting the right-wing authorities’ implementation of neoliberal policies. Second, drawing on discourse analysis I illustrate how C8 perceives the role of urban movements and their vision of urban democracy and then how they translate that to their work. In the end, I point out the challenges of the implementation of this vision by examining the institutionalization process of C8. In the next chapter I begin by outlining the development of the housing movement in the 8th District and describe the activities of the Kőzöd group, which itself was very much involved in it.

2. Grassroots activism in the 8th district

In this chapter I give a short introduction to the development of the 8th District, in which I contextualize the neoliberal urban governance which the grassroots activists opposed. As a response to the processes of neoliberal urban development a strong housing activism scene emerged in the district. I describe the practices of these grassroots organizations, highlighting the way they formed a new urban politics that mobilizes participatory methods. Through this chapter I show what led to the decision of Közöd, and later C8, to engage in formal politics, a decision which opened a new chapter in the life of the local grassroots organizations.

The 8th District is one of the most stigmatized and the poorest inner-city districts in Budapest (Gyáni, 1992). In the 19th century it was a relatively better-off district mostly populated by artisans with smaller factories dotting the area. However, around the turn of the century most of the factories moved out of the district and the Danube flood seriously damaged most of the buildings. In the first half of the 20th century there have been some new housing projects, but not nearly enough to change the character of the area. The two world wars left the district in extreme poverty and about 90% of the housing was run-down. All this resulted in the moving out of the higher status populations and the influx of lower status groups (Ladányi, 1989).

By the second half of the 20th century a large part of the population was poor, elderly, or of Roma origin, and in addition to the existing social and economic problems, the area became strongly stigmatized (Ladányi, 1992). The run-down condition of housing, the strong stigmatization of the district, and its central location taken together has unquestionably meant that the rent-gap was extensive by this time. In the period following the transition, the previously state-owned apartments were privatized, and the better-quality housings were quickly bought by more affluent people (Bodnár, 2001). This process was accompanied by the

decentralization of the Budapest city governance, which put a huge responsibility on local municipalities without enough financial resources. Thus, those parts of the housing that were not privatized are now organized on a municipal level and it is the municipality's responsibility to provide social housing as well (Vígvári, 2008). Without sufficient financial sources and with no “spontaneous gentrification” taking place in the 8th District, the municipality had to look for alternative ways of urban rehabilitation.

As a response to these processes, a study on the deterioration of the 8th district and its development plan was published in 1995 (Echter et al., 1995), which later led to the development of the Corvin and Magdolna quarters. While the Corvin Quarter was one of the most symbolic urban development projects of the post-1989 liberal era, the Magdolna Quarter was the first example of social urban rehabilitation in Hungary (Jelinek, 2017). These rehabilitation programs signal different periods of rescaling urban governance: the Corvin Quarter was an example of the urban renewal through “decentralization without the redistribution of resources” the Magdolna Quarter as period of “EU accession and Europeanisation of public policies” which was followed by “recentralization after 2010” (Czirfusz et al., 2015, p. 59).

The newest urban renewal project is taking place at the Orczy Quarter, where intense national funds were invested in order to establish a new university of public services. This newest wave of gentrification happening in the 8th is just another sign of the right-wing governance's urban revanchism (Smith, 1996), for which the district was always a playground (forbidding homelessness, attacking civil society organizations helping marginalized groups, etc.). This time, the government is trying to invent the image of a “university town” for the district, which consequently means the displacement of marginalized groups in favor of wealthier students and investors. Without implying that these processes would be unique to

Budapest or to the post-socialist transformation in general, it is important to note that the way they unfold is influenced by post-socialist transformation and the local institutional context.

2. 1. Emerging new urban politics

As I described, the overall low quality of housing in the 8th District and the privatization following the socialist transition has led to serious consequences. The economic crisis of 2008 and the election of Fidesz in 2010 only deepened these issues. Arguably the most important activist group in the housing movement in Hungary is The City is For All, which was founded in 2009, just after the economic crisis hit the country. The group was modelled on international organizational principles, particularly a similar initiative in New York called Picture the Homeless (Picture the Homeless, n.d.). The City is for All is a member of the European Action Coalition for The Right to Housing and recently joined the coalition of municipalist movements called Fearless Cities. They are active participants in the international housing movement and constantly struggle to “force the local and national state in Hungary to take responsibility for this [housing] situation and offer systemic solutions” (Udvarhelyi, 2019).

The City is For All is unique among activist circles in Hungary in terms of its structure. Two-thirds of the group’s membership is homeless or have experienced some form of housing poverty in their life, while the other third are “allies”, mostly from educated, middle-class backgrounds (Udvarhelyi, 2019, p. 195). The City is For All is especially significant for this study for two reasons. First, they have successfully stopped numerous evictions and saved multiple families from being separated or ending up on the streets. Not only do they protest evictions, they also provide legal support for families facing such displacement, while at the same time they put political pressure on the government to change certain legislations affecting homeless people. Second, The City is For All also has a great significance in situating the question of homelessness and housing poverty in the everyday political horizon, highlighting

the lack of state aid. As such, their work has been essential to the development of new urban politics in the 8th District and largely contributed to the electoral victory of C8.

Over the years The City is For All's support has grown significantly, leading them to reformat their organization. They decided to change their concentric circles model, which consisted of a small group of activists and a broad network of sympathizers and supporters. Lacking a network of activist groups to work with, they decided to expand their activities through forming sister organizations that work independently but share a common ideology and goals. The first was Street Lawyer (Utcajogász) founded in 2010, which is a group of lawyers who volunteer legal support and representation. The second, From Street to Housing Association (Utcáról Lakásba), tries to work together with municipalities in order to provide housing for homeless people. These groups were later joined by the School of Public Life (Közélet Iskolája) and Living Independently in a Community (Önállóan lakni – közösségben élni). The former trains activists to work in all kinds of social justice struggles, while the latter fights for housing rights for the disabled (see Udvarhelyi, 2015; Udvarhelyi, 2020).

2.2. Közöd – the fight against neoliberal urban governance

The 8th District has been a critical center for housing activism. These groups are at the heart of the activist scene in Budapest and their work is worthy of further research. I draw attention to it to illustrate the struggles of the preexisting groups fighting for housing rights in the 8th district and how they contributed to the emergence of a new radical urban politics. The groups I focus on from now on, Közöd and C8, have been working closely with them, but over time have decided to pursue a new strategy that none of the aforementioned do: running in municipal elections. Közöd was founded in 2014 and operated as an informal association until 2018. They started as a neighborhood association with the intent of helping local people with everyday concerns. Mária Bolba, a Lutheran pastor in the 8th District and an active member in

several groups affiliated with the Mária Mandák Congregational House, was the leader of Közöd since its founding. The Mandák House hosted Közöd's meeting, where they met once a week to discuss how their clients' cases are going or whether they received answers to their letters to the public offices. As its members were mostly educated and middle-class, they saw the group's role as monitoring the work of the municipality and were committed to increasing citizens' involvement in local politics. Közöd stated this goal in 2015 Facebook post:

In our free time we come together in high spirits as active citizens of Józsefváros, in order to be informed about the common issues of our living environment and to work for the development of the local community. We monitor the municipal work of our elected representatives with active thinking, and we would like to contribute to the development of cooperation between residents and decision-makers. If someone asks us who we are, we answer that we are the citizens that you represent, that we have something in common. Sometimes we get the who are you question in a more arrogant way: what do you have to do with it? (Közöd Facebook page, November 23, 2015)

Although Közöd's members embraced all types of local concerns, they quickly came to focus primarily on helping people who encountered housing conflicts with the municipality. They often accompanied these residents in their queries to municipal office or assisted them with executors and family helpers. Poor people who could not get this kind of help were often treated inhumanely by the municipal authorities as their meetings with public officials usually went undocumented and thus it is not possible to hold the officials accountable. One Közöd post described how these meetings often went without them there to help:

The point is, on the one hand, that you don't leave the room, which is already in an unacceptable condition for client reception, without accepting all the solutions that the company has offered, and you're just waiting for them to finally let you go, and on the other hand, that this is done entirely by eliminating writing. No minutes, no audio recordings, the whole process from the first phone call to the last tearful farewell. (Közöd, 2016a)

The activists of Közöd encountered a number of systematic problems, which they talked about in an interview in 2016 (Prókai, 2016). They described the lack of public houses for those in need. The local government almost always said that no flats were available, although Közöd found that there were 150 apartments that the municipality was planning to rent out to civil servants at market prices. The total number of municipally owned apartments in the district that people could actually apply to live in was only ten. These few apartments came with a host of restrictive regulations that further prevented access, like applicants needing to have a high school diploma. Another problem they faced was that if residents were behind rents, the local family support services would not be notified for months. Often tenants in public housing who owed back-pays were also not notified, resulting in even higher debts. Once they faced eviction, non-paying tenants, who were already in a precarious financial situation, also had to pay the lawyers' and the enforcement costs.

Közöd members in the same interview also mentioned that there is perception among municipal workers that people who cannot pay their rent are not really in need. The activists referred to an anecdote in which a poor person showed up in a Mercedes for aid, which narrative resists fading from the public consciousness, although there is hardly any basis for it nowadays. This sort of rhetoric helps justify the housing authority's termination of public housing contracts based on such individuals' supposed "behavioral problems," (Prókai, 2016, para. 14). Other than helping people with housing, Közöd embraced other local concerns as well. The condition of public spaces was always crucial for them, and they fought against the cutting down of trees on city streets, the removal of benches, and actively followed the renewal of the Orczy park. They argued that the municipality's "we clear away the benches, we build the fences' public space development could be done the other way around" (Közöd, 2016b). They protested the establishment of strict rules in the public parks as well, where children were not

allowed to play with balls or ride bikes. They also joined The City is For All's public toilet campaign, demanding more public toilets and making existing ones more accessible.

In 2016, Közöd also stood up against Fidesz's migration policy. As I described previously, the right-wing government mobilized a rhetoric that induced hatred towards the so-called enemies of the Hungarian nation. Fidesz used the 2015 migration crisis not only to prove a point to the European Union in their refusal of the proposed quota system in the allocation of the refugees, but also to undermine the work of Hungarian civil society institutions. Márta Bolba and Közöd also got involved in a wave of accusations after Márta Bolba published an opinion piece on the leftist Kettős Mércé blog (Bolba, 2016). In this piece she described a council meeting that was organized for the representatives of local churches. In that meeting they discussed the Fidesz national referendum that had asked: "Do you want the European Union to be able to mandate the obligatory resettlement of non-Hungarian citizens into Hungary even without the approval of the National Assembly?". Bolba asked those present to help her out what was the phrasing of the question that was turned into a referendum. No one knew the answer. They could also not tell her about the legal consequences of the referendum. Márta Bolba argued that the framing of the question implied both that the European Union is hostile towards Hungary, and that Hungary would be unable to fulfill its obligations to foreigners. She argued for a radically different approach: "I see our duties to help the refugees as a freedom of love, not as a restriction of my freedom" (Bolba, 2016, para. 2). After the right-wing media denounced Bolba as a liar for this article, they connected her and Közöd to the billionaire György Soros, labelled the mastermind behind the migration crisis. Painting Közöd with the same brush as Soros, the right-wing media decried the organization as enemies of the nation:

By the way, the pastor is the president of the Közöd Civil Association, which has already cooperated in several cases with the City is for All movement, funded by one of the foundations of György Soros. The members of the society are self-proclaimed

non-partisan who regularly attend meetings with opposition representatives and anti-government demonstrations. The members of the organization often claim that they are non-partisan and from Józsefváros, however, their members include a former socialist district representative and local MSZP faction leader, György Molnár and his wife Judit Dallos. Their Facebook page also shows that reliable figures of left-wing troublemaker groups are to be found around them. (Magyar Idők, 2017, para. 5)

Once Közöd faced the fact that the current local authorities, namely Máté Kocsis and Botond Sára (who were the previous district mayors), did not leave any room for citizen participation and cooperation they made their decision to run for the municipal elections. As one of their members explained “Although we, civilians, were interested in the local public sphere, prosperity, and social policies, we realized that this territory is occupied by political parties and we have to work with them” (Közélet Iskolája, 2020). Thus, only a month after she was attacked by the right-wing media, Bolba announced that she was running for the interim municipal elections. Due to both their poor representation in the media (largely controlled by Fidesz) and due to Közöd’s belief in face-to-face meetings, she ran a grassroots, door-knocking campaign. Although Bobla lost that election, Közöd members later remarked that this first experience in formal politics largely contributed to the success of the 2019 elections (Partizán, 2019b). In the next chapter I follow up how these experiences of grassroots activism provided a base for C8 in their electoral campaign.

3. C8 – A new vision for urban democracy

In this chapter I analyze the political campaign led by C8 in preparation to the municipal elections. Through my analysis I show how they confronted the neoliberal urban governance and imagined a new model for urban democracy, in which citizens would actively participate in the political decision-making. They led a grassroots campaign in which they implemented their ideas into practice through an emphasis on community-building and participatory program

making. As such, in this chapter I highlight the opportunities and challenges of the grassroots movement in the 8th district.

In 2018 members of Közöd together with other activists supported the campaign of Péter Győri for the 8th District mayor position. After losing this election as well, they decided to end Közöd and form a new group which they named C8 – Civilians for Józsefváros (Civilek Józsefvárosért). C8 continued most of the activities of Közöd and many members of Közöd also continued their work there. C8 remained an informal group but they had very clear goals since their beginning. As their memorandum shows, unlike the more neighborhood-association character of Közöd, C8 is oriented towards municipal politics and citizen activation since its foundation:

We, the undersigned, establish C8 – Civilek Józsefvárosért (C8 – Civilians for Józsefváros, in short C8) with the aim of creating an opportunity for cooperation for active citizens who wish to participate in the creation of a socially livable, economically and environmentally sustainable Józsefváros.

The C8 society and its members, as an open, democratic community, want a public life in Józsefváros in which actors who follow the values of solidarity, justice, fairness, equality, respect for human rights and transparency are able to work together for the common good.

1. We want candidates for mayor and deputies who are committed, prepared and fair for Józsefváros to run in the elections.
2. We want real dialogue between the social actors of Józsefváros and the participation of the community in the decisions that affect their lives.
3. We want municipal (and state) measures to always be based on the criteria of fairness, reasonableness, efficiency and effectiveness, in a way that the aspect of fairness is given priority.

4. We want the local government and state institutions to operate in a citizen-friendly, transparent and economical way.

5. We want to foster the appearance of new public actors and people taking on public tasks in Józsefváros, who can authentically represent the needs of the people living here.

6. We want to create a real public life in the district, in which voices critical of the current leadership of Józsefváros also have a place. (C8 Civilek Józsefvárosért, 2018)

Following their two previous unsuccessful campaigns, many people doubted whether it was possible to win against Fidesz electorally, especially as independent civic candidates. C8, however, had already decided in January that they would endorse an independent candidate. As one of their members explained, they did not see anything special about the situation, nothing really changed compared to their previous attempts. However, they felt like it is their responsibility to fight against an injustice system and that it might be the last chance they had to compete in municipal elections in Hungary (Partizán, 2019a).

Even in this very early stage of planning for the elections they believed that it was important to choose a candidate who could authentically represent the needs of the people living there. András Pikó was seen as a good candidate for many reasons. It was very important for the members of C8 that he lives in the district and has been an active citizen for many years in the district and himself a member of C8. He was also already well-known in middle-class circles as a journalist and a radio broadcaster. For a long time, Pikó refrained from committing to his candidacy as there was not yet a real chance for C8 to run a candidate. This changed when all the opposition parties in the city decided to form a coalition against Fidesz and support each other's district candidates, delegated prior to the election, rather than compete.

In Józsefváros, none of the opposition parties were particularly strong and they all regarded the district as a lost case. Momentum, the youngest among the bigger parties, got the

right to nominate the candidate for the district mayor position and they chose Pikó. C8 and Pikó were only willing to accept the nomination if they were guaranteed that he could run as an independent civic candidate and their program would also remain independent in content. Once the parties agreed to these conditions they started working together. In the previous campaign for Péter Győri, C8 and the other parties had already worked together, but not as effectively. In that campaign the campaign manager was given by the parties but already half of the activists were non-party members. As a member of C8 later summarized, this had not been a very good strategy, but at least they had gotten to know each other and learned to work together (Közélet Iskolája, 2020). Although at the beginning of the Pikó campaign not all the parties agreed that C8 should have their own campaign manager and an independent program, with time, C8 got full power to lead the campaign.

The only way they could manage to lead the campaign was through a very detailed strategy. They started as “friendly” locals and although they tried to keep that image but at the same time, they also worked together with professionals to plan everything they did through the campaign. They knew from the beginning that if they could not mobilize new voters they would not win. They were also aware that winning would not be possible if they relied on traditional media campaigns, because Fidesz would make that impossible. Ultimately, their strategy included three stages, where the first one was the “cute” civic part which turned into a more directly political campaign when Pikó became the official candidate of the united oppositional parties. With this turn, they began a negative campaign against Fidesz, declaring that they were working on breaking down the whole Fidesz regime. They tried connecting local problems with the broader problems of the Fidesz regime, arguing that if you had a problem with how Fidesz was running the country, then you should start fighting back at the local, municipal level. In the last stage of their campaign they realized that they were still lagging

behind Fidesz, so they started relying more heavily on door-knocking campaigns and reaching out to possible voters through personal meetings.

3.1. Laying the foundations of a participatory model

In all stages of their campaign it was of primary importance for C8 to build a community and engage people in politics. They wanted to remove the stigma from the district and rebuild the image of the district to make it cool and likeable, and by doing so encourage people to join their movement. One of the main elements of their campaign was organizing guided tours of the district. They organized twelve of these walks, where they talked about the history of Józsefváros and the problems each area has to face. As one of their members explained, these walks were important in getting to know the district itself and in building a community in which people could start talking about politics. Over time they started branding them as “András Pikó walks” where people could come to talk to him before or after. These conversations became very important for C8. In every interview they emphasized that unlike the candidates of Fidesz that live there, they listen to the problems of the locals and want to hear what they think.

The other main branding element of the campaign was creating a likeable, permanent image of their organization, which would inspire people to join. The “I love 8” design became a symbol for their movement, printed on billboards, tote bags and stickers, while the locals supported them with painted sheets displayed in their windows. As one of their members explained, “it was very important overall that we were out on the street, that people were able to tell their opinions and then we also showed how to politicize in a completely different way. So that it is possible to do such a lovable campaign where everyone feels good” (Közélet Iskolája, 2020).

About 150 activists worked on the campaign. Their primary way of recruiting activists was through surveys, but they soon realized that they had to reach out through door-knocking

to get more people's attention. Still, as a member of C8 summarized, most of their activists were white and had an educated, middle-class background. In a strategic meeting in March, they decided that they will write their program using participatory methods. For this reason too, they used surveys, where they asked the locals what were their most serious concerns. They saw that these surveys were also filled out mostly by people from an educated middle-class background. They were aware that in such a diverse and multicultural district this was a problem, and so they put more and more emphasis on the forms of campaigning where they could personally talk to people. As Pikó explained, they believed that through the door-knocking campaign they were able to gain the trust of the locals and it was largely because of their civic character:

In other words, when I said good evening, I am András Pikó, the candidate of the opposition for the district mayor and I came to introduce myself in person they invited me over for dinner. Because so far no one has talked to them this way, so I think it was a decisive moment and in this I think a civilian can be much more credible in this. (Közélet Iskolája, 2020)

In the end, 500 people answered the survey, showing that according to the locals the most important problem of the district was public cleanliness. Locals considered the municipality's housing management and the situation of residential houses as similarly serious concerns, as well as the small amount of green space and its poor condition. The final program was written in a way that took into consideration not only the problems the locals mentioned but also the order of importance that came out from the answers (Pikó, 2019).

Although András Pikó and C8 were not advertised in any local media, because it was owned by Fidesz loyalists, people started recognizing them on the streets and with time Fidesz also started to take them seriously. One of the first things C8 realized is that when they posted the location of their guided tours those areas were mysteriously cleaned by the time they

arrived. Similarly, in the last few months before the elections the municipality started fixing the roads that people have been complaining about for years and planting new trees where before there had only been abandoned trunks. Fidesz mobilized many other tactics that it is infamous for. The party pressured kindergarten teachers to collect signatures for them (Gergely, 2019), advertised in local churches (Horváth, 2019), and declared that there would be a “Roma terror” in the district if the opposition won (Pap, 2019b). The most important tactic that they used was trying to discredit C8 with a police investigation. Through a fake Facebook profile someone leaked a picture which allegedly showed Pikó and his team illegally recording voters’ personal data. The police ordered a house search and took two laptops (Pap, 2019a). Although the police could not find anything that would have proved the claims, the whole investigation seriously affected the campaign. C8 was questioned on what they believed in the most: the morality of their campaign. However, in the end, Fidesz’s move seriously backfired. Exactly because of this case, C8 and Pikó gained a lot more media coverage, people paid more attention to the upcoming municipal election, and the activists became even more motivated. As the result of the elections, the opposition politicians secured a majority in the municipality with András Pikó as the district mayor. This surprising victory gave hope that there is a possibility of renewing politics even under a regime that is increasingly shifting towards authoritarianism. In the following sections I highlight the lessons learned from the campaign and the future challenges for the further development of their grassroots politics.

3.2. Mobilizing local and international networks

In Józsefváros, the members of *Közöd* and C8 already lost two elections before this successful one. Looking back, the campaign manager, Tessa Udverhelyi highlighted two main elements that contributed to their victory in October. The first important factor was the already

existing network of local activists. As she explained, her knowledge and work in *The City is for All* largely contributed to the success of C8:

This is very much the success of The City is for All. So if I didn't get involved in The City is for All and if we didn't work together for 10 years with blood and sweat, without any money, and voluntarily on building from the bottom-up an effective, efficient and capable team, then this campaign, this would never have been successful (Partizán, 2019b).

The other main contribution that Tessza Udvarhelyi mentioned was the inspiration coming from Barcelona el Comú. In 2017 she went to Barcelona for the *Fearless Cities* Conference, which was an event organized for activist and politicians who believed that political change should be initiated from the local level. As it has been called it was “the “coming out party” of the global new municipalist movement” (Russell, 2019, p. 990) initiated by Barcelona el Comú. As Thompson (2020) argues, the novelty of new municipalism “resides in a newly-politicised and radical-reformist orientation towards the (local) state, in imagining new institutional formations that embody urban rather than state logics” (p. 2). The local level, however, is not seen as inherently better or more democratic, but instead, it is seen as opportunity to introduce practices that could democratize decision-making and distribute power more equally, thus it avoids what Purcell (2006) called the “local trap”. As such, Tessza Udvarhegyi and the campaign team of C8 relied on many ideas that characterizes new-municipalist initiatives. As she explained, it was not only an inspiration in regards to how to engage in local politics, but they also gained a “kind of determination and motivation that even those who are considered by most to be losers and a minority can also win” (Partizán, 2019b).

The success of C8, however, was also dependent on a unique situation. This situation that C8 had their own candidate was the result of the agreement between the oppositional parties. Since none of the parties were particularly strong in the district, and they all thought

that it was a lost case, they agreed on a supporting an independent candidate. As I described, there is a general strong distrust towards politics in Hungary, which also holds for activists who usually prefer avoiding traditional party politics. Thus, the emphasis on the civic character of C8 was crucial in their program. They wanted to distance themselves from politicians who seek money and power, and instead appear as fellow citizens who simply want to persuade the local government to help on the problems of the neighborhood. However, in the case of C8, this independent character did not mean that they would be apolitical, but rather, they wanted to reinvent politics in a way that is more inclusive:

I thought that if Hungarian democratic politics had any possibility of renewal, then really the only chance was that civil society associations and completely average citizens would start politicizing, because here it seemed, it was like a love revolution that happened, and not only love for each other, but love for politics. This was revolutionary and I saw a kind of politicking that I do not notice happening in party politics or in such very mainstream circles. (Partizán, 2019b)

3.3. Challenges

In this section I point out the challenges that the movement has to face in the further implementation of their politics. The first challenge they had to face immediately after the elections is that the very base of their campaign, their civic and grassroots character was called into question. As a member of C8 spelled out, once they won, suddenly they had to take care of so many responsibilities, while at the same time figure out exactly what position C8 should take. They were not a party, so they did not want to act like one, but somehow, they wanted to remain part of the decision-making processes. In this regard, the main challenge they faced, and are still currently facing, is about actualizing two different goals in parallel. On one hand, they want to keep their controlling function, while on the other hand, they want to contribute to “building a social base and developing a model based on participatory democracy with which

we could possibly present a very new thing and which could grow into, say, a Pikó-model” (Tilos radio, October 23, 2019). Naturally, the relationship of C8 to the municipality was quite often problematized. How can C8 keep its civic control function facing András Pikó, who was a member of their own association? The new mayor right after his election made a joke about how he cannot wait until the first protest organized by C8 against him. Although it is yet to be seen if this would really happen, Tessza Udvarhelyi also stresses that the relationship between the civil society and the municipality should not aim for peace, but instead for productive conflicts:

So that I think that for him to remain this civil and movement mayor, this civil and movement sphere must grow up to this task of having such a mayor. (...) I do not think that they must strive for harmony here, we will fight, the civil sphere and the local government, the difference compared to the current situation will be that our goals will be similar. At most, let’s say, civilians want to achieve it more radically, faster, and then obviously they will have to fight these battles with the local government, but I think, it is now the movement really has a task when we have such a mayor (Partizán, 2019a).

The successful conquest of the municipality represents a crucial factor for a movement in their fight for social justice and for a more democratic political system. However, as Mezzadra and Gago (2017) emphasizes, the rhetorical and sometimes electoral victory is easier to be achieved than acquiring “the necessary power to sustain a process of transformation in the medium term” (p. 490). As they explain, the actualization of their agenda “requires returning to debating a programmatic horizon and the formation of coalitions capable of translating it into practice in a context shaped by the emergence of new social conflicts and a right-wing offensive” (p. 491). Thus, following the successful elections, C8 and András Pikó faces urgent challenges in regards of the implementation of their program. They are promoting democratic engagement at large, but that necessarily needs to extend beyond policy making

and reach popular support while being “open to the recommendations or even the criticisms from the citizenry” (della Porta & Felicetti, 2018, p. 265). As della Porta and Felicetti argue implementing participatory and deliberative efforts from above, without the popular support “would resemble an amusement park in the countryside, an escape rather than a source of systemic change” (p. 265).

C8 and András Pikó must face these challenges in their aims to redefine politics and increase citizen participation. On the one hand, they must pacify the conservative middle class people in the district, who see the members of C8 as troublemakers, while on the other hand find ways to involve working-class people into their participatory programs. The months following the election of András Pikó there was a strong effort to popularize the methods of participatory democracy through regular public hearings and forums. Although many people showed up on these events, there is still a general feeling of distrust towards these new approaches in the district. As the district magazine reports: “Walking the streets, talking to the local, we could see that few trusts this. Either because, in their opinion, a politician is never telling the truth, or because they do not believe in the power of the community. This barrier will not be easy for the mayor and his team to break down” (Józsefvárosi Újság, 2020).

These challenges that await C8 and András Pikó are further complicated in a political landscape which is very fragmented both on the local and national scale. Under the current neoliberal authoritarian regime, it is highly questionable if it is possible to remedy the social inequalities in the short term. They are hindered by the structure of multi-level governance, in which the local level often lacks the authority and the sufficient resources to implement redistributive policies. The possibility of scaling up to other levels of governance is also quite limited, since their alliances are mostly made in the local level or at most with districts in similar position. At the same time, even inside the district municipality they are forced to work

together with the party representatives and will most likely be forced to adapt their political agenda.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of the 8th of Budapest, this research explored the agenda of the emerging new urban politics and opportunities and challenges it carries. The 8th District was one of the 14 districts of Budapest where the district mayor positions were won by opposition candidates in the fall of 2019. The surprising oppositional victory in the bigger cities of Hungary gave hope that the power of Fidesz can be overthrown and that municipal politics can be the tool to achieve this goal. In the light of the municipal elections, this research focused on the 8th District of Budapest, which is the most extraordinary case among the newly won districts. Here the electoral victory was the success of many years of grassroots activist experience that was channeled into the campaign. The new radical urban politics that C8 represents extends beyond the critique of the current right-wing regime and directs their critique towards the injustices of neoliberal urban governance. This study focused on three key questions: (a) the type of urban democracy this new urban politics envision and how that confronts urban neoliberalism; (b) the reasons an urban grassroots movement came to the decision to engage in formal politics; and (c) the challenges the movement has to face once institutionalized in local urban politics.

Analyzing the housing movement activism in the 8th District, I showed how a network of activist movement developed with a shared agenda towards fighting neoliberal urban policies. In this investigation I followed Jacobsson and Korulczuk's (2019) argument, who highlighted the importance of focusing our attention on small-scale everyday activism. As they argued, these practices are engaged in a long-term struggle in which they "propose new ways of doing democracy on the local and sometimes the national level" (p. 5). As I pointed out, although the grassroots activism in the district fosters new forms of citizen activation and participation but facing the previous authoritarian neoliberal urban governance the possibility

of influencing urban policy change and achieving radical transformations was very limited. Through the case study of C8, I showed how this long-term engagement in everyday politics directed a group of activists towards involvement in formal politics and how their electoral campaign was already able challenge previously stable political practices through participatory methods. In the final part I outlined some of the key challenges that await András Pikó and C8.

Although the months following the municipal election were characterized by a tense political atmosphere, the COVID-19 pandemic brought significantly new challenges that fundamentally question the future of the new urban politics that started to emerge in Hungary. In these past months the Hungarian government passed a law which allowed Orbán to rule by decree, without a time limit to the state of emergency, and with the ability to arrest people for up to five years for spreading misinformation. At the same time, major funds were taken away from the municipalities while they had to bear a huge responsibility in the control of the epidemic. The COVID-19 pandemic thus intensified the conflict between the opposition municipalities and the government and gave a chance to Fidesz to reallocate funds. This will most likely result in the further weakening of the municipalities and thus the next few years will be extremely challenging for the opposition-led districts and rural cities.

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