Eötvös Loránd University

Faculty of Law

Doctoral School of Political Science

SZÉCSI Árpád

The preludes and the foundation of the Hungarian Democratic Forum, its early history (1987–1990), with a special focus on the role of the "movement roots"
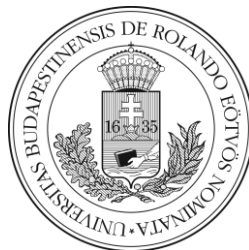
Thesis and summary

Doctoral advisors:

Dr. PESTI Sándor

hab. associate professor

(2018–)

Dr. BIHARI Mihály

professor

(–2018)

Budapest

2021

1. A brief summary of the research project

From the very beginning of my research on the past of the Hungarian Democratic Forum (Magyar Demokrata Fórum, MDF), it became clear to me that the foundation and formation of this regime-changing movement, the history of its first years and, at least indirectly, - its success at the elections in the spring of 1990 were remarkably influenced by the Forum's antecedents, among others, the pre-existing personal contacts and networks. A deeper understanding of this particular set of phenomena, explaining and justifying the connections between them, has been the objective of my academic research.

My research project aims to review and analyse the movement characteristics of the Hungarian Democratic Forum and their effects, to show their significance, and to review the factors related to the *movement* characteristics that explain the electoral success of the MDF in 1990.

The central methodological element of the thesis is "individual case explanation" through comparative analysis.[1] Accordingly, a part of the research project was to thoroughly examine and describe the "individual case" on one hand, and to ascertain the criteria and the subjects of the comparison on the other hand. The former ones were determined with the help of theoretical models of social movements whilst the latter ones were Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ) and the Alliance of Young Democrats (FIDESZ), showing the necessary resemblance to the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF).

My research questions are:

1. How did the Hungarian Democratic Forum's movement antecedents and characteristics influence its early history? Can their impact on the party's electoral success be detected?

2. What were the reasons that the MDF was the first to emerge in Hungary in the second half of the 1980s as a nationwide movement recruiting members, and to show a unique and intensive organisational growth in the early days of the nascent multi-party competition?

---

[1] REZSŐHÁZY Rudolf: *Bevezetés a társadalomtudományok módszertanába [An Introduction to the Methodology of Social Sciences]* Budapest, Typotex, 2016, pp. 81-82.

3. How can the founder-organisers of the Hungarian Democratic Forum be characterised? What role did they play while founding, organising the movement and later transforming it into a party?

4. Were the movement's antecedents and characteristics present in the Forum's political competitors, and what impact did they have on their formation, early history and electoral performance? (Comparative analysis)

2. Brief description of the completed project, methods of analysis

The subject of the essay and the focus of the analysis are two factors, each to be a condition of the other and strengthening each other. The former is of a descriptive-demonstrative nature: in line with the title of the thesis, it presents the pre-history of the Hungarian Democratic Forum, the circumstances of its formation and its early period from autumn 1987 to spring 1990. In my view, *the entire process*, up to its end point i.e. up to the parliamentary election victory (which is highly relevant politically and from the point of view of the exercise of power), *was determined by the movement roots and antecedents* of the MDF. In the first two descriptive sections (chapters 3-4), I therefore had to go into sufficient depth and extent on the processes, major events and relations leading up to the formation of the Forum, outlining the political framework conditions to a necessary extent, followed by a description of the early period between 1987 and 1990 (chapter 5). The second, analytical strand of the thesis has explanatory function, as well as testing and verifying the thesis. This was laid down in the theoretical sub-chapter (2.2) and explained in part in the historical chapters, and then in the comparative analysis and the summary.

In line with the above, the research methodology was also twofold. To explore and describe the period from the early antecedents of the MDF to its electoral victory, it was necessary to use the classic tools of political history research: reviewing, exploring and, if necessary, collecting sources. (Given that the regime change is still part of the recent past, the latter form of the research also became part of the toolbox.) The early history of the SZDSZ and FIDESZ (1988–

1990) has been presented only to the extent necessary for a comparative analysis (subsection 6.1); the processed materials on which the outline is based belonged to similar sources as for the MDF, with the exception of the primary collection of materials. (Its listing follows the below outline of the theoretical methodology.)

Another aspect of the study is the development of a theoretical framework for comparative analysis. Due to the differences between the Western and Eastern bloc countries and between the Central and Eastern European countries which are too great from the point of view of our subject, a comparison with international outlook is not possible.

Among the relevant rival opposition parties of the MDF in the 1990 elections, the SZDSZ and FIDESZ are suitable for comparison. (In the case of the Smallholders' Party and the Christian Democrats, no movement organisation can be found immediately prior to their reorganisation.)

For the development of the criteria of the comparative analysis, I borrowed and adapted schemes from the work of social movement researchers[2], including a resource catalogue from one of the authors of resource mobilisation theory.[3] Using the works of foreign and Hungarian scholars of movement theory, I also developed a comparative table of indicators.

The Hungarian "regime-changing movements", which emerged under the specific political conditions of the Kádár regime, underwent a transformation process worthy of special examination; in the process, they evolved from informal networks into social movements, which very quickly took on the functions of competing political parties, and by the time of the free elections of 1990 could be described as "protoparties" with movement characteristics. I have also adapted a transformational scheme from the literature on social movement theory[4] to examine the specific variants of the three political forces involved in the comparative analysis and to compare their characteristics. The comparative analysis carried out with the help of this and on the basis of the resource catalogue and the table of indicators is presented in subchapters 6.2 and 6.3 of the thesis; the conclusions drawn are summarised in chapter 7 and in part 3 of this thesis summary.

---

[2] E.g. Craig JENKINS; Doug McADAM, John McCARTHY –Mayer ZALD; MIKECZ Dániel; SZABÓ Máté
[3] McADAM, Doug: *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970, Second Edition,* The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London, 1999, pp. 44-48.
[4] SZABÓ Máté: *Társadalmi mozgalmak és politikai tiltakozás [Social Movements and Political Protest]* Budapest, Villányi úti könyvek, 1998, p. 17. and MIKECZ Dániel: *A globalizációkritikus mozgalom Magyarországon. Zöldek, pacifisták, házfoglalók. [The Anti-Globalisation Movement in Hungary.Green, Pacifist, Squatters]* Budapest, L'Harmattan, 2018, p. 191.

The definition and movement theory subsections of the thesis are based on the literature on the subject. The research of a political-historical nature – as well as the parts of the dissertation presenting the results of this research – was based on the reception and citation of other authors' works, as well as on other, diverse sources.

In the course of my research in the three visited archives I studied the documents of the MDF, the leading bodies of the MSZMP (Hungarian Social Workers' Party) and the state security services. (The archives and oral history archives involved in my research are listed in the Annex.)

It was necessary to explore and use primary sources (written and audio) also because the literature on the subject is still incomplete. Comprehensive historical works necessarily only cover in some depth the events and processes directly related to the MDF. Only in recent years have studies (and omnibuses) been published on the Forum, reporting on the results of research on a specific sub-topic. The publication of sources (documentary collections, minutes of meetings, transcripts) has begun. The growing number of memoirs also provides a wealth of information, alongside appropriate source reviews.

Finally, I have placed great emphasis on researching, exploring and presenting the recollections of former politicians of the MDF and other actors who played a decisive or specific role in the history of the period. This was done by working with four or five types of sources.

13 omnibuses contain nearly 300 conversations with people involved in the regime change. Some of them contain oral history interviews, others are transcripts of dialogues broadcast on television and radio. (Only part of István Elek's anniversary series has been published, the rest of the interviews are available on the internet.) Some of the interviews published in the press are also instructive (which, despite the space limitations, provide deeper analysis or new data). The material from the larger oral history archives is of exceptional value.[5] Over the years, I myself have conducted oral history interviews with 27 former actors in the (pre)history of the MDF, relevant to the subject of this thesis.[6]

---

[5] Most of these are available as text transcripts, while a digitised cassette series of one of the OSA's collections, which was opened in 2021, is available as audio material.

[6] ABA Béla, ANDRÁSFALVY Bertalan, BAKOS István, BALSAI István, BIHARI Mihály, BÍRÓ Zoltán, CSOÓRI Sándor, FEKETE Gyula, dr. FEKETE Gyula, HORVÁTH Béla, JESZENSZKY Géza, KISS Gy. Csaba, KATONA Tamás, KOZMA Huba, LEZSÁK Sándor, MÁRTON János, NAGY Gáspár, NAHIMI Péter, PÁLMÁNY Béla, PINTÉR Lajos, POZSGAY Imre, PÜSKI Sándor, SZABÓ Béla, SZABÓ Tamás, SZŐKE László, TALPASSY Zsombor, W.-NEMESSURI Zoltán

Based on the literature and the processing of the listed types of sources, the descriptive sections on political history were prepared. Chapter 3 describes *the roots of the MDF movement and its intellectual-political antecedents,* and traces the history of the populist-national opposition up to 1985. The cultural-political context and the changing attitude of the state party towards intellectual groups critical of the regime are outlined in brief. In parallel, or as an outlook, the operation, the main characteristics of the "democratic opposition" are described. The presentation of the relationship between the two emerging intellectual-political branches is a recurring feature of the description because of its importance. A comparative analysis of their different oppositional strategies is mainly presented in the theoretical outlook of subsection 3.3.4, adapting Albert O. Hirschman's well-known threefold model (Exit, Voice and Loyalty).

Chapter 4, titled *The Immediate Prehistory of the MDF (1985–1987),* basically traces the sometimes parallel, sometimes divergent paths of the further development of the populist-national and democratic opposition from the Monor conference to the Lakitelek meeting. Among the many other clubs and initiatives of the "age of circles", the special college movement is also mentioned. The final sub-chapter provides a summary and an outlook into the existence and absence of informal networks on the "threshold of regime change". The significance of the topic is that these pre-existing networks played a decisive role in the development of the regime-changing movements; the re-founded old parties that lacked them started from a serious disadvantage in their (re)formation and (re)organisation. An important aspect of the chapter is the presentation of the Lakitelek meeting September 1987 and the circle of the "Seven" that played a decisive role in organising the Hungarian Democratic Forum.[7]

Chapter 5 of the dissertation – The *Formation and Early Period of the Hungarian Democratic Forum (1987–1990)* – covers a period almost as long as the immediate pre-history of the MDF, and in the accelerating process of regime change there were many more events, both within the Forum, as well as in the domestic politics that providing the environment. This, along with the differences between the periods discussed, explains why the relevant thematic delineation and "movement-centric focus" of the thesis is increasingly asserted in this chapter.

---

[7] BÍRÓ Zoltán, CSOÓRI Sándor, CSURKA István, FEKETE Gyula, FÜR Lajos, KISS Gy. Csaba, LEZSÁK Sándor

The history of events leading from the formation of the MDF in Lakitelek in 1987 to its electoral victory in 1990 also forms the basis of the comparative analysis from the "side" of the Forum. A brief description of SZDSZ and FIDESZ, which stand on the "other side" of the comparison, is given in subsection 6.1. Building on this, a comparison of the three transforming political forces (informal network – social movement – protoparty) in the process of the regime change is made using the (adapted) transformation model, resource catalogue and indicator table developed in the theoretical chapter of the thesis.

3. Scientific conclusions and their possible applications

The results of the researches carried out, the of the historical description and the conclusions of the comparative analysis proved the thesis of the dissertation to be justified. The antecedents and the movement characteristics of the Hungarian Democratic Forum had a strong influence on its early history and played a significant role in its electoral success.

By answering the research questions, the "chain of reasons" behind the thesis was also established. The movement roots and the early contacts, followed by latent organising, led to the creation of an extensive informal network. With the help of a small, well- (resource) mobilising coordination group – the group of the 7-9 MDF founders – this developed into a countrywide movement organisation as a result of an intensive growth process. The chronological primacy of its formation and structural development gave the Forum a high public visibility and popularity compared to other opposition forces in the spring and summer of 1989. These positive developments for the MDF came to a halt in the autumn of that year; the main reason for this was the 'November referendum, and it was the collection of signatures to call for it, the campaign and finally, the favourable result of the referendum (for the initiators) that gave the Alliance of Free Democrats momentum and elevated it to the position of a potential rival of the Forum. The countrywide organisational network of the SZDSZ was built up with great intensity, its popularity grew, and its membership caught up with that of the MDF by the spring.

In the end, the Hungarian Democratic Forum succeed to maintain its leading position and win the elections, thanks to what I consider to be its "pre-aggregated" resources. Including the

aforementioned initial awareness and popularity resulting from the first-mover advantage in the formation and organisation, the organisational network with countrywide coverage covering all types of municipalities, and the local social embeddedness which also enabled the finding of individual candidates with good chances to win. It was also important to have the network of committed activists, who had gained some experience and practice in two major "logistical mobilisations" (at the reburial of Imre Nagy and his fellow martyrs, the MDF provided the "civilian security" for the mass event, with more than a thousand or perhaps two thousand volunteers wearing armbands. And at the end of 1989, the organisation and logistics of the humanitarian aid convoys to Transylvania, including an own MDF convoy of almost 150 vehicles, was also a mobilisation exercise.)

In the campaign leading up to the first free elections in 1990, a prominent role was given to voluntary political work, including the collection of petition cards and the pasting of posters and flyers, local initiatives and direct outreach to voters, and in this context, the phenomenon of "membership as media", supplementing or replacing the mass media in getting the party's message to the voters.

In all these respects, the MDF enjoyed an advantage over its competitors in ways that could be directly or indirectly explained by its movement roots, antecedents and characteristics, as was evident from answering research question 4. The conclusions outlined below are the result of a brief presentation of the early history and campaigning of the SZDSZ and FIDESZ, and subsequent comparative analyses.

Given that the comparative analysis was partly based on a resource mobilisation model of social movement theories, it was first necessary to clarify the justification of the comparison by answering the first part of research question 4: whether these relevant categories can be interpreted also at the rivals. The answer was positive. A review and comparison of the characteristics of the "shape-shifting" of the three political forces using the transformation model revealed that, for each of them, the period from their founding to the process of party formation (which was only partially completed before the elections) was characterised by the presence of factors that characterise social movements.

Before the four resources highlighted by Doug McAdam were considered, the pre-existing networks of the three political forces were compared. Their main characteristics determined the

initial availability and mobilisability of additional types of resources. The populist-national opposition and the democratic opposition were formed over a longer period of time, the former spreading latently over a large part of the country, the latter concentrated in the capital city, Budapest. As point-based, formal institutions, the special colleges (the bases for the FIDESZ) formed a loose, informal network, holding their first major summer camp in 1985. For a long time, the development and territorial pattern of the local organisations of the three movements and then parties reflected the above conditions. From autumn 1989 to spring 1990 the SZDSZ approached the MDF's numerical organisation and countrywide coverage with intensive growth.

Between the two major rivals, the MDF's temporal lead in terms of recruitment prevailed, as it did in the networking of organisations. After the flag was unfurled in September 1988, the movement experienced a period of very intense growth, followed by a steady increase after six months, but then came to a halt in the autumn of 1989, during the period of the November referendum. The SZDSZ, on the other hand, was able to gain momentum and, even if it could not catch up, it came close to its rival during the election campaign. Immediately after its formation, FIDESZ gained many new members, some of them in solidarity with the threatened organisers, but the dynamics of expansion remained modest throughout and was accompanied by a lack of territorial coverage.

The "pre-existing solidarity incentives" identified by McAdam as a second resource have developed and had a positive impact in all three movements. The resulting motivation was reflected in the activity of members and sympathisers both at the time of the founding of the organisation and during the electoral contest. Although it is not empirically quantifiable, it is nevertheless true that the "total amount" of voluntary work carried out in a campaign can be roughly considered as the product of individual capacities and the number of active members, while its effectiveness is influenced by the degree of organisation, the territorial coverage, the "cohesiveness" of members and leaders, and the "tried and tested" nature of the communication network(s). In terms of these factors, the MDF has had considerable advantages, as has been pointed out in several places in the dissertation.

The third type of resource is "communication networks". Under the Kádár regime, freedom of speech and freedom of the press did not prevail, and intellectual groups critical of the system could only get their messages and thoughts to their sympathisers outside the mass media

channels. The opinion leaders of the populist-national opposition reached them through the less open organs of the first public sphere, as well as through explicitly "movement-like" interpersonal meetings between writers and readers. In the circles of the democratic opposition, the illegally printed samizdat and the "free universities" created a second public sphere. Special colleges engaged in professional and public dialogue in their own communities, sometimes through inter-institutional meetings and through their "semi-legal" internal publications.

These movement-like forms of communication were the basis of the networks of contacts on which the political forces of regime change could build. Even during the democratic transition, the channels of mass communication were opened to opposition parties and their messages only belatedly and with much controversy. This left a large role for communication and the flow of information within movement organisations, and in the campaign the "membership as media" could be a resource. The MDF's countrywide territorial coverage, locally accepted leaders and prestigious supporters also gave it an advantage in this respect.

Finally, in the early history of all three organisations, the leaders who emerged during the movement period – or in most cases were present as founders from the beginning, or even earlier – played a decisive role (they constitute McAdam's fourth type of resource.) In the case of the MDF, I consider it important that, in a changed form and circumstances, but representing the "movement period" and character, most of the founders participated in the party's campaign and contributed to its success. The main thesis of my dissertation, the "chain of reasons" explaining the processes from the early antecedents to the electoral victory, is thus also reflected in their persons.

The conclusions based on the results of the historical part of the thesis and the analytical chapter, the answers to the research questions, outlined and, in my view, justified the thesis of the dissertation; they summarised how its movement roots, its antecedents and consequent characteristics, the personal relationships formed early on and their countrywide network influenced the history of the Hungarian Democratic Forum in the first period. In the case of the MDF, the influence of these factors was very strong, while for the SZDSZ and especially the FIDESZ it was weaker.

Opportunities for further use of the results

The author hopes that the research, covering a longer period than that of the regime change usually considered, processing and establishing in some respect a variety of source types, along with the thesis summarising its results may serve as a starting point for further examinations on various topics.

With regard to the Hungarian Democratic Forum, for example, it is possible to write a more comprehensive early history of the MDF by opening up some of the thematic delimitations. (For this, for example, a scholarly political portrait of József Antall and a well-founded description of his role are essential). I also consider it possible to use my results for a more detailed description or a deeper analysis of the 1990 parliamentary election campaign.

Whether my propositions are formulated within the framework of a movement-theoretical approach or a comparison based on political history, they may inspire researchers interested in the subject to examine the formation and early period of the other two regime-changing parties in more detail; as well as the history of the (re)formation of the Smallholders' Party and the Christian Democrats could be processed on the basis of similar sources as the exploration of the MDF's antecedents and its period up to 1990.

Finally, in the case of any similar undertaking, it is obvious to extend the political history of the party over time, i.e. to present and analyse the governmental cycle following the election victory of the Hungarian Democratic Forum from various perspectives, and perhaps to follow the party's further fate – even until its dissolution around 2010.

4. Publications of the author on the topic of the doctoral thesis

Szécsi Árpád: Antall József kormányalakítása. „Hogyan"-ok és „miért"-ek, egyeztetések, megállapodások és hátterük 1990 tavaszán. [The Ways and the "Why"-s of the Installation of the Government of József Antall. Negotiations, Agreements and Their Backgrounds in the Spring of 1990] In: *Themis. Az ELTE Állam- és Jogtudományi Doktori Iskola elektronikus folyóirata.* 2020/1, 225-255.
http://epa.oszk.hu/02300/02363/00033/pdf/EPA02363_themis_2020_maj_225-255.pdf

Szécsi Árpád: A Bethlen Gábor Alapítvány első évtizede. [The First Decade of the Gábor Bethlen Foundation] In: Bakos István (ed.): *Alapítvány a nemzet javára. A Bethlen Gábor Alapítvány negyedszázada (1980–2005).* BGA–Püski, Budapest, 2005. 79-150.

Szécsi Árpád: A Magyar Demokrata Fórum jelentősége a rendszerváltás folyamatában (Az MDF sajátosságai és funkciói). [The Importance of the Hungarian Democratic Forum in the Process of the Regime Change (The Characteristics and Functions of the MDF).] In: *MTA–ELTE Pártok, Pártrendszerek, Parlamentarizmus Kutatócsoport évkönyve 2009.* MTA–ELTE Pártok, Pártrendszerek, Parlamentarizmus Kutatócsoport – MTA Politikai Tudományok Intézete, Budapest, 2009, 23–32.

Szécsi Árpád: A Magyar Demokrata Fórum történetének kutatásáról. Módszertani számvetés. Eredmények, források, nehézségek. [Remarks on the Research of the History of the Hungarian Democratic Forum. Methodological Summary: Results, sources, difficulties.] In: *Pártok, politika, történelem. Tanulmányok Vida István egyetemi tanár 70. születésnapjára.* MTA–ELTE Pártok, Pártrendszerek, Parlamentarizmus Kutatócsoport, Budapest, 2010, 403–418.

Szécsi Árpád: A „szabadság kis köreitől" a választási győzelemig – a Magyar Demokrata Fórum története a korai kezdetektől 1990. március 25-ig. [From the "Small Circles of Freedom" to Electoral Victory. The History of the Hungarian Democratic Forum from its Early Beginnings to 25 March 1990] In: *Multa rogare, rogata tenere, retenta docere. Tudományos Diákköri Dolgozatok 2001.* ELTE ÁJK, Budapest, 2002. 188-232.

Szécsi Árpád: "From the Tent to the Parliament." The Early Period of the Hungarian Democratic Forum (1987–1990) In: Bódi Ferenc – Andrea Ragusa – Ralitsa Savova (eds.): *Courage in Politics.* Pacini Editore, Pisa, 2020, 161-192.

Szécsi Árpád: Pre-history of the Hungarian Democratic Forum as an Intellectual and Political Movement. In: Bódi Ferenc – Andrea Ragusa – Ralitsa Savova (eds.): *Courage in Politics.* Pacini Editore, Pisa, 2020, 133-160.

Papers before publication

Szécsi Árpád: A Magyar Demokrata Fórum megalakulása és parlamenti párttá válása (1987–1990) [The Foundation of the Hungarian Democratic Forum and its Transformation to Party] In: Bódi Ferenc – Ralitsa Savova (szerk.): *Bátorság a politikában.* Gondolat - Társadalomtudományi Kutatóközpont, 2022 [in press]

Szécsi Árpád: Az MDF mozgalmi gyökerei, szellemi-politikai előzményei. [The Movement Roots and the Intellectual–Political Antecedents of the MDF] In: Bódi Ferenc – Ralitsa Savova (szerk.): *Bátorság a politikában.* Gondolat – Társadalomtudományi Kutatóközpont, 2022 [in press]

Books published with the contribution of the author:

M. Kiss József – Vida István (eds.): *Magyarországi pártprogramok 1988–1990.* [Party Programmes in Hungary, 1988–1988] ELTE–Eötvös Kiadó, Budapest, 2005
    – *introduction*

Szécsi Árpád (ed.): *Lakitelek 1987. A magyarság esélyei. Képeskönyv.* [*Lakitelek 1987. Photos of the Conference on the Chances of Hungarians]*.2., javított kiadás. Antológia, Lakitelek, 2019

    – *editing*

Vida István (ed.-in-chief): *Magyarországi politikai pártok lexikona 1846–2010.* [L*exicon of Political Parties in Hungary 1846–2010]* Gondolat – MTA–ELTE Pártok, Pártrendszerek, Parlamentarizmus Kutatócsoport, Budapest, 2011

   – lexicon entries

5. Annex: Archives and Oral History Archives

Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security

The National Archives of Hungary

Research Institue and Archive of the Regime Change

1956 Institute Foundation – Digital Oral History Archive

National Széchényi Library – Oral History Archive

Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archive – András Bozóki Collection

VERITAS Research Institute for History – Oral History Archive