“Free country, free internet”: The symbolic power of technology in the Hungarian internet tax protests

Elisabetta Ferrari

University of Pennsylvania, USA

Contact Information:
Elisabetta Ferrari
Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania,
3620 Walnut Street, Philadelphia 19104, USA

Email: elisabetta.ferrari@asc.upenn.edu

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Abstract

In 2014, the Hungarian government announced the introduction of a tax on internet usage. The proposal generated large protests, which led to its eventual withdrawal. In this article I investigate the puzzling success of the "internet tax" protests: how could a small tax on internet consumption generate so much contestation? I argue that the internet tax was able to give way to a broader mobilization against the government, because of the symbolic power of the idea of "the internet", to which different political meanings can be attached. Through interviews with Hungarian activists, I reconstruct how the internet was associated with a mobilizing discourse that I term "mundane modernity", which reproduces tropes of Western modernity about the equalizing properties of technology, progress, and rationality, while grounding them in the everyday practices of internet use. I then discuss the types of freedom embedded in mundane modernity and assess its political limitations.

"Free country, free internet": The symbolic power of technology in the Hungarian internet tax protests

In October 2014, the Hungarian government announced the introduction of an "internet tax" that would apply to internet consumption on both mobile and landlines. This proposal was met with protests in the streets of Budapest – the largest mobilization against the right-wing Fidesz government since its election in 2010, and (at the time) the biggest demonstration in Hungary since 1989. Confronted with the size of the protest, the Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, decided to set aside the proposed legislation, which has not been reintroduced since.

In this article I investigate the puzzling success of the internet tax protests: how could a small tax on internet consumption generate so much public attention and protest? I first contextualize the internet tax within the Hungarian political landscape and then explore the success of the protests by examining how the internet came to be envisioned by protesters. I suggest that we should think about the ways in which the internet can play a role in mobilization not just as a tool, but also as a symbol. While the symbolic dimension of the internet has not been extensively studied in relation to social movements, I rely on the literature that has explored the socio-political power of discourses about technology (Flichy, 2007; Jasanoff, 2015; Mansell, 2012; Marvin, 1988; Mosco, 2004).

My empirical analysis is based on interviews conducted with the key activists that organized the Hungarian protests. What emerges from the interviews is that the activists believe that the success of the internet tax protests should be attributed to the topic of the demonstrations: the internet. Yet, it is clear from their accounts that the protests were also about much more than the internet, as made evident by one key event: the trashing of the Fidesz party headquarters. I argue that the issue of the internet tax brought together different

grievances and gave way to a broader contestation of the government. But why? What was so special about the internet tax? I suggest that the idea of "the internet" is particularly powerful because of the different political meanings that can be attached to it. Through the interviews, I reconstruct how four ideas – equality and development, future, rationality, and mundanity – were associated with the internet during the protests; I then suggest that their combination equates the internet with what I term "mundane modernity": the grounding of longstanding tropes of Western modernity in the everyday practices of internet use. I suggest that the discourse of mundane modernity was particularly successful in the post-communist context. I then discuss the freedoms that are contemplated within mundane modernity. In my conclusion, I highlight the need for comparative research on how social movements construct and deploy discourses about technology. Lastly, I also critically assess the limits of mundane modernity: while it is analyzed here as part of a successful progressive mobilization, it shows evident political weaknesses that might make it unsuitable for other social justice causes.

The internet tax protests

The internet tax proposed by the Hungarian government in October 2014 called for a tax on users of 150 Hungarian forints (about $0.50) for each gigabyte of internet traffic beyond an initial untaxed gigabyte. As a first response to the tax, a Facebook page was created: *Százezren az internetadó ellen*, literally "100,000 against the Internet tax", which became the informal organizing hub for the demonstrations[i]. On October 26, 10,000 people marched in the center of Budapest (Hungary: Internet tax angers protesters, 2014). The government responded by announcing that the tax would be limited to a monthly cap of 700 forints ($2.40) for individual users (Feher, 2014).

Unsatisfied by the government's amendments, activists organized a second demonstration for October 28, which gathered 100,000 protesters. It was the largest protest

since Hungary's transition to democracy in 1989[ii], and thus also the biggest demonstration against Orbán's government (Dunai, 2014).

While activists were getting ready to hold a third demonstration, on October 31st, Orbán said in a radio interview that the tax proposal had been misunderstood by the population and that it would not be introduced in its current form (Hungary internet tax cancelled after mass protests, 2014). The organizers of the protests saw this as a victory against the government and celebrated it with a third demonstration (Lyman, 2014). Since Orban's announcement, there have been no further attempts by the Hungarian government to tax internet usage.

Before the government backed out of the internet tax, the protests had begun to move beyond the initial demand to not have the Internet taxed (see also Gagyi, 2014). Opposition movements that had been organizing – mostly unsuccessfully – for years, found in the internet tax an issue they could use to gather support around a broader platform of opposition to the Orbán government. It seemed paradoxical that the threat of a few dollars per month in taxes would lead Hungarians to protest so massively against the government, while the same government had already changed the Constitution (Human Rights Watch, 2013) and curtailed the freedom of the media (Brouillette, 2012). This article addresses the puzzling success of the protests: what was so special about the internet tax that could lead so many Hungarians to the streets?

Context and Analytical Approach

In the 2010s, internet policy became a topic of protests worldwide. The SOPA and PIPA legislation in the United States (Benkler et al., 2015; Powell, 2016), the ACTA treaty

(Nowak, 2016) and online surveillance (Wäscher, 2017) have all been hotly contested. But none of these demonstrations gathered as many people as the Hungarian internet tax protests. Why did internet policy become so salient in Hungary in 2014?

The Hungarian internet tax protests should be examined within the broader civil society opposition to the Fidesz government. By the time the internet tax was proposed, Hungary had already seen several protests, largely concentrated in the capital, which were the expression of leftist and liberal concerns[iii] surrounding the direction in which Fidesz was leading the country, a platform Orbán himself later defined as "illiberal democracy" (Orbán, 2014). Two social movements that emerged in that period, *One Million for the Freedom of the Press in Hungary* (better known as Milla) and *Hallgatói Hálózat* or HaHa (i.e. "student network"), sponsored demonstrations against the Orbán government. While both criticized the Hungarian political system, Milla mobilized for press freedom (Wilkin et al., 2015) and HaHa protested austerity cuts to public university funding (Zontea, 2015). Milla and HaHa were part of the civil society-based, leftist-liberal opposition that is critical of the Fidesz government, but also of the opposition parties, notably the socialist MSZP[iv]. While these movements indeed contested the Fidesz government, they never posed a significant challenge to its dominance, as the party gathered a strong 45% of the national vote in the 2014 elections. Both Milla and HaHa are important reference points for the internet tax protests, whose organizers were all at least marginally involved in one or both movements. However, the internet tax protests were larger than any of the actions ever organized by Milla or HaHa.

The internet tax itself should be contextualized in the larger turn towards illiberal democracy that is at the heart of Fidesz's politics (Bozoki, 2015). Since Fidesz gained power in 2010, it has amended the Fundamental Law (i.e. the Hungarian Constitution) to strengthen the executive branch (Human Rights Watch, 2013), restricted media freedom (Brouillette, 2012), introduced tax increases and budget cuts to healthcare, education, and pensions

(Bozoki, 2015). These actions have taken place amidst a growing populist-nationalist rhetoric, focused on identifying enemies of the Hungarian nation (the EU and "liberal" NGOs are a favorite), and frequent revelations of corruption (Gagyi, 2014). The illiberal turn did not stop after the momentary defeat on the internet tax. Since then, Hungary has become known to the world for both its xenophobic approach to the refugee crisis (Scheppele, 2015) and its attacks on civil society (Dunai and Koranyi, 2014). Currently, it is engaged in a battle with a new enemy, Central European University, the school founded by George Soros (Mudde, 2017).

In this context of grave and repressive political decisions taken by the Fidesz government, an internet tax of a few hundred forints seems like a trivial concern. And yet, it is around this topic that the largest demonstration in post-Communist Hungary emerged and eventually led to a general contestation of Fidesz. I suggest that this success has to do with the use of the internet as a symbol.

While recent scholarship has focused extensively on how the internet can enable protest (e.g. Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Gerbaudo, 2012), it has not yet addressed how the internet can itself act as a symbol for social movements. However, works have highlighted both how technologies can become a symbol onto which societal expectations and fears about social change are projected (Marvin, 1988; Marx, 1964), and how discourses about technology can be produced by a variety of actors and also be politically charged (Mansell, 2012; Mosco, 2004). To account for the ways in which individuals, collectives, societies and nation states think about technology, Jasanoff (2015) and Flichy (2007) speak of "imaginaries" concerning technologies as shared, collective "visions of desirable futures" (Jasanoff, 2015: 4).

Thinking about technological discourses allows us to investigate the political valence of technologies and chart the ways in which they become political symbols. Social

movements can either appropriate certain discourses about technology or challenge them. As such, this article investigates the Hungarian internet tax protests by examining how protesters drew upon a shared symbolic vision of the internet in order to protest against the Orbán government.

Methods

To examine the events surrounding the Hungarian internet tax, I conducted semi-structured interviews with key activists involved in organizing the protests. This purposive sample is composed of 7 men and 2 women, identified through snowball sampling. Although the size of the sample is small, the interviewees represent the core organizers of a group consisting of, at most, 20 people; each interviewee confirmed that my sample represented the most relevant individuals involved in the organization of the protests. The interviewees, with the exception of one older participant, were in their late 20s and early 30s and had several years of experience supporting other social movements and civil society organizations.

The interviews were conducted in English, either in person or via Skype, between January and February of 2017 and addressed several topics: the protests, the internet tax, the political context, and the interviewees' previous activism. The transcripts of the interviews were subsequently analyzed through thematic (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and open (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) coding. In this article, I replace the interviewees' real names with pseudonyms selected from the most common Hungarian names. Direct quotes included in the article were not edited for grammar or syntax.

Just about the internet, more than the internet

The activists chose to frame the internet tax protests as a “single-issue project” (Lászlo), in order to mobilize more people, including those who would not necessarily agree with an anti-Orbán platform. In retrospect, the activists believe that this decision was the main reason behind the success of the protests, as Adam explains:

> It was our main goal, and we keep it for the whole thing, that we don’t want a general protest against the government, because we rather want to have a focus on the internet tax and give the people a victory over the government. Like, even an autocratic government’s will can be defeated by the people. (Adam)

This single-issue focus was successful because the internet tax was an exceptionally clear topic for discussion, as many activists suggest. Interviewees claim that because it was evident to people why the tax was bad, activists didn’t have to do any sophisticated messaging to get their point across. Of the internet tax, Tamás says it was “a very, very clear thing”, for which “you don’t have to talk about democracy or about such complicated thoughts” (Tamás); it was an “easy message” (Daniel), “understandable for everyone” (Petra). To explain how clear the topic of the internet tax was, the activists often compare it with other contested governmental decisions, like the wave of constitutional changes that started in 2011: “the... violation of the Supreme Court is a very, very big thing, but how many of the youth people can really understand the importance of that?” (Bálint).

I argue that while the protests were visibly framed by the activists as solely addressing the internet tax, their success had nothing to do with the specifics of the internet tax and everything to do with people’s broader dissatisfaction with the government, due to other taxes, austerity cuts, corruption scandals, etc. The anger that people expressed in the demonstrations had been building up for a long time and found an outlet in these demonstrations. As Petra says:

> many people get really angry and actually it was not just the internet tax, I mean, not just because of the internet tax, but by 2014 we have reached a point when you know, everybody had enough, that was the kind of the last drop. (Petra)

Petra also adds that many people brought along protest signs that had nothing to do with the internet, which suggests that "people didn't just come because of the internet tax, they came because they had enough of the government" (Petra). Lászlo explains:

> that's what the internet tax was for the people: a very direct hit, and because they already knew that this government is very oppressive towards the people, this whole story, this whole abstract and foggy story suddenly, you know, just concentrated in one dot, and that was the internet tax. (Lászlo)

The interviewees overwhelmingly attribute the success of the protest to its single-issue focus: the internet. And yet, in their explanation of the focus of the demonstration, they reveal that the protest was about much more than just the internet. The issue of the internet tax was particularly suitable for coalescing a series of grievances into one mobilization, that was formally just about the internet, but opened the door for a general contestation of the government.

The trashing of the Fidesz headquarters

One of the main incidents of the demonstrations exemplifies how these protests were simultaneously focused on the internet tax while also representing much more than that. After the end of the first demonstration, a small crowd of protesters headed for the headquarters of Fidesz, Orbán's party. Upon arrival, they started throwing old pieces of IT equipment – modems, routers, keyboards, and even monitors – against the building. The protesters also attempted to tear down the protective fence and break the windows. No one was injured, and

only the exterior of the building was damaged. The organizers did not plan this action, but could not stop it, either.

What the organizers had wanted, was for people to have something to do during the demonstration, instead of solely listening to speeches. Therefore, they planned to end their demonstration outside the Fidesz headquarters and asked participants to bring their old electronic goods along. However, given the unexpectedly large size of the crowd, the organizers had to move the demonstration to a larger square nearby. After they proclaimed the end of the demonstration, part of the crowd went to the Fidesz building anyway, computer parts in hand.

But why did the activists decide to ask participants to bring old electronics? Some of the activists say that they wanted to visually represent the internet in a way that would look good in pictures. But others explain that the old computer parts were meant to be something more than a cool photo-op: they helped convey the message that the internet tax was an obsolete way of thinking about the internet. Adam says that they "asked the people to bring you know, all the mouses [sic], bad computers, to place in front of the Fidesz [building] as a symbolic gesture that their idea to tax the internet is very outdated" (Adam); Dávid echoes him: "simply show them that... bringing the old things... how they are thinking about the whole thing is such old" (Dávid). This episode thus illustrates one of the key criticisms of the internet tax proposal, examined below: the idea that taxing the internet is against the future. As Péter argues:

> Somebody came up with it, and everybody just went with it, that okay, what if we say that, bring some old IT equipment with you and let's make a heap of garbage out of them, to show the government that this idea to try to restrict the internet it's way behind us, it's... it's the mindset of the 1990s and it belongs to the same garbage dump. (Péter)

The internet tax thus became a proxy for explaining the backward-looking attitude of the government: this is what the activists meant to communicate by asking people to bring their obsolete electronics along. At the same time, the fact that protesters started throwing the technology against the Fidesz headquarters further underscores that the demonstration was about more than the internet tax, as Eszter explains:

> actually I think this protest was not only about the internet. But it was about... it was also anti-government protest. Because otherwise they wouldn't destroy the headquarters of Fidesz. And I think for some people it was only about the internet, but for many people it was also about the government. (Eszter)

The organizers' decision to ask protesters to bring obsolete electronics and the vandalism against the Fidesz headquarters both show that these protests were concerned with more than the internet. Lászlo puts it crudely: "it's not just the internet taxation. The internet taxation was kind of bullshit, really..." (Lászlo).

What is the issue, then? I argue that the success of the internet tax protest lies in the power of the idea of "the internet," which can be mobilized to oppose single policies (the tax, in this case), but also serves as an idea to which people can attach different meanings. In what follows, I map the different meanings that are attached to "the internet" by looking at the reasons that activists put forward in order to oppose the tax.

The mundane modernity of the internet

By mapping the different reasons, articulated by the activists, for opposing the tax, we can sketch out both what the internet means for them and other Hungarians, and also how it can become a symbol of different types of social processes, political values and economic concerns. There are four strong associations that emerge from the interviews: equality and development, future, rationality, and mundanity. Taken together, these discourses equate the internet with "mundane modernity": they reproduce classic tropes of modernity about the

equalizing power of technology, its role in progress and its connection to rationality, while grounding them in the everyday practices of internet use.

Equality and development

One of the main problems with the tax was its economic impact: Petra argues that "this amount of money would have meant a lot to many people (…) many people would have been cut from the internet, because they wouldn't have been able to pay for it" (Petra). Eszter describes the burden placed both on poorer communities and on high volume users: "It was not a small amount of money, it was... so many people couldn't pay it, in the countryside, for example... but I couldn't pay it also, because I use a lot of internet…" (Eszter). Adam calls the internet tax a "generally not just" flat tax, because of its lack of progressivity.

The activists claim that while the internet tax would exacerbate inequality, the internet could, under certain circumstances, promote more equality in the country. Many speak of the need to reduce the digital divide between the city and the countryside. They suggest that the government should be concerned with increasing access to the internet, not making it costlier for people to go online. Daniel explains the connection between taxing the internet, literacy and inequality: "that's why [the internet tax] is a bad thing: because... so the internet leads... might lead, or should lead, to digital literacy which would lead to reducing the inequalities in the society, so that's why – it's a bad idea..." (Daniel). Bálint explains how inequality in access to infrastructure is connected to unequal access to information:

> the good thing would be if everybody... okay, I don't know, it's a bit irrealistic, not everybody, but more and more people could use the internet for free, because I think this informational gap between the... between somebody in the center of Budapest and somebody in the center of North Hungary, is very very big. So... I think the right thing would be the government would work on that, to have free internet access everywhere. (Bálint)

It is important to note how, in talking about the divide between the capital and the peripheral countryside, the activists reproduce a language that is common to technologically

deterministic views of information technologies and development. The quotes above seem an application to poorer areas within Hungary of what Burrell (2012) described as the championing of “universal connectivity as an imperative for the progress of developing countries” (p. 133). While the internet tax spurred some protests in the countryside, too, the political divide between the city and the countryside has been a longstanding problem for civil society (see Wilkin et al., 2015).

Future

As mentioned above, the activists believe that the internet tax went against the “future”: this is what they conveyed with their call to bring electronic waste to symbolize that both the tax and the government were obsolete. This notion of future is conflated, as the future often is, with the idea of progress. Adam suggest that “it’s just so backwards thinking to tax the internet”, explaining that “this was in trend with how the government generally thinks about many modern things” (Adam). Bálint reframes this, arguing that the internet tax is “a good symbol that Fidesz don’t know anything about the youth” (Bálint).

Many activists also criticize Orbán’s government for their inability to use and understand the internet and digital technologies – a liability that is at odds with the future. The interviewees are often amused and sometimes outraged when they tell me that Orbán and other politicians are not familiar with new technologies: Bálint says he doesn’t think “that a lot of Fidesz politicians are really good with iPhones” (Bálint); Adam adds that “the Prime Minister personally does not really use new technologies” and that “he doesn’t really understand modern technology” (Adam). As Dávid argues, this means that “Orbán’s government is a government who are not able to really understand the new time, the new technologies” (Dávid). This is echoed by Péter: “the main problem is that for some reason our government doesn’t have any day-dreaming about technology” (Péter).

For the interviewees, the internet tax is another step away from the future. Péter's words communicate the sense of frustration with the direction of the country:

> Right now, we are working our way back to, I don't know, the middle of the 20th century. I don't know if you've been to the countryside. It actually looks like it's the 1950s and people live like it's the 1950s. And we had a dictatorship in the 1950s under socialism! (…) Is that the future? (Péter)

No, the activists would argue, the future is the internet.

Rationality

Another theme that emerges from the interviews is the apparent stupidity of the internet tax. Indeed, the tax proposal had some serious issues of feasibility that the government was never able to address. But the activists communicate this by calling the tax "stupid, absurd" (Adam) or "not really sane" (Daniel). The internet tax is regarded as something that goes against rationality. Lászlo implies that the tax would never have been proposed by anyone who has "some experience with reality" (Lászlo). The activists convey the sense that it would be nonsensical to even think about taxing the internet. Adam says it was "so visibly a stupid thing", Tamás argues that it was "totally crazy", Daniel calls it "nonsense" (several times), Bálint recalls that it "was so silly and so unrealistic, that I can't really imagine to be honest, how could it work". Péter explains more in detail: "So it was evident that it won't happen. In that way, because it just can't. (…) it wasn't a policy issue, it wasn't something coming from an ideological standpoint of the government, it was just a bullshit screwup" (Péter).

The interviewees suggest that the internet tax was not "a very thoughtful idea" (Bálint), a mistake, "a stupidity of the government" (Lászlo). After all, how could someone rational even consider taxing the internet? The recurrence of terms that indicate the

nonsensical and stupid nature of the tax proposal reinforces the notion that taxing the internet would mean going against rationality. This discourse is in line with teleological discourses of technology that emphasize how technological progress is the manifestation of rationality. In this particular context, however, technology as the symbol of rationality takes on an oppositional symbolic meaning.

Mundanity

The fourth theme that emerges from the interviews is that of the mundanity of the internet, which the activists see as a key component of the success of the protests. Eszter contrasts the issue of the internet tax with other controversial decisions of the Hungarian government, like the Media Laws or the amendment of the Constitution, that she finds not only less easily understood, but also less universal: “it was for everyone, I mean, because they made many many things that are much worse than the internet tax, but the other things are not affecting everyone in the country, but this one was affecting everyone” (Eszter). The demonstrations were successful because people could weigh the tax against the importance of the internet for their daily life. In the interviews, the internet emerges as something very personal, a space of personal freedom: a private sphere in which the government should not be allowed to intervene. The internet, says Dávid, “is so involved in our everyday life, that everything which relates… touches it… we act really sensitive on that” (Dávid). Bálint also remarks that people “got furious because they felt they can really lose their personal stuff” (Bálint).

Eszter and Petra both associate the internet to people’s homes, in order to express the deeply personal and everyday nature of the internet:

> every part of the society, everybody understood what does it mean when they put a tax on the internet, and well... at least they understood that they need to pay more and they understood that it's something which would really... like... how to say? which would really affect their personal life, and their, you know... so something which would get into their bedroom, let's say it this way. (Petra)

> I think on one hand it was a big amount of money, but on the other hand, it was like that they are... the government goes into your house. It's your private thing that you use everyday. Of course, you use it for work, but it's your private life, and I think in Hungary many people is addicted to Facebook, but really… They live their lives there, communicating with each other there, organizing events, everything on Facebook. And it was about that, that they want to take away one thing from your life. (Eszter)

Notice here how “bedroom” and “house” signal a connection between the internet and a sphere of life that should be considered private and protected from government intervention.

Another aspect that emerges from this mundane and personal vision of the internet is that it is conceived as a space in which everyone is free to access and consume content. It is a freedom that is constructed around consumption, and not necessarily expression: the freedom to access information, to watch movies, to use Facebook, to share copyrighted material. Dávid even remarks how one torrenting site decided to take a position on the internet tax by alerting its users about how much each download would be taxed. Bálint further explains people’s concerns about what the tax would mean for their downloads: “It's funny because we saw calculations about how [much] one episode of Game of Thrones would cost. (…) There were some speculations about going to Slovakia and Austria and torrent things, and then come back” (Bálint). In her analysis of anti-ACTA discourse, Nowak (2016) also shows that piracy has become an everyday online practice overlaid with an ethos of freedom. Being free to choose what to read or watch – including pirating copyrighted material – is embedded in these visions of the internet as a private and personal space in which people can do what

they please. As Adam summarizes: “this is your space, you decide what you, what you read and don’t need to… yeah, so like, you decide what you read. It’s personal”.

The mundanity of modernity

Three of the four themes identified in the interviews – future, equality and development, rationality – are key concepts associated with Western modernity (Giddens and Pierson, 1998; but also Taylor, 2004). Here they get equated with the internet, which is seen as representing the future, the achievement of equality and development, and rationality. Taxing the internet is wrong, because it goes against modernity. As Adam sums up nicely: “it’s against modernity, it’s against common sense. Yeah, it’s against common sense. And it’s socially unjust, and also even hard for jobs. You have lots of reasons, I think I used this anti-modern comment, against common-sense, it’s like a collection of arguments.” (Adam). Although Adam is not talking about academic definitions of modernity, his argument clearly illustrates how the internet is associated with rationality, with the future, and with equality and development; the internet tax represents a threat to these three important aspects of modernity. Yet this modernity is experienced through mundane, everyday practices: checking Facebook, downloading pirated content, reading the news. Experienced through the mundanity of smartphones and torrenting websites, modernity becomes a domesticated, everyday practice (see Appadurai, 1996). When the internet is equated with it, modernity becomes something that we can hold in our hands.

Taylor (2004) argued that “the sanctification of ordinary life” (p. 102) was part of the experience of modernity. Here, the mundane and ordinary aspects of the internet reinforce the power of the discourse of modernity. It is through this dual association of the internet with both modernity and mundanity that the internet tax protests can symbolically counter Orbán’s

illiberal democracy: by using the internet as a symbol of the modernity that the government is rejecting, but that is mundane for the protesters.

The freedoms of mundane modernity

In talking about the internet tax protests, international media insisted on explaining this mobilization as one about internet freedom. The interviewees overwhelmingly reject this frame and suggest that foreign media probably used it to make the Hungarian protests legible in relation to the American and European debates on net neutrality that were happening at that time. Tamás rejects the idea that internet freedom was at the center of the protests: “I think in Hungary it's, you know, the 20th priority. Sorry, you know, when you have so many problems in a country, you cannot say... it's also, of course, it's an important part, but...”. And yet, freedom comes up again and again, both in the interviews and in the slogans of the protests: “Free country, free internet” (“*szabad ország, szabad internet*”) was one of the most popular.

I argue that instead of focusing on the fuzzy concept of “internet freedom” (see Clinton, 2011), we should instead be attending to “internet *and* freedom”, i.e. to the ways in which certain visions of freedom get associated to the internet and deployed politically. Through the lens of mundane modernity, we can highlight the dual meaning of freedom in the internet tax protests: on the one hand, the liberal political freedom of modernity, on the other, the private consumer freedom of mundanity. Far from contradicting each other, these two meanings of freedom reinforce the power of mundane modernity as a mobilizing discourse, especially in the context of a post-socialist country, where the promise of simultaneous market freedom and political freedom was at the core of the transition (Offe and Adler, 1991).

The way in which modernity is associated with the internet carries with it a notion of freedom that is predicated on Western liberal democracy. In Hungary, this should be interpreted in the context of the Communist regime and its legacy, but also of the more recent turn to illiberal democracy proclaimed by Orbán. Petra explains both aspects. Firstly, she says that by the time the government announced the internet tax,

> Fidesz made it quite clear that they wanted to have an illiberal democracy. They, you know, made strong friendship… with dictatorships and so... they became an ally with Russia, and stuff. And you know, it is kind of hard for the Hungarian people, since we had the Russian occupation, you know, the Soviet occupation and stuff. And it was for many people also kind of symbolic, that the internet meant freedom, and you know, somehow a connection to the West. (Petra)

Second, she adds that "the internet symbolizes, you know, openness, and like all the possibilities", "democracies versus dictatorships" but also – noting how demonstrators brought EU flags to the internet tax protests – that "the internet is… somehow symbolizes freedom, the West, you know, belonging to the West instead of the East". What emerges from Petra's words is a powerful mainstream discourse that connects the internet, democracy and Western liberalism. The internet tax protests draw on this discourse, by turning the internet into a symbol of Western modernity, which can stand in opposition to Orbán's illiberal democracy.

Furthermore, the association between mundanity and the internet carries a set of additional meanings about the notion of freedom, which is understood in terms of the freedom of individuals to consume content. Notice how Bálint defines it in relation to media consumption:

> [people] didn't want to lose the freedom of the internet. I think we don't, we don't have to have theories more complex than that. This was the only really important thing for them, to watch their series free, to watch their football games for free, and... and this was threatened by the government... (Bálint)

Péter echoes this notion of freedom: “People wanted their real actual existing practical internet freedom to be able to use the internet in the next month and the month after that, and the month after that” (Péter). The internet appears as a vast market of content that consumers should be free to choose from. The implications of this mundane, market-driven idea of freedom can certainly carry political weight, especially in a post-communist country. A parallel to be drawn here is with the circulation of samizdat under communism (Kind-Kovács and Labov, 2015), which took on the character of a political practice even when it involved entertainment content. In line with Petra’s quotes, we might speculate that the legacy of the communist past is present in the concern for a freedom that is based on personal and quotidian choices of consumption, and not just in more abstract notions of democracy and political equality (for a similar argument, see Deák, 2011).

One of the most recognizable actions of these protests – which has since become a recurrent feature of the civil opposition to Orbán (Dunai, 2017) – is borrowed from the Umbrella movement in Hong Kong: protesters lifting their phones, with lit up screens, towards the sky. The Hungarian protesters did it several times, even though only two of the interviewees mention it in the interviews. The international media coverage framed that action in terms of media freedom. On the contrary, I suggest that we need to think of the freedom that is referenced in this symbolic action through the lens of the discourse of mundane modernity. It resonates here not so much because it is borrowed from a pro-democracy demonstration, but because it channels a complex set of aspirations about modernity into something as easily accessible and mundane as a smartphone.

Conclusion

In this article, I investigated how a tax on internet consumption of a few hundred forints per month gave rise to the biggest protest in Hungarian history since 1989. Addressing this puzzling success, I emphasized how, according to their core organizers, these protests were at the same time about a very clear and understandable issue, the internet and the government's attempt to tax it, but also about much more than that. I thus argued that the internet was first and foremost a symbol that the protesters could draw upon to express their opposition to the Fidesz government. I also suggested that "the internet" can become such a powerful symbol, because it is associated with social and political constructs that carry additional meanings; in this way, mobilizations that are formally just about the internet come to be imbued with other aspirations. In this case, I have identified a specific discourse that is associated with the internet that I term "mundane modernity": the overlaying of mainstream notions of Western modernity with the everyday mundane experience of internet usage.

I understand the interplay of mundanity and modernity as the key to the success of the internet tax protests. On the one hand, these connections to modernity are powerful because they resonate with mainstream discourses about the role of technology in relation to social change. This discourse is so often taken for granted that even the Orbán government would find it difficult to disagree with it. But it is also so easily understood that it makes the symbolic action of lifting smartphones to the sky immediately legible as a political demand. On the other hand, it is the mundanity of the internet that makes modernity intelligible and tangible. The overlaying of these two concepts is particularly powerful in the context of a post-communist society, because of the specific conditions of the transition, which promised the simultaneous achievement of liberal democracy and market-driven prosperity (Offe and Adler, 1991); such promises have been frustrated in many ways (Bohle and Greskovits, 2012), yet their legacy helps explain the particular power of mundane modernity in the Hungarian case.

However, it would be a mistake to think that symbolic associations of the internet with other political concepts are solely a post-socialist story. I contended above that we should focus on the ways in which the internet is invested with notions of freedom and to what political effect. This is as true for the Hungarian internet tax protests as it is for other mobilizations, from the battle over internet control in Tunisia (Zayani, 2015) to online activism more generally (Beyer, 2014). Further research should investigate how activists think about technologies and how they draw upon or question commonly held, mainstream sociotechnical imaginaries (Jasanoff, 2015). The case of the Hungarian internet tax protests makes visible the fact that – because of the way in which political discourses and popular representations (Mosco, 2004; Turner, 2006) imagine the internet in association with concepts like freedom, democracy, free market, community – even when we are focused on the internet, we are never really just talking about the internet.

Lastly, this article examines the internet tax protests as a story of success in a political context in which activist successes are rare. But it is evident that, although successful in this specific case, the use of "the internet" as a symbol of mundane modernity presents political problems that would make it unavailable for other mobilizations. For instance, the equation of the internet with the project of modernity or with consumption-based definitions of freedom might not have the same appeal on leftist movements in other countries, however resonant they might be with mainstream public opinion. Similarly, we can imagine movements that might be concerned with online surveillance (e.g. Uldam, 2018) in a way that makes it impossible to equate internet technology with freedom. We thus need to investigate how social movements in different political contexts imagine technologies, and how they construct and deploy technological imaginaries in their struggles.

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[i] As of May 2018, the page is still being used and has collected 206,070 likes.

[ii] The size of the October 28 demonstration was surpassed on April 12, 2017, with one of the demonstrations organized against the ad-hoc law against Central European University and the anti-NGO legislation, as recognized by the Twitter account representing the internet tax protests: "Largest protest in Hungarian history – time to go mr orban #ceu" (NoNetTax_HU, 2017).

[iii] This paper is concerned with anti-Fidesz mobilizations on the left, but the emergence of right-wing protest movements in Hungary is an important phenomenon, addressed for instance by Kaposi and Mátay (2008).

[iv] Milla revised its stance on party politics when it joined the "Együtt 2014" party coalition to compete in the 2014 General Elections.