

Possibilities and limits of political humour in a hybrid regime: a visual ethnographic study of the Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party

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Abstract

This article focuses on the Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party (MKKP), which can be defined as a joke party. MKKP uses humour to criticise the corruption flourishing around the governing party Fidesz as well as its simplified and racist form of political communication. However, MKKP's critical stance extends to Hungarian politicians and the political system in general. This visual ethnographic research focuses on the activities that MKKP organised during national days in Hungary between 2017 and 2022, which included a space launch, a peace march and an alternative national day celebration on 20 August. The events can be defined as parody performances. The field material is complemented by a semi-structured interview with the party activists. MKKP's humour is critical and revealing in nature, aiming to expose the powerholders' agenda. However, instead of ridiculing, MKKP's humour is primarily corrective and supportive. As such, it has the potential to alleviate polarisation. In MKKP's activism, creativity and cynicism exist in close proximity to one another. Humour also functions as a powerful antidote against simplified populist truths that rely on fearmongering and enemy images. In a hybrid regime, absurd humour can be used to reveal the inherent absurdities of the political reality. MKKP has occasionally succeeded in entering the state-controlled public sphere. During recent years, the party has started to address societal matters more seriously, without abandoning its roots as a humour party.

Keywords: Hungary, joke party, Two-Tailed Dog Party, humour, absurdity, visual ethnography.

1. Introduction

Humour has been a refuge and a way to vent frustration for many who have battled against Hungary's current populist, radical-right leadership in the past 14 years. That is how long the current prime minister, Viktor Orbán, has been shaping the country to match his image of an "illiberal state" and a "Christian democracy" (2014, 2018). According to Orbán (2022), Hungary and Central Europe represent the real spirit of the West, while Western Europe no longer holds to its former values and will deteriorate into a racially mixed "Post-West".

The seemingly unshakeable rule of the governing party Fidesz and Prime Minister Orbán, with a two-thirds super majority in the parliament, has led to a decline in media freedom, restrictions on liberal civil society and widespread corruption (see, e.g. Ágh, 2016; Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018; Scheiring & Szombati, 2020). Simultaneously, the opposition has become weak and fragmented (see Susánszky et al. 2020). Fidesz's policies have also eroded the independence of universities and science (Enyedi, 2018). This has led to a weakening of democracy and ultimately resulted in a hybrid regime. In September 2022, the European Parliament voted in favour of a resolution claiming that Hungary is no longer a full democracy but instead a “hybrid regime of electoral autocracy” (European Parliament, 2022).

Levitsky and Way (2010) have described such hybrid regimes using the term “competitive authoritarianism”. They are “regimes in which formal democratic institutions exist and are widely viewed as the primary means of gaining power, but in which incumbents’ abuse of the state places them at a significant advantage” (2010, p. 5). Another way of describing such regime is “soft authoritarianism”, which refers to a system of brute majoritarianism that results in drastic changes to the structure of society (Nyyssönen & Metsälä, 2021). Hungary differs from other hybrid regimes because it is externally constrained by the European Union (Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018). In other words, EU membership sets some limits on its shift towards authoritarianism. However, the EU has been more successful in sanctioning human rights violations than in stopping the deconstruction of democracy (Bozóki, 2022).

This article focuses on political humour in Hungary, more specifically on the Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party (Magyar Kétfarkú Kutya Párt, MKKP), which can be defined as a joke or mock party (Nagy, 2016; Barát, 2017). However, in recent years MKKP has shifted its efforts towards more conventional political activities. This has inevitably changed the party's position, as MKKP has moved from criticising Hungarian politics from the outside towards becoming part of the political system and offering an alternative within it. My research questions are as follows:

How does MKKP's absurd humour function in the Hungarian hybrid regime of electoral autocracy?

Does MKKP's political humour make it possible to address problems in Hungarian society, which is characterised by fear and polarisation?

Can politics that utilise humour be credible? Is it necessary for the Two-Tailed Dog party to move beyond its humorous approach as its popularity grows?

In the following sections, I first introduce the Hungarian societal and political context, the divided nature of which is rooted in history and extends far beyond the present-day polarisation. Next, I discuss in more detail how MKKP grew from a humorous street-art project into an official party. I then explain my theoretical starting point for studying political humour in Hungary, followed by the methodology section. My analysis is divided into five subsections, which present my visual field material, an interview with the party activists, and finally, a more general analysis. Lastly, I conclude the article by offering some final remarks on the influence and importance of humorous performances in an illiberal and antidemocratic hybrid regime.

2. Hungarian political context and the split public sphere

Hungarian society is highly polarised and fragmented, and the political culture is characterised by confrontation and negative campaigning (see Palonen, 2009, 2018). Over the years, the governing party, Fidesz, has mastered a dramatic political style that relies on simplification, antagonism and creating new enemies through fearmongering (see, e.g. Palonen, 2018; Sik, 2023). While such a style can be viewed on its own as a specific type of political communication

or strategy, in the hands of a corrupt party (Scheiring, 2018) that largely controls the TV channels and newspapers it has had a profound impact on how Hungarians see the world around them (see, e.g. Polyák, 2019; Kallius, 2023).

Fidesz employs a range of unconventional methods to spread the party's messages and justify its policies. The government regularly organises national consultations with leading questions, accompanied by massive billboard and poster campaigns, making it impossible not to know what kinds of answers are expected (see Batory & Svensson, 2019; Oross & Tap, 2021; Kallius & Adriaans, 2022; Sik, 2023). The consultations usually garner a response rate of approximately 10-20 per cent and are often then followed by another round of billboard campaigns boasting about the enormous level of support for the government's policies. Simultaneously, the government's viewpoints and preferred policies are advertised on the state TV and radio channels, as well as in magazines and at various internet news portals and sites. It is against this backdrop that we need to analyse the emergence of MKKP as a political party.

The societal polarisation of Hungary has deep historical roots. It can best be understood through reference to the so-called populist versus cosmopolitan divide (see, e.g. Kallius, 2023; Marzec, 2020; Taylor, 2021). This division can also be expressed in geographical terms as a separation between the countryside and Budapest (Marzec, 2020; Taylor, 2021). The seemingly all-encompassing division has had a huge impact on the formation of the Hungarian public sphere and civil society.

The notion of a public sphere was originally developed by Habermas (1989[1962]) to depict the circumstances that would facilitate public deliberation. This kind of sphere for critical and rational debate would only be possible in a deliberative democracy, which can be seen as a normative goal. Despite its idealistic foundations, the concept of a public sphere has proven useful in raising critical questions and is still used in the media and societal research (Karppinen et al., 2008). Furthermore, the concept also allows us to see more clearly the scope of the problems in present-day Hungary.

Fraser (1990) has deemed it necessary to extend Habermas's original theory to include the notion of counterpublics. The idea of multiple public spheres helps us better understand the complexity of societies in the 21st century (Bruns & Highfield, 2015; Cammaerts, 2007). For example, Mouffe (1999) has seen competing, agonistic public spheres as desirable, although only within a democratic setting. The fragmentation of Hungarian society (e.g. Sik, 2023) and the deterioration of democracy (see, e.g. Agh, 2016; Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018) has resulted in subaltern counterpublics (Fraser, 1990; Nagy, 2016), or sphericules (Gitlin, 1998). The Hungarian case is an example of a society in which the competing spheres do not contribute to constructive democratic debates. In such circumstances, the public sphere becomes destructive from the perspective of democracy and starts to empty of free public debates (Sik, 2015).

The defining element of the dominant Hungarian public sphere is generating and promoting fear (Barát, 2017; Sik, 2023). Sik claims that for the populist right-wing party Fidesz, it is not enough just to instrumentalise fear; instead, "they rebuild the whole public sphere around virtual fears while juggling with them" (2023, p. 3). According to Sik (2023), this results in a situation where fears are no longer generated in relation to certain values or ideology, but only according to their effectiveness in influencing people and their behaviours. As such, fear becomes a goal in itself.

The Hungarian case makes it possible to study the innovative tactics that actors like MKKP have to rely on to make themselves seen and heard and occasionally enter into the dominant, government-controlled public sphere. Especially the urban city space, in which the public sphere becomes tangible (Harvey, 2006), offers possibilities for creative activism and performances. However, the urban city space in Hungary is in no way free of government control. For example, access to billboards, which previously served as a successful means for MKKP to reaching the people and criticising the government (Nagy, 2016), has been limited of late.

3. Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party

MKKP, established already in 2006, was originally known for its street art and joke election posters with absurd and exaggerated promises, such as “Eternal life” (*Örök élet*) and “Free beer” (*Ingyen sör*). From the beginning, MKKP and its brand of activism have had a strong visual character, but MKKP later extended its activism to include various types of activities ranging from environmental protection to educational “folk high school” activities. MKKP was registered as an official party eight years later, in 2014 (see Nagy, 2016). Since the beginning, MKKP has been strongly personified by its founder, Gergely Kovács. Kovács has always been interested in visual arts, such as graffiti and other forms of street art. He is known to be a big fan of the British comedy group Monty Python (Barát, 2017), whose absurd humour has clearly influenced MKKP.

The party’s humorous critiques are often directed towards the corruption flourishing around Fidesz’s leadership as well as their simplified and openly racist style of political communication. However, MKKP’s critical attitude extends to the entire Hungarian political system (Susánszky et al., 2020). Traditionally, MKKP has highlighted the absurdities and shortcomings of Hungarian party politics with humorous posters, counter-billboards, street art and videos as well as different kinds of political parody performances and online activities (see Lampland & Nadkarimi, 2016, p. 450). Currently, the party is jointly led by Kovács and Zsuzsanna Döme (alias Suzi Dada).

MKKP currently has two elected members and a deputy mayor in various district governments of Budapest, making the party a more serious political actor and changing its character. In Budapest, and in various other towns and villages, the party has become known for its work to improve Hungarians’ living conditions at the grassroots level, such as renovating and painting benches and bus stops as well as filling potholes. It includes a growing network of activists who, within MKKP, are called “passivists” (*passzivisták*), which is an example of the party’s humorous use of language (see Le, 2020). MKKP has profiled itself as being against corruption and the toxic political environment, in which the traditional political parties often focus on negative campaigning and on attempts to damage the reputation of their opponents (see Palonen, 2018). The party attempts to offer voters an alternative in the highly polarised Hungarian political reality.

MKKP’s methods of action have also faced criticism, such as not being serious about the issues they raise, which is a common dilemma for activists utilising humour (see Sørensen, 2016). For example, Mikecz (2020) has argued that relying on cultural hacks is an unsuitable strategy for making detailed political demands. Barát (2017) finds it problematic that when relying on irony, MKKP rarely opposes the government’s claims directly, while Nagy (2016) critically assesses the limitations and possibilities of MKKP’s online feel-good activism. Despite the constraints of such activism, MKKP has succeeded in reaching wider audiences and taking online memes to the streets in the form of a counter-billboard campaign¹ (Nagy, 2016). The empirical examples presented in this article demonstrate that besides online activism, MKKP organises various offline gatherings that encourage genuine participation.

4. Political humour in Hungary

Researchers of political humour have long debated whether humour can be a form of subversion or whether it is only a way to vent frustration (Sørensen, 2016). The Hungarian context offers an interesting setting for studying the possibilities of humorous political activities as a form of

¹ MKKP’s counter-billboard campaigns in 2015 and 2016 criticised Hungarian government’s anti-migrant billboards (see Nagy, 2016).

resistance in a hybrid regime, where the use of more conventional methods of political resistance have not been successful. Therefore, the possibility of using humour as a form of criticism in a hybrid regime needs to be viewed in relation to other possible forms of resistance, or the lack thereof. As noted by Koivukoski (2022, p. 67), little research has been done on the differences between the use of humour in liberal and authoritarian societies. My research aims to increase knowledge about the particularities of the use of humour in a soft authoritarian regime (Nyyssönen & Metsälä, 2021).

Sørensen has focused specifically on humorous political stunts, which she defines as “a performance/action carried out in public which attempts to undermine a dominant discourse”, including or commenting on “a political incongruity in a way that is perceived as amusing by at least some people who did not initiate it” (2016, p. 203). She sees this kind of actions as part of a larger “discursive guerrilla war” (2016, p. 22), which aims to challenge the dominant ideas. Sørensen divides political stunts into five categories: supportive, corrective, naïve, absurd and provocative. Supportive stunts (1) rely on exaggeration, parody and irony and pretend to be supportive of their target, while corrective stunts (2) try to steal the identity of the actor they are criticising and present a corrected message instead of the original one; naïve stunts (3), on the other hand, hide the criticism behind apparent naïveté, whereas absurd stunts (4) ridicule everything around them, and finally, provocative stunts (5) challenge their opponents openly (Sørensen, 2016, p. 204). One characteristic of humorous political stunts is that they “speak to the imagination, thinking out of the box, encouraging audiences to look at reality from a new perspective” (Sørensen, 2016, p. 189).

Humour should primarily be understood as a consciously chosen method of communication when studying actors like MKKP. The party relies on polysemic forms of communication, such as irony and parody, which are open to multiple interpretations (see Boxman-Shabtai & Shifman, 2014). Irony is typically defined as a rhetorical technique that uses expressions that normally signify their opposite, whereas parody humorously imitates a certain actor, event or cultural product (see, e.g. Oxford Dictionary of English). However, Hutcheon rightly notes that, “Irony rarely involves a simple decoding of a single inverted message [...] it is more often a semantically complex process of relating, differentiating, and combining said and unsaid meanings” (1994, p. 85). Parody, on the other hand, is an “imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text. [...] Parody is, in another formulation, repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity” (Hutcheon, 1989, p. 87). As Sørensen (2016) claims, using humour to communicate certain issues does not mean that the activists or politicians are not serious about the matter. Instead, humour as a method of communication “is based on contradictions and ambiguity which distort usual forms of logic communication” (Sørensen, 2016, p. 203). Humorous political stunts can also be seen as part of the tradition of nonviolent action, which is based on dialogue facilitation, power breaking, utopian enactment and normative regulation (Vinthagen, 2015).

Although the complex reality and nuances of humour rarely fit easily into fixed categories, it is possible to analyse the character of MKKP’s activities with the help of the five types of political stunts identified by Sørensen. In this study, I use Sørensen’s (2016) typology as one of my analytical starting points. However, in my own research I prefer to use the term “parody performance” (Laaksonen et al., 2021; see also McGarry et al., 2020), since the versatile array of events organised by MKKP extend beyond the scope of what is usually meant by the word “stunt” and also differ by their very nature from actions carried out by smaller activist groups.

Another way to analyse MKKP’s activities is to locate them within the international phenomenon of political jamming. While utilising methods familiar from cultural jamming, such as reworking billboards, it targets political actors instead of multinational corporations (Cammaerts, 2007, p. 72). Political jamming, which subverts meanings with the help of humour, is used as a part of political communication. Its roots can be found both in political parody and

in various artistic movements, such as Dadaism, surrealism, Fluxus and Situationist International as well as the anarchist DIY culture (Cammaerts, 2007).

During the socialist period, Budapest had a vibrant counterculture and underground scene (Molnár, 2017). However, perhaps the best known example of using humour as a tool for political resistance in a socialist country is the Polish Orange Alternative, which in the 1980s succeeded in subverting the monolithic system by means of absurd humour (Kenney, 2002; Romanienko, 2007). The Orange Alternative and some other movements of that era resemble MKKP in that they did not seek confrontation powered by hate and desperation. Instead, they adhered to their own set of rules and responded to oppressive authorities with carnivalization and merriment (Kenney, 2002). Both international and domestic influences are clearly visible in MKKP's activities, which present a similar anti-elitist attitude and emphasis on creativity and visuality as the earlier artistic movements. Their parody performances can be seen in relation to the tradition of carnivalesque activities, which reverse the traditional order of things (see Bakhtin, 1984).

Humour is often a tool and strategy used by an underdog, and this is certainly the case in Hungary (see Barát, 2017; Nagy, 2016). Humour and irony can also be used to alleviate fear (Barát, 2017; Sørensen, 2016), which is the core emotion that Hungarian governments aim to generate in their populist communications (see Sik, 2023). However, humour and parody do not always have the desired effect. Laaksonen et al. (2021) suggest that while humour offers people a possibility to engage with current political questions, it can also amplify polarisation in online discussions. Billig (2005), on the other hand, sees humour as inherently problematic and polarising. He intends to present a general theory of humour in his study but does not explore the differences between various kinds of humour.

Korkut et al. (2022) offers a more optimistic view, emphasising humour's positive potential for political protest and possibility for challenging apathy and fear in an authoritarian state. They believe that, with the help of humour and absurdity, protests can weaken regimes that rely on political authoritarianism and alternative truths (Korkut et al., 2022, p. 644). Unlike Sørensen, who suggests that when performing absurd stunts, the protesters reject any kind of rationality (2016, p. 49), Korkut and colleagues see embracing the absurd as an effective way of revealing the inner absurdities of an authoritarian regime. Absurdity generally refers to anything wildly unreasonable, illogical and ridiculous (Oxford Dictionary of English). Absurdist humour can be defined "as humour concerned with the absence or refusal of the meaning" (Noonan, 2014, p. 1). I argue that while absurdity as a notion rejects all rationality, this does not mean that there is no rationale in using absurdist humour to reveal an absurd situation. In fact, absurdist humour can be divided into "rational absurd" and "existential absurd". The former often utilises a technique called "*reductio ad absurdum*, in which a logical proposition is led to a nonsensical or contradictory conclusion" while the latter focuses on "the meaninglessness of the human existence" (Noonan, 2014, p. 1). Paradoxically, using absurd humour can be an effective strategy for revealing the truth of a ludicrous or chaotic state of affairs (see Korkut et al., 2022). Absurd humour can make rationality more visible precisely by revealing the lack of it.

In this article, I focus on how political humour works in Hungary. As a hybrid regime of electoral autocracy with a socialist past, it differs in many ways from Western liberal democracies. Hungary has a particular heritage of using humour as a form of resistance during the socialist times (Lampland & Nadkarni, 2016). This tradition, which has long been cherished in literature and cinema, still resonates among many Hungarians, who are yet again caught in a situation in which freedom of speech and the media are being limited by the country's rulers.

The importance of social media for activists and small political groups is undeniable (Nagy, 2016), but the example of MKKP shows that there are direct links between the online and offline spheres (see also Korkut et al., 2022; McGarry et al., 2020). Laaksonen et al. (2021) have importantly pointed out that humour and irony might lead to misinterpretations on digital

platforms due to the lack of contextual information. While the use of humour and irony always entails a certain risk of misunderstanding, the often anonymous and fragmented online environment offers fewer possibilities for managing such risks. In this article, my main focus is offline activism, which allows those participating in a certain event to experience the humorous performances in their intended context and therefore avoids some of the pitfalls of humorous online communication.

5. Methodology

The article is based on participant observations and visual material collected at MKKP events in 2017, 2018 and in 2022 as well as an interview conducted in 2023 at the MKKP party office. Visual ethnographic field material was collected at political gatherings during national days in Budapest and Felcsút (Viktor Orbán's home village) and during the parliamentary election campaigns. The original research plan was revised several times because of the global pandemic, which hit Hungary hard. However, the longer time span has made it possible to study the development of MKKP from before the 2018 elections up until their second attempt to secure seats in the parliament in 2022 and during the summer after the elections. Between 2017 and 2023, MKKP has transformed from being a joke party to a political actor with genuine power and impact in Hungarian politics.

The research material consists of photos (326) and short videos (8) taken by the author during MKKP events as well as field notes and a transcribed, semi-structured interview conducted at MKKP's party office. My method is based on visual ethnography and participant observation. The field material is largely in visual form, and I call the photos and videos "visual field notes". My visual field notes are complemented by audio notes, which I later transcribed in written form. Photos with clearly recognisable individuals were usually avoided and, when necessary, permission was requested to take the photo. However, some photos of larger crowds in a public location were included in the article.

The visual ethnographic method (see Pink, 2013) makes it possible to study non-verbal and unquantifiable elements (Pauwels, 2010), which are abundant at MKKP's gatherings. Visual sociology is based on the understanding that "valid scientific insight in society can be acquired by observing, analysing, and theorizing its visual manifestations: behaviour of people and material products of culture" (Pauwels, 2010, p. 546). According to Pink, it is important that, besides texts and written notes, ethnographic researchers also focus on "objects, visual images, the immaterial and the sensory nature of human experience and knowledge" (2007, p. 22). Being present made it possible to observe the general mood and interactions between the activists as well as between the activists and the audience, which was also important to fully appreciate the performative nature of the activities.

Rather than consisting of one longer period in the field, my fieldwork consisted of several short visits and regularly following MKKP's activities online. This type of patchwork ethnography (Günel et al., 2020) is less time consuming, but provides more opportunities to follow developments in the field over a longer period of time. Patchwork ethnography, which relies on shorter visits in the field and utilises more fragmented but still rigorous data, is an attempt to respond to the changing nature of ethnographic research (Günel et al., 2020).

6. Analysis of MKKP's activities

6.1. Felcsút "space launch", 19-20 August 2017

The first Two-Tailed Dog event that I attended was a parody performance that culminated in a "space launch" (*űrkilövés*) organised in Prime Minister Orbán's home village of Felcsút (Figure 1). It took place behind the municipal hall, which is located on Felcsút's main street. The timing was chosen to coincide with the Hungarian national day, which is celebrated on the 20th of August. The parody performance was preceded by a huge MKKP counter-billboard on the main street, which already in 2015 promised "Soon a space station will be built here" (Benke, 2015). The event was inspired by the government's decision to support, with approximately 10 million euros, the building of a space centre in Gyulaháza, a village with less than 2,000 inhabitants ("Úrállomást avatnak", 2017). It clearly also parodied Fidesz's pompous projects in Felcsút, such as building a luxurious football stadium and a football academy as well as a narrow-gauge railway between the football academy in Felcsút and the nearest village of Alcsút.



Figure 1. In Orbán's home village of Felcsút, besides the famous narrow-gauge railway, a tourist train also takes people around.

The two-day programme consisted of the preparations (Figure 2) for the main event, the "space launch". The idea, according to MKKP, was to launch a rocket into space before the end of the world. The space travellers were one male and one female from each "emblematic group" of Hungarian society: a pair of straw men, public workers, gas fitters, elite athletes and dogs (Farkas, 2017). Straw men, or dummy buyers, are necessary for the corrupt Fidesz, while "public workers" (*közmunkás*) are unemployed people who in Fidesz's "work-based society" (Orbán, 2014) complete basic tasks to receive a small, subsidised income. The gas fitters, on the other hand, refer to Orbán's friend and Hungary's richest man, Lőrinc Mészáros, who previously owned a gas fitting company in Felcsút (Tóth & Hajdú, 2022). Elite athletes, especially football players, have always received special protection within Orbán's regime (Csanádi, 2022). Lastly, the "dog pair" (*kutyapárt*) is a pun referring to both a "pair of dogs" and a "dog party".



Figure 2. Free beer and the heads of MKKP, Gergely Kovács and Zsuzsanna Döme, telling the audience about the upcoming programmes.

Other programmes included concerts by such performers as Buzi Kisfiúk (Gay Little Boys) and Hot Dogz, the official “propaganda band” of MKKP, a football match played with three goals and a conspiracy research conference. In addition, the party organised a space creature exhibition and a space role play. The participants in the role play were instructed to choose a character class — public worker, guard, space creature, Attila Pataky,² politician, zombie, guest or robot — and an origin — Hungarian living inside the globe, Hungarian living on the border or Hungarian living outside the globe (Figure 3). The participants were expected to collect points by completing certain tasks, such as “get a free beer” or “take a selfie with a politician and make them promise you something”. In Sørensen’s (2016) classification, the event most closely resembled a supportive or naïve stunt, while also having elements of an absurd stunt. However, the scope of the event extended beyond what is understood by a “humour stunt”. Besides humour, visuality, creativity and play had a central place in the two-day gathering.

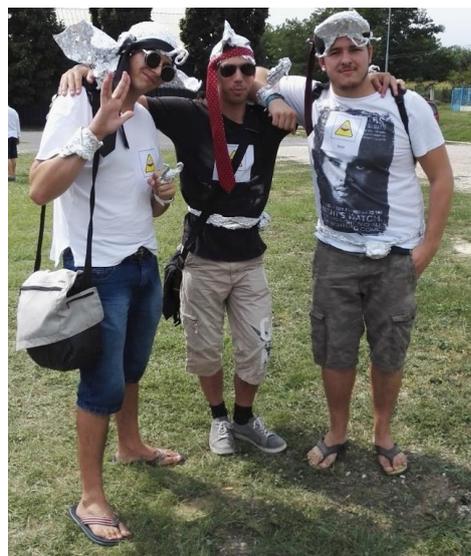


Figure 3. Three men dressed as space creatures (*űrlény*) during MKKP’s space role play.

² Attila Pataky is a famous Hungarian singer from the music group Edda. He is a well-known supporter of the governing party Fidesz.

MKKP's events also contain many elements that challenge the participants to think critically. Instead of directly criticising Fidesz, MKKP employs shrewder methods, such as the poster below (Figure 4), which allows the participants to choose the “enemies of the day” by selecting groups to oppose from the envelope on the right. Different variations of the theme of the absurdity of Fidesz's hate campaigns have been visible at various MKKP events, such as the wheel spinner in the 2022 event (Figure 10).



Figure 4. This handmade sign follows the style of MKKP's counter campaign against Fidesz's racist “Tudta?” posters. It reads: “Did you know? Our enemies today: Clinton supporter, liberal, illuminati, gays, plaid-shirted, teachers”.

The activities reflect on themes relevant in 2017 Hungarian public discussions, such as corruption, public employment, immigration and climate change. MKKP also succeeded in raising some media attention, as the “space launch” was covered by ATV news, an opposition TV channel, and several newspapers and news portals. Also, the chosen location of Orbán's childhood village guaranteed the interest of the media.

6.2. MKKP's parody peace march, 15 March 2018

The MKKP peace march (*békemenet*) was organised on the 15th of March 2018, when Hungary commemorated the Revolution of 1848. It was the second peace march organised by the party as a response to the peace march of the Hungarian conservative right-wing Civil Union Forum (CÖF), which is closely aligned with Fidesz. CÖF has organised peace marches since 2012, and so this was their seventh march. The events attract huge crowds in Budapest, and the number of participants is estimated to have been between 80,000 and 450,000 persons (“Peace March Demonstrations”, 2018). MKKP's parody peace march had direct humorous references to the CÖF peace march organised in a different part of the city. Most notably, as seen in the picture below (Figure 5), the text in the large banner reads “The banner in front of everything!” (*A molinó minden előtt!*), a reference to CÖF's nationalist banner reading “Homeland before everything” (*A haza minden előtt!*), which quotes a poem written by Ferenc Kölcsey, who also wrote the lyrics for the Hungarian national anthem.



Figure 5. The text “The banner in front of everything!” (*A molinó minden előtt!*) refers to the nationalist banner, “Homeland before everything” (*A haza minden előtt!*).

A common strategy of MKKP was to criticise Fidesz through seemingly supportive messages. The often handwritten and handmade signs were carried by many of the participants. The signs read, for example, “Let there be 4/3 [majority] in 2018 [elections]” (Figure 6), “Unlimited son-in-law power”, “UN should take care of the matters in its own country”, “More money for football”, “Let there be peace, but only if we can continue being afraid” (Figure 7) and “Another 8 years”. The signs employ the strategy of a supportive stunt (Sørensen, 2016), in which the participants pretend to be supporting the government, even as they are in fact criticising it. For example, a 4/3 majority refers to the actual 2/3 majority, thanks to which Fidesz does not need the support of other parties to change laws or the constitution. Son-in-law power, on the other hand, is a reference to nepotism within Fidesz, where Orbán’s family members, such as István Tiborcz, have received lucrative business opportunities (Tóth & Hajdú, 2022). Especially interesting is the sign requesting that people be allowed to “continue being afraid”, which insightfully reflects Fidesz’s efforts at manufacturing fear. The main difference compared to typical humorous stunts or performances, which are usually carried out by relatively small groups, is the scale of the events, as the MKKP peace march managed to attract several thousand Hungarians.



Figure 6. Peace march signs: “For sale! Used fence* from USA, *need to pay 27%VAT” and “Let there be 4/3 in 2018”.

The size of the event meant that the messages and motivations of the participants varied. General themes and guidelines were clearly discussed in advance, but some people came with their own personal messages. Besides ironic and supportive messages, others simply criticised the government, while others relied on absurd humour and word play. The critical signs stated, for example, “Let’s end the Fidesz Christian dictatorship and the system of national crime”³, or “Delete Viktor!”. Absurd messages in classic MKKP style asked for “Free things”, “Peace for the universe” and “Peace without a march”. Signs criticising the traditional gender roles promoted by the government had messages like “I made a mistake when I left the kitchen” and “Wife for everyone”.

The parodic nature of the event was further emphasised by speeches given by several key figures of the party from the platform of a moving truck. In the spirit of the 12 points of the Hungarian Revolutionaries of 1848, they demanded the following reforms: “Free censorship and the abolition of media freedom”, “Irresponsible and unaccountable ministries to Budapest”, “National assembly every 40 years” and “Order, slavery and uniformity”. In comparison, the original demands had been as follows: “Freedom of the press, abolition of censorship”, “Independent Hungarian government in Buda-Pest”, “Annual national assembly in Pest” and “Abolition of serfdom” (“A 12 pont”, 2012).

The march’s starting point was in central Budapest, at Oktogon, and it ended at Erzsébet Square, close to the Deák Square metro station. The march attracted thousands of participants, filling the width of the big ring roads and Rákóczi road entirely for the length of several blocks (Figure 7). It attracted a much broader crowd of people unsatisfied with Fidesz government than just MKKP activists. Thus, it differed significantly from the Felcsút “space launch”, which was clearly attended mainly by the inner circle of party activists. MKKP’s profile as joke party without parliamentary representation made it possible for many opposition supporters to attend without needing to worry about the dividing lines between several opposition parties. No other opposition party symbols or signs of affiliation were displayed. According to estimates, approximately 8,000-10,000 people attended the event (Farkas, 2018).



Figure 7. This picture shows the size of the crowd: some of the signs state, “Inner peace, own peace march for everyone” and “Let there be peace, but only if we can continue being afraid”.

The atmosphere of the march was cheerful and in stark contrast to the sombre mood of various other political events organised by the “traditional parties” during the national days. Hungarian politics is characteristically extremely polarised, and negative campaigning is more

³ These refer to the “Christian democracy” and the “System of National Co-operation”. Both terms are used by Orbán to describe the current system (see Orbán, 2018; Csanádi et al., 2022).

a rule than an exception. This divisiveness within Hungarian society was further emphasised by the approaching parliamentary elections, which were held in April. When viewed in this context, the optimism and the overall positive outlook of MKKP is essential for understanding its popularity and appeal.

MKKP's peace marches are multi-layered events, which serve several purposes simultaneously. On the one hand, they are demonstrations or protest marches expressly criticising the Fidesz government, while on the other they are parodies of the original CÖF peace marches. Therefore, the posters at the events also represent this dichotomy: some are critical, others are supportive of their attempts to parody the original conservative peace march. However, confrontation is not the main aim of the events; rather, they seek to create a positive mood and sense of togetherness with the help of liberating humour. Just like during the “space launch”, creativity, visuality and artistic self-expression have a central place in MKKP's peace marches.

6.3. “Not-watching the fireworks”, 27 August 2022

In August 2022, for the second time, MKKP organised an event to humorously protest against the National Day fireworks, for which the Hungarian government spends large amounts of money. The fireworks were cancelled on the 20th of August due to an expected storm, which MKKP naturally considered a huge success on their part. However, the firework show was rescheduled for one week later, and consequently, so was the “not-watching” event. The event was organised in Népliget (People's Park), which is a large public park southeast of the centre of Budapest. The party activists and workers had set up some tents and a screen for Saint Stephen karaoke and for “not-watching the fireworks” (*tűzijáték nemnézés*). They had also arranged for a large inflatable two-tailed dog and a can of free beer, the two best-known symbols of the party. The crowd was not big, around 40–50 people, but most participated in various activities organised by MKKP.



Figure 8. At the summer event, one could pose as Zsolt Semjén, the deputy prime minister of Hungary, who got caught in a scandal in 2018 after shooting a reindeer in Sweden and claiming to have shot a wild elk.

The party also organised, for example, a paper plane competition, which offered a humorous and environmentally friendly alternative to the air show often organised over the Danube River during the National Day. In addition, visitors could make jewellery from recycled plastic, do body painting, pose as Deputy Prime Minister Semjén (Figure 8) or search for the “body parts” of Koppány (Figure 9), who was a pagan and a rival of Hungary’s first Christian king, Saint Stephen, and whose body was cut in four pieces after his death. The focus on Koppány can be seen as an indirect criticism of Orbán and the emphasis he places on Hungary’s role as a “Christian democracy” (Orbán, 2018). Participants could also make glasses covered with animal eye stickers for not-watching the fireworks as well as take part in small workshops, which included drumming and breathing exercises.

Many of the activities at the event offer an alternative to the ways in which August 20th is officially celebrated in Hungary. By emphasising sustainable and environmentally friendly programmes, MKKP enacts what the celebrations could look like in a better reality. As such, the activities resemble what Vinthagen (2015) calls utopian enactment. However, they do not ignore entirely the existing reality, only demonstrate how things could be in an ideal world.



Figure 9. One of the tasks was to put together the skeleton of Koppány, the main rival of Saint Stephen, who was the founder of Hungarian state and in whose honour the August 20th fireworks are organised; after completing the task, people would receive “free money” and stickers.

MKKP activists had also developed a wheel spinner for randomly choosing just who to blame or hate (Figure 10), which followed the logic of the “enemy of the day” poster at the “space launch” (Figure 4). These types of tools function as a “thinking aid”, making visible the logic as well as the seeming randomness of Fidesz’s hate campaigns. MKKP ends up revealing the inherent absurdity of the logic through which Fidesz operates. By emphasising and exaggerating these absurd elements, MKKP paradoxically helps make sense of the polarised Hungarian reality.



Figure 10. Wheel spinner for randomly choosing who to blame or hate. The options are as follows: “LGBTQ, teachers, mixed raced, freelancers, immigrants, Dog party, bears, former Prime Minister Gyurcsány, the EU, drug-using bridge demonstrators.”⁴

Even though the party leadership was not present at the event, I had the chance to talk with some of the candidates from the 2022 April parliamentary elections, who are currently employed by MKKP. These young men grew up during Orbán’s rule and see MKKP as a refreshing alternative beyond the traditional left-right party divisions. They both seemed disappointed that MKKP did not get into the parliament, but one of them pointed out that the party’s resources are limited and that it would have been challenging to continue all the local grassroots level activities if some of the main figures of the party had been tied with parliamentary work. He also questioned the possibility of having a real influence on matters so long as Fidesz maintains its 2/3 majority.

Both men recognised that the party has become more serious in its political objectives but added that some would prefer to continue with the fully humorous approach. One of them also said that he would never have believed that the party leader, Gergely Kovács, could seriously discuss public tenders on television without making a single joke. Instead of being discouraged by the election results, both MKKP workers seemed to be happy that they now had more party funding to extend their activities outside Budapest. Their next aim is to prepare for the local elections in 2024 and eventually be ready for the 2026 parliamentary elections.

6.4. Interview at the MKKP party office

During my most recent visit to Budapest, I had the opportunity to visit the party office of MKKP and interview one of the workers whom I had met during the August 20th event in 2022. Other activists and workers joined the discussion every now and then. This resulted in a multivocal and open discussion about the values, aims and practices of MKKP. We also reflected on the party’s use of humour and the type of humorous communication that MKKP prefers. I used this interview as the basis for extending my analysis beyond the specific events that I had observed during my fieldtrips.

⁴ This refers to an incident in summer 2022 when Gergely Kovács was arrested during a demonstration on Elisabeth Bridge (Erzsébet híd) and found in possession of 1 gram of marihuana (Kőszeghy, 2022).

What is not often discussed in humour research are the educational aspects of humorous political activities. However, when talking with the MKKP workers, they mentioned raising active and critical citizens as one of the party's main goals. According to one of the workers, the aim is for citizens to take seriously their voting duty: "To investigate, to hold accountable, to follow up on [the politicians]". The methods that MKKP utilise, however, do far more than simply provide information. As the examples from my fieldtrips demonstrate, they prefer more innovative methods that encourage participants to think for themselves. In a country with a relatively brief history of democratic governance and open elections, the importance of such a pursuit is easy to understand.

In line with previous research (see, e.g. Sørensen, 2016), the party activists themselves seem to firmly believe that humour is an effective method for achieving political change. MKKP activists also consciously use humour to convey important messages in relation to various societal issues. According to my main interviewee: "That [humour] is something that we can really use to get people's attention. Especially in this kind of political environment". When asked about the possibilities to achieve real change with the help of humour, he emphasised the importance of the content behind their humour: "which calls attention to important matters."

The process by which the main messages are chosen is often communal, and various ideas are tested and contested at party meetings: "In the party members' gathering, we figure out together what should be the main funny sentences that we are standing by." Unlike many traditional political parties, MKKP has only a few actual members, according to the interviewee only around 60. The members decide on matters concerning the party and participate actively in the meetings. To become an MKKP party member, one needs to participate regularly in MKKP's activities and be recommended by two current party members.

MKKP's humour typically incorporates societal issues that the party aims to draw attention to beneath the humorous message. The references can be intricate at times and demand a certain level of general knowledge. Nonetheless, the party members do not see a need to explain their jokes, leaving the responsibility for deciphering the meanings to the audience. Another characteristic of MKKP's humour is that it usually avoids negativity and tends to rely on supportive and corrective communication strategies (see Sørensen, 2016; Laaksonen et al., 2021). When planning party activities, MKKP follows certain guidelines: "All the brainstorming has this motto: 'funny, useful, beautiful'. If someone wants to come up with something, at least one of these should be included." When deciding on the jokes, certain topics are considered obscene and are filtered out of the party's humorous messages and communication, and the activists are asked to rethink their suggestion.

When it comes to parody performances and other forms of creative activities, MKKP activists do not seem to worry about the reactions of the police in Hungary. Instead, they see the involvement of the police or other authorities as adding to the news value of the stunt. My main interviewee characterised the party's stance as follows: "A big part of the party thinks that this just makes doing them a bit more exciting, and that it is a good feeling. And if the police come, then sometimes we wait for them and can make a nice post out of it." Orbán's home village of Felcsút was also mentioned as a location where the police reacted to their activities almost instantly.

MKKP wants to clearly distinguish itself from the more traditional parties by emphasising how it redistributes campaign and party funding. The party has established a foundation called RÓSÁNÉKATÉKA, to which people can apply for funding for their projects (see "MKKP Rósánékateka"): "During the election campaign, we gave out 300 million [forints] in funding; that in itself is already a reason to participate [in the elections]." The possibility to redistribute public money to causes deemed worthy by the party was seen as an important reason to function as a political party instead of remaining a non-governmental organisation.

In its current party brochure, MKKP claims that it is “a lot more than a joke party” (“Mi ez a Kutypárt?”, 2023). While fitting, the label of a joke party carries with it the idea that the party might not be serious in its efforts. When asked, I was told that MKKP does not like to be labelled a joke party (*viccpárt*); instead, party members would like it to be known as a funny party (*vicces part*). According to my interviewee the party activists were also asked whether they would prefer humorous or serious content. Both approaches had equal support, and as a result the party tries to produce the same amount of humorous and serious content depending on the context.

6.5. Possibilities and limits of MKKP’s humour

MKKP’s parody performances rely on both humorous and other creative activities. The party’s example illustrates well that distinguishing between different types of creative activities is difficult. Sørensen (2016) has chosen not to include the non-humorous creative performances within the scope of her humour stunt analysis. However, for the purposes of my ethnographic analysis it does not seem appropriate to exclude the other creative elements of the performances since they are intermixed with the humorous elements of the activities. Also, Sørensen (2016, p. 215) admits in her conclusions that for the activists, separating humorous activism from other types of creative activism is artificial.

While reactive and even provocative, MKKP usually avoids explicit criticism and mocking in its humorous performances. Instead, the party’s humour is insightful and challenges people to think for themselves. In this sense, humour has the potential to alleviate polarisation. What is typical of MKKP’s activities is that they do not aim at direct confrontation or to capture the stage from another political actor. Nevertheless, the links to events that the party criticises or parodies are unmistakable thanks to numerous references and the deliberate choice of time and place for their performances. Even if MKKP’s performances are often reactions to external events, they also serve to strengthen the inner cohesion, solidarity and unity of the activists e.g. the in-group. This happens through various types of joint activities, such as role play. Often, the different aspects of a certain activity are planned in a manner that also promotes media visibility.

When studying humorous performances, it is essential to recognise what type of humour is being used. MKKP often relies on corrective and supportive humour (see Sørensen, 2016), which reveals the power holders’ manipulative communication style and encourages independent thinking without intending to insult its opponents. Such thought-provoking humour requires that recipients process the content of the humorous act or message and, as such, makes it harder to ignore the overall point of the performance. Using humour as a method of communication makes it possible for MKKP to criticise Hungarian politics without having to follow the unfair rules of the political game. Consequently, MKKP does not need to engage in the political conversation at the same level as Fidesz, and with the help of humour it can turn a position of disadvantage to its advantage. In addition, humorous parody performances and billboards interrupt the continuous flow of Fidesz’s propaganda and give MKKP a great deal of visibility.

In MKKP’s humorous activities, the offline and online spheres are profoundly intertwined (see McGarry et al., 2020). Funny memes translate into signs carried at MKKP gatherings, while stickers and graffiti translate into Facebook posts and short videos. While the online sphere is a useful tool for reaching followers, the content is created both offline and online. Reposting memes without actual real-life gatherings would not likely create such a devoted community, which I encountered at the MKKP gatherings during my field trips to Hungary. Despite the growing significance of the online sphere, offline activities are essential for the functioning of the party and provide the material for their online presence (see Kallius, 2022).

Despite its unique advantages, humour also has its limitations as a method of communication. It is much easier to use humour to criticise an opponent than to promote one’s

own political goals. In addition, the use of humour with complex references requires a relatively high level of shared knowledge and understanding. Certain forms of humour, such as irony, rely heavily on such common understandings (Hutcheon, 1994). Furthermore, the growth of MKKP has forced the party to address several matters more seriously in the 2022 parliamentary elections. Choosing the right approach to each question is becoming more and more important as the party's popularity continues to grow, and so relying only on humour is no longer sufficient.

7. Conclusion

Humour as a form of resistance provides an alternative to more traditional political activities in Hungary, which can be described as a hybrid regime (Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018), or alternatively, as a soft authoritarian state (Nyyssönen & Metsälä, 2021), since it does not rely on violence to control the people. Humour has traditionally been seen as a tool of the underdogs and powerless. It is often one of the last non-violent resorts for political activists in an antidemocratic setting (Kenney, 2002). But when it comes to MKKP, the party's humour is strongly linked to more positive forces, such as creativity and usefulness. Doing good is at the very heart of its brainstorming motto "funny, useful, beautiful".

It can be said that in Hungary, there is a monolithic, state controlled public sphere on the right, while on the left there are various subaltern counterpublics (Fraser, 1990), or sphericules (Gitlin, 1998), which together form a relatively large multivocal counter-public sphere. The Hungarian case is an example of a society in which the competing spheres do not contribute to constructive democratic debates. Through innovative means, MKKP has nevertheless occasionally succeeded in entering the often seemingly impenetrable state-controlled public sphere. Using humour as its chosen tool, MKKP has received some media visibility also on state TV channels. More importantly, it has managed to create genuine possibilities for humorous and creative self-expression in the urban city space of Budapest as well as in the countryside, which has traditionally been a Fidesz stronghold.

It appears that in MKKP's activism, both creativity and cynicism, two very contradictory forces, exist in close proximity to each other. Absurd humour especially can be both liberating and cynical. It can be seen as a reaction to the absurdity and insanity of the surrounding world, but it does not necessarily mean abandoning reason altogether (cf. Sørensen, 2016; Korkut et al., 2022). By emphasising the absurdities of the government's policies through humorous means, MKKP, paradoxically, can make rationality, or more precisely the lack thereof, more visible.

MKKP's position as the underdog gives the party only limited possibilities to have an impact and alleviate polarisation on a larger scale. Instead of contradicting Fidesz directly during national holiday gatherings, MKKP offers an alternative way to gather together in a more sustainable and environmentally friendly manner. All in all, being together and involving themselves in creative activities seems to be equally important for the participants as resisting Fidesz's politics. In fact, all three examples of MKKP's activities — the "space launch", "peace march" and "not-watching fireworks" — offer an alternative lifestyle. As such, the party's activities resemble what Vinthagen (2015) would call utopian enactment, in which the activists behave as if the society they are working to create already, at least momentarily, exists. This objective is further highlighted in MKKP's grassroots activities aiming to improve the conditions of local communities.

In conclusion, MKKP uses humour to show that it does not conform to the rules set by Fidesz. Humour gives it latitude in a polarised society. Humour is a powerful antidote and counterforce against simplified populist truths that rely on fearmongering and enemy images.

By countering the fear with humour, MKKP attacks the very core of Fidesz's communication style. The "Let there be peace, but only if we can continue being afraid" sign ironically summarises the perceived mental landscape of Fidesz supporters. It is through the power of humour, laughter and creativity that MKKP aims to break this iron grip of fear. However, more research is needed to better understand the influence that such humorous activities have in a soft authoritarian society.

Political humour, such as the activities of the Orange Alternative in Poland, is thought to have played an important role in the collapse of the socialism in the 1980s. It cracked the control enforced through fear. Consequently, humour can be a useful tool of resistance in an authoritarian society. Is such a development possible in the 21st century, in soft authoritarian Hungary? Fidesz's government, despite its attempts to weaken the core foundations of liberal democracy, has genuine support in Hungary. Today, the complex struggle over people's minds unfolds in various arenas. Furthermore, Fidesz has demonstrated its ability to adjust to changing circumstances by utilising strategies employed by its opponents, even humour, to remain in power. As MKKP's leader Gergely Kovács states in an interview: "When the government is funnier than us, then we are forced to politicise seriously" ("Kovács Gergely", 2021).

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