Rewiring Democracy After Orbán

How Participation Can Counter Informal Power After Orbán

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Hungary's democratic renewal cannot succeed through constitutional restoration alone. The durability of the Orbán regime stemmed not only from formal institutional capture, but from deeply embedded informal power throughout society. Rebuilding democracy therefore needs more than legal repair: it requires institutionalized participation, decentralized power, and directly embedded civil society into governance.

For years, Hungary's democratic backsliding was primarily analysed through formal legal categories in the literature: constitutional amendments, court packing, media capture, and the gradual hollowing out of institutional checks and balances. These dynamics were real and consequential. As Kim Lane Scheppele famously argued, Hungary became a paradigmatic case of "autocratic legalism", the use of law itself to entrench authoritarian power.

Yet legal transformation and constitutional engineering alone cannot explain the 16 years durability of the Orbán regime. Its resilience rested on a much broader architecture of informal power. It created a dense web of political and economic dependency linking local authorities, vulnerable citizens, economic actors, and access to public resources to political loyalty. Formal democratic institutions continued to exist, but the playing field became systematically tilted through clientelist corruption and electoral clientelism.

This system functioned as a self-reinforcing infrastructure of dependencies across Hungarian society, where economic survival increasingly depended on political loyalty. Local governments lost meaningful autonomy and became financially subordinated to the central state. Public resources were reallocated toward politically loyal actors, and feudal structures have penetrated everyday life through electoral clientelism. Informal power reproduced itself because dependence itself became institutionalised. Transitional justice therefore cannot be reduced to constitutional restoration or elite replacement. It must also address the underlying social logic of authoritarian governance.

Decentralisation and Mutual Engagement as Democratic Infrastructure

The first task of democratic renewal is therefore decentralisation. Under the Orbán regime, one of the achievements of Hungary's 1989 democratic transition – strong local autonomy – was systematically dismantled. Local governments controlled by the opposition were fiscally drained, others functioned as an extension of central political control.

This centralisation served an authoritarian goal; by monopolising resources and decision-making power, the regime transformed local dependency into a mechanism of political discipline. Reversing this process requires more than technocratic administrative reform. Restoring fiscal autonomy and political independence to municipalities is essential precisely because decentralisation disrupts the concentration of informal power.

Yet decentralisation alone is still insufficient. Without democratic safeguards, informal networks may simply relocate to the local level. Democratic resilience therefore depends not only on dispersing power, but on embedding civic oversight within governance itself – and this is where civil society becomes the key. In Hungary's case, strengthening civil society is also a practical anti-corruption strategy.

The key challenge is institutionalising mutual engagement between local authorities, organised civil society, and citizens in ways that become self-reinforcing over time. Poland demonstrates an important

comparative lesson in this regard. During PiS rule, democratic resistance did not survive solely through national opposition politics. Strong local governments and embedded civic networks functioned as "pockets of democracy" preserving autonomous political spaces despite broader democratic erosion. Local authorities cooperated with NGOs, grassroots initiatives, and civic organisations to maintain forms of democratic participation and accountability even under increasingly hostile political conditions.

Hungary recently possesses the early foundations of a similar model. The emergence of the so-called "Tisza Islands" during the recent election cycle illustrates the democratic potential of locally embedded civic mobilisation. While they are connected to the broader Tisza movement, these groups remain formally independent from the party itself. Their significance lies in hybridity: they combine central political mobilisation with bottom-up social embeddedness. Importantly, they should not be understood merely as campaign infrastructure. These locally integrated groups have the potential to function as connective tissue between society and politics. During the campaign they created spaces for participation, democratic dialogue, political education, and collective problem-solving in communities where engagement had long been weakened by apathy, dependency, and lack of trust and efficacy.

This is important because hybrid regimes do not hollow out institutions only, they also reshape political culture. Over sixteen years, many Hungarians believed that political participation was meaningless, that loyalty produced benefits, and that power remained distant and unaccountable. Democratic renewal must therefore also become a cultural transformation as well.

From Episodic Mobilisation to Systemic Resilience

The latest Hungarian election also demonstrated how civil society and informal activism can constrain informal power in practice. Economic coercion, vote-buying and intimidation have long featured Hungarian elections, particularly in economically vulnerable rural communities. Formal institutions and external monitoring bodies often proved unable or unwilling to address these dynamics in practice.

A huge novelty of this election was the emergence of grassroots monitoring networks. Civil society initiatives such as the De! action group deployed around 2,100 local "guardians" into vulnerable communities. These volunteers possessed no formal authority. Yet because they were socially embedded, they could identify coercive practices, disrupt intimidation, and raise the political cost of electoral manipulation. Their effectiveness derives primarily from local trust, social presence, and community knowledge. In several districts, their activity likely influenced electoral outcomes directly. Tisza also deployed around 2,250 poll watcher volunteers who have been largely contributing to mitigate electoral fraud. Democracy was defended through local civic engagement capable of interrupting informal mechanisms of control.

The challenge now is how to make resilience permanent, since much of these mechanisms are still informal and ad hoc. Without institutionalisation, such engagement can easily fade away once the immediate urgency of political transition is gone.

Participatory Chains and Democratic Renewal

This is where recent research on democratic innovation becomes particularly relevant. In our recent work on "participatory chains" we argue that democratic renewal cannot rely on isolated participatory experiments detached from actual governance processes. Contemporary democracies suffer from what may be best described as democratic "stagflation", when participation becomes simultaneously more costly and less impactful. Citizens are repeatedly invited to participate in consultations or deliberative exercises, but without real political impact. The result is declining trust, growing disengagement, and participatory fatigue within society.

Participatory chains seek to address this problem by linking different forms of participation across time and governance levels into a coherent democratic ecosystem. Rather than treating citizens' assemblies, consultations, civic monitoring, and policy deliberation as isolated instruments, participatory chains

should connect them into feedback loops. This way, democratic innovations can become mutually reinforcing components of a broader ecosystem, where engagement travels across institutions, communities, and levels of governance. In other words, participation itself becomes institutionalised rather than episodic.

This approach is particularly relevant for Hungary because informal power thrives precisely where participation remains fragmented, temporary, and politically disconnected. Continuous democratic engagement helps rebuild political efficacy, social trust, and accountability from below. Moreover, participatory chains can provide a way to reconnect younger generations to democratic politics in the long run. Most young citizens across Europe increasingly distrust formal institutions while remaining highly active in protest movements and informal activism. Democratic renewal therefore requires creating participatory structures capable of translating this energy into sustained institutional engagement.

Crucially, participatory chains should not be understood simply as a collection of democratic innovations, simply put on top of one another. Their effectiveness depends on careful sequencing, institutional embeddedness, and continuity between participatory stages. Deliberation without political follow-up risks frustration, and participation without accountability might end up as symbolic politics. Therefore, the challenge is creating participatory ecosystems capable of connecting local engagement, national policymaking, and sustained democratic oversight into coherent governance structures.

Beyond Constitutional Restoration

The collapse of the Orbán regime is a historic opportunity to move from a political system of multiple dependencies toward democratic agency. Long-term success will depend less on constitutional engineering, but rather on the Magyar government's ability to institutionalise participation, decentralise power, and embed civil society directly into governance. This is precisely why the Tisza government's initiative, the Institute for a Functional and Humane Hungary could play an important long-term role.

Instead of approaching democratic renewal primarily through legal, technocratic reform, this institute should become a research laboratory for participatory governance itself. It should develop durable mechanisms linking local governments, civil society organisations and democratic innovations into coherent participatory chains. In doing so, it could help institutionalise democratic resilience within the everyday social infrastructure of post-Orbán democracy.

However, effectiveness will depend on whether the institute can maintain genuine independence from partisan control and short-term governmental interests. Equally important is the question of political follow-through. Participatory governance cannot function if public recommendations disappear into administrative or symbolic consultation processes. Ministries, parliamentary committees, and relevant public institutions should face formal obligations to publicly respond to, evaluate, and implement recommendations emerging from participatory processes designed by the institute.

Most importantly, participation itself must become substantively connected to decision-making. As we argue in our article, democratic "stagflation" emerges precisely when citizens are invited to participate without meaningful political consequences from their engagement. Participatory mechanisms therefore need to be plugged into agenda-setting, policymaking, implementation, and oversight processes via feedback loops linking civil society, local and national governments. This would evolve participation from an episodic consultation into a durable democratic infrastructure that can rebuild long-term political trust.

Democratic renewal after Viktor Orbán's hybrid regimes cannot stop at institutional repair alone. It must rewire the social foundations of democracy as a whole.

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