

Growing Ambition in a Shrinking Space: *Hungary's Community Foundations after the Election*

By Tamás Scsaurszki, Roots & Wings Foundation

The build-up to and results of the Hungarian general election confirmed my feeling that my nation has become the “Syria” of Europe. Just a decade ago, it was unthinkable that Hungary could so quickly again become the battleground for major ideologies and political strategies. It could not be envisaged that the world's strongest global players, including Russia and the European Union, would influence it so fundamentally, whilst each claiming that they are doing nothing, or can't do anything more.

As one may guess, the fabric and health of Hungarian society suffers as the country is wrenched apart, divided on what is going on and what should be done. At the individual level, responses are as varied as Hungarians. There are those who give up and leave (according to the *Guardian*, one person leaves the country every 16 minutes), those who celebrate the fought-for national dignity and recent achievements, and there are those that withdraw from public life completely. But there is unexpected depth and richness to this picture, and the nation's newly emerging community foundations are playing a vital role.

The general elections held on 8 April gave (once again) a constitutional majority to the ruling coalition government for the next term. It's a green light to further pursue policies including the demonization, discrimination and harassment of NGOs – along with 'softer' techniques such as squeezing out funding. This has been well documented internationally by the press¹ with an end goal that was made clear in the first post-election statement of the winning parties: organisations meddling into politics must be closed down! For Hungarian NGOs, it is reminiscent of how the communists approached their enemies: those not with us are against us.

This sounds like a textbook example of shrinking space for civil society. And indeed, it is increasingly difficult for community foundations to maintain credibility to work on bettering our communities? However, it is not impossible!

MY BUBBLE

I live in Ferencváros, one of the central districts of Budapest. When it comes to work, many things inspire me to get up in the morning. Here are just two examples: one of the shops in my street is run by a middle-aged man born in Lebanon. Opposite him is a Persian restaurant, where the owner's father frequently sits on the terrace. I often hear these two people speak in Hungarian over coffee. This scene makes me incredibly proud of my community for accommodating these two people in peace.



László Nándori, owner of Nándori patisserie

¹Including the New York Times, The Guardian, The Financial Times, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.

If I walk in the other direction along my street, I find my favourite cake shop, which not only makes some of the best cakes in town, but that has an owner who is a fearless supporter of any (yes, any) activity that makes our neighbourhood stronger, safer and more people-friendly. We have collaborated for nine years, talking every month. I can tell you next-to-nothing about his political views—as he pointed out recently, we have not yet had time to talk about this!

The election results show that this district is as divided politically as any in Hungary. I can sense clearly a growing suspicion of NGOs. Yet, we have many people like my dear cake shop owner who would do an awful lot to create a better community, from leaving their party political views at the door to investing their own time.

Therefore, only outsiders are surprised that **Ferencváros Community Foundation** has enjoyed robust local support from the very beginning. As of last year, it raised €80,000 from the local community and another €13,000 from outside sources, and spent more than €50,000 supporting projects that did everything from tackling homelessness, organising a Christmas fair at a high-rise neighbourhood, and helping kids with long-term sickness to keep up with school-work, to bringing films about multiculturalism to secondary schools.



Radio Ráday, the popup radio station of the foundation

In addition, we initiated a project, funded by the **Global Fund for Community Foundations**, to learn about migrant, our new neighbours—the people who have come from further than most in the district—and to support their participation in community life. We also organised a community weekend called ‘Ráday Corso’ to bring together local residents with institutions, companies, café and restaurant based in the Ráday neighbourhood.

OTHER BUBBLES

For anyone who knows Hungary, the city of Miskolc seems one of the most unlikely places to have a community foundation. This centre of industry during the Communist era now has large segments of deprived population, and has seen a sharp fall in population since the 1990s. But the group of locals who established the **Tézerő Community Foundation in Our City (Miskolc)** didn't let any of this slow them down.

They started their foundation because they saw potential in local people's desire to work together to improve their city. They saw interest from recently established businesses and found the local government open to cooperate.

With huge amounts of voluntary work and backing from several committed business owners, the foundation has quickly become integral to the city's life: the public meetings, events and conferences are important, vibrant gatherings not only for representatives of NGOs, but for businesses, political bodies and the public, none of whom want to be left out of this exciting 'new thing'.



Drawing attention to breast cancer

Community members are walking the talk, too: from money raised locally, the foundation has already funded a number of interesting projects. The County Breast Cancer Association received funding, along with the 'Urban Walks' project that introduces the history and famous places of Miskolc to inhabitants through popular guided walks.

In addition to its heavy focus on local work, Miskolc has involved itself with international cooperation in a big way: the Foundation participated in the **European Community Foundation Initiative's** Cardiff Conference and key members visited the **Odorheiu Secuiesc Community Foundation** in Romania on a study visit, to learn about charitable sport competition.

The city of Pécs, situated in the other corner of the country, has significant differences to Miskolc: it does not have a strong and growing business community, but is considered one of the most cultured, educated and arty cities in the country. It too suffered from the fall of the mining industry and a huge loss of population.

The biggest similarity, however, is in the enthusiasm of those who have stayed: many of them are committed to making the city a better place to live. A dozen people saw in the community foundation concept a good vehicle to make this happen. They registered the **Pécs Community Foundation** in 2016 and spent a year raising funds.

In 2017, the foundation's major undertaking was to support nine projects from the Neighbourhood Fund "to turn neighbours into cohesive communities". One project supports poor Roma women to become tourist guides, another will see a basketball championship between neighbourhoods organised by youth, and a third will renovate children playgrounds and organise special march to connect different neighbourhoods in the city.

Trustees of the foundation are "companions" of the supported projects, which lets them both learn more about the life and issues of communities and to see what additional support they can mobilise. One idea is to organise a Neighbourhood Academy in mid-2018 to bring people from different neighbourhoods together and share best practices of civic engagement.



Trustees meet supported organisations

MERGING BUBBLES – ONE BIG BUBBLE?

These descriptions do not do justice to the richness, vibrancy, or complexity of community foundations' work in Hungary – but they give a sense of some of the ingredients that are needed to take a local initiative off the ground, even while the surrounding environment is hostile. To me, the key requirements are to:

- start a diverse group of committed people and tap into the creative energy of members of your community;
- make sure that you build your organisation's credibility through your personal brand and credibility, and through giving back to the whole community, including marginalised or unpopular groups, from day one;
- regard your whole community (your 'constituency' if you like) as your ecosystem that you have a complex and dynamic relation with, without which you could not exist – this is not just a source of funds or other resources;
- show leadership in working focused on issues (not ideologies) important to the community and reaching out to anybody, including the local government and any political parties open to cooperate or at least to having a discussion;
- use international relationships to learn, break isolation and bring perspective; be ready to change strategies quickly should the situation or circumstances change unexpectedly, bearing in mind that you want to be in your community for the long-term.

Community foundations were recognized with prestigious national prizes: Ferencváros Community Foundation received the Civic Prize for the best fundraising campaign (for its *Swimathon*), while Térerő Community Foundation for Our City (Miskolc) was named the best community initiative in the country.

For sure, these stories paint a picture that does not fully bring out the struggle and setbacks that NGOs have experienced: not only the growing suspicion created by the central government, but also the increasingly difficult regulatory framework, the need to navigate between the organisation's stated values and what is possible, and even the threats to close down organisations. In addition to all of these, every young organisation with ambitious plans and limited resources will experience internal challenges.

But we can also see these realities as drivers for community foundations to push even harder to reach out to the 'undecided middle', to work with the local elite, including open-minded councillors and public figures, on issues affecting the community to ensure legitimacy and transparency, and to question and reinterpret their own mission, intentions and strategy regularly.

Only time will tell whether the result of working in this shrinking space is that we build a new, more resilient type of organisation – or whether we are pursuing a dead end.

The currency of the day: pride, growing confidence and capacity to change the world

From our perspective at the Roots & Wings Foundation (R&WF), the organisation that runs the **Community Foundation Support Programme** (CFSP) providing financial and capacity building support for all of Hungary's community foundations since 2014, nothing can be more encouraging than seeing the development of these foundations.



Community foundation meeting in March 2018

Seeing their commitment to build cohesive communities, their growing confidence and capacity make us proud and feel huge respect towards the people who started them and show courage and leadership to operate them in such arduous times.

In addition to this amazing local energy, the wholehearted support and solidarity from our colleagues around the world is equally motivating. As part of our strategic thinking process in 2017, we approached a dozen people from South Africa to Poland to the USA to Japan about the state of the world, shrinking space, and new opportunities for philanthropy and civil society to address our challenges. Regardless of whether they collaborated with us or whether they had a programmatic interest in Hungary and Europe, everyone was ready to think about these big issues with us.

We have also found it intriguing to read recent publications reflecting on the similarities and differences between the development of Russian and Hungarian community funds/foundations², expanding our praxis as a support organisations to be more resilient and better funders³, and understanding how other organisations cope with this climate⁴.

²When Size Matters: The phenomenon of community foundations in small towns and rural areas of Russia by Larisa Avrorina and Yulia Khodorova. CAF Russia.

³Resilient Funders by Cris Allan and Scott DuPree. Global Greengrants Fund.

⁴The shrinking space for civil society. Philanthropic perspectives from across the globe. European Foundation Centre.

Since the beginning, we have had the most unlikely bunch of funders: a Scandinavian government, a US private foundation, a venture philanthropist, a Polish NGO, a European infrastructure organisation, a German foundation, some institutional funders who wish to remain anonymous, and a great many individuals from Hungary and across the globe (through Ferencváros Community Foundation's swimathon). What is common to each is that they give us their trust, perspective on the world, time and space to reflect and act the way we find adequate while not letting us take our eyes off the big-picture goals. It is almost as if they had all already read the new Grantcraft publication about how 'big donors' can support community philanthropy well⁵.



Staff of CFSP: ready for bad weather

We are not blind, and nor does our enthusiasm impair our vision: in Hungary we feel our civic space shrinking on a daily basis, and this affects every organisation, in and beyond Hungary, involved in supporting our community foundations.

But we are trying to be cautious, strategic and forward-looking, while concentrating on the next great question: how we can tap into the creative energies of local communities and find and nurture new groups of people who will become the founders, trustees and volunteers of the next generation of community foundations. Today, 400,000 Hungarians enjoy the benefits of value-driven, locally-rooted community foundations. It is our ambition and our vision that by 2022, that number will reach one million.

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⁵How Community Philanthropy Shifts Power: What Donors Can Do To Make That Happen by Jenny Hodgson and Pond. GrantCraft.