The Paradoxes of Parliament–Citizen Connections in Hungary: A Window on the Political System

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The main argument of this article is that parliament–citizen connections in Hungary have been conditioned by broad political systemic features between 1990 and 2010. After a brief review of the institutional choices that lead to the current parliamentary set-up, the connections between representatives and the represented are mapped out by examining the level of trust in the legislature, the focus of representation, types of MP–voter contact and diverse constituency-related activities. Further, direct democracy opportunities and the role of new communication techniques are investigated before and during the 2010 election campaign. The findings confirm some paradoxes: although MPs' activity towards citizens has increased, citizens do not connect with MPs to any greater degree; or when direct democracy instruments reach out towards parliament, parties can be found in the background. All in all, parliament's role has diminished with vague representation and accountability patterns.

Keywords: *constituency connection; popular initiatives; ICT; Hungary; parliament and citizens*.

Introduction

This article introduces 20 years of parliament–citizen connections in Hungary, from 1990 to 2010. Our approach and main argument is that parliament–citizen connections are conditioned by the political system per se – that is, parliament–citizen connections are a window on the political system. Parliament–citizen connections depend on how key representative institutions – parties, electoral system and parliament itself – channel these connections. At the same time direct democracy measures also have to be considered. For example, referendum initiatives or popular proposals that intend to affect parliament's work or legislative decisions also constitute parliament–citizen connections. Altogether, the analysis of this connection covers diverse fields – within and outside the representative institutions. The Hungarian case offers an additional systemic question to consider. What is the potential impact of the former, pre-1990, communist regime on this connection and could any tendencies in parallel with the democratisation and consolidation process be observed?

In line with this approach the article will target parliament–citizen connections from different perspectives. In doing so the main question is: how are

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parliament–citizen connections serving democratic representation and can any particular trends be observed? After a brief overview of the changing role of parliament in the post-1990 regime, MPs' and citizens' connections will be analysed, followed by the citizens' connection to parliament, and finally we will examine the opportunities offered by new information and communication technologies (ICT). The time period covered ranges across the last two decades, but whilst information on MPs' and citizens' connections is available throughout that period, this is not the case for citizen connections to parliament. These, largely in the form of direct democracy, have developed as a major issue in the second decade only, thus more recent developments will be introduced. Similarly, the impact of ICT as a new potential instrument in parliament–citizen connections can only be examined for the second decade.

The Changing Place of Parliament – and Citizens' Views

Parliament in Hungary is highly valued and is perceived as a symbol of democratic government mainly for historical reasons. The sovereignty of the country was embodied by parliament: independence movements against the Austrian Habsburgs historically evolved around the acceptance of an independent parliament. Even during the authoritarian regime in the two decades between the world wars and then during the communist regime, parliament was regarded as an institution where public interests could emerge, and even connections between representatives and constituency were highly valued.

When in other communist countries party dominance made the political landscape flat, in Hungary, from 1970 onwards, citizens in local constituencies could nominate their parliamentary candidate (Law III/1970), under the constraints of one-party rule, of course. In the 1980s most parliamentary interpellations covered local affairs (Kerekes 1987, p. 132). MPs sought to respond to local and citizens' demands in this way, although at that time direct parliamentarian and citizen connections were evaluated by academic literature as a sign of weak chains of representation, where pork-barrel politics and direct constituency service substitute democratic rules (Kerekes 1987). Close to the end of the communist period when the first representative surveys were allowed to appear in the spring of 1988, 84 per cent of respondents agreed that those MPs whose parliamentary work was not satisfactory should be recalled (Kurtán *et al.* 1989, p. 499). The mere fact that the democratic transition was streamlined by the last communist parliament – that is, the new democratic framework and its legal foundations were enacted by it – demonstrates the elevated role of parliament (Ilonszki 1993).

The above snapshot illustration of the past might also explain some of the decisions and institutional choices that have formed parliament–citizen connections since systemic change to democracy. The major question in this respect for those who have created the new framework, the negotiating partners of the transition period in 1989–90, was how to adjust the double expectations: to provide opportunities to maintain direct connections between parliamentarians and

citizens in the democratic framework and to ensure the primacy of this highly valued representative institution. Two institutional choices should be mentioned here as responses to this challenge. One is the formation of a mixed-member electoral system, which in the single-member district (SMD) tier in principle offers more opportunities for citizens to establish direct connections with MPs while it could also enforce MPs to follow a more pro-active, constituency- and citizen-focused agenda. The other institutional solution was to create a relatively strong parliament and give primacy to parliament as opposed to direct democracy procedures. This is remarkable because in those years the voice of the people and more direct forms of citizen participation were highly valued.

How have these initial conditions and expectations changed since then? The diminishing importance of parliament can be observed in the first decade and its decline in the second (Ilonszki 2007). The evolution of strongly centralised parties, party bipolarisation and bloc politics (Enyedi and Bértoa 2011) gave way to strong governments (Ilonszki and Jáger 2010). Over the two decades, trust in the new democratic framework and its institutions has not strengthened; rather the constant and low level of trust towards parties in Hungary – as well as in East Central Europe (ECE) in general (Mishler and Rose 2001, Rose and Munro 2003) – has been demonstrated. Trust in politicians is also notoriously low in Hungary, below or around the 10 per cent level,[1] one of the lowest in Europe.

How does parliament fit this trend? Is parliament simply one among many institutions from which the electorate feels distant and distrusts? The answer is more complex. Table 1 shows the changing attitudes of citizens to the institution and, to provide a broader context, it also includes the average figures for the European Union (EU) countries for trust in parliament in selected years. Table 1 covers surveys from the pre-election years (2001, 2005, 2009) and then post-election data (2002, 2006, 2010). In addition, 2008 is included when, without elections, a new government was formed and trust hit rock bottom. Interestingly, in Hungary, trust in parliament is *not* notoriously low, as is the case with other political institutions, and after a temporary decline it goes back to high levels. High levels of trust can be observed in election years, in the post-election surveys, while excessively low levels of trust appear in between elections. The fluctuation of the Hungarian data is in contrast with the average EU figures, where the trend of permanent and continuous decline is obvious.

Table 1: Public Trust in Parliament in Hungary and the EU, Selected Years (%)

	2001	**2002**	2005	**2006**	2008	2009	**2010**
EU	40	42	35	38	34	30	31
HU	43	**52**	29	**47**	15	15	**47**

Note: **Bold** = election years.
Source: Eurobarometer surveys (http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/index_en.htm).

This confirms our assumption that confidence in parliament does indeed absorb and reflect several dimensions of the political community. Norris (1999, pp. 9–10), on the basis of global trends, has decomposed trust into five dimensions: support in the community, in the regime's principles, in regime performance, in regime institutions and political actors. Trust in parliament seems to encompass at least two dimensions: support in the regime's principles and regime performance. At the time of elections, when more attempts are made to attract citizens, they turn towards parliament with more optimism and this embodies general confidence in the political system. In other years dissatisfaction with regime performance and with how things are (from parties to politicians) are reflected in the low level of trust in parliament data. As Boda (2009) has demonstrated elsewhere, value judgement predominates in formulating political trust in the Hungarian political system but regime performance also matters. Parliament seems to absorb both dimensions. Indeed, this implies that understanding parliament–citizen connections is not an easy task at all. After these general remarks the article will now turn to more concrete issues; the connections between MPs and voters being the first.

MPs and Voters

As mentioned above, one of the motivations behind the introduction of the mixed-member electoral system was to respond to the former tradition when direct citizen connections with parliamentarians were highly valued. The SMD tier might offer this opportunity, particularly when parties are not yet fully institutionalised, as was the case at the beginning of the systemic change. The second tier is built on regional party lists. This means that the voters have two votes: one for the SMD candidate and the other for the party list. A third type of mandate (national list mandate) is built on the votes left over from the two other tiers.

MPs' and voters' connections in SMDs are built on a constituency (territorial) basis, and those MPs who consider the constituency as the focus of representation are more open to personal contact with citizens, also being more prone to channel their views and interests into the political system. Table 2 illustrates the representative connection of MPs in selected years. The 1992, 1995 and 1999 results are based on postal surveys; the 2007 and 2010 data come from face-to-face interviews.

Table 2 shows the change in the MPs' perceptions of their role over the past 20 years; unfortunately there is no information between 1999 and 2007, therefore the trend should be treated with caution. Still, the results are quite conclusive in terms of the importance given to constituency representation. It seems that the place of constituency has stabilised in MPs' perceptions of their role. While in 1992 34.7 per cent of respondents said that the focus of representation is the constituency, this percentage is 42.5 in 2010. Since there has been no change in the proportion of SMD and list MPs in the Hungarian parliament in the past 20 years – the electoral system has remained unchanged – and all the samples are

Table 2: The Representative Connection of MPs, in Selected Years

	1992		1995		1999		2007		2010	
Who do you think you represent?	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%
Constituency	34	34.7	47	39.8	28	37.8	32	42.1	98	42.5
Party/party voters	24	24.5	19	16.1	18	24.3	11	14.5	29	12.4
A specific group in society	10	10.2	7	5.9	4	5.4	9	11.8	12	5.3
All the citizens of the country	30	30.6	45	38.2	24	32.5	24	31.6	92	39.8
Total	98		118		74		76		231	

Sources: Centre for Democracy Studies, 1992, 1995 and 1999, Corvinus University of Budapest, http://elitkutatas.uni-corvinus.hu (accessed 5 March 2012); European FP6 Project (INTUNE) 2007, Centre of Elite Studies, Corvinus University of Budapest, http://elitkutatas.uni-corvinus.h, (accessed 5 March 2012); Hungarian Election Study 2010 supported by the Norwegian Financial Mechanism, http://www.valasztaskutatas.hu (accessed 5 March 2012).

representative regarding party affiliation and type of mandate, MPs have undoubtedly become more focused on constituency representation. Constituency is an important political resource for MPs, and for their parties, and not only from the perspective of elections (Ilonszki 2012). Since Hungarian parties are relatively poor, they, and their representatives, try to gain additional resources via establishing the constituency connection. Institutionally, in addition to the electoral system the accumulation of mandates makes this possible. Specifically, an increasing number of MPs also serve as a mayor or member of a regional council (Várnagy 2008, p. 52). These additional functions require and offer more citizen connections than the parliamentary mandate itself.

One aspect of the constituency connection is the effort MPs make to reach voters and to make themselves available to hear voters' requests. Our assumption at this point is that the more visible MPs are in terms of offering their services to their constituents, the more open parliament appears. Table 3 shows the means by which MPs kept in touch with their constituents in the 1990s.

Table 3 shows that fewer and fewer MPs claim to have loose connections to the district and overall there has been a considerable change in the intensity of

Table 3: Types of Contact with the Constituency (% of all MPs)

Types of Contact	1992 ($N = 98$)	1995 ($N = 118$)	1999 ($N = 74$)
Local office	44.9	56.9	59.3
Permanent staff	40.4	59.5	48.1
Visits in the district	61.3	67.4	79.1
Meetings	71.1	64.5	77.4
Receiving letters	44.4	44.9	42.1
Loose connections	5.9	2	0

Source: Same as for Table 2.

MP–district connections. In almost every aspect the 1999 figures surmount the 1992 values. We should particularly note that virtually nobody reports loose connections by 1999 and the proportion of those reporting visits and meetings in the district, as well as maintaining a local office, is higher than the proportion of SMD MPs. The mixed-member electoral system produces approximately 45 per cent SMD MPs. This implies that even the MPs elected on party lists try to reach out towards the constituency and citizens.

The first decade's figures, above, can be supplemented with more detailed information from the 2009 survey, as presented in Table 4. These results are based on face-to-face interviews with 99 MPs. The questions aim to reveal the means by which MPs try to make themselves visible. Hungarian MPs in general appear to be quite active in their constituencies. The only thing they seem to refrain from doing is attending personal and family events like weddings or funerals. A more detailed analysis of these data confirms that – similar to the first decade – list MPs approximate the aggregate results: the type of mandate has no significant impact on the type of activities developed (Papp 2011). Altogether, Hungarian MPs are quite open to citizens' requests, and this is mostly independent from the mandate they hold. They also show a great deal of change from the transition until 2010, as they have become more open towards citizens in several fields. This has to be acknowledged even if the partisan motivation is obvious: to broaden parties' campaign and electoral resources.

Table 4 shows that virtually all of the respondents participate in public lectures and debate nights, advertise constituency services and appear in the local media. It is also worth noting that over 90 per cent are available at office hours. And even those who do not pursue this type of connection say they might do it in the future. In comparison to the first decade's results (see Table 3) the increase of connections is impressive. MPs report extensive connections with local business and action groups and three-quarters of them even meet with their voters in their private homes.

Table 4: MPs' Attitudes towards Diverse Constituency Related Activities, 2009 (% of all MPs)

	Does It	Might Do It	Would Never Do It
Attending weddings, anniversaries and funerals	33.3	30.2	36.5
Meeting with constituents in their private home	74.5	16.3	9.2
Giving lectures and speaking at debate nights	96.9	3.1	0
Sending out personal newsletter and direct mailing	59.1	25.8	15.1
Holding office hours	93.7	4.2	2.1
Advertising constituency service	97.9	2.1	0
Publicising successes	66	20.2	13.8
Meeting local businesses and action groups	83.3	14.6	2.1
Featuring in the local media	94.9	4.1	1

Source: Centre for Elite Studies, Corvinus University of Budapest in cooperation with and supported by PARTIREP Interuniversity Attraction Pole, Antwerp, Brussels, Leiden and Leuven Universities, 2009, http://www.partirep.eu. Data are not yet available to the public, but the link explains the project.

Members' visibility is a key factor for parliament's openness. It does not matter what MPs do or how many services they offer, if this information does not reach the voters. The openness of parliament does not necessarily bring to life MP–voter relationships, and does not necessarily affect citizens' satisfaction with parliament. These concerns are highly appropriate in Hungary. A population survey in 2009 found that more than four-fifths of the respondents had never initiated contact with their MPs. Table 5 also reveals the unsurprising internal demographic composition of (non-)contact. Women and the younger age cohorts are less likely to have contacted their MP.

This finding confirms earlier international comparative studies. Among countries with similar mixed-member electoral systems (Germany, Lithuania and New Zealand), Hungary produces the lowest level of MP–citizen contacts (Norris 2004, p. 241) and the lowest levels of name recognition. These results might stem from the low level of trust in politicians (as mentioned above). As Table 1 showed, trust in parliament fluctuates, reflecting broader (satisfaction with the regime) and more direct (performance) issues. Overall, however, irrespective of what voters think of parliament, they are not keen on contacting their MPs. In contrast, MPs obviously try to establish sound connections with the constituency and citizens.

While the effects of constituency service on voters' evaluation of parliament might not be as great as expected, paradoxically members think that neglecting casework would result in losing votes and losing touch with constituents. According to the 2009 data, 87.7 per cent of MPs think this would be the price of neglecting casework. As to the voters, again in 2009, in the population survey, 51 per cent of respondents said that MPs should represent the constituency. According to 34.3 per cent of the voters, the most important thing MPs should do is to represent the collective needs of the citizens of their constituencies, 28.6 per cent emphasised the importance of casework and 20.1 per cent thought that openness toward the citizens and personal contact are the most important factors of an MP's job.

These facts describe a paradoxical situation. Members have become more open to interaction with voters, but these capacities and intentions remain unexploited. Therefore, the relationship between trust and openness is concentric,

Table 5: Have You Ever Contacted Your MP (%)

	Gender		Age Group			
	Male	Female	Under 30	30–44	45–59	60+
No	81.0	88.4	88.3	85.5	83.2	83.8
Yes	19.0	11.6	11.7	14.5	16.8	16.2

Source: Hungarian Election Study, 2009 (Funded by the Norwegian Financial Mechanism), 2980 representative sample, http://www.valasztaskutatas.hu/eredmenyek-en/adatbazisok.

which means that opening up parliament itself will not cure the low level of connections. However, this does not have to become a vicious circle. Despite general dissatisfaction with politics (Enyedi 2011), Hungarian voters place themselves in the middle regarding satisfaction with their representatives' performance in office. The traditionally low level of political trust does not prohibit the positive process of bringing MPs and citizens closer to each other. At the same time this contradiction brings us back to the initial argument and the title of this paper: parliament–citizen connections are a window on the political system. If and when accountability patterns are blurred, the responsibility and responsiveness of the political elite can be questioned; the voters will not trust MPs' individual moves.

Citizens and Parliament

After focusing on parliament–citizen connections within the institutional and electoral contexts, this section examines how direct connections with citizens evolve. By the beginning of the twenty-first century it was a widely acknowledged general rule that parliaments should ensure publicity, but for a variety of reasons this has not always been the case. Interestingly, TV broadcasting of plenary sessions was introduced in Hungary in the communist period, in 1988. At that time parliament acted as the marketplace where some reform-oriented MPs, including many reform communists, publicised new ideas, and for citizens this opened up a new window: what is politics all about, what does political debate mean? Formerly, this had not been possible to experience. Due to media demand and public pressure the political class hoped to gain an additional source of legitimacy by making parliament more open.

Plenary sessions are open to the general public in Hungary and citizens can follow the sessions live on TV and the Internet. They might even view the plenary from the public galleries; for this, however, special invitation is needed. Written records of the plenary and committee meetings are available on the Internet and in the library of parliament; so is every bill, interpellation and written question. From the very first moment of systemic change, the Hungarian parliament has provided rich information about the activity of the House. The press has unlimited access to the parliament building, and is entitled to follow sessions.

Apart from the openness of the sessions and the work in parliament, the availability of the building itself is considered quite an important aspect of overall openness. Guided tours enable visitors to see where the most important decisions of the country are made. Each year, parliament has several hundred thousand visitors, the majority being Hungarians. Most visitors come with a school class and the building serves educational purposes as well.[2] The number of visitors has increased considerably since 2001 when the old historical crown was placed in the main hall of parliament. Formerly, the crown had been kept in the National Museum as a historical reliquary and why it should be moved to a 'living' and working political institution was a source of heated controversy. The Conservative government at that time made this a symbolic gesture: to emphasise historical

continuity and identity. The crown attracts additional visitors and in this way parliament becomes more visible still.

In political terms, however, the major question is how citizens could and would interact with parliament. The fluctuating levels of trust in the institution have already been mentioned (Table 1). The question here is: do citizens intend and then attempt to influence the parliamentary decision-making process? The answer principally depends on the constitutional rules. Referenda, popular initiatives and petitions are the possible instruments, but in Hungary only the first two are constitutionally available. Referenda can be initiated by the legislative or executive powers to strengthen the legitimacy of important decisions and involve voters in moral decisions going beyond policies (such as the issue of abortion), and can also be initiated by citizens mostly to address policy questions belonging to the arena of governance (Körösényi 2009, pp. 38–39). Obviously, from the parliament–citizen perspective the citizen-initiated referenda are a matter of interest.

According to the Hungarian constitution, certain issues cannot be tackled through referenda such as state budgets, government programmes, dissolution of parliament, obligations arising from international treaties and issues of national defence. It is the task of the National Election Office or the Constitutional Court to decide whether a referendum can be organised on a certain issue. Validity depends on the participation rate while the success of a referendum depends on the number of 'yes' votes cast: at least one-quarter of the total number of citizens eligible to vote must give an identical answer to the question concerned. More importantly, there are two types of referenda in Hungary: those with 100,000 signatures are optional and if successful the referendum decision is only indicative, while those with 200,000 signatures are obligatory and if successful the decision is obligatory: parliament and government must act accordingly.

Referenda initiated by citizens often aim at overriding decisions taken by parliament (and usually introduced by the government); thus they are often highly politicised events. Due to the strict requirements of initiation and validity, referenda cannot be regarded as a real bottom-up process in most democracies, and many observers note that political interest groups (in many cases, parties) seem to dominate the field (LeDuc 2003).

The party politicisation of referenda can be well demonstrated in the Hungarian case as well. When an unpopular government attempted to introduce some reform-guided austerity measures in 2007 the large opposition party initiated a national referendum concerning some elements of the reforms. The seven referendum questions were widely criticised for touching on issues that are banned from referenda (like the state budget). While the National Election Office declared the questions not suitable for a referendum, the Constitutional Court approved three of them and thus the referendum was organised for 24 January 2008. With a turnout rate of over 50 per cent of the electorate and with 80 per cent of voters against the reforms, medical and tuition fees had to be abolished.

These decisions on budget-related issues have triggered heated debate within society on the role and importance of referenda and popular initiatives and had significant political consequences with the collapse of the government a couple of months later. Before this – in harmony with the argument above that in the democratic transition representative institutions were given preference – only two internally conditioned referenda took place: one in 1990 as a side-event of the democratic transition, and another in 2004.[3]

The other measure of direct democracy, popular initiative, with an even more direct parliamentary connection, similarly reveals that instruments of direct democracy are not necessarily and certainly not exclusively rooted in public demand. With popular initiatives citizens are not only asked if they agree or disagree with parliament (as is the case with referenda) but they can put forward their own ideas. Generally speaking citizens can get involved in the legislative process via popular initiatives in two ways: one way is when the popular initiative is a law proposal in itself; the second is when the popular initiative has an agenda-setting function by putting an issue up for parliamentary debate, which is called an indirect initiative. The Hungarian constitution offers this second option only. If the National Election Office accepts the initiative, 50,000 signatures are required (to be collected within two months of the proposal) and parliament should put the issue on its agenda – without an obligation, however, to make a concrete decision. Comparative evidence proves that this type of initiative is not widely used and is generally not successful (Cuesta 2010), but it still has a symbolic value on the grounds that active citizens, with the support of a wider public, can attempt and might overwrite what 'official' politicians think appropriate.

In 2008, in the depths of political crisis, just after the referendum we mentioned above, a civic group put forward a popular initiative to dissolve parliament. The National Election Office rejected it on the grounds that the main representative institution, parliament, has a supremacy over direct participation. The constitutional regulation concerning referenda and a former case from 1992 seemed to support their opinion. In 1992, a civic group initiated a referendum to dissolve parliament and at that time the Constitutional Court rejected the proposal on constitutional grounds. In 2008, however, the Constitutional Court made a different statement accepting the popular initiative, which ran in parallel with a similar proposal inside the parliament formulated by an opposition party. Eventually both the opposition party's intra-parliamentary initiative and the popular initiative were rejected in parliament.

In the first decade very few public initiatives were launched, but until 1997 it was not constitutionally compulsory that parliament put them on the agenda. Since then, if 50,000 signatures have been collected and the National Election Office approves the initiative, it should be placed on the parliament agenda. In 2002 there were 18 initiatives, in 2003 there were 25, in 2004 there were nine, in 2005 there were 28, and in 2006 there were 47. This increasing trend peaked in 2007 when 412 popular initiatives and referendum initiatives were

introduced to the National Election Office (Szigetvári 2008). The sudden growth of public initiatives could clearly be linked to the turbulent political life in the second half of 2006 when the Socialist prime minister's speech (including a statement admitting telling lies during the campaign) became public. The largest opposition party, the Conservative Fidesz started a nationwide protest campaign, including street demonstrations, to force the prime minister to resign. The use of direct democracy was an important part of this campaign. Still, only a handful of initiatives reached the floor of parliament, because the National Election Office worked as a safety filter in this respect. Altogether, between June 2000 and June 2011 parliament dealt with 12 popular initiatives and accepted two of them: one on animal rights and the other on the labour code concerning civil servants. The failed initiatives also raised important issues ranging from ethnic minority issues to pension rights.

The above examples and the flow of controversial events make two questions appropriate: how can citizens make an impact on parliament in a direct way, and how are representative institutions and direct democracy interrelated? According to the 2009 Hungarian Election Study population survey and the 2010 survey of MPs, both MPs and voters seem to be in favour of direct democracy. Voters believe that referenda force politicians to take citizens' opinion into consideration. They also think that referenda might increase interest in politics. The data reveal that, surprisingly, MPs on average are more enthusiastic over direct democracy than voters, which shows that MPs are open to the alternatives of representative democracy even if this makes them lose their monopoly in decision-making. The relationship concerning opinion about referenda and party affiliation is significant in the case of both citizens and representatives. However, the answers are clearly politically conditioned. Between 2007 and 2009 a Socialist government faced direct democracy initiatives – largely triggered by Conservative parties. Thus it is no surprise that Socialist voters are the least in favour of direct democracy, as generally they agree with greater frequency that legislation is parliament's business rather than that of citizens. They are more anxious about the drawbacks of referenda, claiming that they might lead to less well-founded acts. Socialist MPs are the least pro-referendum among all parties.

New Methods – ICT

Interest in new communication technologies has developed in the second decade of our period. The Hungarian parliament has a website, online broadcast, and even a virtual tour on the Internet – but it does not apply Web.2.0 technologies. Ideally, the application of new communication technologies by parliament can be placed in two contexts: how it supports the efficiency and performance of the institution (Dai and Norton 2010) and whether it broadens democracy by promoting the involvement of new groups in the democratic process (Zittel 2009). From the perspective of parliament–citizen connections, both the efficiency-

performance perspective and the democracy perspective of ICT connection are highly relevant but, unfortunately, survey evidence is limited. The 2010 Hungarian Election Study among MPs gives us some information, which can be complemented by a specific election campaign study, helping us explore the nature and extent of this connection.

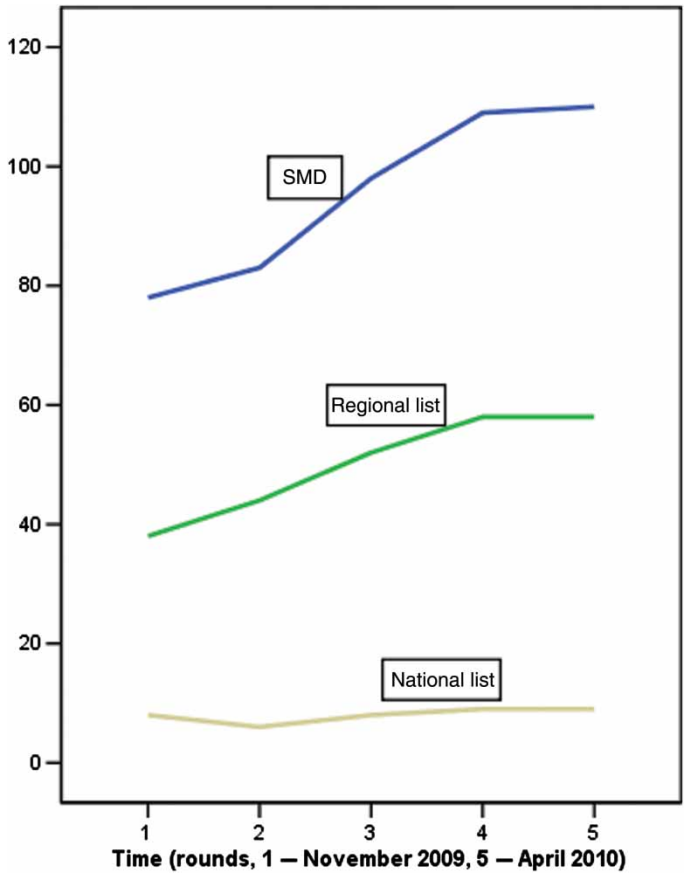
The 2010 Hungarian Election Study was the first where ICT-related questions were asked of MPs at all. MPs claim to keep in touch with the voters via the Internet and about one-third reported having web pages and Facebook profiles. Personal contact is no longer the only means by which citizens can stay in touch with politicians. MPs offer a large volume of information, personal, official or both. MPs' public email addresses enable the voters to reach them with relatively little effort. Our more concrete data come from a project addressing Internet communication technologies during the campaign before the 2010 parliamentary elections, from November 2009 to April 2010.[4]

During this period MPs' web pages were coded to capture the change in the number, style and content of the pages. Therefore we did not work with a constant number of homepages, having also followed the changes in their numbers. New websites appeared on the Internet, and old ones ceased to exist. It became clear that the coming campaign accelerated the growth in the number of MPs' websites. While in November 2009, 37 per cent of the MPs had a working website, in April 2010 this proportion was 52 per cent. More interestingly, before the campaign the Conservative parties had a significant advantage over the Socialists, and MPs with SMD mandate over the List MPs. The strong relationship between type of mandate and existence of a homepage indicates that having a website in itself can be an indicator of the ambition of personalisation. Figure 1 shows that SMD MPs have the highest, and increasing, number of websites, regional party-list MPs have fewer but follow a similar trend, whereas national-list MPs show little activity.

We identified two different types of websites: 'uniform' and 'customised'. In the case of uniform websites, the party delivers a format, with a stream of party news, which MPs then personalise according to their preference. The customised websites differ in terms of visual characteristics and content, being a good indicator of the representatives' intentions to establish their own image and differentiate themselves from the party. More than half of MPs have unique, customised web pages. Clearly, there is an intention to build direct personal relationships with the voters through the Internet. Interactivity would strengthen this intention further. However, the pattern is blurred. More than half of Conservatives offered the chance to post comments while fewer than 5 per cent of Socialist pages did so.

In terms of personal information included in these websites, there is no significant relationship between these variables and party affiliation; 75.5 per cent of Socialist representatives published personal photos, 36.2 per cent mentioned their family or posted a photo of them separately to their biography and 26.6 per cent revealed their hobbies. Fidesz-Christian Democratic People's Party

Figure 1: Number of MPs' Websites by Mandate Type



Source: Papp and Oross (2010).

(KDNP) members tended to disclose less information, but not significantly so, and following the same pattern.

Three conclusions arise on the basis of these findings. First, the MPs' efforts to reach out to citizens with new technologies are impressive and the political (Conservative *versus* Socialist) as well as the time dimensions (campaign-independent and campaign-related activities) are clear. At the same time, in line with the more traditional modes of connection, citizens tend to be inactive and the (low) intensity of connection between MPs and citizens largely depends on them. Although the analysis of the 2004 European Parliament Hungarian election had already concluded that 'politicians are starting to realize that online politics implies more than constructing websites, placing their programs online, and making their speeches downloadable' (Dányi and Galácz 2007,

p. 190), this tendency does not seem at all general, or even widespread. In line with Leston-Bandeira's (2007, p. 418) distinction between the stages of *dissemination* of information and digital *communication* with respect to MP–citizen connections, in Hungary this process is still largely in the stage of dissemination.

The parliament's own website offers wide-ranging information: on parliament's activities including the work of committees, on the legislative process (accepted laws, introduced bills, on-going debates) and on MPs (all parliamentary activity, including speeches). A direct mail contact is also possible. But there is no forum to enable deliberation or online polls for direct feedback. As the 2008 and 2010 World e-Parliament Reports[5] show, the main objectives of the spread of ICT should be the development of transparency, accessibility, accountability and effectiveness. Hungary has developed in terms of transparency and accessibility but lags behind with respect to accountability and effectiveness. The reasons are only partially economic or developmental. Rather, a major reason lies in an outdated understanding of politics, which often regards it as a business of the political class, separated from the citizens. This is also a kind of democracy deficit which in our field appears in relatively weak parliament–citizen connections. This is not exclusively the politicians' responsibility: most citizens do not believe that they can enforce accountability and more effective legislation. Interactivity of ICT techniques or direct pressure is largely unknown. Another reason is that not all MPs are well prepared to apply new technologies: although highly educated, many are in late middle age, thus not born with knowledge of the field as younger generations.

Conclusion

Parliament–citizen connections have been examined above, first within the representation framework, then in the context of direct democracy and finally in relation to new ICT technologies. Is there an overarching pattern that is equally valid in all three respects? The findings are paradoxical: promising and yet disturbing at the same time. The time frame, 20 years of experimenting with democratic institutions, has brought fundamental changes. Members of parliament have become more active in reaching out to citizens. The development of the constituency connection or the introduction and application of new ICT technologies are clear evidence of that. In addition, various tools of direct democracy seem to increase the opportunities for citizens to have an impact on parliament. Still, citizens do not respond to MPs' initiatives; lack of belief in politicians and a fluctuation of trust in parliament prevail. The paradoxes that were identified at the beginning of the article have been strengthened via the analysis.

It should not be a surprise that public response is paradoxical. MPs' activity regarding the citizens is largely motivated by partisan concerns. Citizens do not believe that the selection of (potential new) representatives or the re-selection of sitting representatives depends on constituency/citizen connections. They rather depend on the inner circles of highly centralised parties. Direct democracy

instruments to influence parliament either for constitutional or for political reasons cannot establish sound parliament–citizen connections either. They prove to be party-play while some genuine public initiatives never reach the floor of parliament. A parliamentary reform to strengthen parliament–citizen connections has never been on the agenda. Rather, the position of parliament has diminished and parliament has been sidelined by more powerful institutional and political actors. Without the perspective of the promotion and development of accountability and responsiveness it is hard for parliament–citizen connections to be lively and genuine.

Many parliaments have introduced reforms that are designed to improve their connection with the public. And there is an expectation that the reforms – in the sphere of information, education and communication – will have an effect, at least indirectly, on the level of trust in them. As Rolef (2006, p. 5) notes, however, these reforms have had little effect because, for example, the low level of trust results more from social and cultural developments than from objective reasons, connected with the functioning of the parliaments or their reflection in the media. Also, these connections will depend on the general functioning of the political system. Representation deficit, regime underperformance and more recently even democracy deficit have been identified and demonstrated in the working of the Hungarian political system (Lengyel and Ilonszki 2010). These shortcomings make the focus of this study highly topical: how do parliament–citizen connections evolve under these conditions? Do parliament–citizen connections make up for regime underperformance? Can parliament–citizen connections fill in the representation deficit and revitalise both representation and parliament?

The analysis concludes with 2010, an election year which seems to start not only a new decade but also a new beginning. The mixed electoral system with a majoritarian bias and a high level of dissatisfaction produced a two-thirds supermajority in parliament. A strong government with a populist agenda often turns to the citizens directly – and not via representative institutions. For example, it has applied a citizen survey to learn about public opinion concerning fundamental issues, like constitutional change or political functions of the parliamentary standing committees. In the meantime, opposition parties did not take part in the constitutionalisation process in parliament, claiming it to be undemocratic. The use of direct citizen connections by avoiding representative institutions, including parliament, is a challenge to democracy.

At the beginning of the article we argued that parliament's role is conditioned by different political and institutional realities. So are parliament–citizen connections. In line with the original assumption, our findings show that parliament–citizen connections reflect the broad political environment. Parliament remains a window on political life but window dressing is provided by other actors – mainly parties in the Hungarian case. After all, parliament–citizen connections reflect and depend on broad systemic features.

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Notes

1. More information about attitudes to, and trust in, politicians in GfK Group Market Research Institute survey. More recently, GfK Hungária has produced these results: http://www.gfk.hu/imperia/md/content/gfk_hungariaan/pdf/press_eng/press_2011_6_30_eng.pdf (accessed 30 August 2011).
2. This and further information about the publicity of parliament can be found on http://www.parlament.hu/fotitkar/nyilvanossag_tart.htm, a link to the Chief Clerk of the House (accessed 6 June 2012).
3. Two further referenda, one regarding entry to NATO and the other about joining the EU followed from constitutional obligations.
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5. http://www.ictparliament.org (accessed 6 June 2012).

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