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New Trends in Civic Activism in Central and Eastern Europe

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Abstract: Transitions, democratization and recent democratic backsliding in CEE provide a rich context for examining the meaning and shifting of civic activism and how people participate and organize in civil society today. This article offers a fresh and comparative analysis based on empirical data on the question of what motivates formal and informal activism, and the potentially transformative role of civil society that has recently faced such challenges as democratic backsliding, shrinking public space and polarization. It looks specifically at the responses of Polish and Hungarian activists and advocacy CSOs to these new challenges. Their strategies bring an important lesson on how civil society actors can adapt, continue their mission, or even turn challenges into opportunities. These new trends indicate that civic space in CEE is shifting which is further influenced by the reactions to new forms of social, economic and political crises. It is argued that this shift and the new trends in civic activism require not only fresh empirical data, but also a revision of normative and methodological approaches that have so far been used in civil society and social movement research.

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Introduction

Thirty years ago, many credited civil society for communism's sudden and mostly peaceful demise in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). In the decades since, scholars have debated the definition, structure, impact and strength of civil societies in this region. On the basis of a multi-country representative survey on perceptions of civil society and activism that was conducted in 2019–2020 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Czech Republic, Poland, Russia and Ukraine, and extensive field research, it can be argued that despite important differences in civil society and democracy's trajectories within the region, there are commonalities emerging, with new forms of civic activism that are more informal, more dynamic, and ad hoc, often focused on "everyday issues" that average people identify as important and worthy of engagement. Unlike much previous research that focused on formal non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) and institutional conditions, I argue that civil society development in CEE needs to be analyzed from the perspective of actors – activists and citizens – and the concrete concerns that motivate the varied forms of their activism.

This article summarizes some of the findings of extensive quantitative and qualitative research that looks at the changing nature of civic activism, its various forms, and CSOs' responses to recent crises in selected CEE countries. It is divided into three main sections. The first section discusses theoretical and methodological challenges that research on civil society in the post-communist and democratizing contexts has faced and suggests some solutions that elevate the importance of the category of civic activism. The second section discusses some of the trends and dynamics of civic engagement based on the results of the cross-national survey as well as some selected interviews with activists from the region. The third part focuses on a more specific research question that concerns the challenge of democratic backsliding and its shrinking public space component and vivid examples of how civic activists and CSOs responded to it in Poland and Hungary. This transformative potential of civic activism is also addressed in the context of polarization that affected the condition of civil societies in the region and especially in these two countries. Two main research questions of this paper are the following. First, what are the main dynamics of civic activism that can be observed in CEE in recent years? Second, what are the main responses of civil society actors to the challenges of shrinking civic space and growing political and social polarization that are especially visible in Poland and Hungary in recent years?

Based on comparative empirical research it is argued that civil societies in the region are not weak and play important role despite recent challenges

and sometimes because of them. There are many new forms of civic activism beyond institutionalized NGOs and CSOs that are dynamic, grassroots, and often consequential. The comparison of civic actors' responses to democratic backsliding and polarization in Poland and Hungary indicates not only the changing nature of activism and civil society advocacy, but also its adaptability and resilience.

Theory and methods

The main feature of civil society is an autonomous and independent social self-organization, which manifests in institutionalized, spontaneous, or ad hoc ways¹. Civic activism spans different forms that are adopted by activists, depending on the goals they pursue and the existing conditions or opportunities for their action. Understood broadly², civic activism refers to many different forms of voluntary engagement at individual and group levels and may take both institutionalized (NGOs and CSOs) and un-institutionalized forms (including protests, social movements, use of social media, and ad hoc participation) that comply with the norms of civility and thus do not involve actions that are violent. Activists use self-organization to step up and step in when governments are not capable or refuse to act, or when grassroots action around certain problems or crises is deemed more effective. In the last decade alone, many countries in CEE faced multiple crises and challenges, some of which are global in nature (e.g., democratic backsliding, shrinking public space, Covid-19 pandemic, or environmental crisis), and some which are local or regional (legacies of one-party authoritarianism, Russia's ongoing

¹ See for example: C. Hann, E. Dunn (eds.), *Civil Society: Challenging Western Models*, Routledge, London 1996. There is a vast literature on civil society and its theoretical and empirical dimensions that cannot be reviewed or summarized here. There are also many important recent works that focus specifically on civil society in CEE or more broadly post-communist region, e.g.: G. Ekiert, R. Foa, *The Weakness of Postcommunist Civil Society Reassessed*, «European Journal of Political Research» 2016, vol. 56, no. 2, pp. 419–439; K. Jacobsson, E. Korolczuk (eds.), *Civil Society Revisited: Lessons from Poland*, Berghahn Books, New York 2017; M. Bernhard, *What Do We Know about Civil Society and Regime Change Thirty Years after 1989?*, «East European Politics» 2020, vol. 36, no. 3, pp. 1–22; D. Pietrzyk-Reeves, A. Samonek, *Measuring Civil Society: Lessons from Central and Eastern Europe*, «Communist and Post-Communist Studies» 2023, vol. 56(1), pp. 152–165; P. McMahon, L.W. Niparko, *Shrinking, Shifting, and Strengthening: The Dynamics and Diversity of Civic Activism in Poland*, «East European Politics and Societies» 2022, vol. 36, no. 4, pp. 1355–1376; B. Kees, T. Kontinen, M. Millstein (eds.), *Civil Society Responses to Changing Civic Spaces*, Palgrave MacMillan, Cham 2023.

² R. Youngs, *Civic Activism Unleashed: New Hope or False Dawn for Democracy?*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2019, p. 9.

war against Ukraine). The history of activism in CEE is decidedly multifaceted in terms of its range of activities and mixed in terms of its impact. In some countries and at certain points in time, bursts of activism were responses to a particular crisis, such as corruption in Bosnia-Herzegovina and anti-regime protests in Ukraine, and were quite consequential. Often, however, it is hard to measure the exact impact of social activism on desired outcomes, because outcomes are neither direct nor immediate, and social activism occurs alongside other processes.

Although civic activism can be supportive of democracy its normative focus is not given and should be treated as an empirical question. A real test for any civil society is whether active citizens can speak out and mobilize in different ways, either formally through volunteering, establishing and joining CSOs and social movements or informally and locally, linking online activism with offline action, or simply supporting various groups and organizations who represent their interests or views. Thus, civil society is not reduced to associationalism, but it includes various other forms of civic engagement which have multiple forms and objectives. This broad understanding of civic activism is not without boundaries or degrees of importance. Signing an online petition or donating to a CSO may not show the same level of commitment as charity work or active participation in a social movement or even organizing others locally for a common purpose. However, even various forms of online activism indicate the potential for a voluntary conscious effort to support some type of civic action, whether organized or spontaneous³.

Over the last three decades, dominant measures, such as the USAID Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index, emphasized the role of formal organizations and legal and regulatory structures that shape the environment for social self-organization. Although on the rise in most regions of the world, informal types of civic participation and online activism are rarely incorporated into these measures and indices. The methodological challenges associated with identifying these initiatives and evaluating their impact on political processes and citizens' awareness of public concerns make their absence unfortunately common. Today, these new forms of activism and social participation in CEE and elsewhere in the world, which are growing in number and intensity, require a rethinking of how we map and understand civil society activism.

³ J. Oser, M. Hooghe, S. Marien, *Is Online Participation Distinct from Offline Participation? A Latent Class Analysis of Participation Types and Their Stratification*, «Political Research Quarterly» 2013, vol. 66, no. 1, pp. 91–101; Y-H. Lee, G. Hsieh, *Does slacktivism hurt activism?: the effects of moral balancing and consistency in online activism*, *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (April 2013), pp. 811–820; R. Youngs, *Civic Activism Unleashed...*, pp. 82–100.

While scholars have discussed the importance of “non-institutionalized” forms of community engagement⁴, new empirical evidence provides a more holistic understanding of these forms of civic participation and their impact.

The process of political and social transformations in CEE that begun in 1989 has produced different outcomes in different countries in the region. Their potential for successful democratization was conditioned by a number of factors widely discussed in the literature⁵. It is, however, unclear what civil society’s role in these processes has been and is today. In light of my empirical research, much more interesting question is not what civil society can do for democracy, but how robust civic activism of various kinds can be despite unfavourable institutional conditions produced by defective democracies, hybrid regimes or moderate autocracies. In other words, civic activism in CEE should no longer be studied as simply a vehicle of democratization and consolidation⁶, but instead should be understood as an important social phenomenon that has many forms and accomplishes a variety of goals.

This assertion comes with three related arguments which are partly methodological and conceptual, and empirical. The first is that civil society in CEE needs to be studied as a phenomenon in its own right that plays an important societal role regardless of the regime type and its contribution to democratization or consolidation⁷. Second, the CEE context requires a more holistic or nuanced understanding of civil society than the one provided by the static liberal approach more suitable to old, well-established democracies. Third, despite relatively low rates of individual participation – in comparison with Western democracies – usually measured in surveys, civic activism in CEE is very dynamic, new civil society actors constantly emerge or become mobilized, and it is their reasons for action and their influence at the local and national levels that are decisive indicators of the potential of civil society

⁴ C. Welzel, R. Inglehart, F. Deutsch, *Social Capital, Voluntary Associations, and Collective Action: Which Aspects of Social Capital Have the Greatest ‘Civic’ Payoff?*, «Journal of Civil Society» 2005, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 121–146; P. Kopecký, C. Mudde, *Rethinking Civil Society, «Democratization»* 2003, vol. 10, no. 3, pp. 1–14; J. Ekman, S. Gherghina, O. Podolian, *Challenges and Realities of Political Participation and Civic Engagement in Central and Eastern Europe*, «East European Politics» 2016, vol. 32, no. 1, pp. 1–11; K. Jacobsson, E. Korolczuk (eds.), *Civil Society Revisited...*

⁵ See e.g. J. Zielonka, A. Pravda (eds.), *Democratic Consolidation in Eastern Europe*, vol. 2: *Interantional and Transnational Factors*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001.

⁶ H. Linz, A. Stepan in their 1996 book *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press) assumed that developed civil society was one of the four major arenas of democratic consolidation.

⁷ G. Ekiert, J. Kubik, A. Vachudova, *Democracy in Post-communist World: An Unending Quest*, «East European Politics and Societies and Cultures» 2007, vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 7–30.

in the given context even if it is more difficult to measure. Individual participation and association membership are just one aspect of the strength and potential of a civil society⁸. Other aspects include the capacity measured over time for social mobilization and engagement in community life through civic campaigns, peaceful protests, contestation, social movements and other forms of civic activism, as well as the density of relationships that allow for effective engagement including supportive interactions between civil society and government. This new conceptualization of civil society should find some common ground that will allow for a better understanding of civic activism under both favourable, mixed and unfavourable political and institutional conditions.

The persistence of hybrid regimes and democratic backsliding in the region raise the question of the potential of civil society to initiate political change and policy reform, on the one hand, and of the role of citizens who can mobilize, sometimes in large numbers for issues they care about, such as state capture, corruption, threats to civil rights, or values they strongly support. There are many recent examples in CEE of non-institutionalized forms of civic involvement such as mass protests, demonstrations and budding social movements that contribute to the strengthening of civil society and social capital⁹.

The findings presented in the next two sections are based on the results of empirical research conducted in the form of a cross-national representative survey in five countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Czech Republic, Poland, Russia, Ukraine) at the end of 2019 and beginning of 2020 (N=6703) followed by field research in the form of semi-structured interviews with activists and CSOs representatives in Poland and Hungary¹⁰ as well as Ukraine, and most recently focus group interviews conducted in 2022 in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Poland. This research suggests that citizens in CEE have positive expectations of more informal civic engagement. Most of them treat active civic participation as an important norm of citizenship and they tend to trust civil society actors when they address important societal issues. Elite-challenging actions, which have recently erupted in Poland in the form of protests and women's strikes indicate that, as in the 1980s, people still mobilize when

⁸ T. Petrova, S. Tarrow, *Transactional and Participatory Activism in the Emerging European Polity: The Puzzle of East-Central Europe*, «Comparative Political Studies» 2007, vol. 40, no. 1, p. 76.

⁹ C. Welzel, R. Inglehart, F. Deutsch, *Social Capital...*, p. 122.

¹⁰ Hungary was not included in the cross-national survey because it exemplified a similar trend as Poland, of a rapid democratic backsliding after full consolidation which resulted in Hungary being categorized as a hybrid regime in the most recent Freedom House (2023) index.

their rights are at stake and when political elites take decisions which openly antagonize certain groups and contribute to further polarization in society on such controversial issues as abortion. Forty-eight semi-structured interviews were conducted in Poland and Hungary in person or online from 2020–2022. They focus on the responses of independent CSOs to the recent processes of shrinking public space for civil society actors as well as growing polarization. The interviews lasted an average of one hour and were conducted in person or online. Responses were recorded and transcribed. All transcribed interviews were analyzed using the Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) method, which is particularly appropriate for studies that aim to explore “the meaning of categories through latent examination of their context”¹¹.

Potentially transformative power of civic activism

Various examples of activism indicate that pro-democratic elements of civil societies in CEE retained some of their initial characteristics of either being politically engaged in contentious efforts against political elites and democratic erosion (more broadly against inefficient states that neglect everyday needs of the people and certain rights); or waking up when something important is at stake and a crisis becomes a threat that people need to react to. These reactions sometimes take the form of in person protests, but gradually everyday sustained efforts to organize, mobilize, and act have also been visible, facilitated by social media and communication technology¹². Digital platforms, like those developed by a-Hang in Hungary¹³ or Akcja Demokracja¹⁴ in Poland enable cooperation and collaboration of like-minded citizens, groups and organizations, allowing for information sharing and organizing online petitions designed to strengthen democracy. These digital platforms also became hubs for civic education and raising awareness, promoting both in person and online mobilization.

In recent decade, we have observed potentially transformative power of civil society activism in the region, with examples from Poland, Hungary, Romania, Ukraine and Serbia where large numbers of people mobilized for

¹¹ M. Schreier, *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice*, SAGE Publications, London 2012; A. Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2012.

¹² These non-institutionalized forms have already been noticed by scholars, e.g. D. V. Polanska, *Motywacje osób niezinstytucjonalizowanego sektora społecznego*, [in:] G. Chimiak, K. Iwińska (eds.), *Krajobraz społeczeństwa – Polska 2014*, FIO, Warszawa 2015.

¹³ The Voice: <https://ahang.hu/en/>

¹⁴ <https://www.akcjademokracja.pl/>

issues they care about, such as a clean environment, state capture and corruption, and women's rights. These examples show that both social movements and ordinary citizens remain important and powerful forces in the semi-consolidated democracies, hybrid regimes or competitive authoritarianism, which potentially can deter further democratic backsliding or consolidation of authoritarianism¹⁵. Focus group interviews conducted in three towns in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2022 reveal that there is some popular scepticism about CSOs and their mission, especially in the context where the model of a foreign-funded civil society persisted for some time. This makes citizens prefer engaging in less-institutionalized, horizontally-organized activities, but they are also sceptical of their effectiveness.

Dalton tested the "civic voluntarism model" according to which "people participate because they can, they want to, or someone asked them"¹⁶. A cross-national survey conducted for my research project also allowed for testing the explanatory power of this model. The survey was conducted in five countries chosen because they represent three different groups of post-communist states in CEE: Poland and Czech Republic (leaders of post-1989 democratization), Bosnia and Herzegovina (a post-conflict state) and Russia and Ukraine (post-soviet states). Recent indices such as Freedom House "Nations in Transit" 2021 and 2023¹⁷ show that these countries differ in terms of their current political regimes; Czech Republic is still regarded as a consolidated democracy, Poland is a backsliding or de-consolidated democracy, Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as Ukraine are hybrid regimes that have never consolidated as full democracies, while Russia is a consolidated authoritarian regime. These differences in the level of democracy and freedoms' protection in each country have significant impact on institutional conditions of their civil societies.

The survey indicated several different patterns emerging (see Table 1) when exploring the capacity of a series of variables to predict rates of civic participation. These variables included: 1) demographic characteristics of the person (age, socio-economic status, gender); 2) political attitudes that matter for participation (e.g., political efficacy, satisfaction with the government); and 3) connections to others. A regression analysis predicting the decision to act shows that across these cases education, urban location, interest in politics

¹⁵ E. Knott, *Perpetually 'Partly Free': Lessons from Post-Soviet Hybrid Regimes on Backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe*, «East European Politics» 2018, vol. 34, no. 3, pp. 355–376.

¹⁶ R. Dalton, *Citizen Politics: Public Opinion and Political Parties*, CQ Press, Thousand Oaks 2019, pp. 65–66.

¹⁷ Freedom House, "Nations in Transit 2021: The Antidemocratic Turn". Online: https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/NIT_2021_final_042321.pdf. Freedom House, "Nations in Transit 2023: War deepens the regional divide". Online: https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/NIT_2023_Digital.pdf.

and membership in organizations are often strong and positive predictors of participation of all kinds, whereas age has a strong negative impact, meaning that the older the people the less likely they participate. However, empirical research shows significant differences between CEE countries, which likely suggest the additional impact of country-specific political and/or socio-economic factors and the variation within region and even its sub-regions.

Table 1. Predicting rates of civic participation

Predictors	Poland	Czechia	Russia	Ukraine	BiH
Resources					
Education (high)	0.088**	0.072	0.026	0.031*	0.066
Age	-0.008	-0.028**	-0.023**	-0.013**	-0.018*
Gender (female)	0.019	0.047	0.014	-0.006	0.018
Settlement (urban)	0.007	0.02	0.018	0.018	0.054*
Motivations					
Political Efficacy	0.001	0.074*	0.034	-0.004	0.017
Political Trust	-0.009	-0.063*	-0.052*	-0.002	0.050
Support for democracy	-0.069**	-0.002	0.021	0.001	-0.002
Norm of engaged citizenship	-0.007	0.047	0.084*	-0.010	0.007
Interest in politics	0.081***	0.096**	0.087***	0.0595***	0.020
Group factors					
Group membership	0.611***	0.372***	0.446***	0.526***	0.483***
R	0.4058	0.1879	0.1904	0.2906	0.2508

Note: Dependent variable is an additive index of participation of all kinds mentioned in Question 2 of the survey: protest/demonstration/strike, membership/actively engaging in a CSO, volunteering, social movement; organizing others around a common interest, signing a petition, donating money to a CSO or NGO; sharing information about a public issue on social media; contacting a politician or civil servant, or other. The results do not include weights.

Statistically significant effects: * $p < 0,05$, ** $p < 0,01$, *** $p < 0,001$ are denoted by asterisks.

Source: ‘Perceptions of Civil Society and Activism’. Cross-national survey, 2019–2020.

When asked about norms of engaged citizenship most people in surveyed CEE countries respond positively (strongly agree or agree) to two gestures about citizenship norms. 51% agree and 36% strongly agree with the statement “Citizens should be actively engaged in social and public life”, and 46% agree and 43% strongly agree with the statement: “Citizens should watch over the actions of government.” Details by country for “strongly agree” answer are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Norms of engaged citizenship

Norm of citizenship	Bosnia & Herzegovina	Czechia	Poland	Russia	Ukraine
Citizens should be actively engaged in social and political life (% strongly agree)	31.32	21.39	18.64	34.27	55.12
Citizens should watch over the actions of government (% strongly agree)	29.09	24.43	29.88	38.06	67.56

Source: 'Perceptions of Civil Society and Activism'. Cross-national survey, 2019–2020.

The results presented in Table 2 show an interesting correlation. The more advanced is the country in democratization (Czechia and Poland – despite recent backsliding), the less strongly motivated citizens are to support either of the norms. At the same time, it is a well-functioning liberal democracy, and not a hybrid regime or incomplete democracy, or consolidated authoritarianism that provides the best conditions for the two norms to be practiced effectively.

The survey also shows that citizens in CEE believe that important social issues (from fighting corruption, helping someone in need, advocating for more or better services, protesting against economic or employment conditions to supporting or opposing a local government or its policy and raising people's awareness and knowledge about a problem) should be addressed by citizens' own action. Recent crisis caused by Russia's war against Ukraine has shown an enormous potential of people in Poland and Ukraine to organize in humanitarian effort and sustained help to refugees who in large numbers crossed the Polish border, especially at the beginning of the full-scale war. Interestingly, the participants of one out of three focus groups conducted for my project in Poland in August 2022, just a few months after the war started did not mention humanitarian help and assistance to refugees from Ukraine as an example of their own or people's they know civic activism, and it was hardly mentioned by participants of the other two groups. This suggests that the very notion of civic engagement is either associated with more civically oriented issues, such as signing a petition, participating in a protest, joining an association or volunteering, or Polish people treat help to refugees as a human rather than civic duty. Yet, this large-scale volunteering cannot escape unnoticed among bursts of civic activism in CEE in recent years¹⁸.

¹⁸ P. McMahon, *Poland's hospitality is helping many Ukrainian refugees thrive – 5 takeaways*, *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/polands-hospitality-is-helping-many-ukrainian-refugees-thrive-5-takeaways-200406> (8.07.2023).

By highlighting the public actions of both professional activists and ordinary individuals, researchers can better understand and expose the complexities of advocacy, collective action, and the foundations of civil society in CEE today. Although civil society activism thirty years after the fall of communist rule does not look the way many early democracy promoters in the region expected, inspiring individuals and creative organizations have been engaged in numerous activities and campaigns beyond voting and elections. Recent research has acknowledged this shift to focus on engaged individuals and informal associations or movements, advocating a critical approach to “highly normative and narrow understandings of civil society.”¹⁹ An important take-home lesson from extensive field work in CEE countries is that newer expressions of less hierarchical activism tend to address practical, everyday problems, challenge the liberal economic system, and engage in more spontaneous forms of action. These are phenomena that have often been ignored by the standard literature on civil society in the region. Interviews and conversations with people who are actively working to change minds, alter policies, solve problems, and encourage democratic norms and practices offer a different and more accessible approach than that provided by theorists or statisticians who also examine civil society and its impact. These conversations will be highlighted in the last section which will discuss yet another trend in civil society activism prompted by recent democratic backsliding.

Democratic backsliding and its impact on civil society in Poland and Hungary

To answer the question of how democratic backsliding impacts a transformation of civil society activism I have examined responses of selected Polish and Hungarian advocacy and other independent CSOs to the process of shrinking civic space, based on 48 semi-structured interviews (25 in Poland and 23 in Hungary) conducted in 2020–2022. The selection procedure was determined by the area of activity of the organizations. Selected organizations represent CSOs engaged in promoting democratic values and norms, defending human rights or rights of vulnerable groups, environmentalism, civil society development, transparency and political accountability, or Roma minority in Hungary. This section presents only some of the findings that allow for a comparison of the Polish and Hungarian cases with respect to various strategies that organizations took when challenged with the Polish after 2015 and Hungarian after

¹⁹ K. Jacobsson, E. Korolczuk, *Civil Society Revisited...*, p. 3.

2010 governments' attempts to limit the space for independent civil society voices and advocacy. These attempts, as well as other forms of democratic erosion have been more radical in Hungary than in Poland with the former being now regarded by Freedom House index as a "transitional or hybrid regime."

In the literature that dominated in 1990s, the emergence of autonomous independent civil society was seen as supportive for democratic consolidation or even one of its major preconditions. Today, we should consider its role in democratic backsliding and de-consolidation. Have civil societies in Poland and Hungary been too weak to counter that process of backsliding or has the argument about civil society's role in democratization been unfounded? Rather than engaging in pure theorization and normative arguments, this paper seeks a rigorous comparison of the conditions of civil societies and CSOs' responses to democratic decline in Poland and Hungary. My findings based on interviews indicate that although the public space for autonomous CSOs, their voices and advocacy has been limited under both Fidesz and PiS governments, many NGOs and CSOs managed to continue their mission and adopt new strategies to respond to the new challenges.

The current process of democratic backsliding is understood as a decline in the quality of liberal democracy which affects horizontal accountability, the checks and balances through which independent state agencies hold each other accountable, but also vertical accountability which is exercised by non-state actors, such as citizens, civil society organizations and the media on the government and state agents more broadly²⁰. One of the key questions for this research concerns the relationship between the process of perceived de-consolidation and the strength of civil society advocacy groups. The rise of illiberal democracy naturally undermines some of the fundamental institutions and legal mechanisms that are built into the framework which is necessary for the existence of CSOs and especially those which are involved in promoting democratic and liberal norms. It also significantly affects existing opportunity structures²¹. The liberal component of a democratic order provides a necessary framework for associational life which is at the core of civil society. The recent developments in Poland and Hungary need to be analyzed from the perspective of illiberalism²² which might have a significant impact on CSOs and NGOs in several key dimensions analyzed in this paper.

²⁰ D. Waldner, E. Lust, *Unwelcome Change: Coming to Terms with Democratic Backsliding*, «Annual Review of Political Science» 2018, vol. 21, pp. 93–113.

²¹ M. Gerő, A. Fejős, S. Kerényi, D. Szikra, *From Exclusion to Co-Optation: Political Opportunity Structures and Civil Society Responses in De-Democratizing Hungary*, «Politics and Governance» 2023, vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 16–27.

²² P. Krekó, Z. Enyedi, *Explaining Eastern Europe: Orbán's Laboratory of Illiberalism*, «Journal of Democracy» 2018, vol. 29, no. 3, pp. 39–51.

The empirical side of the consolidation process might be quite different from what theorists designed as a model²³. As one of my interviewees from a Hungarian CSO observed, the roots of the current authoritarian shift can be tracked back into 1990s and 2000s because support for liberal democracy was not very strong even before Orbán's government:

The people are expecting the decisions from the state, they don't really understand the concept of democratic participation in decisions, there is no culture of supporting civil society organizations, people tend to expect strong leaders to manage things, that has long roots in Hungary (Interview 41).

The literature on interest groups suggests that associations and groups are potential prime mechanisms to ensure responsiveness of the political system to citizens' demand²⁴. This instrumental or external function, more than the internal role of associations, might be the reason why we should include voluntary associations as key ingredients of a democratic political culture. Today, civil society organizations around the world are confronting ever stricter barriers and limitations on their ability to operate, a phenomenon often referred to as "closing space" or "shrinking public space" for civil society work²⁵. CSOs are under significant pressure as restrictions on foreign funding, barriers to registration, worsening legal environment, undemocratic or unconstitutional civil society laws, intervention in CSOs' internal affairs, formal and informal attacks on activists defending democratic norms and other forms of harassment have proliferated. These restrictions, as it is the case in Poland and Hungary, are most commonly imposed by governments seeking to limit the influence of civil society actors²⁶. Increasing awareness of this phenomenon has elevated concerns among civil society advocates and CSOs themselves, especially those involved in promoting and defending democratic norms and individual rights. The term "shrinking public space" for civil society actors that is used here refers to various attempts to constrain the activities of civil society groups that are not accidental but are products of deliberate decisions made by governments. What is of great significance in this process is the agency of political leaders, often described as populist or authoritarian or anti-liberal. We certainly need

²³ L. Diamond, *Rethinking Civil Society: Toward Democratic Consolidation*, «Journal of Democracy» 1994, vol. 5, no. 3, pp. 4–17; D. Pietrzyk-Reeves, *Weak Civic Engagement? Post-Communist Participation and Democratic Consolidation*, «Polish Sociological Review» 2008, vol. 161, pp. 73–89.

²⁴ F.R. Baumgarten, B.L. Leech, *Basic Interests: The Importance of Groups in Politics and Political Science*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1998.

²⁵ T. Carothers, S. Brechenmacher, *Closing Space: Democracy and Human Rights Support Under Fire*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington DC 2014; CIVICUS 2015.

²⁶ M. Gerő, et al., *From Exclusion to Co-Optation...*, p. 18.

better understanding of the incentives that are driving the closure of public space so that it is more immune to the influence of civil society actors. In Poland and Hungary, those incentives have been discussed by both policy commentators, practitioners and scholars²⁷. The limitations are perceived as measures against “liberal civil society” created by well-established NGOs, rights advocacy groups and social movements whose agenda is seen as involving either promotion or protection of liberal values and attitudes, which include such self-expression values²⁸ as freedom of choice, social tolerance, public expression and aspiration to individual liberty.

Until recently this liberal civil society was taken for granted as the bastion of democratic attitudes and strong supporter of democratic consolidation and promotion of democracy in other countries. Today liberal civil society coexists with a “conservative civil society” whose actors support traditional values that according to World Value Surveys scale include religiosity, national pride, respect for authority, traditional family values, as well as economic and physical security. The most recent WVS conducted in Poland in 2012 indicated that support for traditional values in Polish society was higher than support for liberal, self-expression values²⁹.

Paradoxically, the new phenomenon of shrinking public space in Poland and Hungary supports the thesis of civil society’s impact on the quality and sustainability of democracy. The process of shrinking civic space involves various anti-NGO measures such as discrediting liberal advocacy organizations that work in the sphere of democracy promotion, transparency, anti-corruption, rule of law, human rights, migration and minority rights (especially women’s and LGBT rights), but also environmental organizations. At the very outset of their terms in office, Law and Justice (PiS) coalition in Poland and Orban government in Hungary attacked NGOs associated with liberal values, minority rights and open society. They tried to either demobilize these groups, discredit them in the eyes of the public or limit their influence³⁰. In what follows the changing conditions of NGOs in Poland and

²⁷ V. Mora, *Shrinking civic space How NGOs take up the challenge: Interview with Veronika Mora, Director of Ökotárs Foundation*, «Activizanship: Values, Democracy, Citizenship» 2016, no 2, <http://civic-forum.eu/publication/view/activizanship-2-values-democracy-citizenship> (12.04.2022); V. Mora, *Democratic Backsliding and Civil Society Response in Hungary*, CIVICUS, <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/re-imagining-democracy/stories-from-the-frontlines/3257-democratic-backsliding-and-civil-society-response-in-hungary> (12.04.2022); A. Ploszka, *Shrinking Space for Civil Society: A Case Study of Poland*, «European Public Law» 2020, vol. 26, no. 4, pp. 941–960.

²⁸ C. Welzel, R. Inglehart, F. Deutsch, *Social Capital...*, p. 128.

²⁹ World Value Survey Wave 6 (2010–2014), Poland 2012, <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV6.jsp> (7.03.2023).

³⁰ B. Greskovits, *Rebuilding the Hungarian right through conquering civil society: the Civic Circles Movement*, «East European Politics» 2020, vol. 36, no. 2, pp. 247–266; A. Kövér,

Hungary will be examined and compared and some preliminary conclusions will be drawn as regards the role of civil society in democratic backsliding.

The process of shrinking public space and democratic backsliding in Hungary and Poland has been widely reported and documented³¹. There are also comparative studies³². The analysis presented here is based on forty-eight semi-structured interviews with representatives of CSOs which work in the area of democracy, civil society, rule of law, anti-corruption, human rights, but also migration, minority rights and the environment. Most of the selected organizations are members of two umbrella networks of NGOs: Polish Federation of Non-Governmental Organizations (OFOP) and the Civilizáció coalition of NGOs in Hungary.

In the past, many advocacy and rights organizations would do their work in cooperation with state authorities, as our interviewee from Hungarian Helsinki Committee admits. Once the political environment has changed many NGOs had to rethink their goals and strategies. For rights and advocacy organizations it meant that they would now focus more on monitoring the legislative and constitutional process, providing legal information and analysis to the public and raising awareness on how rule of law and civic space function under the new circumstances:

We stopped trying to do advocacy directly in terms of consultation with the Hungarian government. It was not necessarily our own will that stopped it, but rather the drying up of these opportunities (Interview 28).

Influencing policies by civic actors no longer seems a democratic norm:

The [Polish] government has the advantage and is definitely stronger and introduces policies as it believes fit. Perhaps the petition that was sent by the organizations was useful? Maybe yes, maybe not, I do not know. The government has made their decision on their own, regardless of such short-term turmoil that we had caused. (Interview 9).

At the same time many organizations started to focus a lot more on the public as their attention turned from policy and decision-makers to the public, its needs and awareness.

The deterioration of the rule of law after 2010 in Hungary and after 2015 in Poland had very serious negative consequences for CSOs which tried to continue their mission in the sphere of democracy, civil rights, the environment etc.

A. Antal, I. Deák, *Civil Society and COVID-19 in Hungary: The Complete Annexation of Civil Space*, «Nonprofit Policy Forum» 2021, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 93–126.

³¹ A. Heller, *Hungary: How Liberty Can Be Lost*, «Social Research» 2019, vol. 68(1), pp. 1–22; J. Rupnik, *Explaining Eastern Europe: the Crisis of Liberalism*, «Journal of Democracy» 2018, vol. 29, no. 3, pp. 24–36.

³² E.g. M. Szuleka, *First victims or last guardians? The consequences of rule of law backsliding for NGOs: Case studies of Hungary and Poland*, *CEPS Papers in Liberty and Security in Europe*, no. 2018-06 (2018).

They had to be positioned on an ideological spectrum and face a new style of democratic politics for which any bottom-up impact on decision-makers is not acceptable, especially if it comes from organizations defending human rights. Preferable treatment though would be given by decision-makers to those CSOs which follow the agenda of the government (Interview 41, Interview 25).

For many organizations in Poland and Hungary, especially those which did not have to struggle financially, the challenge of shrinking public space brought new opportunities for self-reflection and identification mission review. They had to find new strategies on how to secure and diversify funding, how to interact better with their stakeholders, beneficiaries but also the larger public, become better rooted in their constituency and raise awareness and support for their work. As one representative of a watchdog organization in Poland stressed: *Promotion of democracy via promoting quality in public life: 'It works!'* (Interview 10). Some organizations admit that they try to make the most of the crisis and to mobilize bottom-up support in the society itself. At the same time government and media campaigns have also brought a lot of burden to CSOs, no matter of their size, as the shift of attention and finding the way to continue their mission was very costly psychologically and required a lot of extra work and effort (Interviews 5, 28, 30, 32):

It's like threats of repression and then a long wait, and then doubts and then guesses, and then the guesses being overturned. So, it is more of a constant tension and constant pending. Then a constantly, systematically increasing oppression (Interview 33).

New challenges brought new incentives for action and strategy change for many organizations in Poland:

Our behaviour has changed in a variety of ways. Firstly, by diversifying the sources of financing, and secondly by learning a different language and paying attention to the way we communicate with the outside. (Interview 4).

A very important aspect of that shift, noticeable especially in Hungary, is the attempt of organizations not only to fight back against the new threats and measures, but also to raise awareness of their work among the public and to have better links with their constituencies. In both countries, despite all effort of the government and the public media to discredit the whole sector of independent NGOs, social support measured by the level of trust people have in non-governmental organization has not been reduced, and in Poland it was higher after the smear campaign of 2016 than before³³. However, the

³³ According to an opinion poll conducted in November 2020, 56% of Poles trust social organizations, and among those who had contact with CSOs 74% declare trust in social organizations, <https://publicystyka.ngo.pl/pod-lupa-coraz-lepszy-wizerunek-organizacji> (2.06 2021).

'chilling effect' of the government's effort to discredit certain NGOs and isolate them from the wider public in Hungary has also affected their relationship with donors who are now less willing to support organizations than before.

So, the observation is that everything is made to make our life hard and to understand that we are on the wrong side and to make the population understand that we are on the wrong side (Interview 29).

The tactics of the governments and their anti-NGO campaigns have very similar objectives in both countries. They aim at undermining the credibility of the NGO sector and at destroying its financial sustainability due to new central policies of distributing public funds to CSOs. Public authorities in Poland have explicitly "modelled their policies after the relevant changes adopted in Hungary"³⁴. What differs is the initial condition of civil society and its subsequent deterioration. According to the latest USAID Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index³⁵ the overall CSO sustainability score for both Poland and Hungary declined, but the Index produced quite different scores: 2.9 (with 3.2 for advocacy and 2.8 for public image) for Poland, and 4.0 (with 4.3 for advocacy and 4.2 for public image) for Hungary which means that the situation of civil society organizations in Hungary has worsened more drastically. But there are also interesting differences as regards civil society-the state relations with higher colonization of civic groups by the state in Hungary and higher political integration around the governing party. The relationship with the government in Poland is difficult but there is still some room for cooperation, which often thrives at the local level while in Hungary independent NGOs perceive the relationship as "constant war" in which they are "enemies of the state" (interviews 35, 46, 47)³⁶.

Another significant difference is about opportunity structures that exist at the local level. In Poland many of the interviewed CSOs reported that they still can rely on local government's support in some of their activities (Interview 8, Interview 11). This has not been the case in Hungary with very few exceptions such as the 8th district council in Budapest. In both contexts, CSOs had to learn how to rely on each other, form coalitions and networks, share and work together rather than compete.

So we are working for certain values that contradict this nationalist populism and we are simply networking so that "democrats of the world, unite." It is such a philosophy to

³⁴ A. Ploszka, *Shrinking Space...*, p. 959.

³⁵ www.fhi360.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/csosi-europe-eurasia-2021-report.pdf (12.04.2023)

³⁶ For recent analysis of the relationship between CSOs affected by the regime and the state in Hungary see M. Geró, A. Fejós, S. Kerényi, D. Szikra, *From Exclusion to Co-Optation...*, pp. 17, 21–23.

counteract this “nationalist isolationism,” or the wave of authoritarianism, present all over Europe. (Interview 8).

In both countries, civil society has become weaker over the years because of a widening gap within the non-governmental sector itself. The first division is between anti- and pro-government organizations often described as GONGOs. The second division is between large, well-established often capital based NGOs with various sources of funding, often coming from abroad (Open Society Fund in Hungary, EU and EEA grants in Poland) and smaller, locally based CSOs which in Hungary were affected much harder because they lost support of local governments which was not the case in Poland. And thirdly, there is the division between progressive, liberal NGOs and conservative groups visible in both countries. As a Hungarian interviewee stresses,

The existing divisions are further exacerbated by the governmental rhetoric, which uses particularly strong language in Hungary, and which differentiates between the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ NGOs, often treating the ‘bad’ ones as ‘foreign agents (Interview 38).

This polarization has also grown in Poland:

It is not that we are different, but what matters is the fact that the government and those radical right-wing organizations say that we do not have the right to exist in the political and social sphere. PiS politicians perceive conservative organizations as a true civil society, “the salt of the earth”. (Interview 17).

What is also similar is the awareness among CSO communities that they must deal with the situation of shrinking space themselves, working closely together and resisting the attacks and intimidation. Unlike many scholars writing about the shrinking civic space phenomenon, activists in Poland and Hungary stress that this problem cannot be solved from abroad, by foreign governments, the EU, foreign NGOs, international courts etc. What seems much more effective is coalition building and networking at home and above all strengthening social base, social trust in CSOs, and citizens’ awareness of the role, mission, and purposes of the whole sector and how important its everyday activities are for the society’s well-being. This requires that organizations are well-rooted in society and the public sphere. As a Hungarian interviewee stresses, “reclaiming civil space” is about

“broadening the grassroots basis and constituency of civil society, facilitating cooperation and networking as well as bringing the civil society voice to the European level.” (Interview 47).

We learn from this comparison that the situation of independent civil society and its actors is similar in both countries although the Polish authorities have abstained from taking some of the most radical steps taken against NGOs

in Hungary. Both societies, however, face the same question of their future political and constitutional developments in which civil society actors can play an important even if limited role. There is more optimism in Poland:

For twenty years we have experienced various opportunities and threats that we have survived thus I am sure we will survive the obstacles we face today and the environment we have to operate in. (Interview 1)

These findings show that independent CSOs which managed to survive the first blow of Fidesz or PiS governments have worked hard, sometimes very quickly to adapt to the new situation, turn challenges into opportunities whenever possible, design new funding strategies based on significant resource diversification, build or join networks of similar organizations and engage more effort and resource into strengthening support in societies. These are the main lessons that we learn from CSOs in Poland and Hungary which continue to play important social and civic roles.

The process of democratic backsliding has also been fuelled by raising polarization. Among the phenomena shaping civic activism in CEE region, political and social polarization can be the most destructive and influential, especially when it is a top-down, elite-created polarization, which is used instrumentally by those in power.³⁷ As mentioned before, Poland and Hungary have suffered from democratic erosion under new political elites who used several different strategies to maintain power. Among them, polarization through media and the identification of enemies in the political sphere but also in civil society, accompanied with anti-liberal rhetoric and disregard for the rights of minorities, have created a climate that makes dialogue and compromise on important issues almost impossible. Some activists in Hungary see polarization in Hungarian society as extreme, a division between “us and them”: those supporting the government and those who do not support it, and they seem to “be living in different realities” (Interview 47). At the same time, civil society is also divided by the government’s rhetoric and communication, which praises charitable and recreational organizations but stigmatizes as enemies those which go beyond such goals. The landscape of civil society in Hungary is also populated by government-organized NGOs established to be *the vocal supporters of the government to create a kind of parallel civil society* (Interview 47).³⁸ But we also learn from the same interviewee that independent civil society has not disap-

³⁷ H. Tworzecki, *Poland: A Case of Top-Down Polarization*, «The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science» 2019, vol. 681(1), p. 97.

³⁸ G. Ekiert, *Civil Society as a Threat to Democracy*, [in:] N. Stoltzfus, C. Osmar (eds.), *The Power of Populism and People: Resistance and Protest in the Modern World*, Bloomsbury, New York 2021, pp. 59–60.

peared in Hungary, and it is more important for democracy than ever, even if there are clear tensions within civil society and between civil society and the state. The mission of the organization has not changed because civil society “needs support more than ever.” This requires that social organizations are sustained and strengthened. There is a clear need to support existing hubs of knowledge and expertise, to provide financial and non-financial support, and to continue the transfer of knowledge to other organizations. What civil society and activists can do is to expand their constituency among those who are open to issues and causes that are salient in society. In fact, Hungarian civic activists have responded in four crucial areas. First, is the constituency, which involves building stronger ties with society. Second is the community, which is about encouraging active citizens’ participation in public debate and civic action. Third, is communication, which is about better and more transparent processes of communicating about what civil society’s work is and gaining support among the citizens. The final area is coalitions, which are focused on building trust and mutual support among civic organizations so that they can cooperate and stand up for each other (Interviews 39, 46, 47).

In Poland, the response to polarization has been a bit different. There are examples of activists who either try to be a-political and maintain their mission of protecting important values such as everyday patriotism (Interview 25) cooperating with like-minded people no matter what their political preferences are. Other activists try to build bridges and dialogue among people and groups and organize them around important common social and political issues that require cooperation, and mutual support that at the same time help overcome imposed polarization and strengthen community.³⁹ This can be an important arena of civil society work in the near future for which it matters how existing legal and institutional conditions are shaped taking into consideration much more positive overall image of CSOs in Polish society.

Conclusion

Former Polish and Hungarian Governments’ efforts to weaken the civic sector, to destabilize or divide it, and to treat it as an enemy is a clear indication that civil society does play an important role as a potential barrier to reforms and legislation that undermine the rule of law, human rights, and democratic constitutionalism and thus act as a safeguard of norms and mechanisms of

³⁹ A good example of this initiative is the New Community Foundation, <https://www.ncf.org.pl/>.

a liberal-democratic order. Civil society actors and groups perform many functions in society, but they are not political as such. Only some organizations have the capacity and formulate goals which make them responsive to democratic backsliding and actively involved in pushing back. However, if at the same time they have to push back against open attacks towards them, find new sources of funding, build new coalitions and secure social support there is little chance that they can also strongly oppose the policies of their governments.

This research shows that many civic activists in Poland and Hungary perceive today's challenges as opportunities: to rethink their mission and strategies, to innovate, to become closer to target groups and to each other, to become independent and diversify funding sources, and to improve communication with people across the board. In other words, despite a widespread perception among scholars and practitioners that civic space has been shrinking, particularly in certain Central European countries, activists in Poland and Hungary emphasize that a much more significant process is taking place as a response to this constantly changing situation. It is, instead, social mobilization that happens both in-person and online, is sometimes institutionalized but more often we find that civic activism in CEE is intentionally spontaneous and ad hoc and, to an important extent, undermines the static view of a shrinking public space in CEE. Good examples of such engagement are participation in online consultations, signing online petitions, or criticizing certain policies via ad hoc protest and movements that are vibrant, spontaneous, and well-organized. Activists working in tough conditions or battling specific barriers have adopted horizontal networks that intentionally contrast with the hierarchical, NGO model decisively promoted by international donors in CEE in the 1990s. These horizontal networks, which take advantage of digital communications, allow each of their parts to adapt to the new conditions. Horizontal approaches are also intentionally taken by activists to empower citizens themselves to act, rather than to act on behalf of others. Put another way, these agents of change are using "leaderful" approaches designed to cultivate many leaders and to democratize decision making, as championed by young Polish feminists.

Although civic engagement rarely influences policies immediately or directly, this should not be interpreted as a failure or as inconsequential. What qualitative research shows is that civic activism in CEE plays an unparalleled role in shaping social and political outcomes, even if it is delayed and indirect. It is important to be realistic about what civic actors can do. Bernhard, for example, argues civil society actors can work as a "firewall" for democracy⁴⁰,

⁴⁰ M. Bernhard, *What do we know about civil society...*

serving as a final layer of accountability when anti-democratic forces have captured democratic institutions. However, on their own or even in alliance with elements of opposition political parties, civic activists cannot prevent powerful political authorities from re-asserting authoritarian rule, as the cases of Russia and Hungary after 2010 illustrate. Since we are facing yet another crisis caused by Russia's war in Ukraine it is hard to predict the future of activism and civil society in this region. These new trends indicate that civic space in CEE and beyond is shifting which is further influenced by the rise of authoritarianism and reactions to new forms of social, economic and political crises. This shift and the new trends in civil society activism require not only fresh empirical data, but also a revision of normative and methodological approaches that have so far been used in civil society and social movement research.

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