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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Gerő, M., Szikra, D., Fejős, A., & Kerényi, S. (2023). From Exclusion to Co-Optation: Political Opportunity Structures and Civil Society Responses in De-Democratising Hungary. *Politics and Governance*, 11(1), 16-27. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v11i1.5883>

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Article

# From Exclusion to Co-Optation: Political Opportunity Structures and Civil Society Responses in De-Democratising Hungary

Márton Gerő<sup>1,2,\*</sup>, Anna Fejős<sup>2,3</sup>, Szabina Kerényi<sup>2</sup>, and Dorottya Szikra<sup>2,3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Social Sciences, Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary

<sup>2</sup> Centre for Social Sciences, Hungary

<sup>3</sup> Central European University, Democracy Institute, Hungary

\* Corresponding author ([marton.gero@tatk.elte.hu](mailto:marton.gero@tatk.elte.hu))

Submitted: 4 June 2022 | Accepted: 12 October 2022 | Published: 13 January 2023

## Abstract

While it is well-known that democratic backsliding imposes a variety of challenges on civil society organisations, it is often assumed that it represses civil society. However, a closer look at the impact of democratic backsliding on civil society organisations reveals that even in countries where democratic backsliding is fairly advanced, the relationship between civil society and the state is more complex. Close cooperation and partnership between civil society organisations and the state are scarce in backsliding countries; the relationship between civil society organisations and the state might, however, range from hostility to varying forms and degrees of co-optation. Based on interviews with representatives of civil society organisations and the examination of the sector-specific social and political environment, we aim to explore the forms and factors that shape the relationship between civil society organisations and the state in Hungary. More specifically, we analyse the impact of the changing political opportunity structures on three important sectors of civil society organisations: human rights organisations, environmental organisations, and women’s organisations. We argue that, to seize control over civil society the government applies sector-specific strategies, ranging from exclusion to co-optation. State strategies, in turn, spark different responses from civil society organisations.

## Keywords

civil society; environmental policy; gender; human rights; Hungary; hybrid regimes; political opportunity structure

## Issue

This article is part of the issue “Democratic Backsliding and Organized Interests in Central and Eastern Europe” edited by Michael Dobbins (University of Konstanz) and Rafael Labanino (University of Konstanz).

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## 1. Introduction

The impact of democratic backsliding on civil society has lately gained considerable interest in political science and political sociology. Some refer to these processes as “shrinking,” or “closing” space, in which the legal and political environment for civil society organisations (CSOs) is increasingly hostile (Carothers, 2016; Pospieszna & Pietrzyk-Reeves, 2022). The “shrinking space” phenomenon was originally observed in autocracies (Dupuy et al., 2016), but similar tendencies have recently been identified in established democracies (Bolleyer, 2021). Our article focuses on Hungary, which

is a clear case of de-democratisation and has been considered the first undemocratic country within the European Union (Bogaards, 2018; Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018; Delbois-Corfield, 2022).

Without a doubt, the relationship between the state and civil society is more restrictive in hybrid regimes than in established democracies. Although the state aims to control civil society in these regimes (see Lorch & Bunk, 2017) rather than enabling citizens’ participation, empirical research has pointed to diverse means through which control is exercised. The state applies a repertoire ranging from repression and exclusion to co-optation, and the response of CSOs also varies from exit strategies to

various means of resistance (Toepler et al., 2020). In this article, we assume that the relationship between the state and civil society actors differs by sector, reflecting the given sector's political importance to the state. For example, while human rights organisations (HROs) are being attacked and excluded by the state, in the case of other sectors that comprise less politically inclined organisations or are working on issues more paradoxical for the government, the relationship is more complex.

Therefore, our research focus is on the complexity of relationships between the state and civil society in a hybrid regime. We show that the state applies varying strategies to gain control over civil society, and that, in turn, CSOs' possible responses are strongly influenced by these strategies. To examine the diversity of this relationship, we discuss the changes that have taken place in three crucial CSO sectors in Hungary, which have developed diverse paths: (a) HROs, (b) environmental protection organisations, and (c) women's organisations.

To define the relationship between the state and CSOs, we apply the concept of "political opportunity structures" (POS), understood as access to decision-making mechanisms. POS are usually understood as a characteristic of the national level (della Porta, 2013). In this article, we further nuance the concept of POS when we apply it to the sectors and issues of civil society actors.

In the case selection, we aimed to discuss the varying opportunities for different sectors of civil society. The human rights sector is included as a "benchmark." Human rights and democracy promotion organisations are the main targets of attack by autocratic governments (e.g., CIVICUS Monitor, 2022; Donáth, 2021). In Hungary as well, these organisations were immediately placed on the frontline when attacks on civil society started (see Torma, 2016).

Our second case, the Hungarian environmental sector, has always been considered well-organised (Petrova & Tarrow, 2007), however, after 2010, it was hard hit by the disintegration of its institutional framework. Recently, with the international rise of environmental and climate issues, the government claims to be the true bearer of environmentalism. Despite the state's increasing attention, the sector has not been polarised.

Similar to HROs, since the mid-2010s some feminist organisations have also been attacked by the government. The family has been a main issue for successive Orbán governments, while more recently gender equality and women's rights have been highly contested. Organisations in this sector have been deeply polarised according to divisive governmental strategies; consequently, now they are important actors either as enemies or allies of the government (Szikra et al., 2020).

In our study, we compare POS for civil society actors in Hungary in the three fields and examine the responses of organisations in the different sectors. We analyse how CSO strategies differ based on POS. We have found that the most radical exit strategies are more frequent in

the environmental and human rights sectors. Meanwhile, CSOs in the women's and family sectors have witnessed the emergence of parallel structures and mechanisms of co-optation. To explore governmental strategies, we review institutional changes relevant to each sector based on desk research, the qualitative analysis of governmental statements, and legal and policy documents. Our research uses semi-structured interviews with representatives of CSOs and movements. Between 2016 and 2020, we conducted a total of 40 interviews: 10 with HROs, 10 with environmental organisations and movements, and 20 in the field of women's and family organisations. All the HROs are registered, and most of them were established before 2010. The HROs interviewed deal with a range of issues, including LGBTQ rights, freedom of speech, the media, corruption, and the rights of the Roma minority and immigrants. Environmental civil society actors include both formal organisations and informal movements, including a variety of actors ranging from conservationists through the renewable sector to local activists. Besides professional and advocacy issues, the formalised organisations in our sample have been involved in political and movement activities as well. In addition, we have interviewed activists from loose networks or non-institutional groups, which in the past years have been engaged in local environmental activism.

Since the sector dealing with women and the family is where the government has promoted a shift in focus, we interviewed women's rights and feminist organisations, family organisations, and both anti- and pro-government actors and a far-right organisation. Most civil society actors in our sample are registered, but we also included a social movement and an informal expert network promoting traditional values.

We first review the reasons why governments driving democratic backsliding seek to increase their control over civil society rather than destroy it. Second, we argue that government strategies and CSO responses are highly dependent on the perceived POS. Finally, we show that, accordingly, the repertoires of co-optation or exclusion might vary from subfield to subfield.

## **2. The Relationship Between the State and Civil Society Under Democratic Backsliding**

By civil society, we understand both informal and legally constituted associations or voluntary organisations with non-governmental and non-economic objectives, which aim to produce public goods or to change society through collective action (Anheier, 2004; Diani, 2015). Accordingly, a diverse pool of organisations is considered in this study, including social movements, associations, and foundations with diverse activities and aims. Traditionally, civil society is considered as contributing to democratisation and government control, as a key driver of political competition (Cohen & Arato, 1992; Edwards, 2009; Merkel, 2004). Perceiving civil society as a source

of competition and control would imply that autocratic governments intend to destroy civil society. However, research on civil society in autocratic regimes shows that this is hardly the case (Lewis, 2013; VonDoepp, 2019). Regarding their functions, Lewis (2013) and Lorch and Bunk (2017) identify three political benefits of the existence of civil society to autocratic regimes:

1. Most hybrid/backsliding regimes usually want to present themselves as democratic. Naturally, they try to prevent the development of a strong critical civil society, but they might allow the operation of some critical organisations.
2. Although consultation mechanisms are weak, CSOs can still be seen as a limited feedback mechanism and sometimes “can strengthen the legitimisation discourse of authoritarian regimes” (Lorch & Bunk, 2017, p. 6).
3. Even in autocratic regimes, civil society provides marginalised groups with the means and resources of representation (Lewis, 2013).

Civil society functions as an important arena of social integration and socialisation processes, both in democratic and non-democratic regimes, that crosscuts social strata and enables communication between different social groups, and nurtures different types of solidarity (Chambers & Kopstein, 2001; Cohen & Arato, 1992). It is also a terrain of political activities, framing, mobilisation, and thus, mediation between the state and society (della Porta, 2020). At large, through its discursive and mobilisation potential, civil society is an arena where the concept of the political community, the ingroup, and the outgroup might be defined (Alexander, 2006).

In addition, civil society has an important governance potential. It provides services and has an impact on policies (VonDoepp, 2019). Through their potential outreach to local communities and their flexibility, CSOs are often seen as an effective and democratic way of planning and implementing governmental programmes (Gerometta et al., 2005; Smismans, 2008). In authoritarian settings, however, the service provider aspect of CSOs is strengthened, contributing to the stability of the regime via legitimising outputs (Lorch & Bunk, 2017).

Some studies point out the emancipatory potential in the newly opening opportunities for both states and civil society—like the “Europeanisation” project for Serbia and the different CSOs (Fagan & Wunsch, 2019). However, this process could also result in the subversion of EU rules and may strengthen authoritarianism in these countries (Fagan & Wunsch, 2019). This has been very much the case in Hungary, as will be presented below.

### *2.1. Governmental Strategies and Civil Society Organisations’ Reactions*

To capture the range of government strategies, we apply the concept of POS, the access to decision-making

processes, i.e., the official channels of social dialogue, the access point to power through the administration, or coalition partners (della Porta, 2013; Kriesi, 2004). We consider POS open when actors outside the ruling party and government bodies can easily participate in decision-making, e.g., channels of social dialogue and inclusion are in place and processes of participation are cultivated. In contrast, opportunity structures are closed when it is difficult or impossible to participate in decision-making processes.

Although the concept of POS is usually understood on the national level, some case studies apply it on the regional, local, or issue level as well (Garbaye, 2004; Hooghe, 2005). For Hungary, we focus on sectoral-level opportunity structures. We examine the openness of sector-level POS by considering existing institutions and channels for dialogue between CSOs and governmental institutions. In the institutional setting, we emphasise what level of the government is represented at the issue, and how issue-specific governmental institutions have changed.

We argue that although in an emerging hybrid regime the general tendency is for POS to be closing, there are variations within this general tendency. Even though many of the previously existing institutionalised channels of social dialogue and inclusion have been closed in the past decade, CSOs sometimes have certain opportunities to participate in decision-making.

POS might also influence the *modus operandi* of CSOs. Petrova and Tarrow (2007) contend that in Central and Eastern Europe, CSOs are more likely to apply transactional activism, i.e., inter-organisational networks and engagement in negotiations, rather than mass-mobilisation (participatory activism). On the one hand, transactional activism leads to the professionalisation of CSOs, a process resulting in strategic thinking and specialised roles in the organisation (Dobbins et al., 2022).

On the other hand, according to the literature on social movements, the openness of POS leads to an increase in the frequency of protests, while the closed nature of the POS promotes the radicalisation of the instruments used (Caiani & della Porta, 2018). In the Hungarian case, it seems to be an emerging tendency that more open opportunity structures promote the use of negotiated instruments. Closed structures push actors towards “social movement-ization” (SMO-ization) and more conflictual forms of resistance (della Porta & Steinhilper, 2021). Thus, paradoxically, closed POS may lead to the emergence of participatory activism.

## **3. Changes in Political Opportunity Structures and the Responses of Human Rights, Environmental, and Women’s Organisations After 2010**

### *3.1. Human Rights Organisations*

National-level processes of closing space have directly affected HROs. Since 2010, when the currently governing

Fidesz won a two-thirds majority in parliament, it has issued restrictive legislation for the registration and operation of CSOs. It has also deconstructed the previously existing channels of social dialogue, such as the National Reconciliation Council (Arató & Mikecz, 2015). After 2010, the gradually developing dialogue between CSOs and the government took a backward turn. Interviewees reported that while prior to 2010 the government had usually sent draft legislation to HROs and responded to their expert opinion, this practice gradually faded away after 2010. Openly available funding programmes have been curtailed (Sebestény, 2016), and public harassment of human rights and other critical organisations is frequent (Kopper et al., 2017). Overall, Fidesz has created a hostile environment for CSOs.

In the latest report for the UN's Human Rights Council, high concerns are raised about dismantling media pluralism and freedom of expression in Hungary, which is crucial for the work of HROs (Khan, 2021). Media pluralism has weakened because regulatory bodies now depend on the government, and ownership structures have been altered (Polyák, 2019). Last but not least, the government has attempted to stop the independence of the judiciary (Chronowski, 2021; European Commission, 2021).

The structure of human rights-focused state institutions has also been substantially altered in Hungary. Before the 2011 adoption of the current constitution, the so-called fundamental law, four parliamentary commissioners had been working independently of the government: the parliamentary commissioners for civil rights, for data protection, for the rights of national and ethnic minorities, and the general deputy parliamentary commissioner. Furthermore, in 2007, a commissioner for future generations was also appointed. In 2012, due to centralisation, the ombudsmen's offices were integrated into one for the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights Office (Szabó, 2012) with decreased resources and personnel and fewer access points to the general public and non-state institutions. Another important institution, the Equal Treatment Authority, was also abolished in 2021 (Csengery, 2020). Earlier, this institution had often worked in partnership with HROs and legally handled complaints regarding discrimination cases based on ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation.

According to our interviewees, HROs interpreted the above processes as the closing of POS. All the more so because, coupled with institutional changes, their domestic funds dried out. There were two major blows in this respect: transforming state-led funding in 2012, and an attack against organisations distributing financial support coming from the European Economic Area (EEA) and Norwegian Civil Fund. The outright offensive affected most of the critical and grant-distributing organisations (Sebestény, 2016; Torma, 2016). HROs also report that social dialogue with state partners is increasingly difficult and has been essentially impossible since 2015.

The above-mentioned closing of access and funding opportunities led to the most prevalent response by

HROs: the exit strategy. Until 2021, this field had lost 40% of its organisations (KSH, 2021). Although there might be other causes behind the decreasing number of organisations, e.g., the lack of financial resources after the global economic crisis (Guasti, 2016), the steady decline since 2010 and sectoral differences (see Gerő & Kerényi, 2020) suggest that the main reason is to be found in the political environment. Smaller organisations choose to maintain their activities on the minimum level, but many have disappeared, such as the former Roma advocacy organisations. Two types of organisations have been able to manage this situation relatively well. The more professionalised, larger, older organisations, which can attract international donors and manage large projects, and the ones established after 2010, which started to apply new management strategies. They have been able to maintain or even increase their incomes, often running multiple, internationally funded projects. Overall, both for old and new organisations, activities targeting the public, rather than officials and authorities, have gained a more important role. As part of this tendency, strategic litigations, reports released to the public, and the emphasis on contact with local communities have gained greater significance. Crowdsourcing and community financing are integral parts of fund-raising strategies. For example, one organisation that relies on international funding started a regular programme based in local community centres, in order to popularise their work. The decision they made was not to run a large project with numerous road shows but to organise regular events for a smaller community. The aim is to stabilise their "brand" in this more specific target group, whose members may, in turn, help the organisation as individual donors. This tendency is paired with new strategies like the application of such managerial tools as strategic planning and the more frequent use of social media. Overall, we see local activities aiming to increase the social embeddedness of HROs and their turning towards mobilisation and community development as a response to the closing POS.

### 3.2. Environmental Organisations

Around the great political transition in the 1990s, the environmental issue was essential and even symbolic (Láng-Pickvance et al., 1997), resulting in the development of a fairly strong environmental movement in Hungary. This sector became one of the strongest and best organised all across the country, and its representatives were involved in the decision-making processes of environmental issues and took an active part in the consultation processes in the field. After 2010, however, major environmental institutions were disintegrated or reorganised, and the consultations stopped. Professional organisations were no longer invited to participate in the discussions preparing legislative changes. The role of experts in the environmental sphere was gradually dwindling. Consequently, the legislative and policy changes brought about a sharp turn in this sector (Buzogány et al., 2022).

Among the first changes, in 2010, the Ministry of Environment was incorporated into the Ministry of Agriculture, its staff was reduced, and its budget was drastically cut. The functions belonging to the Ministry of Environment were dispersed between various offices and ministries. With the closing of the autonomous Ministry, the funds available for the civil sphere had to be divided between different sectors. During the pandemic, the Ministry of Agriculture withdrew the already very limited funding available for applications in the environmental sector (approximately €200,000 annually). The attacks against organisations distributing and receiving financial support from the EEA/Norwegian Civil Fund, therefore, had a dramatic effect on environmental organisations (Torma, 2016).

Shortly after the reorganisation of the Ministry, the institution of the independent Ombudsman for the rights of future generations was integrated into the Office of the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights. In parallel with the institutional changes, the sector lost a significant potential ally: LMP, the green party, which entered the parliament in 2010, was built on the Hungarian environmental movement, but under the two-thirds Fidesz supermajority their scope for making politics was largely limited to street politics (Buzogány, 2015), thus the party has weakened considerably. In summary, the above-described essential changes have negatively affected the structure and the possibilities of the environmental sector, including both the more established actors and grassroots organisations. Accordingly, the POS for the environmental sphere also started to close after 2010. Even though in some areas the POS may seem more open than in more democratic Czechia (Horváthová & Dobbins, 2019), the government leaves no space for consultations with civil society experts.

Another difference compared to the HROs is that despite the closing POS, the number of environmental organisations has not been shrinking. On the contrary, it actually increased between 2010 and 2014 (from 1,768 to 2,112) and decreased moderately after 2014 (KSH, 2021). This development may be due to the rising popularity of environmentalism and its rising political importance, as well as the increasing funding opportunities for environmental projects. While it is difficult to trace the number of organisations affected by the changes, the field was undoubtedly hard hit by cuts in funding, i.e., the closing of the EEA grants, causing a serious lack of resources for environmental NGOs.

One typical response of CSOs in this field is the emergence of new, non-political, non-critical organisations that either provide services or engage in non-political activities, such as ecological kindergartens, the greening of schoolyards, or garbage collection. Other organisations are explicitly pro-government. A good example is an organisation initiated by the then-president of Hungary. Another influential NGO representative is a member of the Fidesz party. The two often appear as the government's consultation partners in environmental issues.

And while the channels for genuine consultation negotiations were blocked, in 2021 the government initiated a consultation on environmental protection, using an online questionnaire. Since 2010, the government has launched a series of "national consultations," a form of direct marketing campaign in which highly didactic and manipulative questions are posed to citizens, with the goal to demonstrate their popular legitimation (see Bocskor, 2018). This consultation was different, the questions were more professionally phrased, but clearly the government had no interest in reaching citizens. Yet, the government communicated a "consultation" with 70,000 citizens, which was the number of respondents. The government's public communication went as far as to state in the campaign that, "unlike the left wing," it was the true bearer of the environmental issue. This feature of Fidesz communication has been witnessed also in local issues. For instance, during the protest against the construction of buildings in the Budapest City Park, the government-backed investor City Park Ltd. company campaigned in the area by claiming that it was taking care of the park and the environment, and organised polls among local citizens.

We have also seen examples of exit strategies in the field by previously active CSOs who have moved towards the SMO field. There is an increasingly popular local movement whose activists reported in our interviews that they do not request funds from the city council or any national agencies to avoid any political partnership. Instead, they build up strategies to support themselves through market enterprises to reach their "true civilian" goals by withdrawing from both the state and the civil sphere in its traditional sense. On the other hand, the opposite, radicalising strategy can also be observed. Some CSOs previously engaged in professional activities have explicitly initiated political acts. For example, a civil network called Civilization was initiated by a large organisation attacked by the government as a key actor in the former Norwegian Fund distribution. Labelled as "enemies" of the government, many of its members claim to have been pushed into the field of politics by the series of attacks on the field. The initiative organised protest actions and was successful in organising against the bill to monitor NGOs with reasonable foreign funding.

Overall, with the state's co-optation strategies and despite the closing opportunities, the environmental sector survives by switching strategies, SMO-isation, and the earlier noted transactional activism as a massive tool for environmentalists in Hungary.

### 3.3. Women's Organisations

In line with its increasingly harsh anti-gender narrative and the parallel pro-traditional family discourse and policies, the Hungarian government has been engaged in a Janus-faced strategy with civil society actors in the field of women's issues. Our research shows that the state has effectively deepened the gap between

feminist and conservative actors by harshly attacking the former, and overly promoting the latter. The attacks against civil society groups dealing with women's rights and gender equality started in 2012 with an article in the government-friendly weekly *Heti Válasz* that listed "Soros-related" organisations. Hostile actions continued in 2016, using administrative means like audits by the Government Control Office and the National Tax and Customs Administration, alongside disputes over allegedly misusing the EEA/Norwegian grants. Although the audits did not find any sign of fraud, they exhausted all the energy and administrative capacities of feminist civil society actors. Moreover, these organisations have been de facto excluded from state funding, as the framing of calls defined clear normative expectations serving the goals of the "family-mainstreaming" discourse, such as strengthening the values of marriage and the family.

Meanwhile, moderate conservative organisations whose ideological orientation is close to the government's, have been embraced through strategic coalitions, policy influence opportunities, and unprecedented amounts of state funding. However, not all conservative organisations received funding (Fejős & Neményi, 2020). The organisations enjoying support include some long existing and a few recently founded ones that promote as their ideal the traditional, white, heterosexual "healthy" family raising at least two children. The funding opportunities were manifold: Those closest to the government received normative funding from the central state budget (strategic partnership with a large-families organisation), and others received regular funding from the State Secretariat for Family Affairs within the Ministry for National Resources (Ministry for Family Affairs between 2019 and 2022), and grants from the Fund of National Cooperation, the only open state fund for CSOs. The largest amounts were handed out directly, without open calls or a transparent granting process.

Since 2010, the position of women's affairs within governmental structures has been drastically downgraded and placed in a small unit, consisting of no more than a few civil servants working under the State Secretariat of Family Affairs. In the same way as in the other two sectors, the Fidesz administration eroded formal consultations with women's organisations. The Women's Rights Thematic Group chaired by the State Secretary of Family and Youth Affairs within the Ministry for National Resources meets twice a year and is the only channel through which women's organisations have direct and official access to the government and policymaking. Organisations have a right to propose issues for the agenda and comment on what they hear, but they have no right to discuss proposals, vote on, or veto them. In practice, this means that the government pretends to engage in consultations with women's groups, while there is no real consultation to enable the voicing of plural interests and to allow them to influence policies. Meanwhile, traditionalist organisations that are allied with the state have established strong informal con-

tacts with the Ministry. They receive up-to-date information about policy proposals and are invited to consultations and events where government programmes are launched and have their brochures distributed in the Ministry. These organisations provide legitimacy to the government's traditionalist agenda concerning women and families while receiving both symbolic and material promotion from the state.

Depending on where organisations found themselves in terms of the embracing and excluding strategy of the state, their responses also differed greatly. Our research has revealed that due to the divisive state strategy, women's organisations are effectively split in two: those loyal to the government and others that are critical of it. We found that the connections between the two sides have practically disappeared, which is unlike the pre-2010 period when they occasionally joined forces on certain issues concerning women (Fábián, 2009). Despite their nearly complete lack of access to governmental circles, most feminist actors report that some of their important ideas and programmes have been taken up and fulfilled by the Fidesz governments. This means that ideas elaborated by civil society actors are implemented by the government without giving them credit and/or involving them in the planning or implementation of related programmes. As the head of one of the organisations working for work-life balance says, her plans to offer career training to mothers in local service centres landed on the table of the government via a local Fidesz politician running a related NGO, however, she was explicitly banned from taking part in planning and implementation.

In sum, since 2010, the Fidesz government has opened POS for traditionalist women's organisations, while completely closing down for advocates of women's rights. As families and gender equality have been central to the Fidesz political agenda, the state utilises the resources, connections, and knowledge of conservative women's organisations to achieve and legitimise its aims. Meanwhile, the government has directly attacked feminist organisations on a discursive and administrative level and has effectively excluded them from financing and policymaking. Organisations have reacted in various ways, including a radical downscaling of their activities, the creative renewal of fundraising strategies, and the radical reformulation of claims.

#### 4. Civil Society Actors' Responses

Our research has revealed different forms of responses of Hungarian CSOs to the varying extent of shrinking POS in the three sectors scrutinised. They range from the extinction of certain actors to an ever-closer relationship with the state.

*Exit strategies* are applied when organisations can no longer fulfil their goals in the form of a CSO, mostly due to the drying up of financial resources. In the most radical cases, some organisations had to *completely terminate*

their operation. This was particularly the case for small organisations without a stable budget and the capacity to engage in the bureaucratic management of the EU and other internationally funded projects in the human rights sector and the realm of women's organisations. It should be added that exit strategies are sometimes temporary. Organisations first minimise their activities, trying to survive as registered but sleeping organisations that do not act continuously but can resume their activity when circumstances change.

A less radical response to the shrinking POS is the strategy of *abeyance*, i.e., withdrawal from political activism, while actors still maintain the organisation based on small reserves and a drastically reduced staff (Taylor, 2013). This was particularly present among feminist actors as they moved towards academia, maintaining their organisations through occasional workshops on specific issues.

Another exit strategy is *changing the organisation's legal form*. Some, especially in the environmental and women's rights sectors, ceased to operate as registered organisations or withdrew from the civil sphere, establishing small enterprises instead. The main motivation is to finance their activities based on market revenue, rather than from the local or national government's public support, as that would result in dependency on political actors. In both fields, activists have opened private enterprises (e.g., restaurants or shops) to finance their activities, as they have found that the market is a safer and more open space than civil society.

*Professionalisation* is a characteristic of larger and older independent organisations that have better chances of surviving because they can diversify resources. Often, government attacks even facilitated their access to *new financial resources* because intensified public attention helped them secure foreign grants or collect more microdonations. Before the mid-2010s, in the human rights sector, it was common to rely on one donor for at least 50% of the budget. In a few years, the share of a single donor in organisations' revenues dropped significantly (Geró et al., 2020). Women's organisations dealing with body politics (reproductive rights, LGBTQ issues, or domestic violence) occasionally managed to find new international donors.

As part of the professionalisation process, especially HROs introduce *new managerial and communication techniques* to counteract governmental attacks and increase their visibility and popularity, which also implies introducing more strategic thinking about activities, communication, and fundraising.

*SMO-isation and community organising* aim to (re-)engage with the local population or seek specific target groups. Especially environmental and HROs support or even organise campaigns and protest activities. Among women's organisations, we have observed the launching of new and often informal civil society groups, and the return to grassroots activism. Community organising has been increasingly important in all three sec-

tors. Rather than direct political protest, these activities establish long-term commitments to one specific community to empower it. SMO-isation is also connected to organisations' new fundraising strategies, applying more crowdfunding or seeking individual donors and emphasising campaigns to collect 1% of people's personal income tax designated to CSOs.

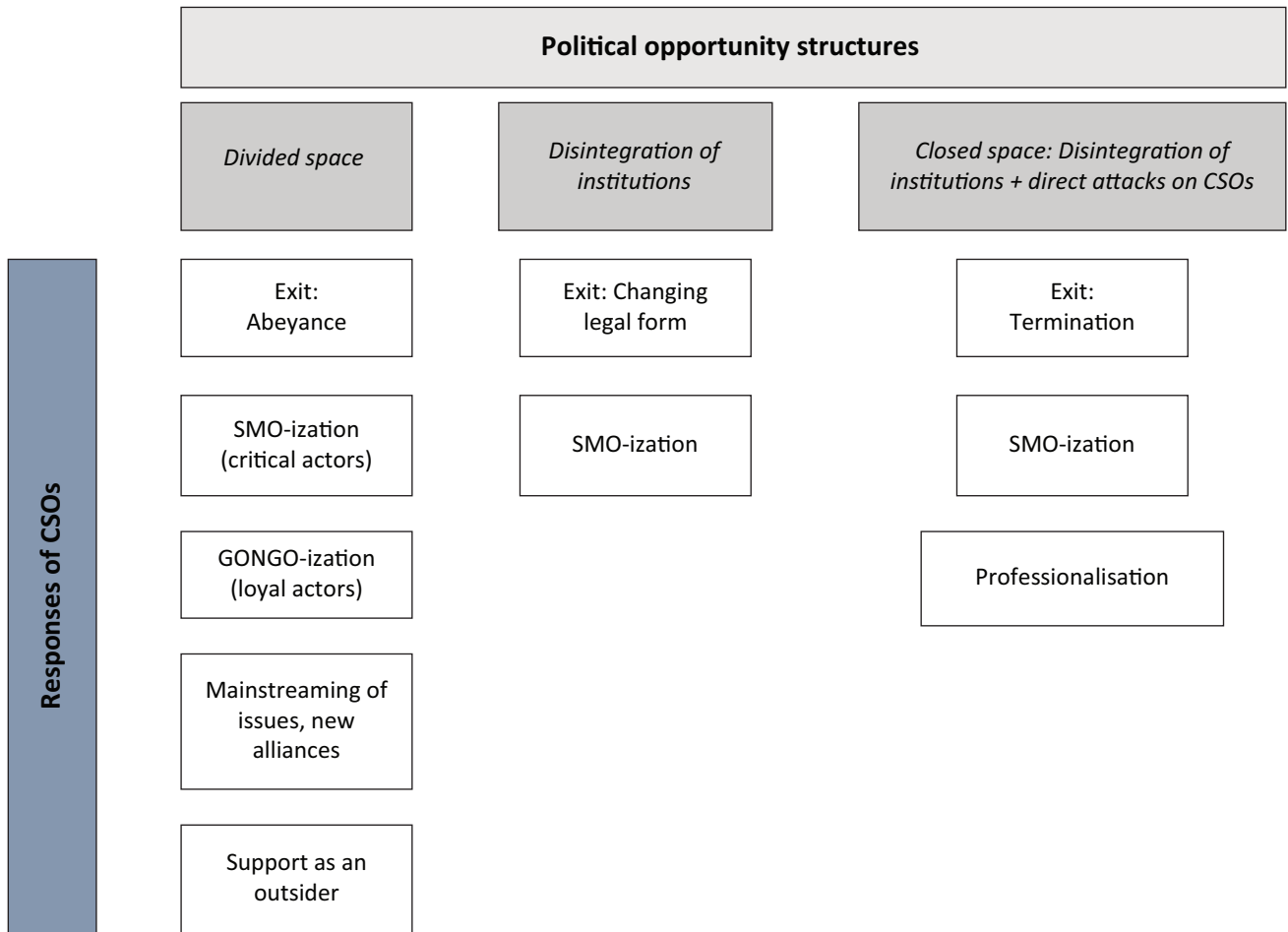
*Mainstreaming of issues and forming new alliances and transactional activism* are due to the increasing politicisation of issues, especially in women's rights organisations. We have identified this phenomenon as "protest mainstreaming," i.e., coalition building with organisations and private actors that had previously no interest in furthering gender equality (Szikra & Vajda, 2020). For instance, a feminist organisation successfully included a gender component in a large multi-actor project that engaged with corruption and poverty. Also, LGBTQ actors often found more support than earlier, even cooperation with corporate actors in a hostile political environment. Recently, climate change has evidently emerged as one of the main issues.

*GONGO-ization* is a consequence of engaging in strategic partnerships and receiving excessive funding from the state (Szikra et al., 2020). Some conservative CSOs openly promote the government's family policy programmes and even harmonise their communication with that of the government. In the case of an organisation that strived for supporting childbearing and families, we found that generous funding enabled them to launch new programmes, create fancy web pages, employ staff, and rent spacious offices. This boost was especially notable during the Covid-19 lockdowns when the organisation could quickly and efficiently mobilise to help (overwhelmingly wealthy) families (see also Fejős, 2022).

Finally, there is *support as an outsider*: There are movements and actors, especially concerning gender issues, that have no official relationship with the government but are pleased to see that the government is implementing their traditionalist ideas. Thus, even if they enjoy no official support from the government, they will openly endorse its policies.

Figure 1 summarises the most typical impact of different types of (closed) POS on the responses of CSOs. Our main argument is that autocratic states seize control over civil society using various tools. Thus, although POS is generally closed, this closure is exercised in several ways: The total closure of POS involves restrictive legislation and harassment of CSOs, which triggers the termination of operation, SMO-ization, and professionalisation of already large organisations. A more silent way of closing POS, i.e., the gradual disintegration of institutions relevant to a sector might lead to less radical exit strategies and SMO-ization, while the open division of the institutional and public space to "enemies" and "friends" leads to different results for CSOs critical of and loyal to the government. Critical organisations might experience a total closure of POS, consequently engaging in SMO-ization, or exit strategies,





**Figure 1.** Types of closed POS and typical civil society organisation’s responses.

while loyal organisations perceive a relatively open environment leading to increasing closeness to the government (*GONGO-ization*). The peculiarity of this situation is that the high politicisation of issues may lead to new alliances and newly found support for critical organisations. Although they are not exclusive categories, the intersections between POS types and CSO responses in Figure 1 aim to visualise the most typical responses.

### 5. Conclusion

In this article, we have analysed how sector-specific POS influence the responses of CSOs in a hybrid regime. For that, we have examined three civil society sectors in Hungary: human rights, environmental protection, and women’s and family organisations. The Hungarian context is peculiar, since Hungary is part of the EU, yet over the past decade a radical shift has turned the political system into a hybrid regime. This has affected the landscape for CSOs, resulting in a radically closing space for civil society, especially since 2014.

To explore the varieties of changes in the context of different types of organisations, we have used the concept of sector-level POS, understood as access to decision-making processes. By qualitatively analysing

policy documents, reports of organisations, and interviews with 40 representatives of CSOs, we have examined how the institutional setting has changed for the three sectors, and what the processes of social dialogue are. We have found that, for HROs, the tendencies are identical to what the literature on closing space identifies. For the environmental sector, we have found a similar disintegration of institutional reconciliation and drying up of domestic funds as in the other two sectors, but with much less public shaming. In this case, the organisational field is much less destroyed than in the case of HROs. For women’s and family organisations, the POS are more diverse. While progressive and feminist organisations have a similar situation as HROs, CSOs nurturing more traditional values are co-opted by the government. A number of them receive generous funding and have the opportunity to influence public policies, especially family policies. This happens through ad-hoc, non-formalised discussions, and in a few cases, through so-called strategic partnerships. The price is their absolute loyalty to the government.

Thus, the three variations of POS yield different strategies, ranging from exit to professionalisation, and from accepting co-optation to applying more conflictual repertoires. We have identified different exit strategies

in all three sectors. Professionalisation is more prevalent among HROs and in the field of environmental protection. Meanwhile, due to the government's all-embracing family mainstreaming, *GONGO-ization* is frequent among traditionalist family organisations.

We aim to show that a hybrid regime applies various strategies to gain control over civil society. Although Hungary is a recently developed hybrid regime and its membership in the EU might prevent the use of direct aggression and violence against CSOs, the state repertoire does not differ significantly from what other hybrid regimes or autocracies apply. Excluding them from decision-making, public harassment, and blocking resources are significant tools, but in many cases, they have a more diverse repertoire, including co-opting organisations. About environmentalists, the government intends to avoid conflicts in issues where they have less control, such as climate change. The nature of these strategies profoundly influences the strategic responses of CSOs: exit, chilling controversial issues, surviving (or even growing) with the help of international funds, or trying to engage in more participatory ways of struggle. In this respect, our results contradict the general social movement literature: Our research shows that participatory activism is significantly enhanced by the closing of opportunity structures.

On the "co-opted side" of civil society, *GONGO-ization* and support based on ideology, nurturing particular solidarities also appear. These strategies are known from other authoritarian contexts. In other cases, however, the de-democratisation of civil society precedes the de-democratisation of the state (Sombatpoonsiri, 2020). In China, *GONGO-ization* happens on a much larger scale because of the already limited options organisations have (Hasmath et al., 2019).

The limitation of our research is that by examining a small number of organisations it is difficult to tell the extent the Hungarian government has succeeded in controlling the entire civil society. Although we suspect that the changing environment's influence on civil society is substantial in other sectors as well, further research on a systemic level is needed to identify the domestication and autocratisation of Hungarian civil society, as well as its potential to counterbalance negative tendencies. As Hungary is considered the most advanced example of autocratisation in Europe, our findings may be relevant in other EU and non-EU countries, including, for example, Poland, Bulgaria, the Western Balkans, or other steeply autocratising countries on Europe's peripheries, like Russia and Turkey. Detailed comparative research could show the variations of shrinking POS and the strategies of civil society to survive or strive in other geographic and economic contexts.

### Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and the editors for their work. The devel-

opment of this article was made possible by the support of the Centre for Social Sciences (Incubator Grant No. 06013609 "De-Democratization and the Trajectories of Civil Society" and the International Publication Fund of the Centre for Social Sciences). Szabina Kerényi's contribution was also supported by the project National Research Development and Innovation Office—NKFIH1380, and Márton Gerő's work was partially funded by the project NKFIH-134768. Anna Fejős and Dorottya Szikra's research was supported by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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### About the Authors



**Márton Gerő** is an assistant professor of sociology at the Faculty of Social Sciences of Eötvös Loránd University and a research fellow at the Institute for Sociology of the Centre for Social Sciences. His research interests include civil society, social movements, and the processes of political integration. Currently, his main research project is “Civil Society, Enemy Images, and Redistribution: The Interplay Between Structural Factors and Political Action in the Process of De-Democratization.”



**Anna Fejős** is a doctoral candidate in sociology at the University of Bremen, a researcher at the Institute for Sociology, Centre for Social Sciences, Budapest, and a research associate at the Democracy Institute, Central European University. Her research interests include the study of gender and ethnic/racial inequalities, social inclusion and exclusion, and equality policies concerning vulnerable social groups. She has recently co-edited a book with Dorottya Szikra on the changing landscape of women’s organisations under de-democratisation in Hungary.



**Szabina Kerényi** is a researcher at the Institute for Sociology, Centre for Social Sciences, and currently completing her PhD on the Hungarian environmental movement at the Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. Her research focuses on social movements and civil society and issues of sustainability in different communities. She is currently preparing a special issue on freedom in Central and Eastern Europe with Piotr Kocyba and Marcin Ślarzyński.



**Dorottya Szikra** is a senior researcher at the Institute for Sociology, Centre for Social Sciences, Budapest, and visiting professor at the Department of Gender Studies, Central European University, Vienna. Her research centres on family policies in Eastern Europe, the welfare state, and gender under democratic decline. Her recent publications include (with Kerem Öktem) the article “An Illiberal Welfare State Emerging? Welfare Efforts and Trajectories Under Democratic Backsliding in Hungary and Turkey” in the *Journal of European Social Policy* (2022).