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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Civil Society, De-democratization and Political Polarization: The Hungarian, Polish, and Israeli Cases

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ABSTRACT: This study aims to identify how civil society reacts to the de-democratizing attempts and the political polarization that usually accompanies this process. Civil society actors working under populist rule usually have to overcome two main challenges: the government's attempt to attack and co-opt civil society, and political polarization, which limits their social embeddedness, a crucially important criterion for resistance and maintaining their independence. I will examine the Hungarian, Polish, and Israeli cases and show how civil society organizations respond to the changing political context and how these responses might interact with political polarization. In each case, the paper introduces the policies and main legislative framework, funding and political discourse concerning civil society, and the responses of a diverse set of organizations (human rights, environmental protection, and civil society development organizations along with right-wing or pro-government civil society organizations). The main time frame of the analysis is between 2010 and 2020 for Hungary and Israel, and 2015-2020 for Poland, but in some accounts, I will also refer to developments between 2020 and 2023, using desk research and organizational interviews.

KEYWORDS: civil society, Hungary, Israel, Poland, political polarization
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1. Introduction

One of the most striking developments of the last 15 years in politics is the rise to power of populist politicians in democratic countries. This tendency goes hand in hand with democratic erosion, since populists in power often attempt to empty democratic institutions, occupy the media, and cut independent social and political actors from their resources to maintain their rule (Kremnitzer and Shany 2020). This is usually associated with deepening political polarization and the stronger role of identity politics (McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018).

The literature pays increasing attention to strategies of civil society organizations in a de-democratizing context (Gerő, Susánszky, Kopper, and Tóth 2020; Dobbins, Horváth and Labaninos 2022; Korolczuk 2023; Pospieszna and Pietrzyk-Reeves 2022; Ślarzyński 2022). These are important accounts of the reactions of civil society organizations (CSOs), with both independent and pro-government/right-wing ones responding to the changing political environment. However, they focus mostly on how CSOs respond to de-democratizing governments' policies towards civil society. This usually includes responses to attacks on civil society, changes in legislation, limiting domestic and foreign funding, and the overall so-called shrinking space phenomena.

In general, this research does not consider polarization as a major factor influencing organizational behavior; thus, it neglects that besides the changing institutional context, CSOs have to deal with increasing political polarization Both pro-government and critical organizations claim that they represent a significant part of the population. Political polarization, however, might pose a serious limitation to strengthening their social embeddedness. Furthermore, they might perceive them according to their political orientation as genuine, pseudo civil society organizations, or foreign agents. Therefore, I will examine the reactions of CSOs not only to de-democratization, but to political polarization as well. I will argue that, in many cases, the strategies of independent organizations to survive the attacks of populist governments might unconsciously contribute to the maintenance of political polarization, while co-opted or pro-government organizations might actively contribute to political polarization in order to build a larger supporter base and to support the government.

Thus, I depart from the recent focus of research on civil society, often discussing whether civil society can act as a savior of democracy and describing civil society organizations' reactions to the attacks from governments. Instead, I investigate how the strategies of civil society actors relate to political polarization when populist actors are in power. As an empirical base, I examine three cases: Hungary, Poland, and Israel, mainly between 2010 (2015 in Poland) and 2020, reviewing state policies towards civil society in the last decade and examining civil society actors, based on interviews and document analysis. However, in the Israeli case, I will refer to more recent developments in 2022-2023, because of the rapid changes connected to changes in the Supreme Court, proposed by the current Benjamin Netanyahu government, which have elicited wide-scale social responses.

2. Civil society, de-democratization, and political polarization

Civil society is typically discussed in three ways in relation to de-democratization. First, and most recently, in the realm of the shrinking, closing or contested space literature (Wolff and Poppe 2015; Carothers 2016; Anheier, Lang and Toepler 2019), civil society is seen as a possible way to counterbalance (to some extent at least) democratic erosion trends (Bernhard 1993; della Porta and Felicetti 2019; della Porta 2020). Even more prevalent is the attempt to assess the impact of the closing space on civil society and to identify the strategies of civil society organizations (Bolleyer, 2021; Buzogány, Kerényi, and Olt 2022; Dobbins, Horvath and Labanino 2022a; Dobbins, Horváth and Labanino 2022b; Gerő, Fejős, Kerényi, and Szikra 2022; Pospieszna and Pietrzyk-Reeves 2022). However, more recent attempts also emphasize that de-democratizing

governments apply a divisive tactic towards civil society. While these governments harass human rights and democracy promotion organizations, they try to co-opt organizations in other fields, for example, in family policy (Rogebband and Krizsán 2021; Szikra and Fejős 2020).

The second topic usually discussed is the role of civil society in authoritarian regimes. Even classic autocracies tend to maintain some parts of civil society. Naturally, this civil society is often kept under control; if not, political leaders try to control or cut their resources (Dupuy, Ron and Prakash 2016). Nevertheless, organizations with limited independence, co-opted civil society organizations, and governmental non-governmental organizations (GONGOs) have an important role in providing legitimacy through discourse and through providing services and limited feedback to authoritarian governments (Lorch and Bunk 2017; Toepler et al. 2020; Atalay 2022).

Third, and partly independently from the research above, civil society is also approached as discourse on belonging to a political community. For Jeffrey Alexander (Alexander 2006; Morgan 2021) civil society is an independent sphere upholding universalistic values of human rights and citizenship in democracies. When these general values are attacked, the institutions of civil society (usually the media, civil society organizations, and movements, but the list is not exhaustive) step up and defend these values in (mainly) discursive conflicts. The discourses are based on binary codes, such as solidarity versus self-interest, and defining who is and who is not part of the community.

Naturally, these approaches have variations and nuances, and there is a huge literature on civil society organizations nurturing non-democratic values and, thus, participating in dismantling democratic institutions (Chambers and Kopstein 2001; Kopecký and Mudde 2003; Jamal 2018). In some ways though, all these approaches seem to describe phenomena or processes that contribute to understanding civil society's role in maintaining or counterbalancing political polarization.

In explaining the power-grab of populists and de-democratization, polarization is a core concept. In simple terms, the argument is that severe political polarization blocks communication between social groups and divides society into two blocks that see themselves as enemies. This state of affairs in a society then allows politicians in power to legitimize attacks on democratic institutions in the name of their people and to defend them from the "Other" (Lührman 2021; McCoy, Rahman and Somer 2018). Political polarization, according to McCoy et al. (2018:18), is "a process whereby the normal multiplicity of differences in a society increasingly aligns along a single dimension, cross-cutting differences become reinforcing, and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of 'Us' versus 'Them'". The important consequence of polarization is that every difference between political camps may be explained with the identity of the two blocks.

Thus, from the point of view of political actors, increasing political polarization consists in utilizing conflicts between social groups, based on their interests, social status, values, or collective identity (Inglehart and Norris 2016; McCoy and Somer 2019). Different elements (e.g., social status or identity) of conflicts are probably targeted with different tools. While material interests might be best targeted with economic tools or redistribution, values and identity can be changed through (political) communication and the modification of social networks (Tilly 2000, 2003). Building on political polarization requires the integration of conflicts and collecting groups of different social backgrounds under one umbrella.

Charles Tilly (2000, 2003) also proposes that there is a close relationship between the sharpness of boundaries between groups and processes of democratization (or de-democratization). He argues that categorical inequalities, understood as maintained and "organized differences in advantages by gender, race, nationality, ethnicity, religion, community or similar classification categories" (2003, 37), play the central role in the relationship between democratization and social structure. Where inequalities are larger, the chance of de-democratization is higher for several reasons, but Tilly's main argument is that, intentionally or

unintentionally, political actors always manipulate categorical inequalities, thus, political actors also have an impact on polarization, simply because of their effort to maintain power.

Although in newly de-democratizing countries, polarization processes are facilitated and exploited by the incumbents, they are not necessarily the only actors aiming at and benefiting from polarization. For example, the efforts of Fidesz at polarizing Hungarian society before the party won the elections in 2010 had clearly helped it to seize power (Enyedi 2005; Greskovits 2020). Either way, the process blocks communication between social groups and leads to distrust, animosity, and increasing homogeneity. With increasing polarization on the one hand, and increasing homogeneity on the other, rather than traditional cleavages, identity plays the most significant role in the realignment of society.

Tilly (2003, 40) also attributes political processes to the three terrains of altering categorical inequalities: 1) The relationship between public politics and categorical inequalities refers to the alignment of grouping of political actors along these inequalities: if there are cross-cutting ties, de-democratization is less likely. 2) Integration or disintegration of trust networks into politics can be translated into creating isolated or political well-connected networks. 3) Alterations of relations between citizens and governmental agents refer to the broadness and equality of political participation and control over the government. While the first element might be attributed to access to decision making processes and public policies (redistribution), the second and third are more aligned with political communication and, more importantly, with mobilization processes and networks of civil society.

While civil society's role in nurturing democratic and non-democratic ideas and values is fairly well researched (Chambers and Kopstein 2001; Kopecký and Mudde 2003), and their role in democratization and supporting autocratic regimes (Lorch and Bunk 2017; Wischermann et al. 2018) has also been in focus recently, it is less understood how CSOs cope with or contribute to political polarization. It seems that only Béla Greskovits (2020) has been working on a similar issue recently, exploring the role of civil society in re-building the political right.

3. The selected cases

To examine CSOs' responses to both de-democratization and political polarization, I selected the Hungarian, Polish, and Israeli cases.[1] The countries are selected based on their similarities and certain differences. Similarities are detected in the political and institutional settings. First of all, although it may be debated how far democratic erosion has proceeded, incumbents in the period of the research, Fidesz, Likud and Law and Justice (PiS), beyond any doubt attempted to weaken democratic institutions.[2] Furthermore, each of the countries is classified as at least a defective democracy: Hungary is seen as an externally constrained hybrid regime (Bozóki and Hegedűs 2018) or even as a competitive electoral autocracy (Delbois-Corfield 2022). Poland was classified as an illiberal democracy (Sadurski 2018), and Merkel classified Israel as an illiberal and semi-exclusive democracy (Merkel 2012). However, it is important to note that the classification of Hungary and Poland was changed to "diffusively defected" and "illiberal" only under Fidesz and PiS rule, while Israel has been classified as a semi-exclusive democracy not only during the Netanyahu period, but

[1] It is important that the Polish and Israeli cases reflect the situation before the attack of Hamas on 7th of October 2023 and the Polish election in October 2023, when PiS could not secure the majority to form a government.

[2] Hungary's and Poland's score on Freedom House's Nations in Transit index has declined in the last decade: Hungary's score has declined by more than one point on the scale of seven, while Poland has lost around 0.8 point since 2015. A simple measure of democracy indices from V-dem (the mean value of the five main democracy indices) yields a decrease in the quality of democracy from 0.65 to 0.34 between 2010 and 2020 in Hungary, and a similar decrease for Poland between 2015 and 2020 (dropping from 0.76 to 0.48). In Israel, the decrease is small, 0.62 to 0.61, thus in this case mainly the attempt of introducing similar measures by the incumbent can be detected.

earlier as well. Although in Israel, democratic erosion was not reflected strongly by the various democracy indices (see footnote 1), Katz and Gidron (2022) and Kremnitzer and Shany (2020) argue that several policies or political actions by the Netanyahu government are taken from the "illiberal playbook" of populist politicians.[3]

In the examined period, the policies, legislation, and tactics to increase the influence of the Likud, Fidesz, and Law and Justice (PiS) governments, were in many respects similar. On the one hand, these practices consist of legal measures, such as limiting the power of the courts, restricting the operation of civil society organizations, and increasing the influence of the government on the media. On the other hand, framing based on fear and attacking civil society, human rights organizations, and government critics are important tools for incumbent actors (Scheindlin 2017; Majtényi, Kopper, and Susánszky 2019).

In terms of institutional settings, similarities are stronger between Hungary and PiS governed Poland, because most legal changes initiated by the Netanyahu government did not pass legislation, or the initiatives to influence media institutions were discovered by other independent media outlets. This shows that despite the similarities in political actions and political discourse, there is a great difference between the political structures of Central European countries and Israel.

Despite these differences, however, political polarization is a defining characteristic of each country. Although the intensity of conflicts varies, in all three cases, political polarization has intensified over the past years (Neuberger 2020; Bassan-Weiss 2022; Vachudova 2019). In each country, we see the evolution of a strong antagonism between a right-wing populist or illiberal bloc versus an "opposition or change bloc". The normalization of such hostile political rhetoric is reflected in political attitudes and political behavior, strengthening old and introducing new political cleavages. These new cleavages include versions or sub-themes of the "cosmopolitan versus traditionalist and populist" values proposed by Inglehart and Norris (2016), such as gender roles, the situation of the LGBTQ community, or the broader questions of the usefulness of human rights.

3.1. Political polarization in Hungary, Poland, and Israel

In each country examined, polarization or the formation of increasingly sharp group boundaries is on the rise. Probably Hungary is the most advanced in this respect: citizens' perception of most of the important issues is based on political orientation, including the state of democracy, corruption, trust in institutions or in one's future, and immigration (Bognár, Sik, and Surányi 2018; Kmetty 2018; Janky 2020; Susánszky, Szabó, and Oross 2021). Recent studies of the elections demonstrate that responsiveness to the political communication of Fidesz, emphasizing enemy images and threats, defines almost exclusively whether a person votes for the incumbent or otherwise (Gerő-Sik 2022). Thus, the Fidesz electorate shows increasing homogeneity through the 2010s, with only an urban-rural divide (people living in smaller towns or villages versus people in the capital). However, longer term, we should also take into account a regime's performance in meeting basic needs and maintaining or increasing people's economic status (Huszár 2022).

In the Polish case, polarization is less advanced (Vachudova 2019). Although there is also an urban-rural divide, it seems less decisive than in Hungary. The incumbent party, however, raised several issues and questions: media ownership (national versus foreign ownership), abortion and LGBTQ issues, and the independence of the judiciary: The PiS-led government pushed for legislation increasing the influence of the

[3] Recent changes in the Israeli government also strengthen this view: Netanyahu's Likud lost the election against a broad coalition, called the 'Change Bloc' in 2021, and came back to power last year with coalition partners belonging to the extreme right, and instantly pushing for a legislation significantly weakening the Supreme Court of Israel (e.g., Tibon 2023).

Sejm over the judiciary, blocking foreign ownership in the media[4], and introducing zero tolerance on abortion, which led to mass protests, and to the view that Poland is on a similar track of de-democratization as Hungary (Cianetti, Dawson, and Hanley 2018; Sadurski 2018). Consequently, the main divide between the former opposition and the ruling elite and their constituencies is not a nuanced ideological one or a pro-democracy versus anti-democracy divide.

In the Israeli case, political cleavages might be more markedly based on social inequalities. In Israel, there is a strong cleavage between those benefiting from the high-tech industry, and those who are on the poverty line. On the one hand, this divide intertwines with a religious-secular cleavage: the more religious a person is, the more likely they are to live in poverty (see the high proportion of the poor in the ultra-orthodox community). On the other hand, there are also ethnic divisions. The main ones are the Jewish-Arabic divide and the Mizrachi-Ashkenazi divide, both of which also intertwine with economic positions (Berman 2020; Katz and Gidron 2022). However, Berman (2020) argues that despite the strong presence of social inequalities in the existing cleavages, there is little or no response to increasing inequalities in terms of voting behavior.

Another important issue is the withdrawal from Gaza and the occupation in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. In other words, the support for a two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is also an important (if not the most important) polarizing cleavage in Israeli politics. Interestingly, initially, the Israeli public was more supportive of the two-state solution than Israeli right-wing parties, even when Likud gained power in 2009 (Katz and Gidron 2022). However, since 2006 the support for the two-state solution gradually decreased among Israelis, from 71 percent in 2006 to 43 percent in 2018, and since the terrorist attack by Hamas in October 2023 and the following war in Gaza, it has declined even further (Vigers 2023). In parallel with this process, naturally, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has become an even more marked subject of political polarization, where the ultra-orthodox (identified with the right) are the strongest supporters of the annexation of the occupied territories, while the majority of the secular population have identified with the left (Mitchell 2016).

4. Data and method

The empirical section of the paper is built partly on desk research collecting governmental tools applied in relation to civil society. The assessment of the impact on the organizations' work, however, is based on interviews and data collection from their documents. This paper will mainly build on the interviews. In total, between 2021 and 2023, I interviewed leaders of 61 organizations and conducted 65 interviews in total. The original design was to select organizations in the field of human rights, environmental protection, and women's rights or family policy. Besides interviewing mainly organizations independent from or critical of the respective governments, I intended to include at least some that work on the local level. The selection procedure was difficult: although initially I selected organizations in all of the fields, and similar organizations in the three countries; in Poland and Israel the refusal/non-response rate to the interview request was around 50 per cent.[5] As a consequence, in Poland I could not interview any environmental organization, and in the Hungarian and Israeli cases, LGBTQ organizations did not respond to the interview request. Pro-government/right-wing organizations were also more difficult to access in Poland and in Israel. Nevertheless,

[4] Since the legislation could not pass, the PiS led government applied a different tool: the state-owned oil company started to buy out media outlets. https://notesfrompoland.com/2020/12/18/what-does-polish-state-oil-firms-media-takeover-mean-five-expert-views/. This is similar to the tactic the Hungarian government uses, to collect most pro-government media outlets under the umbrella of one, seemingly independent foundation (Polyák 2019; Kovács, Polyák, and Urbán 2021).

[5] I emailed every organization at least twice, and usually tried to contact every organization before each field-trip. I conducted three field trips to Poland between 2021 and 2023, and three to Israel in 2022 and 2023.

I believe I managed to interview actors from the most significant ones in both. In the Polish case, several of the organizations reported a conservative background, but only one is considered pro-PiS.

Table 1. The number of organizations included in the study

Country	National level	Local-regional level	Altogether
Poland	**11**	**7**	**18**
Hungary	**21**	**6**	**27**
Israel	**14**	**2**	**16**

The differences in the distribution of the interviewed national and local-regional organizations are due to the different levels of governance in the three countries. First, in Poland, regional governance is more important than in the other two countries, thus it was easier to reach local organizations in Cracow. Second, being present physically in Hungary most of the period, provided more opportunity to conduct interviews with local chapters of larger national level umbrella organizations as well. Interviews are partly retrospective in nature, and in Israel, part of the interviews were conducted in a period when Likud was in opposition, while another part in 2022, during the ongoing struggle in Israel. In some cases, more than one member of an organization was interviewed. In Poland, interviews were carried out in Cracow and Warsaw, in Israel in Tel Aviv, Haifa, and Jerusalem, and in Hungary mainly in Budapest and surrounding towns.

5. Governance strategies towards civil society in the context of political polarization

State policies towards civil society have gone through significant changes in each of the selected cases. However, there are differences in how systematic these changes are. I will discuss four terrains in detail: discourse on civil society (A), control over resources (B), co-optation of organizations (C), and (D) establishment of a network of loyal organizations.

(A) Attacks on (independent) civil society: the discourse

In each of the countries analyzed, from time to time a heated debate flares up about civil society, with human rights or similar organizations at the forefront. Political leaders often picture them as enemies of the state or traitors to the political community and launch campaigns against them. These attacks on human rights organizations are common to all three countries (Kopper et al. 2017; Dyduch 2018; Jamal 2018). Legislation attacking civil society organizations constitutes a part of these campaigns. In many cases, the attempted criminalization of several activities and labelling organizations with foreign donors do not incur any legal consequences,[6] as they play a role in political campaigns only. These campaigns share the element of accusing

[6] In Hungary, according to Act LXXVI of 2017 on foreign-funded organizations, receiving more than 7.2 million HUF (about 18 000 EUR) should put a label on their website and communication materials, and the donors should be listed on their website. The law lost its effect in 2021, albeit it is replaced by different legislation with a similar purpose. In Israel, the "Transparency bill" was introduced in 2016, stating that organizations receiving support from foreign donors, especially from the European Union, should state this in their official documents (Robinson 2024). Earlier, in 2011, the Budget Foundations Law, was

human rights organizations of representing foreign interests rather than the people. Foreign interest is represented by international actors, George Soros (mainly in Hungary and Israel), the United Nations and the European Union (in Israel), or the European Union (in Hungary and Poland). Depicting human rights organizations as enemies serves various purposes:

1. It delegitimizes these actors and their critics in relation to the governments (see Katz and Gidron 2022);
2. It enhances the discourse on enemy images, and decreases trust towards other groups: to picture a foreign and powerful enemy (e.g., George Soros) might be important because it sets out a task that only the incumbent could resolve (Ferguson 2014). Also, powerful, external enemies remain in place for a long time, giving long-time tasks for political actors. However, actions against internal enemies, such as civil society organizations, liberal activists and journalists, might yield more results: legal action can be taken against them, and victories can be achieved. Furthermore, internal enemies are not easy to recognize, as they are "enemies among us"; thus, everyone should be suspicious of everyone else. This is expressed blatantly in Viktor Orbán's infamous speech about illiberal democracy[7]: In Hungary, in the disguise of civil society, there are political activists, paid by foreign actors:

> "But then at the periphery of state life, there always appear non-governmental organizations. Now the non-governmental world in Hungary paints a very peculiar picture. Because, in contrast to professional politicians, a civil activist or community is organized from the ground up, stands on its own feet financially and is of course voluntary. In contrast, if I look at the non-governmental world in Hungary, or at least at the organizations that are regularly in the public gaze – and the recent debate concerning the Norway grants has brought this to the surface – then what I see is that we are dealing with paid political activists. And in addition to these paid political activists, there are political activists who are paid by foreigners".

The claim of the populist governments that the judicial system will be modified is often connected to this discourse, not only because of the inherent nature of the human rights discourse but because of competing concepts of democracy. While human rights actors nurture the concept of democracy, where individual rights, minority rights, and checks and balances are an integral part of the system, for populist actors, democracy equals electoral success. Electoral success means legitimacy gained from the people to represent the people. Thus, every institution blocking the policies of these governments acts against the "people". The judiciary (or the Supreme Court in Israel) is then pictured as representing liberal or foreign values and interests that human rights organizations represent, thus they have also become traitors to the nation. In this manner, campaigns against civil society actors are also tools used to legitimize actions against judicial independence, without directly attacking the judicial system: As one right-wing organization's leader in Israel said in my interview:

> "The first thing we need to do is fix the judicial system in Israel, because the judges and the Supreme Court is too active….In Israel the Supreme Court is not a constitutional court, but it is acting as the constitutional court. It's a mess. And all those NGOs, they always go to the Supreme Court. And the Supreme Court is happy. And then the Israelis, the regular Israelis, again, they are sad, because they voted for the government, but those NGOs came, they went to the Supreme Court, (blocked the government's initiatives) and this is the bypass of democracy".

There are certain differences between the cases: First, the way to engineer the anti-civil society discourse is somewhat different in each country. In Poland and Hungary, the discourse is mainly started and pushed by

introduced (see Katz and Gidron 2022), enabling the withdrawal of funding from any organizations and institution denying the Jewish characteristic of Israel.

[7] https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-25th-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp

ruling actors and the pro-government media, and the campaigns are conducted through pro-government media outlets. In Israel, the discourse was originally initiated by civil society organizations and movements in the early 2010s. For example, the Institute for NGO Research runs the NGO-Monitor, an initiative which claims to apply a control mechanism over foreign-funded organizations.[8] Another example is *Ad-Kan*, an organization engaged in investigative work against left-wing civil society organizations. Ad-Kan's repertoire includes legal tools, research and staging undercover agents to expose the activities of the targeted left-wing organizations[9]. While in Hungary the Orbán-government started anti-civil society campaigns by attacking organizations funded by the Norwegian Civil Fund, in Israel the claims made by the Netanyahu governments are often based on the work of civil society actors.[10]

Also, while the set of attacked organizations may change in the Hungarian case (mainly environmental organizations in 2014, then organizations working with refugees between 2015-2018, with LGBTQ organizations included after 2018), in Israel it is more stable, generally attacked are organizations from the "Peace Camp". Peace Camp organizations are perceived as radical left-wing organizations[11] promoting a solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where Palestinian and Jewish people would have the same individual and collective rights. Consequently, the Jewish character of the state would diminish, which in the view of right-wing organizations, would mean the end not only of Israel as a Jewish state but that of Jewish self-determination as well. However, the vast majority of human rights and left-wing organizations' actors argue for a two-state solution, partly because, according to the director of an organization, arguing for a one-state solution "would be unable to attract any donors". "Peace Camp" might not be a term that all organizations would easily accept, since their approach is more diverse than this name would suggest (e.g., Lamarche 2019).

The second difference is in the extent discursive (or legislative) attacks and harassment influence civil society organizations. As the literature on the shrinking space for civil society suggests, human rights and democracy promotion organizations are at the forefront of this discourse. In each of the three countries, the main human rights and civil society development organizations had similar experiences: They were attacked in the political discussion, labelled as organizations financed by George Soros, or as foreign agents. In the Hungarian case, besides human rights and civil society development organizations, in the interviews environmental and women's organizations also talked about the impact of these campaigns.

In the Polish case, local organizations were aware of the attacks and the nature of discourse, but felt less influenced in their everyday work:

> "You know, the local level is the most important; the parliament, the president, all these people are far away, and let's keep them as distant as possible. What actually matters is the local municipality, the local councils and the councils, for example, of the districts".
>
> "For my organization, I would say that there's no significant problem because we have been able to apply for quite diverse funds. And also, we have some, I would say, contacts. So for instance, we've managed to establish one consortium for the needs of climate mitigation without problems. We are perceived as, I would say, making so-

[8] https://www.ngo-monitor.org/

[9] https://www.adkan.org.il/

[10] E.g., How a Right-wing NGO's Agenda Became Israeli Government Policyhttps://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2018-10-12/ty-article/.premium/how-a-right-wing-ngos-agenda-became-israeli-government-policy/0000017f-e67c-d62c-a1ff-fe7f7a980000

[11] The radical left-wing is understood as working for a one-state solution, with equal rights for everyone regardless of their ethnic belonging, which, according to right-wing actors, might change the Jewish character of Israel. It is important to note that radical right-wing actors also favor a "one-state" solution, known as Greater Israel. It would include the West Bank and, in some versions, even more extended areas of the historic Israel. In this version, the Jewish character would be strengthened at the expense of the Palestinian population.

called honest progress without political affiliation. That's why we could work with many other entities and stakeholders. So for my organization, the changes are not significant".

In the Israeli case, it seems that organizations not dealing directly with the Israeli-Palestinian issue were not influenced by the "shrinking space" discourse. Other fields, such as environmental protection, had not been considerably influenced before the Supreme Court proposed changes in 2022.

(B) Controlling the resources

Controlling material resources is mainly an issue for Hungarian and Polish political actors and civil society. Although there are several acts in Israel that might make it more difficult for CSOs to access public funds, since Israeli civil society is much less dependent on the state and much more reliant on foreign donations (Katz and Gidron 2022) than in Hungary and Poland, this is not a pressing issue in itself. In the Hungarian case, however, the government had done a great deal to ensure that public funds arrived at the desired organization: When Fidesz gained a constitutional majority in 2010, it immediately started to modify this framework. In justifying the changes, Fidesz referred to some of the problems that emerged between 1990 and 2010, (accountability, high administrative load, etc.). The new law addresses these issues, but at the same time tightens state control. The new Act on Civil Society[12], in place since 2012, introduced stricter rules for acquiring public benefit status and replaced the National Civil Fund Program with the National Cooperation Fund.[13] The Fund's support is usually small (in 2020, maximum 500 thousand HUF or about 1,500 EUR per year) and favors smaller, local organizations, as well as strong centralization of funding. Sebestény (2016) characterizes the regulatory changes concerning the operation of civil society organizations and public benefit status as an essential shift in the concept of public benefit status towards public service. This means that the focus is on whether CSOs can earn the trust of the state, rather than on strengthening trust in civil society. The state, instead of nurturing the proliferation of independent organizations, seeks to properly identify which organizations can take on their responsibilities. Moreover, the restructuring of funding has significantly reduced the number of applicants to the National Cooperation Fund (Sebestény 2016).

Poland followed a similar path to Hungary. The PiS government established the National Freedom Institute-Centre for Civil Society Development (NFI) in 2017. The NFI supports folk universities and the scouts movement in separate programs and designs support for local civil society organizations.[14] Large CSOs in Poland criticized the Fund's establishment, fearing that resources would be allocated only to pro-government organizations, and would be lacking transparency.[15] It seems, however (partly based on my interviews), that there is a direct impact in favoring organizations connected to PiS,[16] although the targeting of small, conservative, religious organizations had a more important influence on civil society (Ślarzyński 2022). The Klon Jawor Association, running the largest portal for civil society organizations in Poland[17], argues that there is an increasing number of irregularities, but also recognizes that the operation of the National Freedom

[12] Act CLXXV of 2011 on the Freedom of Association, on Public-Benefit Status, and on the Activities of and Support for Civil Society Organizations.

[13] While two thirds of the decision-making bodies of the National Civil Fund are made up of elected civil society representatives, and one third of delegates of the responsible ministry, in the National Cooperation Fund the ratio of elected and delegated members is the reverse of the earlier system. Besides, prior to 2010, the budget of the Fund was tied to the amount of the one percent designation of the income tax (the state was obliged to provide the same amount); this obligation was removed by the new law.

[14] https://niw.gov.pl/en/about-nfi/

[15] https://publicystyka.ngo.pl/zagrozenie-systemowe-helsinska-krytycznie-o-instytucie-wolnosci

[16] https://publicystyka.ngo.pl/pierwsza-dziesiatka-narodowego-instytutu-wolnosci-i-zagmatwana-procedura-konkursowa

[17] see: ngo.pl

Institute is better than they expected.[18] A significant difference in the funding of CSOs in Poland, compared to Hungary, is the role of cities and regions. While the NIF has an annual budget of 160 million PLN to distribute, Warsaw in itself supports CSOs with an annual 300 million PLN, and Wroclaw supports them with 140 million PLN.[19] There are other government funds, such as the Patriotic Fund, albeit much smaller in revenue.[20] Similar to the Hungarian case, a higher amount is distributed through other governmental institutions. The Klon Jawor Association writes about a 700 million PLN spent by the Ministry of Family Affairs only in 2019 (Kowalsky 2022).

(C) Co-optation of civil society organizations

In the Hungarian case, Fidesz increases its influence on organizations through funding and so-called strategic partnerships. Pro-government organizations receive a large proportion of their revenues (50-70 per cent) from ministries based on individual agreements. They often label this as "operational funding". Among the organizations interviewed, this is most prevalent among family organizations, but also appears among those dealing with Hungarian minorities and pensioners. Some organizations receive funding from the party foundation of Fidesz. Strategic partnership, in addition, means that from time to time they are invited to consult with the government.

In Poland, the main tool for funding pro-government organizations is either the NFI or it is done through state-owned companies. The most important example is a network of local clubs connected to *Gazeta Polska*, a right-wing newspaper. The network has supported right-wing parties since the mid-1990s, and specifically PiS since the mid-2000s. After PiS seized power in 2015, the clubs remained active, and state-led companies started to finance them. Several members of parliament and government officials have emerged from these clubs (Ślarzyński 2022).

In the Israeli case, there is a personal relationship between right-wing organizations and the Netanyahu government,[21] but this relationship is more equal than hierarchical. The government does not give money to these organizations; they mostly receive funding from their conservative American Jewish supporters. However, they might feel that the Netanyahu-led government listens to them. For example, some of them were involved with the Budget Foundations Law in 2011, and the Transparency bill on foreign funding in 2016.

(D) Establishment of a network of loyal organizations

The funding strategies and ideological alignment of right-wing/conservative civil society and right-wing populists in government led to the emergence and strengthening of right-wing organizational networks. These networks partly existed earlier as well: *Gazeta Polska* clubs, for example, was established in the 1990s. Fidesz has also worked on establishing connections and increasing its embeddedness in civil society through its Civic Circles since 2002 (Greskovits 2020). Several organizations in the network have existed for 30 years, at some point becoming part of the network under the Fidesz government between 1998 and 2002, or later, but all of them were conservative-leaning. They had personal ties to right-wing parties, thus their alignment started on a value basis. When Fidesz came into power, the connection was strengthened by the funding they received.

[18] https://publicystyka.ngo.pl/poprawny-niw-gorsza-narracja-refleksje-po-5-leciu-instytutu
[19] https://publicystyka.ngo.pl/poprawny-niw-gorsza-narracja-refleksje-po-5-leciu-instytutu
[20] The Patriotic Fund aims to promote patriotic attitudes and Polish civic identity. See https://fundusz-patriotyczny.pl/o-funduszu
[21] For example, a right-wing movement states on its homepage: "Our activities have been supported time and again by the significant majority of Israeli society and leading decision makers, including the Prime Minister (Netanyahu)".

In Israel, a new population of right-wing movements was born and strengthened after 2005, the unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip.[22]

5.1. What happens to organizations critical of the government?

Naturally, the discourse and difficulties with funding have a decisive impact mainly on human rights and other critical organizations, which often leads to these organizations having to defend themselves, having to argue that they are not traitors to the nation. Since the discourse imposes a perceived homogeneity on them, they constantly have to emphasize their position to the public and even inside their closer networks, while most people see them as too extreme while, conversely, some other organizations see them as too centrist or not progressive enough.

> "For right-wing people here, the organization will sound like a radical left-wing group. That's if you ask normal right-wing people here in Israel, that will probably be the answer. Second thing, as if you were like someone from the center or center-left. They will say that we are a leftist organization, but people from the left or the radical left will think that we are a center-left organization. And that's very interesting because when we work together with other organizations, we find ourselves like more in the center side of the map, with more organizations further left of us". (Israeli peace organization)

In the Israeli case, this constant self-explanation also means that many organizations striving for a two-state solution[23] are working only on the Israeli side with other Israeli organizations, or with Israeli citizens, still they have to make a huge effort to combat campaigns conducted by the Netanyahu governments and right-wing CSOs, which suggests that they work with Palestinians.

In the Hungarian case, de-democratization also had a certain chilling effect on sensitive issues.

> "We try to formulate our messages in a way that convinces. Just as if we were convincing the voter who is making the decision. So professionally, I would avoid to write a letter (an open-letter or a letter written to decision-makers) that aims to achieve a political goal, but 90 percent of this letter is about the fact that the European Union wants this or the European Union wants that. Actually, that's it, so that's how civil society organizations are able to work in Hungary". (Environmental organization)

While in Israel and to a certain extent also in Poland, organizations have turned more political: This is certainly the case with women's rights organizations and movements in Poland with the issue of abortion being in the center of political debates and protests after 2017. In Israel, the judiciary reform proposed by the current Netanyahu government in 2022 drew less political organizations into the networks of organizations protesting against the judicial reform.

To some extent, polarizing discourses have cut organizations off from resources. Mainly in the Hungarian case, interviewees explained that donors tend to remain anonymous, or they might even withdraw their former

[22] For example, *Im Tirtzu* was established in 2006, *Regavim* was founded in 2005, as a reaction to the withdrawal from the Gaza Strip: "*Regavim* (Hebrew for 'mounds of earth') was conceived in the darkest days of 2005, as Gush Katif was emptied of its Jews and Peace Now was waging a successful legal campaign against a host of Jewish communities. Three young Jewish idealists looked out of their windows – one from his home in Samaria, one from his office window in the Binyamin region, and one from the window of an IDF jeep in the Negev – and realized that the Land of Israel was gradually disappearing before their very eyes. Together, they combined their expert legal and fieldwork skills to confront the forces undermining Jewish sovereignty and delegitimizing the Jewish State" https://www.regavim.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Introducing-Regavim-Protecting-Israels-Resources-Preserving-Israeli-Sovereignty.pdf

[23] As one interviewee explained, even if they were pushing for a joint state with equal rights and representation regardless of ethnic belonging, no one would support it: neither the people, nor a single donor.

support. Finding volunteers or conversing with people outside their close circles might also be difficult. On the other hand, larger organizations report that they have been able to grow since the attacks. Behind this growth, there are two underlying mechanisms: First, the attacks mobilized those who would support these organizations. Thus, they support the organizations financially as well with micro donations, although most of their revenue usually comes from international donors. Second, in Hungary, for example, smaller organizations could not cope with the situation, thus, larger ones had to take on issues they would not work on before.

While human rights are usually attacked by populists, with other issues the case is more complex. For example, feminist organizations are attacked, family organizations are supported (or co-opted) by populist leaders (e.g., Szikra and Fejős 2020). Environmental protection, an increasingly important issue that enjoys strengthening popular support in Hungary and Poland, makes it difficult for the government to directly attack organizations that focus on it and pushes the government to react.

The attacks on CSOs sometimes lead to an increased administrative burden on organizations, but more importantly, they pose a mental burden on their employees, since it is often stressful to work under such a pressure In Hungary, organizations have introduced programs to cope with this situation. In Israel, the case is more extreme: since the discourse caused Peace Camp organizations to be perceived as “extreme” in the sense that most of the Israeli public would not share the prospect of a common state based on equal rights. Employees might not be keen to discuss their work, since it might spark conflicts even in their families or close social circles or leads to a constant need for self-explanation.

On the other hand, in Poland and Hungary, CSOs enjoy increased popular support. Individual small donations and one percent tax designations contribute more significantly to their revenues. Their outreach is more considerable in several social groups and more responsive to their issues or values. In Hungary and Israel, the main supporters of these fields are educated middle-class people mainly in larger cities. In Poland, however, women’s protests started a process of grassroots feminist activism in rural areas. Common strategies are to engage in community building and for human rights organizations to provide more services to ordinary citizens instead of doing only strategic litigations.

In this regard, there is a difference between Polish and Hungarian organizations: Increased popular support in Hungary does not mean that the organizations could overcome the social divide. Their supporters remain well-educated people, mainly in urban areas. In Poland, however, the issue of abortion seems to be mobilizing women in small towns and middle-sized cities as well, as a reaction to the interference of the Catholic Church, that discourages people to participate in the anti-abortion movement:

> “They (the church) were calling people out during the masses. The priests working in schools would attack children, saying ‘you know, your mother is a murderer’. And there was this huge, huge backlash …and that’s when the movement was born… people finally rebelled in the small and middle-sized cities” (Women’s organization in Poland)

5.2. What do right-wing and pro-government organizations do?

In the Hungarian case, the main organizations supporting the government are usually financially dependent on the government. This dependency also means that their funds have increased since before 2010. This increased funding rarely comes with clear instructions. Instead of executing government directives, they mainly do three things:

First, they increase the volume and intensity of their activity. Thus, instead of organizing one event, they do five. Consequently, they usually increase their outreach.

> "I can tell you that the volume has been steadily increasing. The funding for our grants for our operations has also been standing on more legs, ranging from the one per cent of personal income taxes to the corporations. Obviously, since 2010 maybe what we're dealing with has been valued governmentally, and obviously the volume of government grants or government funding has increased compared to what we have tried and try to make use of. And you can see this in the fact that we can provide camps for, say, five thousand children a summer, rather than three hundred. Or we can organize trips not for five hundred but for twenty thousand children". (a Hungarian youth organization)

Second, most pro-government organizations try to build membership and increase social embeddedness. This means that the largest organizations reach 10-15 thousand people on a weekly basis, at least via e-mail. A common strategy of right-wing movements and organizations is to build constituencies: groups at universities and secondary schools. The presence in small cities and villages sometimes "targets" marginalized groups, families, or the elderly, which is another way to deepen the social embeddedness of an organization. This "targeting" is usually done through non-political activities, nurturing social connections and cherishing the national identity. The direct political message is only informally spread, and in highlighted events (lectures, ceremonies, etc.). While on these occasions, the opposition (or other imaginary enemies) is criticized at some point, the main technique is to voice nothing but the government's narrative. This way, the discussion of alternative worldviews can be avoided, as it might lead to criticism of the proposed narrative. The dependency leads to the promotion of government communication (e.g., including it in the newsletter).

Since these organizations share the goals of the government, they promote the views of the populists in power, or at least the issues they push. It is common to have governmental actors at their events: In both Israel and Hungary, right-wing organizations have held protests supporting the government (Mikecz 2023). In Israel, a group of pro-governmental organizations took on the role of organizing a protest for the judicial reform throughout 2023.[24]

To be able to perform these activities, growing organizations apply more professional management and marketing techniques, regardless of whether they target specific groups (e.g., single mothers) or operate locally as neighborhood organizations. Their formal and informal membership often provides feedback about government policies or emerging issues. Through their interpersonal relations, e-mails, and consultation they forward this feedback to government officials.

Providing feedback works similarly in the Polish and Israeli cases. However, since some of the largest organizations are financially independent of the government, they might even criticize the government for not being right-wing enough.

Another common feature is to organize cultural events, meetings and clubs. Cultural events have various forms and roles:

A) Local gatherings and clubs promote the national identity, based on a traditionalist image of national food, music, and rural culture.

B) Through commemorations and ceremonies (even funerals), they create events of elite representation and promote their own criteria of recognition. For example, the Civic Alliance Forum in Hungary established an Award for Intellectual Patriotism (*Szellemi Honvédő Díj*).[25]

[24] For example, Im Tirtzu claims, that the organization mobilized 200.000 citizens in 75 demonstrations supporting the judicial reform (Im Tirtzu 2023, 4).

[25] For the latest ceremony, see: https://civilosszefogas.hu/szellemi-honvedo-dijatado/.

C) They give an opportunity for the local elite to provide the feeling of recognition to local groups: For example, pensioners' clubs are tied to lonely elderly women, but are also a pool for volunteer-work and contact with the local mayor. As an interviewee explained:

> "Now I was in... (a town) recently, because one of the (pensioners') clubs was 15 years old there, and the mayor was there. He himself said that he had received a lot of help in several pensioners' clubs. I think there are five clubs there, and he said that if you have a problem, the first thing to do is to tell them, then they will certainly help you with events in the town, especially on 15 March and national holidays like that, when they go to wreath-laying ceremonies and what have you, not only there (in the town) but anywhere". (Hungarian organization)

Conclusion: What is the role of civil society in political polarization?

In this paper, I have examined how civil society actors, both critical of populist right-wing governments and loyal to them, respond to the changing political context, thus the attacks on civil society, the increasing control over funds and co-optation attempts, and the accompanying process of political polarization. While responses to de-democratization are well-researched, the role of political polarization in these responses is less explored.

Thus, through structured interviews, and desk research, I examined organizations focusing on civil society development, human rights, women's rights and family or environmental protection. Besides, I interviewed several service-oriented and right-wing organizations supporting the right-wing populist governments in Hungary, Poland and Israel.

Government policies have been grouped into three interrelated categories: 1. political discourse, attacking civil society, sometimes including legislative attempts, 2. changing the legal framework and domestic state funding, 3. co-optation of civil society organizations.

Responses have been discussed separately for organizations independent from or critical of the governments. The main similarities of the cases are connected to the organizations focusing on human rights and civil society development. First, in the field of human rights (including women's rights), democracy promotion and partly in that of environmental issues, the situation is twofold: large organizations grow, and local grassroots activities are often increasing, but middle-sized organizations suffer and vanish. Second, the politicization of issues by incumbents leads to increased support for them. However, in the Hungarian and Israeli cases, cleavages between different social groups are too strong to overcome, which leads to heightened mobilization within the camps, but also to increasing antagonism between groups. In Poland, the situation is different. The issue of abortion has mobilized women from smaller, generally more conservative localities as well.

These organizations are at the forefront of the discursive battle. Presented as enemies of the nation, they face very similar consequences, such as increased bureaucratic burdens, having to constantly explain their position, the loss of domestic funds, and an increasing need for international funding. They tend to turn toward emphasizing social embeddedness, since communication with the state becomes difficult or impossible. In this process, they are able to enlarge their support base and strengthen their connections with other like-minded organizations. As a non-intended consequence, however, this process might contribute to political polarization. As organizations are using a rationally developed repertoire to cope with the challenges and increase their embeddedness in their supporter base (mostly well-educated people in larger cities), they also contribute to building a block in the polarized political landscape.

Pro-government organizations respond to changes by maintaining an image of independence, although they also acknowledge their closeness to the government, usually claiming that this closeness is based on values. The transformation of domestic funding in the Polish and Hungarian cases, on the one hand allows the

proliferation of local, right-wing, and religious organizations. On the other hand, in Hungary, selected organizations receive substantial funding from the government, increasing their dependence, but also allowing to scale up their activities and rapid professionalization. This also enables to reach more people, usually offering them the narratives proposed by governmental actors. Hungary seems to be an extreme case in this regard: organizations might receive 50-70 per cent of their yearly revenue from the government. This level of governmental funding was not known in Poland, or in Israel. In both cases, for larger right-wing organizations, however, international funding (from the diaspora) is important, which might explain the differences in the legislation concerning foreign funding.

Overall, through scaling up activities or using the alignment in the government and right-wing movement narratives, these organizations are also trying to be more present in smaller towns and villages, at universities, or among the youth. Through this, they also play a role in developing the building blocks of a polarized political and social landscape.

In this article, I provided an overview. There are many details which require more research or clarification in later analysis: The unintended consequences of responses from CSOs to both de-democratization and polarization require more attention. A more detailed analysis of funding structures (including foreign funding of right-wing organizations, and the role of the diaspora in radicalizing domestic politics are also key issues for a better understanding of developments in these countries. The strategies of attack and co-optation increase the polarization of civil society. Attacked organizations build coalitions, while right-wing organizations are building networks and increasing their outreach to social groups. The outreach (either through marketing tools or by being on site) targets various social groups and often involves creating personal ties. Thus, while civil society organizations are pushed to form “pillars” (Ekiert 2021), critical organizations further homogenize their relatively homogenous group of supporters, and organizations supporting the government bring various social groups under one umbrella.

The research carried out had important limitations in answering these questions: The varying pool of accessible organizations provides a good starting point of comparison, but to obtain sounder results more qualitative and quantitative research should follow. The lack of environmental organizations in the in the Polish and the missing LGBTQ organizations from the Israeli and Hungarian set might make it difficult to draw generalized conclusions. However, I think that comparing organizations most often attacked by the government? and organizations in other sectors provides a useful insight, showing how the structural position of organizations influences their responses to the changing political and social environment.

The situation has changed since the research was carried about: In Israel, a war has shifted the focus and circumstances of organizations working towards democracy and peace; in Poland, a new government has seized power. The transformations of civil society in the light of these major events should also need further research.

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