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EDITORIAL

Civil Society and the Spread of Authoritarianism: Institutional Pressures and CSO Responses

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The debate on civil society and authoritarianism has gained prominence in academic and policy circles. Worldwide, civil society organizations (CSOs) have reported a deterioration of the political climate, limiting individual rights and freedoms, and growing policy restrictions for CSOs, hindering their everyday work. In the name of national security and sovereignty, CSOs have been confronted with a tightening of legal regulations and scrutiny across various political regimes and find it increasingly difficult to obtain funding and public support, a global trend which has become known as a shrinking or closing space for civil society (Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2014). CSOs' pushback against this corroborates civil society's "essential contribution" to democracy and human rights (Council of Europe, 2007); as a result, the outlined trend is not monodirectional. Moreover, states' limited capacity to meet socioeconomic needs increases their readiness to seek the involvement of civil society in welfare provision, thereby shifting or even expanding opportunities for CSOs to access to state resources (Anheier et al., 2019). However, these opportunities are mainly open to organizations whose ideology aligns with that of governments using authoritarian methods (Korolczuk, 2023).

This virtual issue offers an overview of research generated by this debate on the pages of *Voluntas* within the past 5 years (2018–2023). It brings together ten single-country studies that capture a variation in state's "strategies of institutional containment" of CSOs (Schedler, 2013, 69), and CSOs' response strategies across different contexts. By broadening the geographical scope to include countries of different political settings, we aim to highlight that state's co-optation and/or suppression of civil society can take place beyond recognized authoritarian regimes, i.e., also in countries with formally established democratic institutions and procedures. During recent decades, the latter have been referred to in literature as "hybrid regimes," a concept that captures the combination of democratic and authoritarian elements (Diamond, 2002), but suffers from conceptual ambiguity and empirical confusion (Armony & Schamis, 2005). Building on the pivotal *Voluntas* 2020 special issue on civil society in authoritarian and hybrid regimes (Vol. 31, Issue 4), we selected the articles of this virtual issue to highlight the dynamic character of the creeping *authoritarianizing* processes taking place in democracies and blatantly authoritarian warmongering states alike. We suggest that it is imperative to attempt at linking together what may seem to be unrelated or isolated phenomena that effectively constitute a "backlash against the liberal international order" (Bromley et al., 2020).

The selected articles represent a broad variety of geographical areas, analytical perspectives and methodological approaches. Geographically, the virtual issue showcases a view of countries that are less frequently at the center of scholarly interest. Some of the selected publications focus on cases such as India, China and countries in South-East Asia, thereby linking the debate on authoritarian civil society to the questions of development and public governance. In the presented sample, the study of civil society in authoritarian contexts is approached from two main theoretical approaches. While some of the papers offer a policy perspective and analyze the instruments and

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mechanisms that governments apply to control or shape the civil society sphere via administrative measures, other articles focus on organizational response strategies that civil society actors use to deal with increasing restrictions in authoritarian(izing) regimes.

Looking at authoritarian policies and its effects on civil society, the introductory article of the 2020 special issue "The Changing Space for NGOs: Civil Society in Authoritarian and Hybrid Regimes" by Stefan Toepler, Annette Zimmer, Christian Fröhlich and Katharina Obuch (2020) shows that authoritarian governments' approaches are not uniform, but rather represent a combination of measures that restrict the space for the politically active CSOs, while at the same time offering opportunities for service-providing and state-supportive CSOs to expand their operations. According to the authors, this selective mechanism has repercussions for the relationship between the more expressive civil society and the more service-oriented nonprofit sector. While nonprofits get to be more involved in social service delivery and contracting, the advocacy function of civil society has increasingly been marginalized. The authors conclude that the selective control and co-optation strategies have far-reaching consequences for the conditions of CSOs in authoritarian contexts.

Similar processes are revealed in the article "Exploring the Impact of Political Context on State–Civil Society Relations: Actors' Strategies in a Developmental State" by Hiwot Amare Tadesse and Trui Steen (2019). The authors focus on the role of political ideology in state-civil society relations in Ethiopia, which is considered a democratic developmental state. The analysis shows that co-optation and repression policy instruments are originating in the developmental state's search for autonomy and embeddedness as features of socioeconomic transformation. For the state, the implementation of "embedded autonomy" requires the government to actively shape expectations of all actors involved in public policies while relying on controlling and overstretched (rather than competent) bureaucratic sphere, thus leaving few opportunities for civil society to influence policy making.

The effects of state policies toward civil society can be studied at different policy levels, as the regulatory conditions for CSOs are not solely shaped by national governments, but also by other external stakeholders that set rules for CSOs. Two of the selected articles depart from the nation-state narrative by focusing on local-level governance and grassroot mobilization, on the one hand, and on international financial support to civil society in authoritarian countries, on the other. Farid and Li's "Reciprocal Engagement and NGO Policy Influence on the Local State in China" (2021) compares six localities in China to find out how CSOs–government collaboration can lead to the former's policy impact on the latter. Examples include influencing government departments' internal work methods, facilitating policy implementation and shaping policy revision.

Danilo Vuković's "The Quest for Government Accountability and Rule of Law: Conflicting Strategies of State and Civil Society in Cambodia and Serbia" (2018) is a comparative case study of one Mainland Southeast Asian and one Western Balkan country discussing the impact of donor-driven social accountability initiatives implemented by CSOs. He argues that the support for international donors-driven local CSOs contributed to the lack of effectiveness of the depoliticized approach to development and social activism. These entities, rooted in a specific neoliberal understanding of civil society, failed to mobilize citizens and make the state accountable. The findings of the comparative study of externally funded CSOs in Cambodia and Serbia reveal the limits of the non-confrontational approach when it comes to cooperation with the state and the unintended side-effects of the preference for technical assistance over political mobilization on work with constituencies.

The range of organizational responses to authoritarian attempts to curtail the civic space varies from compliance to subversive advocacy, withdrawal from cooperation, overt protest and appeals to international actors. Lorch and Sombatpoonsiri's article "COVID-19 and Civil Society in Southeast Asia: Beyond Shrinking Civic Space" (2023) explains the capacity of CSOs to withstand authoritarian pressure as a result of the state's dependency on nonprofit welfare provision, specifically in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors demonstrate that insufficient and exclusionary responses to the pandemic crisis in five South Asian countries opened spaces for mobilization for service delivery, which in some cases gradually evolved into other, more autonomous forms of organizing. The process of "cross-fertilization" led to emergence and intertwining of practices of social provision, self-governance, political protest and advocacy and demonstrated that they generate the pushback against legal restrictions imposed by the state.

The outcomes of interaction between the state and civil society in natural and manmade disaster situations is at the center of Syal, Wessel and Sahoo's article "Collaboration, Co-Optation or Navigation? The Role of Civil Society in Disaster Governance in India" (2021). India represents a case of a democratic neoliberal state under an "authoritarian populist" regime, in which restrictions, control and stigmatization are applied to suppress political civic opposition and protest. The burden of public management in areas prone to flooding, earthquakes and droughts requires accumulation of a wide range of resources (from professional expertise to institutional trust and manpower),

that cannot be carried by the state alone. CSOs joining the process of disaster governance accept the limitations for advocacy set by the state. The authors distinguish between "invited" spaces of collaboration and "claimed" autonomous spaces, which are more open for contention.

CSOs working on "non-polarizing" issues that align with the interests of the authoritarian state are operational in other national contexts, too. Nihal Kayali's contribution "Negotiating State-Civil Society Relations in Turkey: The Case of Refugee-Supporting Organizations" (2022) explores how CSOs working with refugees' rights during the refugee crisis in 2016 had to balance their capacity and identity against the risk of potential co-optation, displacement or loss of legitimacy in the eyes of beneficiaries and funders. Distinguishing between high- and lower-capacity and rights- or needs-based organizations, the author presents a typology of cooperation strategies that highlights the role of resources, geographical reach and internal organization over self-identification when the outcomes of such cooperation are framed.

In Russia, where the authoritarian restrictions are more severe than in most countries, to an extent that Russia is considered a source of authoritarian diffusion worldwide (Koesel & Bunce, 2013; Roberts, 2015; Roberts & Ziemer, 2018), CSOs are faced with the need to present themselves as apolitical, viable partner to the state. In their article "Creating Organisational Strength from Operationalising Restrictions: Welfare Non-profit Organisations in the Russian Federation" (2020) Crotty and Ljubownikow demonstrated that in submitting themselves to the regulations and scrutiny, CSOs can find ways to influence policies, but such influence is primarily limited to their specific areas of operation. The authors examined nonprofit service provision in healthcare, where CSOs complement or substitute public services, becoming indispensable and thus capable of affecting governance practices that influence their beneficiaries. It is suggested that such efforts may build more general trust in civil society in Russia and help buffer against some arbitrary institutional behavior, even though democratization is not their main driving force.

While the Russian regime stands out in its gradually escalating authoritarian deployment over the past two decades, there are countries where oppression is used even more violently and widely. In Colombia, CSOs promote democracy and human rights under threat of not only stigmatization, restrictions and funding limitations, but also intimidation, physical harassment and murder. They nevertheless succeed in sustaining and even expanding civic space for their beneficiaries, employing reactive/defensive as well as proactive strategies. Alexander, Elias and Hernandez in "CSO Advocacy and Managing Risk in Hybrid Regimes: An Exploration of Human Rights Organizations in Colombia" (2023) reveal how advocacy CSOs in Colombia use cloaking and coalition-building with various stakeholders (including the media, expert community, state institutions and international organizations) to assert and legitimize their claims, and to protect themselves against accusations and threats.

From a methodological perspective, all selected publications rely on qualitative studies and make use of a broad variety of data sources, including interviews, policy papers and gray literature. Together, they paint a multifaceted landscape of institutional or organizational structures and dynamics, capturing a broad geographical and socioeconomic representation (corresponding national, regional, local levels of state–civil society relations), variation across different sectors of civil society (environment and education, healthcare and disaster management, specific or broadly formulated human rights advocacy), as well as variation across relevant actors (politicians, academic and professional experts, state bureaucrats and civil society activists). One notable exception to the prevalence of qualitative methodology is Ji Ma's paper "How Does an Authoritarian State Co-opt Its Social Scientists Studying Civil Society?" (2023) who conducted meta-analysis and network analysis. This article examines funding resources and scholarly networks as two important channels of state co-optation of knowledge production in China. The results of Ji Ma's study show how an authoritarian knowledge regime is enhanced by scholars at the center of the network who closely follow the narratives of the state's policy plans, making an important contribution to the study of authoritarian regimes' manipulation with information and knowledge as instruments of oppression (cf. Guriev & Treisman, 2019).

Drawing conclusions from the diverse case studies we can determine that civil society organizations face similar challenges in different country contexts. Policy restrictions as well as selective mechanisms of control and co-optation seem to be common policies toward CSOs in authoritarianizing settings. Other commonalities include CSOs' reaction: They either comply, withdraw or resist. Service-oriented CSOs are more likely to comply, whereas advocacy-oriented CSOs' response is more varied, ranging from reorienting themselves to service provision (including to their members), moving to cooperation with other stakeholders or changing their advocacy strategies.

Although many relevant articles have been published, the links between individual case studies are yet to be established. In addition to the two main perspectives—institutional contexts and organizational responses—more analyses are needed to investigate the complex relationship between state, international stakeholders and CSOs. For example, the impact of democratic remittances on civil societies in authoritarian states, where democratic remittances are defined as "the act of transnational transferring

of norms, values, practices, social capital and material and non-material resources in support of the home country's democratization of its political system, its society and the culture that informs social and political institutions and popular orientations" (Fomina, 2022, 40) merits more research attention. Further investigations should focus on how political discourses shape civil societies' policies. One example is the role of external private donors and the uncivil society actors they support to weaponize and exacerbate cultural polarization (Datta, 2021). Having in mind that cultural polarization gave rise to populism which in turn contributed to the emergence of the "illiberal pillar of civil society," we contend that future research needs to address the "pillarization" of civil society understood as its "vertical segregation … into distinct compartments with limited interaction across a dividing boundary (be it religious, ethnic, political)" (Ekiert, 2020, 9). This resonates with research on the third wave of autocratization which describes the process of creeping authoritarianism as a gradual decline of democratic regime attributes under a legal façade (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). This process does not only manifest itself in full autocracies, but also in traditional democracies that experience democratic backsliding and thereby become more repressive in their stance toward civil society (Mechkova et al., 2017). The authoritarian state's efforts to trigger "competitive division of civil society" domestically (Schedler, 2013, 68) undermine the functioning of autonomous civil society.

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Kayali, N. (2022). Negotiating state-civil society relations in Turkey: The case of refugee-supporting organizations. *VOLUNTAS*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-022-00545-9. **Published: 28 November 2022 NOT ATTRIBUTED TO AN ISSUE YET.**

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