



# HOW CIVIL SOCIETIES ARE UNDERMINED: AN ANALYSIS OF FACTORS THAT ENDANGER CIVIC FREEDOMS

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## ■ Introduction

■ At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, liberal democracy was broadly seen as the political option capable of obtaining global hegemony. Its main competitors, who defined the evolution of the *age of extremes* (Hobsbawm 2015), were deposed of their influence and appeal (Fukuyama 1992: 248). However, the first decades of the 21st century witnessed the emergence of new challenges for open societies. Already in the 1960s, political scientists argued that populism was on the verge of becoming an alternative to the political model promoted by the Western bloc (Ionescu–Gellner 1969: 1). At that time, populism was associated with the malformations that appeared in the democratization processes of former colonies. Later, fully developed democratic regimes also started being affected by the ascension of populist movements. Growth in migration flows and the crisis of representative democracy paved the way for electoral successes for illiberal parties; some of them managed in the 2000s to become members of governing coalitions (Aicholzer et al. 2014: 132). Social, economic, and political factors offered opportunities for anti-establishment politicians willing to undermine political pluralism. Globalization and European integration were among the elements that weakened the social-democratic left (Bandau 2022: 6), while the ideological transformations that severely reduced the differences between mainstream parties that used to be adversaries alienated important parts of their voters (Akkerman 2003: 152–153).

After 2010, the legitimacy of those who governed was further reduced in numerous liberal democracies, and, gradually, a new political elite gained ground. For instance, in Hungary, Viktor Orbán managed to build a so-called illiberal democ-

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racy on the ruins of several Socialist-Liberal cabinets by altering the constitutional order (Halmai 2019: 300). In the United States of America, the authoritarian traits of Donald Trump's personality (Kellner 2018) are still shaping the political arena. On the other hand, authoritarian leaders that already had a hegemony established managed to solidify it and use it as a basis for aggressive foreign policy actions. The Russian President Vladimir Putin (March 2023), the Chinese leader Xi Jinping (Shirk 2018), and the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (Gunter 2024) are excellent examples in this regard.

Currently, a so-called polycrisis is experienced worldwide (Lawrence et al. 2024). Climate change is an ongoing existential threat to humans, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are only partially removed, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine is threatening global peace. The impact of this polycrisis on the authoritarian wave described above cannot be determined before the elections for the European Parliament due in June 2024 or before an outcome becomes foreseeable in the Ukrainian War.

Shaping an overview is not possible without an element that is not always receiving in literature the attention it deserves: the role of civil societies in building or preserving liberal democracies. Identifying some of the main factors that undermine civil societies can be helpful for understanding which are the most important vulnerabilities of liberal democracies.

Our analysis is preceded by a brief section of theoretical and methodological considerations. The main section focuses on information from several reports and studies based on data regarding the state of civil societies collected worldwide. Relevant to our endeavor are those countries that either went through a significant decline in upholding civil rights and liberties or improved aspects like the freedom of association, assembly, or expression. We focus only on evolutions that took place after the COVID-19 pandemic began. Our conclusions are based on comparing the data provided by non-governmental organizations and linking it with the elements presented in the theoretical section.

## Theoretical and methodological considerations

Civil societies, in the current meaning of the concept, are a product of modernity. The Swiss-French philosopher Benjamin Constant argued that in antiquity, political mechanisms ruled over the private lives of citizens. Only representative systems were created later, by reducing the political involvement of individuals, an autonomous space where privacy was respected (Constant 1997). The German philosopher Georg W. F. Hegel stated that civil societies are a consequence of the rising role of the bourgeoisie in Western communities. Skeptical regarding the involvement of the state in what they perceived as private matters, the advocates of strong civil societies focused on economic issues (Hegel 2008: 180-196). Influenced by this perspective, Karl Marx argued that the way civil societies are organized in



capitalism undermines the possibility of the democratic organization of proletarians (Niemi 2011). On the other hand, the French political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville considered that civil organizations are a pillar of democratic regimes (Tocqueville 1969). Later, Tocqueville's perspective became far more influential than Marx's, regardless of the ideological background of those who studied this topic. Nevertheless, some academics highlight the danger of hijacking civil organizations and transforming them into tools for building closed societies (Berman 1997).

One of the most widely used definitions of civil society, one that is not free of controversies because of its range, is the following: „*Civil Society comprises the private domain which exists in the space between (a) the state and its various apparatuses, and (b) the economy and its various expressions; flourishes where the state is in pluralistic democratic mode and the economy is in capitalist mode; is a Western European/North American phenomenon which has contributed to the creation of the conditions for freedom, democracy and successful economic performance.*” (British Council 1999). Another definition that is relevant to our endeavor was provided by John Keane. Keane states that the concept „... *both describes and anticipates a complex and dynamic ensemble of legally protected nongovernmental institutions that tend to be nonviolent, self-organizing, self-reflexive, and permanently in tension, both with each other and with the governmental institutions that “frame,” constrict and enable their activities.*” (Keane 2009)

The contemporary understanding of civil societies is based on their separation from the state. It is difficult to imagine such an autonomous sphere in an absolutist monarchic regime. Therefore, until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, civil society was associated with good governance. Later, although the boundaries between the political system and civil society were delineated, the latter was often presented as essential for the proper functioning of the former. Liberal democratic theories state that the role of civil society is to disseminate ideas generated by public opinion in the political arena, to educate citizens on public matters, to bring to accountability the dignitaries that abuse their powers, etc. (Baker 2002: 1) In opposition to Marx's perspective, currently the dominant view in the literature is that civil society is autonomous not only in its relationship with the state but also in its relationship with the market (Van Rooy 2004: 6–7).

Totalitarianism and civil societies cannot coexist. Totalitarianism lacks the moral component that is usually important for the functioning of the civil sphere. Monitoring, coercion, and punishment are the pillars of its universe (Cheung 2021: 229). Today, the specter of authoritarianism is far from a ghost of the past. As mentioned above, in the USA, Donald Trump upturned the political arena, promoting an authoritarian populist vision. American democracy, although its history is marked by several flaws, was widely seen as an example of resilience. Alexis de Tocqueville is not the only author who considered the development of civil organizations as a main cause of this resilience (Levitsky–Ziblatt 2018). Today, this characteristic is questioned by Trump.



Levitsky–Ziblatt (2018: 24–25) present four key indicators of authoritarian behavior: rejection of (or weak commitment to) democratic rules of the game; denial of the legitimacy of political opponents; tolerance or encouragement of violence; and readiness to curtail civil liberties of opponents, including media. The fourth aspect is the most relevant to our study. An authoritarian politician proposes or implements policies that restrict civil liberties. Moreover, the right to assembly and organization is weakened, and the possibilities of protesting against the rulers are reduced. Not only political rivals but also critics from mass media or NGOs are presented by exclusionary populists as a threat to the national interest.

Saskia Brechenmacher and Thomas Carothers (2019) published a study regarding the perils that civil society agents face worldwide. Some of the worrisome elements they identified are the following: technological innovations are instrumentalized by autocratic governments for restricting the civic space; illiberal politicians are increasingly successful at the polls; international institutions are weakened or hijacked by anti-democratic alliances. The democratic liberal camp has difficulties neutralizing this trend. It lacks strategic clarity, and the causes of the new reality are still unclear to those who should help undo it. Moreover, Western regimes find it difficult to act to protect foreign civil organizations, given that in their own countries, open society is endangered.

Our goal is to highlight social, economic, or political elements that contribute to the shrinking of the civil sphere. The information we analyze is provided, among other sources, by two projects meant to present the global landscape of the state of civil societies. Firstly, CIVICUS is a worldwide network of civil structures that is „...dedicated to strengthening citizen action and civil society throughout the world.“ (CIVICUS n.d.) It promotes values like justice and equality, knowledge, and principled courage. We focus on elements presented in the last two reports realized by CIVICUS, named *People Power under Attack* (2023 and 2022). Secondly, the V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) project is meant to measure the latest evolutions regarding the condition of democracies all over the globe. It is realized by an institute affiliated with the University of Gothenburg (V-Dem 2015).

We are not constructing a quantitative analysis based on the data offered by these projects. We are extracting information to put forward preliminary conclusions meant to create a basis for future research. The descriptive and explanatory components of our research relate to a normative one. A descriptive study has the role of „gathering data and facts“ (Mitulescu 2011: 35) on issues and phenomena that are unknown or in a continuous process of transformation. In our case, as mentioned above, the information is extracted from public documents. The explanatory dimension is enabled by the comparative approach. Given that we focus on the cases that, according to CIVICUS, recently experienced the greatest fluctuations regarding the state of civil society, it can be argued that our research includes a multiple case study, useful for identifying „...factors that appear in multiple situations.“ (Chelsea 2007: 601)



## Civil society – current transformations

According to CIVICUS Monitor, in 2023, the main violations of civic freedoms consisted of the following: intimidation, protest disruption, detention of protesters, censorship, harassment, detention of journalists, attacks on journalists, excessive use of force on protesters, and detention of human rights activists (CIVICUS Monitor 2023). One year earlier, in 2022, the overview was similar (CIVICUS Monitor 2022). The right to protest and freedom of speech are among the main targets of the enemies of open societies.

In 2023, seven countries (*Table 1*) registered significant downgrades regarding the state of civil society. Among them, we can identify not only states like Venezuela or Kyrgyzstan, which are labeled by Freedom House as *not free* (Freedom House 2024), but also Germany. This highlights an element presented above civic freedoms are vulnerable in the Western world as well. On the other hand, in five countries (*Table 2*) the situation of civil society organizations improved (CIVICUS Monitor 2023).

In 2022, the group of states that were downgraded in the *People Power under Attack* report was significantly bigger than it will be in 2023, including 15 members. Among them, we can find not only the Russian Federation (which launched its military aggression in Ukraine in 2022) or Afghanistan (which came once again under Taliban rule in 2021), but also EU members like Greece and Cyprus. Regarding the states that improved their condition, the authors highlight ten cases. Unlike in the next report, countries from the EU and the Americas are included (CIVICUS Monitor 2022).

*Table 1. Downgrades regarding the state of civil societies*

2022	2023
Antigua and Barbuda	Germany
Dominica	Bosnia–Herzegovina
Suriname	Kyrgyzstan
Cyprus	Senegal
Ghana	Sri Lanka
Greece	Bangladesh
<b>United Kingdom</b>	Venezuela
Guatemala	
Lesotho	
<b>Tunisia</b>	
<b>Afghanistan</b>	
Myanmar	



<b>Russia</b>	
Tajikistan	
Hong Kong	

Source: CIVICUS Monitor 2023–2022

If we enlarge slightly the analyzed period, we can observe that between 2018 and 2023, in Africa, countries like Ghana, Tunisia, and South Africa had their scores reduced by the CIVICUS Monitor experts. On the other hand, the Central African Republic or Sudan improved their situation. In the Americas, Ecuador, Haiti, and Venezuela moved in the wrong direction, while in the Bahamas civil society organizations became more autonomous. Interestingly, the USA had its score reduced in 2020, but later, this negative trend was reversed. In the Asia Pacific area, Afghanistan, India, and Myanmar had downgrades, while Mongolia is one of very few cases with an upgraded score. In Europe and Central Asia, several countries devolved: Belarus, Germany, Greece, Poland, Russia, the UK, etc. The cases with improvements are fewer: Austria, Moldova, etc. The Czech Republic had a brief decay that was stopped after a crucial electoral moment. In the Middle East, Iraq and Jordan had a downgrade. Here, no country managed to improve its score (CIVICUS Monitor 2023).

*Table 2. Upgrades regarding the state of civil societies*

<b>2022</b>	<b>2023</b>
Bahamas	Timor-Leste
<b>Czech Republic</b>	Benin
Latvia	Lesotho
Armenia	Libya
Chile	
United States of America	
Cote d'Ivoire	
Burundi	
Central African Republic	
South Sudan	

Source: CIVICUS Monitor 2023–2022

It is important to highlight that the *People Power under Attack* reports place the analyzed countries in five categories: Open, Narrowed, Obstructed, Repressed,



or Closed (CIVICUS Monitor 2023–2022). Therefore, although, as we saw above, both Germany and Russia experienced a decline recently, the two are in different areas of our landscape; in Germany, civil society organizations are narrowed, while in Russia, they are closed.

Based on the information presented above, we selected six cases for our analysis: the UK, Germany, the Czech Republic, Russia, Afghanistan, and Tunisia. Europe is overrepresented: two countries (Germany and the Czech Republic) are EU members, one (the United Kingdom) recently left the EU, and one (Russia) is partly a European country. We decided in this way because of the peculiarity of having in recent years experienced a significant wave of democratic backsliding in different European regions.

### United Kingdom

Between 2018 and 2021, civil society organizations in the UK were presented as narrow. Their situation changed in 2022 when the country was downgraded to the obstructed category, where it remained in the latest *People Power under Attack* report (CIVICUS Monitor 2023). This evolution is a symptom of a European crisis: „Although Europe has the most countries rated as open, rating changes highlight that no region is immune to state restriction of civic freedoms, with Greece and the UK now downgraded to the obstructed rating and Cyprus to narrowed rating.” (CIVICUS Monitor 2022)

The main reason behind downgrading the UK is represented, according to the CIVICUS Monitor (2022) experts, by a deterioration of the freedom of peaceful assembly. In April 2022, the *Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts (PCSC) Act*, drafted by representatives of the Conservative government led by Boris Johnson, was enacted. This law imposed restrictions on the rights to protest and assembly based on arguments regarding the disruption of individual or collective activities through noise or the right to transport (Manchester City Council 2024). Moreover, in April 2023, the Conservative government led by Rishi Sunak managed to enact the *Public Order Bill*, which, among others, forbids protests near transportation networks or oil and gas and energy supplies (Amnesty International 2023).

Other sources suggest that the situation regarding the state of civil society in the UK is less grim (we must note that the above-mentioned bills apply only in England and Wales; Scotland and Northern Ireland are outside their district). Based on the V-Dem index, the conclusion is that civil society participation is at an elevated level. Although there were brief and slight downgrades in 2019 and 2021, in 2022, the UK equals its highest score in this regard, 0.95/1 (Our World in Data n.d.). However, we must highlight that this index focuses not on how authorities treat civil society organizations but on how willing citizens and organizations are to get involved in the public sphere. Moreover, given that the analyzed period stops in 2022, we cannot say that the index reflects the effects of the above-mentioned bills.



It must be emphasized that political decisions lie behind the deterioration of the state of civil society organizations. Governments confirmed by a Parliament that was democratically elected shaped these laws, which were approved by the legislative. The restriction of civic freedoms can start at the ballot.

According to the *Economist Intelligence Unit*, the UK's score regarding civil liberties worsened between 2015 and 2022, from 9.4/10 to 9.1/10 (Our World in Data n.d.). There is a clear correlation between another decision taken at the polls, the one regarding the UK's withdrawal from the EU, and this downgrade. Being an EU member is not a guarantee for preserving an autonomous and thriving civil sphere; for example, Hungary and Poland are, just like the UK, in the category of obstructed civil society organizations, according to CIVICUS Monitor (2022). Nevertheless, for the moment, being outside the EU is a factor that reduces the chances of blocking legal initiatives that can harm civil society.

The Brexit vote was fueled by an intertwining of ideological and technological factors. David Miliband (2020) argues that the *fake news* phenomenon, facilitated by social networks like Facebook, has a growing influence on politics in states like the UK or the US. Digitalization can be used by the resurgent radical right to reach its harmful goals for liberal democracies and civic spheres. However, it must be stated that Brexit became possible not only because of the populist manipulative discourse but also because of the EU's democratic deficit, highlighted by the Eurozone debt crisis (Muller 2016: 96).

## Germany

Until 2022, civic space was rated in Germany as open. The situation changed in 2023 when Germany was relegated to the narrowed category. This decision was a consequence of the fact that the German state was among those „...that escalated repression of environmental activists.” (CIVICUS Monitor 2023)

For instance, in January 2023, approximately 700 protesters who opposed the extension of a coalmine were removed by the police from the village of Lutzerath, which was planned to be destroyed to allow a company to proceed with extracting coal. The authorities used force disproportionately to empty the village (Nolting 2023). Moreover, a movement called *Last Generation*, which participated in acts of non-violent disobedience, became a target for the judiciary system. Police members often use pain-inducing techniques against the so-called *climate terrorists*, while other options for repressing them, like detentions, are pondered (Singelstein–Obens 2023).

Once again, the conclusions of the People Power under Attack reports are not reflected by the V-dem Civil Society Participation Index (Our World in Data n.d.). Germany has an almost perfect score of 0.98/1. However, our observations presented above are relevant in this case as well: the index focuses on the willingness of citizens and organizations to engage in civic activities and the analyzed period stops in 2022.



On the other hand, the *Economist Intelligence Unit's* index highlights a trend regarding the upholding of civil liberties in Germany that could become worrying: the country's score decreased between 2017 and 2022 from 9.7/1 to 9.4/1 (Our World in Data n.d.).

Firstly, it is both ironic and worrisome that movements meant to protect the environment are repressed under the supervision of a governing coalition that includes an ecologist party (Alliance 90/The Greens). Secondly, the German case reflects the importance of international politics and economic developments for the state of civil societies. The mentioned coalmine was opened because of the energy crisis generated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Moreover, the authorities might tend to use violence against non-violent disobedience acts that disturb economic activities in periods when the economy is struggling. In 2023, the German economy fell into recession (Trading Economics n.d.).

The German case also highlights the role of ideology in weakening civil societies. The repressive acts against environmental NGOs are favored by the resilience of climate change denialism in Western societies. This denialism, although it changes its shape as time goes by, remains a vital component of right-wing discourses (Cann–Raymond 2018). The anti-elitism promoted by exclusionary populism is undermining trust in the scientific arguments regarding climate change (Kränge et al. 2021).

## Czech Republic

Between 2018 and 2020, the Czech Republic's rating regarding civil society was open. In 2021, the country was relegated to the narrowed category. However, in 2022, it regained its original status, which was maintained in 2023 as well (CIVICUS Monitor 2023). Crucial to this development was the government change that followed the parliamentary elections held in 2021: „*Under the government of Prime Minister Petr Fiala a few positive changes have been documented. For example, the draft legislative proposal to strengthen the editorial independence of Czech Television.*” (CIVICUS Monitor 2022)

Mass media's independence is vital for preserving the autonomy of the civil sphere. On one hand, a media institution can be weaponized against open societies by private interests. On the other hand, those who hold political power can use public media structures to undermine the checks and balances system. In January 2022, Fiala's cabinet committed in a Policy Statement to amend the legislation regarding Czech Television and Radio, one of the goals being to ensure the sustainability of funding. In the same document, the government stated that climate change is unquestionable (Government of the Czech Republic 2022).

The European Commission's most recent report regarding the rule of law in Czechia acknowledged the positive impact of the legislative modifications that targeted the public media. The report also highlights the progress regarding the independence and transparency of the judiciary system (European Commission 2023: 1).



The freedom of justice is essential for the proper functioning of civil society organizations. The image reflected by the V-Dem Civil Society Participation Index is once again slightly different from the one presented by the People Power under Attack reports. Firstly, we can notice that in 2023, the Czech Republic's score is significantly lower (0.79/1) than the ones of Germany (0.98/1) or the UK (0.95/1). Secondly, according to the index, the Czech Republic had its highest score (0.82/1) in 2017, the year in which, in December, the right-wing populist Andrej Babis took over the position of Prime Minister. Later, slight fluctuations were observable, the lowest point being in 2020 (0.78/1) (Our World in Data n.d.). On the other hand, the *Economist Intelligence Unit* provides a landscape that matches the one presented by CIVICUS Monitor. In 2015, in the Civil Liberties Index, Czechia's score was 94/10. A sharp decline followed in 2017, with the country scoring 8.5/10. The negative trend was inverted after the Fiala government was appointed. (Our World in Data n.d.)

The case of the UK highlighted the harmful impact that elections can have on the state of civil society organizations. Czechia represents a different kind of example: civil liberties are enhanced, not undermined, at the polls. In 2021, Andrej Babis, rightfully labeled as the *Czech Donald Trump* (Heijmans 2019), lost the parliamentary elections. This result paved the way for a genuinely democratic government that, until now, has undeniably had a positive impact on the efforts to maintain the Czech Republic in the category of open societies.

Downgrades, like the one experienced after Babis took office, are possible not only because of external factors, like elections or geopolitical evolutions but also because of the internal dynamics of the civil space. In Central and Eastern Europe, as well as in other geographical regions, some NGOs tend to avoid political subjects in their activities, focusing on individual or community endeavors. Although some argue that this approach is proper for respecting the separation between the state and civil society, it can become counterproductive (Quigley 2000). If civil organizations avoid the political battlefield, leaders like Babis can benefit.

## The Russian Federation

Until 2021, Russia's rating in the *People Power under Attack* reports was repressed. In 2022, the country was downgraded to the closed category. This status was maintained in 2023 as well (CIVICUS Monitor 2023). Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Ukraine, whose sovereignty and territorial integrity had been targeted by Russia since 2014 (Rusu 2023: 157–158), created the conditions for further undermining civil liberties: „*In Russia, the government's crackdown on civic space further intensified since it launched its full-scale war on Ukraine (...) Nationwide anti-war protests have been brutally repressed, with over 19,500 people detained since February 2022.*” (CIVICUS Monitor 2022) Russia's aggression also impacted the activity of external NGOs. As mentioned above, the German authorities restricted civil liberties because of the energetic and economic conditions shaped by the Ukrainian war.



On the other hand, the necessity of sheltering Ukrainian refugees boosted civic activity in several European countries (CIVICUS Monitor 2022).

On December 1, 2022, the *foreign agents law* came into effect, additionally restricting the freedom of speech. Anyone with views that contradict the position of the authorities can be labeled as a *traitor* and suffer legal consequences (Human Rights Watch 2022). The death of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, which occurred in February 2024, is a direct consequence of the climate built by the Putin regime. Hundreds of people were detained by the authorities for publicly gathering to honor Navalny's memory (Amnesty International 2024).

In Russia's case, the image provided by V-Dem is quite like the one provided by the *People Power under Attack* reports. According to the Civil Society Participation Index, Russia had its highest score (0.60/1) between 1992 and 2000. In 2001, its score plummeted to 0.54/1. In 2020, the figure was 0.43/1. Two years later, after Russia invaded Ukraine, the situation was much grimmer: 0.25/1 (Our World in Data n.d.). The conclusions put forward by the *Economist Intelligence Unit* are alike: Russia's score in the Civil Liberties Index decreased from 4.1/10 in 2021 to 2.4/10 in 2022 (Our World in Data n.d.).

Russia's situation proves that foreign policy decisions and policies that impact the civil sphere can be intertwined. Moreover, large parts of the population can be convinced to renounce their civil liberties by propaganda, which creates the false image of a looming existential threat generated by foreign enemies. The presidential election that reconfirmed Putin in March 2024 was neither free nor fair (Euronews 2024). Nevertheless, studies show that most Russian citizens still support their authoritarian leader (Van Brugen 2023).

The Putin regime's propaganda is distributed through tools generated by the latest technological developments, not only internally but also abroad (Natea 2023: 158). The Kremlin has a role in the perpetuation of the *fake news* phenomenon mentioned above. Once again, ideology is a key part of the image we are observing. The messages emitted by the Russian propaganda are fueled by a worldview that has notable Conservative elements (Colton 2022) and is replicated mostly by individuals with right-wing political sympathies (Soares et al. 2023).

## Afghanistan

The Central Asian country's situation is partly like that of Russia. Until 2021, Afghanistan's rating in the *People Power under Attack* reports was *repressed*. In 2022, the country was downgraded to the *closed* category. This status was maintained in 2023 as well (CIVICUS Monitor 2023). As mentioned above, the civil sphere was virtually dissolved after the Taliban regained political power: „*Afghanistan has been downgraded due to severe restrictions on civic space imposed by the Taliban following their takeover in 2021. Activists who have been critical of the Taliban have faced arrest, unlawful detention, abductions, torture, and extrajudicial execution.*” (CIVICUS Monitor 2022)



Freedom of expression, association, or assembly was all but erased by the new government. The regime also radically changed the status of women in Afghanistan: they were banned from several public activities. The secular worldview that existed in the country for a brief period before 1979 and that slowly gained roots once again was replaced by religious values that are in opposition to basic human rights. A few NGOs were able to continue their activities, although the regime crackdown maintained its intensity. These organizations operate in clandestinity and focus on humanitarian aid (Tapesch 2023).

The Civil Society Participation Index (V-Dem) reflects the dramatic decline in this domain in Afghanistan. In 2020, its score was 0.74/1 (the highest score, 0.76/1, was registered in 2015). In 2022, the score was reduced to 0.12/1, lower than in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the Civil Liberties Index, the *Economist Intelligence Unit* provides a similar image: from 3.8/10 in 2020, Afghanistan's score decreased to 0.3/10 (Our World in Data n.d.).

Firstly, Afghanistan's case reflects once more the importance of foreign policy decisions in shaping the state of both internal and external civil societies. Following the path opened by the Trump administration, the Biden administration decided to bring home its troops from Afghanistan after a conflict that lasted almost 20 years. Based on reasons linked to the internal political struggle, this decision enabled an autocratic restoration, which is fatal for the Afghan civil space. Secondly, the policies of the Taliban prove once again that religious fundamentalism and civil society cannot coexist. Undeniably, the essence of the worldview promoted by fundamentalists is totalitarian (Tibi 2007).

The current situation of Afghan civil organizations is partly a consequence of the international community's inability to build mechanisms meant to support NGOs in grim environments. The strategic confusion mentioned by Brechenmacher and Carothers (2019) is a key cause of this situation. Directing funds to structures that have the goal of spreading humanitarian aid or limiting abuses is often hampered by indecision or bureaucratic procedures. Moreover, the mission of international organizations like the United Nations (UN) is sabotaged by the animosities between its main members (Tapesch 2023).

## Tunisia

Until 2021, Tunisia's rating in the *People Power under Attack* reports was obstructed. This rating was encouraging for a country that was not completely immune to the Islamist challenge. There were reasons to argue that Tunisia was the only case of successful democratization among the states that were swept by the revolts known as the Arab Spring. However, in 2022, Tunisia was relegated to the *repressed* category, where it remained in 2023 as well (CIVICUS Monitor 2023). The main responsible for this decline is Kais Saïed: „*The 2021 decisions of President Kais Saïed to freeze parliament, suspend the constitution, dismiss the head of government and indefinitely extend his extraordinary powers has resulted in a more*



*hostile environment for civil society.*" (CIVICUS Monitor 2022) We have in this case a clear example of hijacking a democratization process. The leader of the executive branch becomes a tyrant by erasing the separation of powers.

In August 2022, a new Constitution was adopted, which offered a legal background to the new political reality. The fundamental law states that the president cannot be impeached and has the authority to appoint the prime minister and the cabinet. Given that his position was significantly strengthened, Saïed proceeded to persecute political opponents and civil society organizations. Besides the constitution, additional legislation was used to reduce the freedom of the press, further constraining the civic space (CIVICUS Monitor 2022).

V-Dem's index regarding civil society participation confirms the conclusions of the *People Power under Attack* reports. After reaching a historically high score of 0.91/1 in 2013, Tunisia saw its situation worsen significantly after 2020. In 2022, its score was only 0.61/10 (Our World in Data n.d.). The *Economist Intelligence Unit's* Civil Liberties Index is another instrument that reflects the failure of Tunisia's democratization. Between 2015 and 2019, the country's score was 5.9/10. In 2022, it shrank to 5/10 (Our World in Data n.d.).

It is important to mention that Saïed was elected president in free and fair elections held in 2019 (Yerkes 2019). His acts represent an excellent example of a democratically elected leader who upturns the will of the citizens. Saïed's actions represented a capitalization of adverse conditions. The president took advantage of the turmoil generated by the pandemic and the economic difficulties that accompanied it. Such developments can occur in consolidated democracies as well, but where civil society is deeply rooted, wannabe autocrats might find it more difficult to implement their plans.

Although seen broadly as a pragmatic technocrat who focuses on growing his political influence and is uninterested in ideological details, Saïed can use to his advantage some of the core concepts of global right-wing radicalism. For instance, racism is becoming a key element of his approach. Recently, NGOs and their representatives were brutally repressed for trying to protect the rights of Black African migrants (Human Rights Watch 2024). As in many other countries, the fears of some citizens become a weapon that the autocrat uses against his opponents.

## Conclusions

Seva Gunitsky (2017) argues that upturns in international relations have a profound influence on the transformations of political regimes: democratic waves are generated by external elements. These waves can have negative equivalents: authoritarianism can also become contagious. Democratic and anti-democratic metamorphoses are triggered by hegemonic shocks (sudden changes in the statute of a global power).



Our case studies highlight the importance of international politics for consolidating/weakening civil societies. Could it be argued that today we are experiencing a hegemonic shock? It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an answer to this question. Nevertheless, some of the information we presented suggests that there is a correlation between a severe crisis in American politics and society and a global regress in civil liberties.

The UK's case highlights the impact of foreign policy decisions (London never fully internalized its status as an EU member) on the internal civil environment. Russia's aggression in Ukraine influenced civil societies both internally and externally. In Afghanistan, civil society organizations became victims of a decision taken in Washington.

One of the main conclusions of our paper is that foreign policy matters. An equally important one is that elections matter. The situation of civil society organizations in the UK changed after the Brexit vote and after the parliamentary elections held in 2019. In the Czech Republic, civil society regained its full autonomy after the legislative elections held in 2021. The presidential elections in Russia are constantly marked by irregularities, but their result reflects the will of most Russian citizens. In Tunisia, Saïed gained the opportunity to shift towards authoritarianism after being democratically elected president.

History also matters. The USA and the Czech Republic managed to improve the state of their civil society, not only because of electorally generated government changes but also because of having a significant tradition in upholding political and civil liberties. However, this does not mean that Europe or Northern America should be less worried regarding the current surge of illiberalism. The interwar period's lessons should never be forgotten.

Other factors are also highly relevant to the evolution of civil societies. Economic difficulties might influence the authorities to restrict the right to protest. Moreover, open societies cannot survive without an independent judiciary system and an independent mass media. The relationship between the state and the citizens should be characterized by trust. Otherwise, civil organizations might be overshadowed by populist movements. The lack of trust weakens democracies (Dobrescu–Durach 2023: 44).

Our case studies tend to confirm at least some of the conclusions put forward by Brechenmacher–Carothers (2019). The process of digitalization encompasses not only opportunities but also significant risks for liberal democracies and thriving civil societies. Disinformation shapes an environment in which the activity of NGOs is often obstructed. International organizations like the UN or the EU have limited possibilities for altering this reality. The UN Security Council's mission is sabotaged by its authoritarian members. In the EU, illiberal states use their veto rights to block important decisions of the European Council.

A crucial aspect is that NGOs operate in a climate dominated by ideology. The latest developments we described clearly contradict the assumption that globalization is shaping a post-ideological order.



From the UK to Afghanistan and from Tunisia to the Czech Republic, ideology is still the main driving force behind social and political evolutions. Western liberal democracies can overcome their strategic confusion regarding civil societies only if they replace economic pragmatism with an unambiguous commitment to democratic values.

Civil organizations are not mere objects of actions taken by others. Even if the global landscape is characterized by democratic backsliding, they still have the possibility, in many countries, to be proactive and to fight back when their autonomy is endangered. As Quigley (2000) argued more than two decades ago, if NGOs deliberately avoid political topics, at one point they might find it difficult to continue their mission.

The causal connections are not easily definable in our endeavor. Eric Fromm (1941) argued that Protestantism is an effect of the emergence of the capitalist economic system. Later, the spreading of Protestant cults favored the further development of capitalism. This evolution has similarities with the one we described: the weaknesses of the civil sphere can be seen both as a cause and as an effect of the ascension of illiberal/autocratic movements. After the Cold War ended, NGOs failed to function as an antidote to the emerging radical parties or movements. Later, this radicalism contributed to a loss of autonomy for civil space.

We do not claim that the image we shaped through our case studies is complete or definitive. We opted for a small-N analysis, which, unlike a large-N analysis, is well-suited for qualitative research (Collier–Elman 2008: 781). Moreover, we focused especially on external factors, like the way ideology’s impact on several aspects of political and social life is affecting the activity of civil organizations. The role of the internal dynamics of NGOs was observed only to a short extent, which is one of the main limitations of our paper.

Studies that use different methodological tools and focus on more countries could shape additional conclusions or even reevaluate the importance of some of the aspects we focused on. One who observes a transforming landscape is always in danger of lacking precision in his endeavor. Nevertheless, we are confident that our study can be helpful for better understanding a topic that is vital for the political and social development of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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