

THE DOMESTICATION OF THE CIVIL SPHERE — THE HUNGARIAN EXAMPLE*

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The Model of Civil Sector Domestication

■ During the period of Hungarian liberal democracy following the regime change (1990–2010), the government – albeit often professionally contradictory and inconsistent – generally approached civil society in a “laissez-faire” manner, expanding the possibilities for establishing organizations, attaining public benefit status, and diversifying funding sources. This setup undeniably faced specific growing pains: courts interpreted the conditions related to the registration of organizations quite arbitrarily (earlier research repeatedly documented contradictory rulings from the courts, etc.), financing was by no means impartial; however, this partiality remained at lower levels of professional-political decision-making and did not become a systemic mechanism (Bíró 2002).

In 2010, after eight years in opposition, the Fidesz party won a two-thirds majority in parliament. It announced the National System of Cooperation – NER (Nemzeti Együttműködés Rendszere), which brought significant changes in several areas, including the civil sector. In its political declaration on national cooperation, Parliament’s call and key phrase of this system are: “Let there be peace, freedom, and harmony.” Even this 2010 declaration employs the tools of militant rhetoric, using phrases such as “we have regained the right to self-determination” and “the Hungarian nation has successfully revolutionized.”



This new ‘social contract’ aims to make the country strong and prosperous by building its system around the following watchwords: work, home, family, health, and order¹.

Since 2010, the regime led by Fidesz, under the so-called “illiberalism” explicitly named since 2014, has created its narrative within the NER universe, demanding exclusivity, centralizing, and utilizing public resources for its ends (taxes, EU subsidies, and even citizen obligations), while suppressing alternative interpretations of reality. Over 15 years, the NER has dismantled the democratic institutional system that ensured mutual oversight (from the Constitutional Court, through the ombudsman’s institutions, via the President’s Office, down to the prosecutor’s office, every public authority is practically arranged into a hierarchical – subordinate – structure), it has excluded and increasingly made the independent, critical press impossible, and not least has made the profit sector state-controlled, the property of its protégés (see Magyar 2013; Magyar–Vásárhelyi 2014; Filippov 2018). Particularly evident through the example of human rights organizations is the change in the relationship between the state and civil organizations since 2010 (Gerő et al. 2020).

The shift is characterized by four main areas: governmental and civil consultations have ceased, representational channels have narrowed, resources have been withdrawn from civil organizations, and, most notably, a governmental campaign has been launched against human rights-focused civil organizations. Deák (2024) describes the post-2010 government policy as a new type of authoritarian regime that “rejects democratic rules of the game, denies the legitimacy of political opponents, and is willing to restrict the freedom of its adversaries” (Deák 2024: 117). This political attitude has also affected the civil sector, which must either adapt to the new “rules of the game” or face co-option, marginalization, coercion, or replacement by government-created entities (Deák 2024).

The key term in the NER is dependence, while “autonomy” becomes its “pejorative term.” It is no wonder, then, that one of the most characteristic chapters of this structure is its treatment of civil society. Understandably so, as associations independent of power are alien to hierarchical social organization. From the media to culture and the profit sector, the system’s primary goal is to establish dependence, thereby embedding a hierarchical order. Civil society, however, is everything that is not hierarchy and dependence: its lifeblood is autonomy, networks of cooperation, and self-governance. Its foundation is conduct characterized by limited and accountable public authority, taking on tasks not provided by the state or the private sector, and practicing participation, publicity, and freedom of expression. Civil society is essentially a form of political culture, a “civilized” public life

1 The Political statement of the Hungarian Parliament on the System of National cooperation https://2010-2015.miniszterelnok.hu/kozlemeny/az_orzagyules_1_2010._vi._16._ogy_politikai_nyilatkozata_a_nemzeti_egyuttmukodesrol
last accessed 18/03/2025



based on the rule of law, democracy, civic responsibility, and tolerance. This – not so latently – presupposes a commitment to specific values; that is, the cohesive force of this area is the manifestation of a citizen attitude, which often integrates into non-profit organizations but usually remains grounded in civic cooperation (Nagy–Nizák–Vercseg 2014).

Thus, according to the NER logic, the pressure to dismantle this autonomous world, regulate its members, restrict its scope, and render it impossible is inevitable since civility, the attitude of the citizen, would potentially create space for the free exchange of ideas. The system, therefore, poisons this civil world, both in its legal environment and by shaping public opinion, as well as distorting its financing. Since the rise to power of the Orbán government in 2010, apparent efforts have been observed to gain political control over the civil sector and to pursue a governmental practice that weakens civil society (Körösényi 2015). This – and the phenomena discussed below – is what the literature calls ‘shrinking spaces,’ defined by a lack of opportunities. The danger of this process is that shrinking spaces can become closed and contested spaces (Wolf–Poppe 2015) in which the functioning of CSOs is severely limited and sometimes impossible. It is essential to see that the narrowing of opportunities is not unique to the NER; in Europe there is a growing tendency to limit CSOs, which, in Bolleyer’s (2021) view, is a consequence of the challenges of the so-called uncivil society (terrorism, crises, etc.) (Rumford 2001), while the impossibility of civil society is precisely the result of the intensification of uncivil processes (Bernhard 2020) with a lack of active actions and brakes. Yet, the domestication actions discussed in our study fall outside the term ‘uncivil society’ in that the threats claimed to be the cause of shrinking civil space are, in some cases, distorted or created and are specific in that while they constrain some organizations, they support others (Geró 2020).

In our study, methodologically based on the pillars of desk research, supplemented in several cases with “worst practice” elements, we present how the interpretability of this model, since 2010, but mainly since 2014, has been structured and solidified within a process and framework for the domestication of civil organizations. We present the legal environment that has enabled the creation of the model, the financial background, and the media environment that supports the model’s validity and illustrate its operation with specific cases. In summary, we aim to argue that the NER system is not fundamentally based on the aforementioned “laissez-faire” approach but rather on a restrictive logic, precisely one that employs a threefold methodology: support-direction, domestication, and disqualification.

The first step is the promise of support: by centralizing and controlling funding, the government signals that civil support is contingent on aligning with the NER. This approach is successful with most organizations that prioritize mission-driven goals over a political stance. In its early stages, the model required only a non-contradictory attitude toward the system, but by the 2020s, it had shifted to include only organizations that actively reinforced the NER.



If financial coercion fails, the state employs media tools to apply pressure, especially targeting organizations aligned with independent or opposition causes. This step of domestication becomes apparent as communication efforts isolate organizations with traditional civil society goals, such as monitoring state power and influence.

And if even this fails, the state uses its public power tools to enforce government will: it turns off organizations deemed neither supportable nor domesticatable. While there were numerous examples of the use of the first tool, even in cases of imperfect implementation of the democratic model in Hungary, the use of the second tool has barely any precedent. The deployment of public power tools is characteristic of a non-democratic system.

Changes in the Legal Environment

According to Article VII of Hungary's Fundamental Law, everyone has the right to form and join organizations. This foundational principle, along with its freedom, was fundamentally restructured by Act CLXXV of 2011 – on the Freedom of Association, the Status of Public Benefit, and the Operation and Financing of Civil Organizations – which comprehensively regulates the functioning of nonprofit organizations². Under the legislation, civil organizations are required to submit annual reports, which inherently disclose the sources and amounts of funding they receive. Civil organizations must operate transparently – as is expected in other sectors – since they often carry out public duties, but transparency for civil organizations was assured even before this legal regulation. However, the law introduced only apparent public benefit regulations while abolishing the previous logical system that classified organizations based on whether they served themselves (“self-benefit”), served everyone (public benefit), or carried out state responsibilities (outstanding public benefit).

The situation changed radically in 2014 with the so-called “*Tusványos speech*” by the Prime Minister: “*When I look at Hungarian civil society, ... I see that we are dealing with paid political activists here. Moreover, these paid political activists are also activists who receive funding from foreign sources. They are activists funded by identifiable foreign interest groups, intending to influence Hungarian state life at any given moment and on any given issue. A committee has also been established in the Hungarian Parliament to continuously monitor, record, and publicize the*

2 Among other things, it defines bankruptcy, liquidation, dissolution, and deletion procedures, legality oversight, the registry of civil organizations, their financial management, reporting obligations, bookkeeping, rules for public benefit status, provisions for civil information centers, regulations on state support for civil organizations, and the National Cooperation Fund. It also regulates the registration, operation, and dissolution of civil organizations. In parallel, Act CLXXXI of 2011, which governs the judicial registration of civil organizations and procedural rules, came into force. Additionally, a government decree from 2011 (350/2011) regulates the financial management, fundraising, and public benefit status of civil organizations.



acquisition of foreign influence.” (Orbán 2014) – thus clearly targeting civil organizations.

The opening act of this campaign was the so-called Norwegian case in 2014. In 2011, the Hungarian state signed a bilateral cooperation agreement with Norway regarding the Norway Civil Support Fund, which outlined the objectives, scale, and fields of development aid to be received by Hungary – covering a total of 12 fields/programs³. The Brussels-based Financial Mechanism Office administered the civil program, which selected the program’s Hungarian operator, the Ökotárs Foundation (Hungarian Environmental Partnership Foundation), through a two-round tender process (Autonómia n.d.). Eventually, this civil society organization came under scrutiny in 2014 as a “bad civil” organization with “influential” effects stemming from its redistribution of foreign funds (see later).

The next step – based on the Russian model⁴ – was Act LXXVI of 2017 on the Transparency of Organizations Supported from Abroad, which required organizations receiving over 7.2 million forints (approximately EUR 18,000) annually in foreign support to register as foreign-supported organizations. This legislation, commonly referred to as the “foreign agent law,” also mandated that these organizations disclose detailed information about all foreign supporters – whether through private donations or otherwise – and display the foreign-supported status on their websites and publications beyond the official registry.

A peculiar aspect was that the EU’s Erasmus+ program also fell under the law’s jurisdiction, requiring beneficiaries of the Erasmus+ program to register as foreign-supported organizations. The legislation was criticized by the European Court of Justice (NIOK 2021) and ultimately lost its effect in 2021⁵. The law’s significant negative impact was the stigmatization of civil organizations (TASZ 2017), which, although the legislation is no longer in effect, left lingering implications, as it suggested for years that civil organizations receiving foreign funding served foreign interests rather than or even against, community goals and Hungarian interests. Moreover, the legislation exempted sports and religious associations, political parties, trade unions, and public and political foundations from its scope, thus marking a distinction between “good” and “bad” civil organizations.

In 2018, Act CLXXV of 2011 was amended (Act XLVI of 2018) as part of the so-called “Stop Soros” legislative package, criminalizing assistance and support provided to refugees. Although the European Court of Justice also rejected this

3 Supporting and developing the civil sector was a priority for the donor (Autonómia n.d.).

4 Russia’s 2012 ‘foreign agent law’ imposed severe restrictions on NGOs receiving foreign funding, requiring mandatory registration, public labeling as ‘foreign agents’, extensive financial reporting, and frequent state audits. Organizations faced criminal penalties, fines, and disqualification from public work, while later amendments extended the law to independent journalists and media outlets. This model systematically dismantled civil society by stigmatizing and restricting foreign-funded organizations.

5 Judgment of 18 June 2020, Commission v Hungary (Transparency of associations) (C-78/18, EU:C:2020:476)



legislative package⁶, as it violated EU regulations – because it criminalized refugee aid and deemed asylum applications inadmissible (Arató 2021) – it remains in effect⁷. Another noteworthy detail is that the legislation was passed on June 20, which coincided with World Refugee Day. Although the Constitutional Court ruled that it was unlawful to threaten refugee-supporting civil organizations with imprisonment, the fact that assisting refugees remains considered illegal remains unchanged, thus intimidating all civil organizations that provide information and legal representation (Civilizáció 2023). Moreover, the legislative package targeted the Open Society Foundation, led by George Soros, which supported several Hungarian civil organizations, regardless of whether they were involved with refugees or not. Consequently, the media offensive accompanying the legislative changes labeled all such organizations as “Soros mercenaries”.

Act XLIX of 2021 further tightened regulations by targeting civil organizations engaged in activities that could influence public life. According to the law, organizations with an annual income exceeding 20 million forints (approximately EUR 50,000) are subject to special financial regulations, allowing the State Audit Office (ÁSZ) to inspect their internal documents. As a result, in 2022, ÁSZ launched investigations against several civil organizations, typically giving them an 8-day deadline to submit documents. This deadline, which was particularly burdensome for civil organizations operating with volunteers and no paid staff, clearly came at the expense of their operations.

Also, in 2021, the Child Protection Act (Act LXXIX of 2021) came into effect, conflating pedophilia and LGBTQ issues and aiming to make it impossible for organizations dealing with these topics to operate. The roughly 11-paragraph child protection section prohibits the depiction of sexual and gender minorities and the gratuitous portrayal of sexuality in schools, advertisements, various media platforms, and even bookstores⁸. Consequently, organizations addressing gender identity and equality were wholly excluded from schools. However, the legislation did not stop there: citing the law, the National Museum restricted minors under 18 from attending the 2023 World Press Photo exhibition in Helsinki.

In 2023, under the National Sovereignty Protection Act (Act LXXXVIII of 2023), the Sovereignty Protection Office was established, ostensibly to protect Hungary’s sovereignty by closely monitoring those receiving foreign funding. Still, in practice, it stigmatizes organizations involved in raising voter awareness of their rights – particularly when aided by foreign funding – thereby discouraging various civil activities. Soon after its establishment, the Office quickly began its work, investigating two organizations: Transparency International Hungary and Atlatszo.

6 Judgment of 16 November 2021, European Commission v Hungary (C-821/19, EU:C:2021:930)

7 <https://mkogy.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=A1800006.TV>

8 Hungary’s first Child Protection Act, Act XXXI of 1997, addresses child protection and guardianship administration across 190 sections.



Overall, civil society organizations, in addition to their daily activities, had to prepare for psychological warfare that could reach them at any time, either through media channels or even official procedures. This pressure disrupts operational structures and erodes the morale of staff working in high-pressure organizations. The continuous and increasingly stringent legislative pressure and the legal framework for restraining civil society organizations have not only created disillusionment and fear within the sector but have also made it clear that, regardless of whether precedent-setting proceedings are initiated, any organization (whether through a deliberate, ambiguous, or deliberately misinterpreted action) could at any moment find itself subject to targeted harassment based on the suffocating legal environment. Consequently, most organizations, having no interest in conflict, align their operations with the expectations of the NER.

Changes in the Funding Environment

As stated in the introduction, the first stage of domestication is the centralization of funding. Under the National Cooperation System (NER), the financial independence and autonomy of civil organizations have continually diminished, as evident in various measures, including the centralization of funding sources, political redistribution, and tightening of legal regulations. This process involved stigmatizing foreign-supported organizations, obscuring state support allocations, and providing preferential support to newly established government-affiliated civil organizations.

In 2011, the government abolished the National Civil Fund Program (NCA), which distributed approximately EUR 175 million (7 billion forints) annually among Hungarian civil organizations based on applications evaluated by decision-makers chosen mainly by the civil sector. In its place, the National Cooperation Fund (Nemzeti Együttműködési Alap, NEA) was established, with only one-third civil representation in decision-making, and placed under the direct control of the NER. In NEA's operations, civil organization support and influence on their political orientation became evident. In the very first call for applications in 2012, government-affiliated civil organizations received generous operational support from the budget (e.g., the Teleki László Foundation received 5 million forints (EUR 12,500), the Hungarian Melon Association 4.4 million forints (EUR 11,000), the Association of Hungarian Rural Residents 4 million forints (EUR 10,000), the Women for the Nation's Future Association 1.2 million forints (EUR 3000), and the Hungarian Women's Interests Association 3.3 million forints (EUR 8250) (Atlatszo, 2012)). The level of domestication is perfectly exemplified by a 2019 television interview with Vince Szalay-Bobrovniczky, Deputy Secretary of State for Civil and Social Relations at the Prime Minister's Office, who stated regarding NEA's resource distribution: "We strive to filter out any organization that we believe does not perform real work but primarily seeks to fulfill political goals with which we disagree." In 2020, the NEA distributed



more than 77 billion forints (19,25 million EUR), with a significant portion going to government-affiliated, mostly GONGO (Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organization) groups⁹. An example of these recipients is the Civil Cooperation Forum (Civil Összefogás Fórum, CÖF), which organizes pro-government rallies and NEA-sponsored marches and which received funding not only from NEA but also 508 million forints (EUR 1,270,000) from the state-owned Hungarian Power Companies in 2016, and 170 million forints (EUR 425,000) from a subsidiary of the state-owned Hungarian State Lottery Plc.; in 2021, they received an additional 25 million forints (EUR 62,500) from the Hungarian Development Bank, also state-owned, and another 40 million (EUR 100,000) from a subsidiary Hungarian State Lottery Plc. (Atlatszo 2022). These funds supported communication and campaign activities that reinforced the government's narrative and discredited or defamed the opposition, especially during elections. The intertwining of resource distribution and political domestication is further underscored by the appointment of László Csizmadia as the head of NEA upon its creation. Csizmadia, who also founded and serves as the spokesperson for CÖF, served as the president of the NEA council from 2012 to 2020.

In NEA, the decision-making positions reserved for civil representatives – a minority share of one-third – were often filled by government-affiliated applicants and their organizations, who then used NEA resources to finance their campaigns, thereby closing the circle.

Those above the 2017 “foreign agent law” marginalized many civil organizations that received foreign support. One example is the Foundation for Humanity, which works on human rights and had previously won multiple grants but was barred from accessing Erasmus+ funds due to its opposition to the legislation, making it impossible to continue some of its programs (Telex 2022).

The political distribution of state support has become decisive in the civil sector. In addition to NEA, the government established the Urban Civil Fund in 2019 to support local civil organizations. In 2021, the Urban Civil Fund distributed over 4 billion forints (approximately EUR 10,000,000), with a significant portion allocated to government-affiliated organizations. Approximately 60% of the funds were allocated to NEA-aligned organizations (Zubor 2022). Among the most prominent beneficiaries was the organization “Civilians in the Name of the Holy Crown,” which received 500 million forints (EUR 1,250,000). Other significant beneficiaries included the Carpathian Basin Youth Association (350 million forints, approximately EUR 875,000), the National Association of Hungarian Families (250 million forints, roughly EUR 625,000), and the Network for Families (200 million forints, approximately EUR 500,000). The Hungarian Christian Democratic Association, a politically affiliated organization, was also among the supported groups.

9 GONGOs (Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organizations) are civil organizations created, operated, and funded by a given state's government to conduct political activities domestically or internationally that support that government's policies, or, in some cases, to secure foreign funding (Hasmath 2019).



The geographical distribution of grants is also telling, as in regions dominated by the Fidesz government, such as Northern Hungary and the Southern Great Plain, 70% and 65% of grants, respectively, went to NER-affiliated civil organizations. Generally, the fund's resources often went to local civil organizations that did not primarily focus on local community development, thereby reinforcing the government's political messages.

Meanwhile, organizations focused on gender equality, for example, are almost entirely excluded from state funding opportunities. Many marginalized organizations repeatedly applied for NEA grants but received no support, while others stopped applying as early as 2011 and never attempted it again (Szikra et al. 2020, p. 114).

The government is also not interested in strong, autonomous advocacy organizations, as genuine involvement of civil entities in the decision-making mechanism would contradict centralization efforts; however, these organizations may play specific limited legitimizing roles. An example is the umbrella organization created for youth advocacy, the National Youth Council, which began its operations in 2011, although it was officially registered only in 2015. After registration, a government takeover within the organization occurred in 2016, sidelining the truly professional civil members (Nagy–Szeifer 2016), and from then on, with increased financial resources, the organization only supported issues aligned with the government's ideology, remaining silent on topics like the "Stop Soros" legislative package or the stigmatization of students protesting for education (Oross–Nagy–Szalóki 2019). Similar governmental control can be observed in many advocacy organizations, which does not necessarily obstruct their work but does dictate their operational boundaries and scope of activities, limiting autonomy.

The examples reveal that the government is increasingly restricting the resources available to autonomous civil organizations while setting conditions undermining their independence and values. Thus, those unwilling to apply for domestic resources must turn to foreign funds. What is novel is not that the current government allocates resources to civil organizations close to it but that it reshapes the funding environment to compel civil sector actors to interpret themselves within a narrative aligned with government policy.

Media Environment, Governmental and Pro-Government Pressure

Beyond the laws, public statements and smear campaigns against civil organizations are regularly featured in state media (Ökotárs 2024). This propaganda constructs a narrative around civil society that emphasizes stigmatization, a sharp division between "good" and "bad" civil organizations, and fosters general hostility toward the concept of civil society.

Regarding civil organizations, the media amplifies the aim of undermining positive public opinion and reinforcing a stigmatization narrative (Móra et al. 2021).



In the summer of 2013, a list appeared in the weekly magazine *Heti Válasz* (Bódis 2013), naming 13 organizations identified as “Soros-supported” entities, which were funded by the Open Society Institute (OSI), the Center for American Progress, the Center for Reproductive Rights, and the Trust for Civil Society. The article suggested an international conspiracy theory, with George Soros as its primary driver, funding “bad” civil organizations in opposition to Hungarian interests from the United States. Later, in the media campaign connected to the so-called “Stop Soros” legislative package of 2018 (see later), organizations associated with OSI found themselves not only in the national but also in regional and local media’s cross-hairs, with social media platforms amplifying terms and stereotypes like “Soros office,” “Soros nest,” and “Soros soldier,” spreading and reinforcing these labels. These keywords sporadically appear across media channels, functioning as part of the NER media¹⁰.

A notable shift in media pressure against civil society emerged with the rise of Megafon, an organized effort to shape social media narratives. The network, claiming a “right-wing digital freedom fight,” argued that the right’s voice needed amplification to counterbalance the dominance of the “liberal mainstream” on the internet (Megafon n.d.). In addition to training, daily content production is among its tasks, and these reports target not only nationally significant organizations but also regionally focused civil groups¹¹. With a well-established structure, they bolster anti-civil rhetoric nationwide and devote significant attention locally to ensuring the constructed narrative remains persistent. Any organization can become a target, such as the Mikepércs Mothers for the Environment Association, which advocates for transparency in local state investments in the eastern part of the country. In the propaganda’s interpretation, their work opposes significant investments, and thus, the Hungarian economy is allegedly influenced by foreign funding that affects national interests.

The government plays an especially active role in shaping the activities of legal and advocacy organizations, which, although operating independently of political parties, often find their activities interpreted within a similar sphere. During the so-called “Soros campaign,” which targeted civil organizations supported by the wealthy patron, many human rights civil organizations became targets of government attacks.

10 For example, concerning the U.S. Ambassador’s visit: “Pressman held a briefing at the Soros nest in Debrecen” (Magyar Nemzet 2024), and there are opinion pieces discussing “Soros mercenaries” (Magyar Nemzet 2024). Even in 2023, Orbán Balázs, the Prime Minister’s political director, used rhetoric characteristic of combat situations, referring to “Soros soldiers” on his public social media platform when the Open Society Foundation announced it would place greater emphasis on regions outside Europe (Orbán n.d.). On a local level, a specific Facebook page was created opposing the “Soros office” under the name We Don’t Want a Soros Office in Debrecen (We Don’t Want n.d.), and the local 1693.hu website also featured an introduction to the “Soros nest” in Debrecen (1693 n.d.).

11 In Pécs, a money bag was placed in front of a civil organization’s headquarters, while in Debrecen, “rolling dollars” were thrown into mailboxes following the U.S. Ambassador’s visit.



A telling example is the government's "National Consultation on the Soros Plan" (444 2017), where Amnesty International Hungary and the Helsinki Committee are explicitly listed as organizations that supposedly threaten national sovereignty¹² (Kákai 2020). Through smear campaigns, pro-government media outlets attempt to reshape public opinion by framing civil organizations as members of international networks intent on toppling the government.

Public Power Tools in Service of the NER

In terms of public power tools, government-led harassment and other repressive measures are particularly evident, and these actions often have lasting consequences, even if it later turns out that there was no violation of legal or ethical norms. By then, the damage has been done, leading to significant distortions in social structures.

The conflict surrounding the Norwegian Civil Support Fund (NCSF) began in 2014 when the Hungarian government attempted to gain influence over autonomous funding sources. The Norwegian government financed the program as compensation for access to the free market and supported organizations that focused on protecting democratic values (Kákai 2020). The distribution of the fund's resources was coordinated by the Ökotárs Foundation, which the government claimed was politically biased as it supported organizations that criticized the functioning of the state, such as Transparency International and K-Monitor. The Government Control Office conducted multiple raids on Ökotárs and other civil organizations, with some individuals even being taken away in handcuffs, though no irregularities were found (Glied–Kákai 2017; Bíró 2019). The support system was eventually shut down in 2021 after the Hungarian and Norwegian governments could not agree on the program's continuation.

The NER's domestication intentions took an extreme form concerning welfare civil society organizations. The tension between the Hungarian Evangelical Fellowship (MET) and the government was addressed in 2011 when the government revoked its church status. According to the related legislation, religious communities not explicitly named were required to reapply for official recognition; however, MET did not receive this official acknowledgment. As a result, the organization lost the rights and financial support previously necessary to maintain its institutions

¹² In the national consultation launched in October 2017, the fifth statement read: "George Soros also wants migrants to receive lighter sentences for crimes they commit." The explanation mentions two organizations: "George Soros provides substantial funding to organizations that support immigration and defend migrants who commit illegal acts. One such organization is the Helsinki Committee, which argued regarding the illegal crossing of the border that applying severe legal consequences for unlawful entry is questionable. Another Soros organization, Amnesty International, repeatedly demanded the release of Ahmed H., who attacked Hungarian police officers defending the border with stones and was subsequently convicted. Amnesty would even seek compensation from the Hungarian state."



– including schools, social services, and homeless shelters. Due to the conflict, the functioning of MET’s various social and charitable services was jeopardized. In 2024, the operating licenses for schools managed by MET were revoked just six days before the start of the school year (MET 2024). Although the European Court of Human Rights determined that the Hungarian government had violated MET’s right to freedom of religion,¹³ the domestic legal and political situation remained unchanged, and the government has continued to sabotage the religious community’s church status since 2011.

On January 1, 2024, the Sovereignty Protection Office (Szuverenitásvédelmi Hivatal, SZH) was established, with a statute claiming it was designed to respond to foreign interventions threatening national sovereignty. However, one of its first actions was to investigate the investigative news portal *Atlatszo* and Transparency International Hungary (Szabadeurópa 2024). *Atlatszo* has long been one of the most critical independent watchdogs in Hungarian public life, often exposing corruption cases, and it operates as an internationally recognized independent medium. However, the Office accused the organization of serving foreign interests. These investigations impose administrative burdens on *Atlatszo* and seek to damage its reputation, undermining the trust it has built with the public. Transparency International Hungary (TI) also became a target of the Office. The anti-corruption organization, committed to the rule of law and transparency, has disclosed numerous cases involving the government over the past years. In TI’s case, the Office also cited foreign funding as grounds for investigation. According to the SZH’s findings, “the organization operates as part of a more than thirty-year-old global lobbying network, conducting political pressure activities aligned with the interests of great powers behind this network” (SZH 2024), allegedly serving American interests. The Office further stated that TI “seeks to portray Hungary and its administrative bodies in a negative light. The organization inflicts genuine political, economic, and social harm in Hungary through its shadow reports, which contain disinformation submitted to the European Commission.” This action closely mirrors the harassment of civil organizations in Russia during the 2010s. It is ironic, given that, before the NER era, today’s leading figures within the NER frequently referenced TI reports. However, the SZH’s domestication role is most evident in its investigation, under the guise of sovereignty protection, of the Göd Environmental and Urban Protection Association, primarily involved in uncovering legal violations related to the battery factory near the town of Göd (Gulyás 2024). The use of public agencies (such as tax authorities, offices, and investigative bodies) against civil organizations has, by 2024, shifted from sporadic, specific cases to a planned, systemic, and generalized practice.

¹³ Magyarország v. Evangélikumi Testvérközösség v. Hungary (Application no. 54977/12)



“It is Finished” – Conclusion

In our study, we aimed to demonstrate that the NER’s so-called “domestication” strategy regarding civil society and the measures employed to achieve it explicitly seek to weaken democratic institutions and structures and dismantle civil society’s independence. These independent institutions and organizations – many of which carry out state responsibilities – are often framed as enemies within government policy and rhetoric, rendering their autonomous and legitimate operations a perceived threat to the government that shapes this rhetoric. Since 2010, and especially since 2014, the state has established a system that addresses the lack of transparency among civil organizations, placing civil society under increasingly tight control. Through this pressure, it offers two choices: domesticate initially autonomous organizations or strive to render them ineffective. To this end, the government utilizes state resources or the promise thereof, its media dominance, and does not hesitate to employ its public powers – an approach foreign to democratic societal structures – to turn off autonomous civil organizations.

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