cogitatio

POLITICS AND GOVERNANCE

Democratic Backsliding and Organized Interests in Central and Eastern Europe

Volume 11

Issue 1

2023

Open Access Journal

ISSN: 2183-2463

Edited by Michael Dobbins and Rafael Labanino

Politics and Governance, 2023, Volume 11, Issue 1
Democratic Backsliding and Organized Interests in Central and Eastern Europe

Published by Cogitatio Press
Rua Fialho de Almeida 14, 2º Esq.,
1070-129 Lisbon
Portugal

Academic Editors
Michael Dobbins (University of Konstanz)
Rafael Labanino (University of Konstanz)

Available online at: www.cogitatiopress.com/politicsandgovernance

Table of Contents

Politics and Governance (ISSN: 2183–2463)
2023, Volume 11, Issue 1, Pages 1–4
https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v11i1.6532

Editorial

Democratic Backsliding and Organized Interests in Central and Eastern Europe: An Introduction

Rafael Labanino * and Michael Dobbins

Department of Politics and Public Administration, University of Konstanz, Germany

* Corresponding author (rafael.labanino@uni-konstanz.de)

Submitted: 25 November 2022 | Published: 13 January 2023

Abstract
This editorial introduces readers to the thematic issue on organized interests in the context of democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe.

Keywords
civil society; democratic backsliding; organized interests; post-communism; social movements

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

1. Democratic Backsliding and Organized Interests: A New Research Agenda

The regression of democratic quality and the emergence of competitive authoritarian regimes have been among the main political phenomena across the globe over the past 20 years (Levitksy & Way, 2020). There is, however, a large variance in the severity of de-democratization between regions and countries as international indices of democratic quality attest (Coppedge et al., 2022; Repucci, 2020). As Bermeo (2016) emphasizes, democratic backsliding in the 21st century so far does not necessarily lead to full dictatorships. Most regimes, even the more repressive ones, retain basic institutions of electoral democracies. Apart from Russia and Belarus, in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) the nature of the power grab and re-engineering of political institutions are more subtle. Scheppele (2018) called the strategy of these governments of constant constitutional and legal tinkering to achieve authoritarian ends—and attacking and capturing institutions supposedly checking the executive—"autocratic legalism."

Nevertheless, CEE governments have visibly and increasingly engaged in state capture to the extent that parties either monopolize key state institutions such as courts and enterprises or that "public power is exercised mainly for private gain" (Sata & Karolewski, 2020, p. 208). Indeed, much scholarly attention has been devoted to the nature and development of democratic backsliding and the hybrid regimes in CEE (Bánkuti et al., 2012; Buzogany, 2017; Enyedi, 2020; Hanley & Vachudova, 2018; Magyar, 2016). Observers have emphasized that there is no uniform neo-authoritarian recipe for governance in the region. While Hungary has been characterized by overtly authoritarian nationalism centered around Viktor Orbán since 2010 (Kelemen, 2017; Scheiring, 2020), Poland exhibits somewhat more pluralistic dynamics both between rivalling factions within the governing party and within the party system in general (Sata & Karolewski, 2020). Under Andrej Babiš' Ano party, Czech politics has, by contrast, been characterized by a newer brand of managerial populism purportedly based on technocratic and entrepreneurial principles (Buštíková & Guasti, 2019).

Yet we still know relatively little about how democratic backsliding has re-shaped the linkages between governments and civil society. Indeed, a few recent studies have addressed some aspects of the effect of backsliding on civil society in CEE. Greskovits (2020) and Ekiert (2019) explored the grass-roots support for illiberal

incumbents, the emergence of "illiberal civil society organizations," and networks aligned with authoritarian and nationalist objectives. Gerő et al. (2020) demonstrated that the closure of the political opportunity structure (POS) in Hungary is prompting regime-hostile groups to withdraw from policy-makers altogether. In a Polish-Slovenian comparison, Kamiński and Riedel (2021) conclude that Polish organizations are currently enduring greater existential threats than their Slovenian counterparts. Yet, an analysis by Pospieszna and Vetulani-Cęgiel (2021) also showed that Polish interest groups are well capable of enhancing their networking strategies to navigate the increasingly authoritarian context.

Despite these advancements, there are still few theory-driven accounts on how backsliding affects such key themes of interest group research such as organizational development, lobbying strategies, access to policy-makers, or interest articulation. This is surprising as backsliding clearly affects the deliberative component of democracy crucial for interest articulation, representation, and intermediation. As the Varieties of Democracy Indices shows (Coppedge et al., 2022), the deliberative component of democracy has declined since EU access—on average by 0.11 points on a scale from 0 (*low*) to 1 (*high*) in 11 CEE member states. We graphed the yearly scores for the six CEE countries the contributions in this thematic issue cover (Figure 1).

Nevertheless, the widely observed closing of the political space, the strengthening of the executive, and political centralization may have a counter-effect, namely jumpstarting anti-regime civic activity and prompting organizations to re-calibrate and enhance their advocacy strategies. In other words, democratic backsliding may stimulate the "coming of age" of interest groups as more defiant, responsive, and strategically diversified organizations, a development potentially stimulated by the coronavirus and the associated shift towards digital technology. Furthermore, the closure of the political opportunity structure may contribute to social mobilization strategies of NGOs excluded from decision-making structures.

However, even if many interest groups show so far remarkable resilience to even the odds, after a certain level, de-democratization might threaten their very existence. To keep on struggling can eventually prove to be futile in an increasingly closing and hostile political environment, amid harassment from the authorities, attacks by government-controlled media, and ever scarcer financial resources. This would truly be a tragic outcome in a region, where civil society groups played a definitive role in bringing down communism and in the subsequent democratic transition just three decades ago.

2. Introducing the Articles in This Issue

The thematic issue systematically addresses the impact of democratic backsliding on organized interests in the post-communist region. It comprises a diverse selection

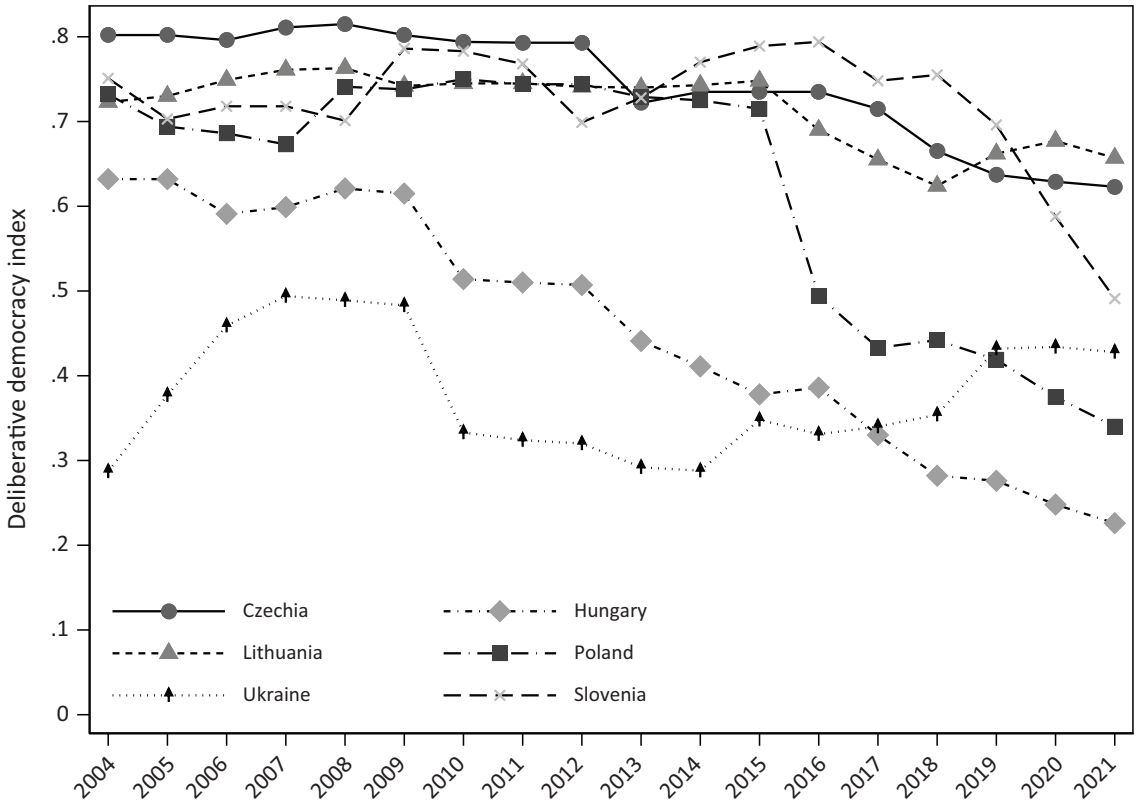

Figure 1. Annual development of the V-DEM deliberative democracy index in selected CEE countries, 2004-2021. Source: Coppedge et al. (2022).

of theory-driven empirical accounts embedded in current interest groups and civil society research from scholars based both in Eastern and Western Europe. The six articles cover six countries across CEE: Czechia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine, and Slovenia.

Four articles in the issue are single case studies based both on interviews and secondary sources. Richter (2023) explores how vested interests were the drivers behind democratic backsliding with a focus on anti-corruption reform processes. The analysis highlights that civil society actors allied with Western pro-democracy donor organizations played a pivotal role in the containment of backsliding attempts in Ukraine. Gerő et al. (2023) find that the Orbán government applies sector-specific strategies against civil society organizations. In general, the closing of opportunity structures seems to enhance participatory activism in Hungary, while "Gongoization"—i.e., co-optation by the illiberal incumbent—is most pronounced among "traditionalist" women's organizations.

Two articles investigate how the Janša government's attempt at an illiberal power grab, between 2020 and 2022, affected interest groups in Slovenia. In their contribution, Novak and Lajh (2023) provide a systematic analysis of the repressive measures against civil society organizations and the different modes of civil mobilization against them. Janša made it much more expensive for CSOs to function because of an increased administrative burden. At the same time, he restricted their financial resources: both funds in general and for their services were reduced. Fink-Hafner and Bauman (2023) compare the responses of Slovenian trade unions and environmental NGOs. Their study finds that the ideational homogeneity of trade unions enabled them to jointly shift towards outside lobbying strategies, namely, protest. In contrast, the fragmented environmental NGOs could not develop any joint perception of illiberalism and, thereby, failed to adapt.

Two articles are comparative studies. Berkhout et al. (2023) examine the internal democracy of interest groups. Based on the Comparative Interest Group Surveys (Beyers et al., 2020) they examine the internal decision-making processes of Dutch, Belgian, Portuguese, Swedish, Polish, Slovenian, and Lithuanian interest groups. They find that post-communist interest groups have more internally organized influence on policy-related organizational decision-making compared to their Western counterparts, where members have a weaker voice.

Finally, based on a new survey of 428 Czech, Hungarian, Polish, and Slovenian interest groups (Dobbins et al., 2022), Labanino and Dobbins (2023) explore whether backsliding turns interest groups away from lobbying at the national level towards the EU or the regional levels. Their article finds that it is rather the closure of the political opportunity structure in general than a lack of individual group access to policy-makers that explains moving away from the backsliding national level towards the supra- or sub-national levels. However, on a more positive note, they also find that internal development (professionalization) and domestic inter-group cooperation are key organizational resources even in the context of democratic backsliding.

Acknowledgments

The authors acknowledge generous funding from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG – German Research Foundation) and Narodowe Centrum Nauki (NCN – National Science Center).

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

Bánkuti, M., Halmai, G., & Scheppele, K. L. (2012). Hungary's illiberal turn: Disabling the constitution. *Journal of Democracy*, *23*(3), 138–146. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2012.0054

Berkhout, J., Beyers, J., & Hanegraaff, M. (2023). The representative potential of interest groups: Internal voice in post-communist and western European countries. *Politics and Governance*, *11*(1), 50–64.

Bermeo, N. (2016). On democratic backsliding. *Journal of Democracy*, *27*(1), 5–19. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0012

Beyers, J., Fink-Hafner, D., Maloney, W. A., Novak, M., & Heylen, F. (2020). The comparative interest group-survey project: Design, practical lessons, and data sets. *Interest Groups & Advocacy*, *9*(3), 272–289. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41309-020-00082-0

Buštíková, L., & Guasti, P. (2019). The state as a firm: Understanding the autocratic roots of technocratic populism. *East European Politics and Societies*, *33*(2), 302–330. https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325418791723

Buzogany, A. (2017). Illiberal democracy in Hungary: Authoritarian diffusion or domestic causation? *Democratization*, *24*(7), 1307–1325. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2017.1328676

Coppedge, M., Gerring, J., Knutsen, C. H., Lindberg, S. I., Teorell, J., Alizada, N., Altman, D., Bernhard, M., Cornell, A., Fish, M. S., Gastaldi, L., Gjerløw, H., Glynn, A., Grahn, S., Hicken, A., Hindle, G., Ilchenko, N., Kinzelbach, K., Krusell, J., . . . Ziblatt, D. (2022). *V-Dem dataset v12* [Data set]. V-Dem. https://www.v-dem.net/data/the-v-dem-dataset

Dobbins, M., Labanino, R. P., Riedel, R., Czarnecki, S., Horváth, B., & Szyszkowska, E. (2022). Organized interests in post-communist policy-making: A new dataset for comparative research. *Interest Groups & Advocacy*. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41309-022-00172-1

Ekiert, G. (2019). The dark side of civil society. In J. Zakowski (Ed.), *Concilium Civitas almanach*

2019/2020 (pp. 39–59). Concilium Civitas. http://conciliumcivitas.pl/the-dark-side-of-civil-society/

Enyedi, Z. (2020). Right-wing authoritarian innovations in Central and Eastern Europe. *East European Politics*, *36*(3), 363–377. https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2020.1787162

Fink-Hafner, D., & Bauman, S. (2023). Interest group strategic responses to democratic backsliding. *Politics and Governance*, *11*(1), 39–49.

Gerő, M., Fejős, A., Kerényi, S., & Szikra, D. (2023). From exclusion to co-optation: Political opportunity structures and civil society responses in de-democratising Hungary. *Politics and Governance*, *11*(1), 16–27.

Gerő, M., Susánszky, P., Kopper, Á., & Tóth, G. (2020). Strategies for survival: Human rights organizations' responses to the closing of political opportunity structures in Hungary. *Politologický časopis—Czech Journal of Political Science*, *2020*(2), 119–139. https://doi.org/10.5817/PC2020-2-119

Greskovits, B. (2020). Rebuilding the Hungarian right through conquering civil society: The Civic Circles Movement. *East European Politics*, *36*(2), 247–266. https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2020.1718657

Hanley, S., & Vachudova, M. A. (2018). Understanding the illiberal turn: Democratic backsliding in the Czech Republic. *East European Politics*, *34*(3), 276–296. https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2018.1493457

Kamiński, P., & Riedel, R. (2021). When illiberalism looms-mortality anxiety and the perceived existential threat among Polish and Slovenian interest groups. *Interest Groups & Advocacy*, *10*(4), 454–477. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41309-021-00135-y

Kelemen, R. D. (2017). Europe's other democratic deficit: National authoritarianism in Europe's democratic union. *Government and Opposition*, *52*(2), 211–238. https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2016.41

Labanino, R., & Dobbins, M. (2023). Multilevel venue shopping amid democratic backsliding in new European Union member states. *Politics and Governance*, *11*(1), 65–79.

Levitksy, S., & Way, L. A. (2020). The new competitive authoritarianism. *Journal of Democracy*, *31*(1), 51–65. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0004

Magyar, B. (2016). *Post-communist mafia state. The case of Hungary*. Central European University Press.

Novak, M., & Lajh, D. (2023). Challenges facing organised interests under a populist right-wing government in Slovenia. *Politics and Governance*, *11*(1), 28–38.

Pospieszna, P., & Vetulani-Cęgiel, A. (2021). Polish interest groups facing democratic backsliding. *Interest Groups & Advocacy*. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41309-021-00119-y

Repucci, S. (2020). *Freedom in the world 2020. A leaderless struggle for democracy*. Freedom House. https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/FIW_2020_REPORT_BOOKLET_Final.pdf

Richter, M. M. (2023). The diversity of actors in reform backsliding and its containment in the Ukrainian hybrid regime. *Politics and Governance*, *11*(1), 5–15.

Sata, R., & Karolewski, I. P. (2020). Caesarean politics in Hungary and Poland. *East European Politics*, *36*(2), 206–225. https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2019.1703694

Scheiring, G. (2020). The political economy of illiberalism. In G. Scheiring (Ed.), *The retreat of liberal democracy: Authoritarian capitalism and the accumulative state in Hungary* (pp. 51–93). Springer Nature. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-48752-2_2

Scheppele, K. L. (2018). Autocratic legalism. *The University of Chicago Law Review*, *85*(2), 545–584. www.jstor.org/stable/26455917

About the Authors

Rafael Labanino is a research fellow at the Department of Politics and Public Administration, University of Konstanz, in the project The Missing Link: Examining Organized Interests in Post-Communist Policy-Making. His main areas of research are social policy, social dialogue, higher education policy, democratization, and organized interests in Central and Eastern Europe.

Michael Dobbins is an adjunct professor of policy analysis at the University of Konstanz. His doctoral thesis dealt with higher education in Central and Eastern Europe. His main areas of research are higher and secondary education policy and post-communist transformation processes. He is the co-director of the research project The Missing Link: Examining Organized Interests in Post-Communist Policy-Making funded by the German DFG and Polish NCN.

Politics and Governance (ISSN: 2183–2463)
2023, Volume 11, Issue 1, Pages 5–15
https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v11i1.5862

Article

The Diversity of Actors in Reform Backsliding and Its Containment in the Ukrainian Hybrid Regime

Michael Martin Richter [1,2]

[1] Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen, Germany; richterm@uni-bremen.de
[2] Bremen International Graduate School of Social Sciences, Germany

Submitted: 31 May 2022 | Accepted: 9 September 2022 | Published: 13 January 2023

Abstract
Numerous studies on democratic backsliding mostly focus on the state executive as a driving force. In contrast, the analysis presented here highlights the role of vested interests as the main actors behind backsliding processes in hybrid regimes. In a focused case study of anti-corruption reforms in Ukraine, this contribution analyses the initiation of backsliding by these actors through their influence on nominally independent branches of power as well as the subtle takeover of the legislative repair process that followed. The case study is based on original semi-structured expert interviews and document analysis. The main argument is that the distinct role played by the state executive also substantially changes the interaction between the actors involved. For the case of Ukraine, the study shows that the leverage of Western organisations in conjunction with the expertise and swift reaction of Ukrainian civil society organisations constitute a necessary precondition for the containment of backsliding attempts.

Keywords
backsliding; civil society; democracy promotion; European Union; hybrid regimes; International Monetary Fund; Ukraine; vested interests; Western donors

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

1. Introduction

Much of the scholarship on backsliding—defined here as a relative power expansion of systemic insiders vis-à-vis outsiders through the violation of democratic principles—sees the executive branch, or sometimes more generally the incumbent or simply ruler, as the leading force behind this process (Cassani & Tomini, 2020; Dresden & Howard, 2016; Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Hale, 2015).

However, this exclusive angle runs the risk of omitting backsliding attempts initiated by and for the sake of vested interests (VIs) outside the formal political arena. Recent publications have highlighted the relative neglect of this angle in the backsliding literature despite its theoretical relevance (Jee et al., 2022). And although missing yet a generally accepted and applicable theory, noteworthy studies on backsliding consider “that a coalitional approach is worth taking very seriously, perhaps centrally” (Waldner & Lust, 2018, p. 108). VIs are “people and groups [that]…receive…material benefits…[which] are being directly provided to them by the institution [they have a VI in]” (Moe, 2015, p. 289). They are crucial for understanding the dynamics of hybrid regimes, particularly those characterised by “state capture” (Hellman et al., 2003). In such a polity, policymaking is significantly shaped by “individuals [that] spend resources trying to influence the state to create the rents they want” (Khan, 2000, p. 74).

Ukraine is usually seen as a good example of a state capture case (Balmaceda, 2007). There, VIs continue to block a transition towards a fully democratic regime, whilst their role in the dynamics of hybrid regimes remains more ambiguous as they have reportedly

switched political camps, hence coalitions, depending on their expected benefits (Hale, 2005; Pleines, 2019; Way, 2021). Despite this, the scholarship on Ukraine focused predominantly on democratisation processes, through which it investigated the failure to progress towards a fully democratic state (Králiková, 2022), or explained specific cases where reforms have succeeded on a smaller scale (Nizhnikau, 2020). The literature on backsliding focused on monocausal explanations, such as the influence and quality of civil society alone (Knott, 2018). However, a strand has emerged in the scholarship that sees the interplay between international and domestic actors promoting democratic transformation as crucial in explaining outcomes (Nitsova et al., 2018; Samokhvalov & Strelkov, 2021). Yet, whilst providing a multicausal approach, these studies currently focus on the democratisation drive alone.

Accounting for these shortcomings, this article empirically investigates a major anti-corruption backsliding attempt in Ukraine from the perspective of VI groups. It does so from the understanding that "today's trends in backsliding are rational reactions to international incentives as well as domestic history" (Bermeo, 2016, p. 15). It, therefore, seeks to explain the actors, the timing, and the instruments of backsliding initiation by Ukrainian VIs, the subtle capture attempt by nominally reformist forces during the repair process, as well as the containment by networks of democracy promotion. This article not only contributes to the literature on Ukraine but to the broader academic discourse on backsliding, highlighting the thus far relatively neglected role of diverse VIs outside of the formal political arena and flexible coalitions as crucial factors in this process.

To proceed with the argument, this study elaborates on the domestic and international characteristics of the Ukrainian case. The role of VIs, the collusion of politics and economics, and networks of democracy promotion in hybrid regimes in general and Ukraine specifically will be presented with a special reference to the existing (backsliding) literature and its gaps. Subsequently, the methodological and case selection approach will be explained. Section 4 presents the empirical assessment of the case. In the end, the results are summarised and connected to the broader academic discourse.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. The Case of Ukraine: A Plurality of Vested Interests as Actors of Democratic Erosion

VIs are an integral part of political processes in all polities (Moe, 2015). From an analytical perspective, these actors have been described as "key forces for stability" (Moe, 2015, p. 279) due to their resistance to policy changes threatening their benefits. One such fundamental change would be a democratic transformation of a hybrid regime, hence opening and levelling the institutional playing field in the political economy. In the event of a push towards democratisation, different VI groups might join forces, hence establishing coalitions of different sorts, to preserve the system "on the basis of the common plundering of their own state" (Balmaceda, 2007, p. 141).

Ukraine is characterised by a nominal democratisation path, as visible by the signature of the Association Agreement (Wolczuk, 2018), and a factually strong presence of various VI groups. These VIs are grouped around different, relatively fluid political economy coalitions that are a central feature of the system (Way, 2021). The continuous influence of these groups is usually put forward to explain the failure to achieve a democratisation breakthrough (European Court of Auditors, 2021). In the Ukrainian context, these VIs are known as "oligarchs," individuals holding both substantial economic and political power. The collusion of economics and politics is a general feature of non-democratic regimes (Kupatadze, 2015), but in the case of state capture, it is the former yielding more control over the latter than the other way around. Through it, the stability of an incumbent depends on the support of such a group or groups (Baez-Camargo & Ledeneva, 2017).

The system in Ukraine can be described as "neopatrimonialism" (Nizhnikau, 2020). It is a result of both Soviet legacies, most notably "patrimonial communism," as well as deliberate choices by politicians during the post-Soviet transformation period (Hale, 2005, p. 149). In Soviet times, this system was characterised by "low levels of bureaucratic professionalism…high levels of corruption and nepotism, few opportunities for contestation, little to no economic freedom, high degree of restrictiveness and isolationism, and no access to the West" (Dimitrova-Grajzl & Simon, 2010, p. 210). Although the system nominally changed, it was still argued that "the whole class of political elites, though *plural and competitive*, are profoundly cut off from the citizenry…[and] corrupt, self-interested, and ineffective" (Carothers, 2002, p. 10). An important feature of VI groups and coalitions in the Ukrainian system, which contrasts with countries like Russia and the Soviet period, is "pluralism by default" (Way, 2021). It is rooted in the regional divisions of the country. Through it, different VI groups could appeal to their respective constituencies, but rarely to the constituencies of their rivals, through which they possessed a secured power base that led to a *relative* balance of powers (Nasuti, 2016).

Taking regional divisions and post-Soviet legacies together, the transformation path has brought about a system in which a high degree of competition among interest groups is complemented by a relatively closed system and a weak executive (Balmaceda, 2013). This competition also takes place in the formal playing field, as parliamentary loyalties in Ukraine are usually divided into different informal loyalties to oligarchs (European Court of Auditors, 2021). As such, parties have been described as "loose affiliations…which are subject to change when the interests of the oligarch leading it

change" (Cleary, 2016, p. 12), whilst elections are characterised as a "part of a broader game" (Balmaceda, 2013, p. 11). This "game" is amplified by media control ("media capture") that most of these oligarchs possess, skewing the electoral playing field further (Knott, 2018).

However, just as VIs create (temporary) coalitions to prevent a throughout democratisation in a state capture regime, they also prevent the monopolisation of power of a winning side. This setting is largely attributed to the relative balance caused by regional divisions (Way, 2021) and is seen as a "panacea against autocratic backsliding" (Pikulik, 2019, p. 493). It contributes to Ukraine's continuity as a hybrid regime, although with changing degrees of openness, which can be framed as *regime dynamics* (Hale, 2015, p. 486). Backsliding stands in this respect for negative changes within the *existing framework of a hybrid regime*, that is, the regression of previous democratisation progress.

Therefore, contrary to theorisations of autocratic backsliding that are a sign of a relative strengthening of the executive (Dresden & Howard, 2016; Hale, 2015), reform backsliding in state capture regimes can be initiated by VIs in times of a weakening state executive. This is in alignment with the general insight that "backsliding reflects incentive structures" (Bermeo, 2016, p. 17). In the Ukrainian case, for instance, political crises between temporarily aligned actors of nominally reformist forces have been used by agents hostile to reforms. This was the case under the reform-oriented President Yushchenko, who had to align with the pro-Russian Yanukovych and appoint him as prime minister in 2006 due to a deteriorating coalition with the grouping of Tymoshenko, an oligarch herself. In supporting the President, the latter in turn managed to halt reforms as well as stop corruption investigations on the oligarch Renat Akhmetov, a close ally of Yanukovych (Nasuti, 2016).

2.2. The Interplay Between Western Donors and Local Civil Society Organisations as a Counterweight

The previous case also showcases the flexibility among VIs regarding coalitions and their fluidity. Another example is Petro Poroshenko, oligarch turned politician, who served, among others, as minister of economy under Yanukovych in 2012, when Ukraine experienced arguably the most severe case of backsliding in its post-Soviet history (Kudelia, 2014). Despite this, he became the face of the imminent post-Yanukovych time as the country's first elected president after Euromaidan. He was responsible for Ukraine's remarkable, although limited, short-term democratisation push. This can be explained by the outstanding importance of domestic and international constraints imposed on the ruling class in hybrid regimes (Dresden & Howard, 2016).

External pressure is described as a central constraint in the literature (Hale, 2015). In the Ukrainian context, the signature of the Association Agreement, the corresponding import of an entire legislative framework, and the associated conditionalities are key examples of the interplay between pressure and incentives exercised by external actors. However, the influence that third parties may exercise in promoting democratisation, or preventing backsliding, is hereby conditional on economic and/or financial constraints that the government faces (Andrews, 2013). That is because the decision to implement conditional reforms or not underlies a cost-benefit analysis. This explains why the track record of reforms in Ukraine was particularly strong in the direct aftermath of the Euromaidan, as war and potential financial collapse threatened the state and increased its reliance on Western funds (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022). In addition, it has been argued that the influence of one actor can additionally be constrained by the presence of another actor that serves as a counterweight, putting forward what is known as "rival conditionality" (Ademmer, 2016). Such an actor, like Russia in the Ukrainian case, who focuses much more on geopolitical demands than good governance conditionality, served for a long time as an alternative pole for (financial) support for some of the VI groups. This highlights the important role of Ukraine in the geopolitical contestation between the EU/West and Russia.

This also explains differences among VI groups. Some of them, particularly those in the executive, might be dependent on Western aid to keep the country financially afloat, public grievances at bay, and thus their formal position secure. From this perspective, they are then forced to initiate, at least formally, democratisation reforms. However, there are continuous attempts to undermine these reforms either in the process or ex-post as they hit the very benefits of VI groups, particularly when they concern far-reaching anti-corruption measures.

This leads to a crucial limitation of foreign, Western actors in preventing backsliding in hybrid regimes: the ambiguity of many decisions and their interactions with aspects such as sovereignty, particularly those carried out by VI-controlled state institutions, like courts (Bermeo, 2016). In conjunction with quick and subtle decision-making processes, this increases the importance of civil society actors. Civil society bears the potential to limit backsliding tendencies by providing information, advocacy, and mobilisation of the masses (Palyvoda et al., 2018). They complement international donors as they understand the local context and possess the necessary in-depth information on developments to which they can react quickly. Yet, civil society in Ukraine "has generally been classed as apathetic, weak, and ineffectual [through which it] tend[s] to be reactive to issues and events" (Cleary, 2016, p. 7). In particular, Ukrainian civil society organisations (CSOs) "weaknesses include organisation of activities aimed at influencing political decisions and support of the public interest in a specific issue" (Palyvoda et al., 2018, p. 11). The corresponding "low degrees of civil society organisation" (Harasymiw, 2019, p. 289) and distance from society (Lutsevych, 2016) are also said to be consequences of Soviet legacies. This

way, civil society in Ukraine has not been considered in the academic literature as a factor bringing about far-fledged democratisation (Worschech, 2017).

Nevertheless, its reactivity is a crucial mechanism to signal backsliding attempts and possibly prevent them when working in conjunction with Western actors. As a result, a new strand has emerged that departs from monocausal explanations and focuses on the impact that the interaction between international partners and civil society in fostering or defending change has. It proposes a model where CSOs are responsible for the elaboration and monitoring of reforms and international organisations for the crucial leverage to push for them (Nitsova et al., 2018). It can therefore be expected that in cases where CSOs alarm Western donors of backsliding attempts and rigorously track the repair process, those partners *can* use their leverage to skew the incentive structure of key policymakers towards backsliding aversion. When working alone, either the political leverage (situation of CSO activity without Western leverage) or the reactivity to subtle capture attempts by possessing local knowledge would be missing (situation of Western leverage without CSO activity).

3. Methodology

The foregone analysis has highlighted the importance of VIs as central actors in the backsliding process. Also, the interplay of Western donors and CSOs as constraining factors became visible. This study takes a neglected yet important look at a backsliding attempt from the VI perspective to explain the causal mechanisms for backsliding in state capture regimes and therefore contribute to the ongoing debate.

3.1. Case Selection

The case selected for this study is based on the iMore index, compiled by VOX Ukraine, which tracks and scores all legislative and judicial decisions in Ukraine on a 5 (*best*) to –5 (*worst*) scale. It, therefore, gives a comprehensive in-depth overview of the political dynamics in the country regardless of the formal branch of power involved. This is important to omit the executive bias and consider other captured branches of power. Hence, this approach to case selection reduces the risk of selection bias. Figure 1 shows all 442 assessed acts in Ukraine since the inauguration of President Zelensky until the Russian invasion.

The selected case, marked in red, refers to Decision 13-r/2020 of the Constitutional Court of Ukraine (CCU) from October 27, 2020. There, crucial provisions of Ukraine's Law 1700-VII on the Prevention of Corruption were deemed unconstitutional as they supposedly infringed "judicial independence" (CCU, 2020c, p. 3). In particular, the transparency of the asset declaration system and liability for false declarations were hit by the ruling. In effect, obliged people could publish false declarations without the threat of sanctions, which was seen as a severe hit on the anti-corruption infrastructure in Ukraine.

3.2. Analytical and Data Collection Approach

Given the magnitude of this decision and the multiple actors involved, this study sought to explain both the timing and instruments of backsliding efforts applied by different VI groups as well as the relatively successful fightback by democratic players. Hereby, and in contrast to other studies, a two-level assessment of VIs was made to distinguish the methods and context between those VIs that are out of reach of Western leverage and those where this pressure is an inherent feature, all with the overarching goal of formulating and proving causal mechanisms in the proposed framework.

It relied on official documents issued by respective actors, secondary sources such as analyses of the civil society sector, and in-depth, semi-structured interviews.

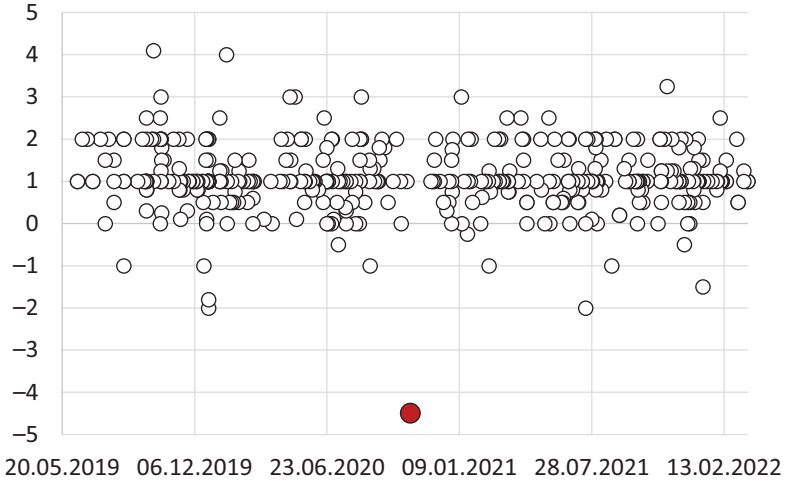

Figure 1. iMore ratings from the beginning of V. Zelensky's term. Note: Each dot represents one assessed normative act. Source: Author's work based on (VOX Ukraine, n.d.).

These interviews were conducted with 12 representatives of the civil society sector in Ukraine, current and former Western policy advisors in Kyiv and Brussels, as well as representatives close to the government. The data collection started from November 2021 onwards and was interrupted by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. All interviews were conducted in English through online communication platforms with the previous explicit consent of the respective interviewees. The explicit consent also applies to the de-anonymisation of presented data, such as quotes, which were otherwise anonymised. The collected material, of which each interview lasted between 45 to 90 minutes, was transcribed and analysed in MAXQDA. There, inductive and deductive coding patterns were applied that differentiated between the strategies and approaches of VIs to conduct backsliding and the dynamics between as well as reactions of CSOs and Western partners. These dynamics were considered in both, the overall context of Ukraine and for this case study to get an inside view of the background processes of that time.

4. Analytical Part

4.1. First Backsliding Attempt: The Entire Dismantling of Institutions Led by Anti-Western Actors

The praeludium to Decision 13-r/2020 were Rulings Nos. 9-r/2020 and 11-r/2020 from August 28 and September 16 respectively (CCU, 2020a, 2020b). In both, the CCU ruled that certain provisions of the establishment of the National Anticorruption Bureau (NABU) were unconstitutional. On the ground of the "independence of the law enforcement body," the appointment procedure was to be transferred away from the president to the government and parliament-controlled cabinet of ministers (CoM; CCU, 2020b, p. 1). Through all three decisions together, the central pillars of the anti-corruption infrastructure were effectively ruled unconstitutional and basically all, albeit modest, anti-corruption progress was eliminated (Venice Commission, 2020). That is because the National Agency on Corruption Prevention (NACP) relied on the asset-declaration system and NABU, the investigative body, was in turn dependent on the workings of the NACP. The establishment of all its pieces, NABU, NACP, and the asset declaration system, as well as their subsequent independence, were key demands of Western partners, like the EU and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and usually referred to as the biggest reform success stories (IMF, 2021d, p. 81).

4.1.1. Actors, Instruments, and Goals

Dissenting voices in the CCU saw the rulings explicitly as a way to increase the exposure of NABU to VIs present in the legislative branch (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2020). Together with the increased formal protection from the asset declaration system, it meant the capture of anti-corruption institutions by VIs. Unsurprisingly, they happened following official appeals by 47–51 parliamentarians (CCU, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c) for each ruling from the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, of whom almost all belonged to the pro-Russian party Opposition Platform—For Life. It is heavily influenced by Viktor Medvedchuk, an oligarch with close ties to the Kremlin (Vorobiov, 2020). Besides targeting institutions that were potentially dangerous for VIs, these actions were also linked to raising attention on the side of Western policy advisers. In this way, they hoped to diminish Kyiv's relations with the West, as they would put in question further tranches of the $5 billion standing agreement that Ukraine signed in June 2020 with the IMF and associated aid from the EU on which the country relied (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022).

Moreover, Russian links and own interests were also visible in the CCU itself. Three of the ruling judges, including its head, who bought real estate in occupied Crimea in 2018 and who was appointed by Yanukovych, Oleksandr Tupytskyi, were notified of the incompleteness of their asset declarations before making the ruling, which was seen as a general conflict of interests on this case (Venice Commission, 2020). Simultaneously, there were even unofficial price tags for judges' votes during the decision-making process in this case (anonymous interview with Western policy advisor). One policy advisor noted the effect of this ruling and the role of the CCU:

> It is basically back to zero….The constitutional court is a very powerful instrument that VIs have in their hands as the constitutional court is obviously not independent….How the decision was taken is a clear indicator that this court acts upon order and not based on rule of law and that's also one of the reasons why this reform backsliding happened. (Anonymous interview with Western policy advisor, November 2021)

This shows how VIs used their informal influence channels to formally dismantle much of the institutional infrastructure that could endanger them, including the top judges of the court itself. Moreover, this case demonstrates how this influence might come from outside of government-controlled groups, hence another piece of evidence against executive bias.

4.1.2. Timing of the Attack

In a December poll, the CCU ruling was seen by Ukrainians as the third most important political event of 2020, right after the local elections and Covid-19 (Razumkov Center, 2020), hence those issues will have given the context and timing for the attack. These rulings were issued when domestic and international attention was directed towards the second wave of Covid-19. Moreover, just two days before Ruling 13-r/2020, local elections in Ukraine took place, which brought massive losses to the president's Sluga Naroda (SN) party

(Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022). It happened at a time when Zelensky's public support was decreasing and the parliamentary fraction highly fragmented: For example, already in March 2020, SN failed to gather a majority in 70% of parliamentary votes and a major cabinet reshuffle took place (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022). This is not least due to increased conflicts within the ruling party, divided along the lines of different VI groups (Wilson, 2021). Hence, these are clear indicators of an increasingly pressured executive and fragmented legislative branch.

4.1.3. Reaction by Networks of Democracy Promotion

The ruling generated significant salience, and, in its direct aftermath, the EU and the G7 Ambassador Group all published special statements, raising alarm on this issue, and calling for a resolution (European External Action Service, 2020c). The EU publicly linked further financial aid to the reversal of the setback of this decision and saw it as potentially justifying a temporary suspension of the visa-free regime (European External Action Service, 2020c). Simultaneously, protests erupted in Kyiv against the ruling and more than 50 influential CSOs called all involved CCU judges to resign (Transparency International Ukraine, 2020a). Moreover, the Venice Commission became active, issuing an extensive analysis questioning the CCU decision from a legal perspective (Venice Commission, 2020).

It is important to note that this backsliding attempt was conducted by pro-Russian actors. These representatives are generally out of reach of Western policy leverage and their political goals differ substantially from West-leaning VI groups in Ukraine. As such, the head of the National Bank of Ukraine and President Zelensky were both univocally alarmed that a failure to reverse this obvious case of backsliding would lead to a suspension of financial aid from its international partners, something the country was in dire need of at that time (bne IntelliNews, 2020). Additionally, the finance minister estimated that the decision had already cost the country $2 billion in its immediate aftermath, not least as it became clear that Ukraine would not receive another IMF trench in 2020 (Leshchenko, 2020).

It is worth noting, however, that the IMF did not issue any official statement concerning the situation. Nevertheless, in its 2021 loan extension report, it highlighted that "adverse constitutional court rulings challenged the anti-corruption framework in fundamental ways that required restoring its effectiveness *before the review could proceed*" (IMF, 2021d, p. 1). Yet, the issuance of tranches by the IMF is dependent on successful reviews. This also applies to the EU whose aid in this context is explicitly tied to official backing of Ukraine by the IMF. It seems logical that this line was communicated during non-public meetings. For instance, when the head of the National Bank of Ukraine visited Washington and spoke to IMF representatives on multiple occasions during that period (bne IntelliNews, 2020).

4.2. Second Backsliding Attempt: Subtly Capturing the Fightback Process by Actors Under Western Leverage

The first backsliding push was led exclusively by VIs connected to the judiciary and legislative branches that were out of reach of direct Western leverage. In contrast, the "repair" process was also subject to backsliding attempts, but with different methods. In this respect, it has been noted that: "They [VIs] try to put in some loopholes in the necessary legislation to still profit. So, they do a lot to undermine Western efforts in Ukraine but trying to do it discreetly…not to endanger themselves" (interview with Tetiana Shevchuk, Anticorruption Action Centre, December 2021).

From this perspective follows the particular importance of the interplay between CSOs and international organisations, as one CSO representative said:

> They want to trick the reforms and what they are doing is much easier for us to foresee: What might be the traps [that] they will put in the way of the reforms? The international community [on the other hand] has [the] political capital and leverage to advocate for the reforms. (Interview with Olena Holushka, Anticorruption Action Center, January 22)

This stems from the fact that the actors of the second backsliding push relied to various degrees on Western donors. For one, their political ratings were tied to the financial survival of the state as they were governing in different positions, but also for the sole sake of showcasing good relations with the West. As one representative noted concerning the incumbent:

> Zelensky didn't want to rely on the IMF, etc. But after some years, he understood that you should be in this club, you should work with IMF, you should meet the club to get more cheap money, to get handshakes, otherwise, you will be in the club of some strange people. (Interview with anonymous government source, January 2022)

4.2.1. National Agency on Corruption Prevention Repair and Constitutional Crisis Case

In response to the crisis, President Zelensky proposed Draft Law 4288 to the parliament which foresaw, along with the cancellation of the CCU Decision 13-r/2020, the dissolution of the entire judge composition of the CCU; a rejection of this law, he insisted, would also endanger Ukraine's commitments to its Western partners (Zinets & Polityuk, 2020). Although the dissolution of the CCU composition would have been unconstitutional in itself, Zelensky's actions in this context were supported by 57% of the population (Leshchenko, 2020). However, the president failed with his proposal and withdrew the draft law knowing he would not gather the necessary majority in the Rada and faced severe international criticism for it,

most notably on the grounds that the unreformed nomination procedure would have given Zelensky significant power over the court.

Despite that, the president first suspended Tupytskyi, whilst he later cancelled the Yanukovych decrees on his appointment on the grounds of national security, which was in itself seen as unconstitutional, raised concerns by CSOs, and was later overruled by the supreme court (Transparency International Ukraine, 2021b). Yet, the prosecutor general simultaneously issued charges against Tupytskyi for alleged corruption and institutional controversies erupted. This, however, might not be seen as a direct case of backsliding as per definition, since a politically dependent judge, who arguably made unconstitutional rulings, was replaced with another arguably dependent judge in a constitutionally questionable manner. Hence, the degree of openness remained on the same, troublesome level. Moreover, as the US put Tupitskyi on their Magnitsky Act sanction list "for significant corrupt acts to include the acceptance of a monetary bribe while serving in the Ukrainian judiciary," they referred to him as "*former* chairman" of the CCU (Blinken, 2021). This shows a lack of intervention, or quiet tolerance, on behalf of Western donors in this case *despite concerns from Ukrainian CSOs*.

Besides Zelensky's draft law on the dissolution of the entire judge squad, the "compromise" from Rada Speaker Dmytro Razumkov also failed to be enacted. It foresaw the re-institution of the previous anti-corruption infrastructure but treated false declarations as a *criminal offence and not a crime* (Transparency International Ukraine, 2020d). It would render the anti-corruption institutions toothless, through which CSOs called it "dangerous" and "not a punishment [but] a way to increase corruption" (Transparency International Ukraine, 2020d). During a high-level meeting with Ukrainian PM Shmygal, EU High Commissioner for Foreign Affairs Borrell and EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Várhelyi argued that the "law…has several deficiencies and does not produce the necessary deterrent and corruption prevention effect" (European External Action Service, 2020b). Despite having passed the Rada, it was eventually vetoed by President Zelensky, as required by the civil society and Western partners. Hence, once Western donors intervened together with CSOs, the law was effectively stopped. As this example shows, VIs might use the repair process to *change details of laws* in the legislative process that might seem minor but actually render institutions ineffective. These details might be so minor that they remain under the radar of Western donors.

Importantly, at this stage, there were many competing draft laws in the parliament, even within a single party, such as SN (Transparency International Ukraine, 2020c). One of them was Draft Law 4301-a, from Oleksandr Dubynskyi. It foresaw the complete exclusion of judges from the law on corruption, hence also from the asset declaration obligation. Dubynsky was not only considered a close ally of the oligarch Kholomoisky, but closely related to Tupytskyi, as the head of the CCU is officially residing in a mansion owned by businessman Serhiy Levchenko, whom himself ran for an SN mandate during the local elections with the explicit backing of Dubynsky (Sorokin, 2020). This additionally demonstrates the different connections and informal alliances across branches of power and party lines. It also highlights the attempt by VIs to make use of internal divisions in the parliament during times of a weakened executive to push for different draft laws that would suit their interests. Knowing of these divisions, they might use their own informal leverage to push for amendments and exclusion in laws during the "repair process."

Finally, however, all draft laws foreseeing a softening of the previous asset declaration system failed to pass the necessary legislative process. The proposals endorsed by many CSOs managed to get through (Transparency International Ukraine, 2020b). The original asset declaration system with criminal liability and other provisions on the functioning of the NACP was therefore reinstalled in December 2020 by passing Law No. 4470 and Law No. 4471, respectively. Shortly after, the EU announced the disbursement of €600 million in financial aid to Ukraine as part of an emergency package (European External Action Service, 2020a). Although the Memorandum of Understanding was already ratified in mid-September 2020, the dispersion was only allowed to happen after Ukraine continued its engagement, for which the reversal of the NACP setback was crucial. Subsequently, in a press briefing in January 2021, the IMF confirmed that it had resumed its virtual mission to Ukraine in December 2020 and therefore proceeded with the review (IMF, 2021b).

4.2.2. National Anticorruption Bureau Case

However, although the NACP case was resolved, a broad parliamentary front worked on amending the law on NABU, officially under the banner of making it align with the constitution. In February 2021, the parliament pushed for Draft Law 5070 right after an unsuccessful negotiation round with the IMF. It would provide the CoM with unprecedented powers over this agency to select and remove its head as well as create uncertainty over the legality of the existing leadership. Hence, this would have brought opportunities for VIs to take over this agency. As one former EU advisor in Kyiv noted, the interaction with CSOs to prevent such a scenario was paramount:

> There were many different attempts to undermine NABU. There was a law by which the parliament would select the chairman of NABU. So, if this law goes undetected, they might quickly adopt it and then it's too late. Once a law has been adopted it is hard to intervene again….So, in these cases, they [the CSOs] would say that there is a law in

> the pipeline. Please intervene to have it stopped. (Interview with Henrik Larsen, former EU advisor to Kyiv, November 2021).

With respect to the interaction between CSOs and international donors, one Ukrainian representative noted further:

> [The exchange is] very regular. There are different groups dealing with the rule of law, donors, or anti-corruption institutions. There are even groups for each specific anti-corruption institution or for the Ministry of Justice….There can be weekly, monthly, or quarterly meetings. But quite often, they are in *constant contact*. (Interview with Iryna Fedets, Institute for Economic Research and Policy Consulting Kyiv, November 2021)

Right after the draft law was published, Justice Minister Malyuska admitted that it was "not agreed with the IMF…and we will pass the law only after obtaining approval from the IMF" (Concorde Capital, 2021). Such a law, in any case, would go against the basic provisions in the standing agreement that highlight the "independence and effectiveness of Ukraine's anti-corruption infrastructure [as] the requirement under the current IMF support programme on the status of which discussions continue" (IMF, 2021c). CSOs repeatedly and publicly warned against, and therefore also during these "constant contacts," passing Law 5070 (Transparency International Ukraine, 2021a). It was eventually dropped, and Draft Law 5459 was introduced, which guaranteed the legality of the existing leadership of NABU, hence leaving no possibility to remove its staff sooner. However, it foresaw the selection procedure for the new head to be conducted by a president-led body and the CoM. Although seen as a step forward, this dependence on the executive and the incumbent was still widely criticised by CSOs (Transparency International Ukraine, 2021a).

The final law in this respect was Law No. 5459–1, which passed the Rada on 19 October 2021. It legally strengthened the agency and transferred the selection procedure from the president to a committee consisting of three delegates from the CoM and three experts *selected by Ukraine's international partners*, giving the latter real influence over this agency to safeguard its independence. This law was endorsed by CSOs, whilst the EU *explicitly urged Ukraine to pass it earlier*, and the IMF later praised this decision ("EU calls on Rada to adopt bill on NABU status," 2021). Just one day before passing the law, the IMF announced that it had reached a staff-level agreement with Ukraine, which will have been an important precondition for it (IMF, 2021a).

5. Conclusion

Besides historical legacies, the domestic and foreign incentive structure in Ukraine is a result of its geopolitical role, regional divisions, and political decisions. That is, despite some historical commonalities, it differs noticeably from autocratic post-Soviet countries like Russia. Rather, parallels of this system have been drawn by different authors regarding, e.g., Kenya (Hale, 2015; Way, 2021). This work, therefore, paves the way for further comparative inquiries on backsliding. In accordance with theoretical studies, it highlights the importance of the coalitional approach and the relative power balance of actors to understand backsliding. It proposes a causal mechanism in which due to the relatively high degree of competition, the attempts to backslide can be conducted by different actors not falling under the system of checks and balances of both formal politics and Western leverage. They nevertheless yield significant control over parts of the state and might initiate backsliding in times when divisions within the ruling coalition and/or a weakening of the executive appear. This stands in contrast to the usual angle of the executive as the backsliding actor observed in much of the literature and underlines the relevance of this alternative focus.

Actors in this ruling coalition who can formally fight back backsliding attempts, such as the executive or other branches of the state, are also partly controlled by VIs but dependent on Western support. As such, they might be forced to fight back due to constraints stemming from international dependencies and their corresponding incentive structure. However, in the process, they might seize the opportunity and build provisions to increase their own relative power. These alterations are so fine that they might easily end up under the radar of Western donors when operating alone. At this stage, groups that initiated backsliding in the very beginning might also seek to build in concessions as seen in the "compromise" draft laws, highlighting the cross-party coalition building and influence of VIs.

It is then the task of CSOs, quickly navigating in and possessing profound knowledge of the local context to signal such attempts to international donors which effectively use their financial and political leverage to prevent using institutional eruptions for the benefit of these VIs. In accordance with theoretical elaborations, where international donors abstain from doing so or even factually accept the situation, such as in the controversial case of laying off the head of the CCU, CSOs alone are too weak to break through with their postulates. This article highlights through this the deficiencies of the state of democracy and the subsequent distance of the citizenry in a state capture regime, whereas a coalition of Western actors and local CSOs, which does not have a democratic mandate by the Ukrainian people, is necessary to safeguard institutional independence and good governance reforms against coalitions of actors that are nominally obliged to it by their popular mandate.

However, it also shows the potential for long-term alterations. Just as the influence of the EU and CSOs together might be enough to prevent backsliding, but falling short of facilitating a democratic breakthrough

today, there is room for optimism in the current context: In the case of many CEE countries, the "prospect of [EU] membership has been both credible and attractive enough that the EU might even be considered a potential 'external base' for alternative power pyramids in patronalistic countries" (Hale, 2015, p. 458). As the Russian vector, on which most of the anti-reformist forces relied, is effectively dead due to the Russian invasion, the leverage of the EU is growing relatively stronger. Although it is too early to predict what post-war Ukraine will look like, a serious commitment to the membership perspective by the EU might alter the incentive structure irreversibly and potentially lead to a break-up of these dynamic anti-reform coalitions and therefore pave the way for a democratic breakthrough, as seen in other places in Europe and the world.

Acknowledgments

The author expresses his gratitude to Heiko Pleines, Michael Rochlitz, the FSO colloquium participants, and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. Moreover, he is thankful to all interviewees for their openness and readiness to share their insights. Furthermore, he appreciates the opportunity given to him by the funding of the EU HORIZON 2020 Innovative Training Network "MARKETS" under MSCA Grant agreement number 861034.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

References

Ademmer, E. (2016). *Russia's impact on EU policy transfer to the post-Soviet space: The contested neighborhood*. Routledge.

Andrews, M. (2013). *The limits of institutional reform in development: Changing rules for realistic solutions*. Cambridge University Press.

Baez-Camargo, C., & Ledeneva, A. (2017). Where does informality stop and corruption begin? Informal governance and the public/private crossover in Mexico, Russia and Tanzania. *Slavonic and East European Review*, *95*(1), 49–75.

Balmaceda, M. M. (2007). *Energy dependency, politics and corruption in the former Soviet Union: Russia's power, oligarchs' profits and Ukraine's missing energy policy, 1995–2006*. Routledge.

Balmaceda, M. M. (2013). *The politics of energy dependency: Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania between domestic oligarchs and Russian pressure*. University of Toronto Press.

Bermeo, N. (2016). On democratic backsliding. *Journal of Democracy*, *27*(1), 5–19.

Bertelsmann Stiftung. (2022). *Ukraine country report*. BTI Transformation Index. https://Bertelsmann-project.org/en/reports/country-report/UKR

Blinken, A. J. (2021, December 9). *Elevating anti-corruption leadership and promoting accountability for corrupt actors* [Press Release]. U.S. Department of State. https://www.state.gov/elevating-anti-corruption-leadership-and-promoting-accountability-for-corrupt-actors

bne IntelliNews. (2020). *NBU says no IMF tranche for Ukraine this year*. https://www.intellinews.com/nbu-says-no-imf-tranche-for-ukraine-this-year-196579

Carothers, T. (2002). The end of the transition paradigm. *Journal of Democracy*, *13*(1), 5–21.

Cassani, A., & Tomini, L. (2020). Reversing regimes and concepts: From democratisation to autocratisation. *European Political Science*, *19*(2), 272–287.

Cleary, L. (2016). Half measures and incomplete reforms: The breeding ground for a hybrid civil society in Ukraine. *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea*, *16*(1), 7–23.

Concorde Capital. (2021). *Draft law targets NABU chief, provokes discussions on IMF support*. https://concorde.ua/rs/daily/item_77421

Constitutional Court of Ukraine. (2020a). *Summary to the Decision of the Grand Chamber of the Constitutional Court of Ukraine No. 9-r/2020 of August 28, 2020*.

Constitutional Court of Ukraine. (2020b). *Summary to the Decision of the Grand Chamber of the Constitutional Court of Ukraine No. 11-r/2020 of September 16, 2020*.

Constitutional Court of Ukraine. (2020c). *Summary to the Decision of the Grand Chamber of the Constitutional Court of Ukraine No. 13-r/2020 dated October 27, 2020*.

Dimitrova-Grajzl, V., & Simon, E. (2010). Political trust and historical legacy: The effect of varieties of socialism. *East European Politics and Societies*, *24*(2), 206–228.

Dresden, J. R., & Howard, M. M. (2016). Authoritarian backsliding and the concentration of political power. *Democratisation*, *23*(7), 1122–1143.

EU calls on Rada to adopt bill on NABU status. (2021, October 19). *Ukrinform*. https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-polytics/3334860-eu-calls-on-rada-to-adopt-bill-on-nabu-status.html

European Court of Auditors. (2021). *Reducing grand corruption in Ukraine: Several EU initiatives, but still insufficient results* (Special Report No. EN 23/2021). https://www.eca.europa.eu/en/Pages/DocItem.aspx?did=59383

European External Action Service. (2020a, December 09). *EU disburses €600 million in macro-financial assistance to Ukraine* [Press Release]. https://shorturl.at/hotY0

European External Action Service. (2020b, December 08). *Ukraine: High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell and Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi discuss the implementation of the reform agenda with Prime*

Minister Shmyhal [Press Release]. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/ukraine-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-and-commissioner-oliv%C3%A9r-v%C3%A1rhelyi_en

European External Action Service. (2020c, November 3). *Ukraine: Statement by the spokesperson on the fight against corruption after the constitutional court decision of 27 October* [Press Release]. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/ukraine-statement-spokesperson-fight-against-corruption-after-constitutional-court-decision-27_en

Haggard, S., & Kaufman, R. (2021). The anatomy of democratic backsliding. *Journal of Democracy*, *32*(4), 27–41.

Hale, H. E. (2005). Regime cycles: Democracy, autocracy, and revolution in post-Soviet Eurasia. *World Politics*, *58*(1), 133–165.

Hale, H. E. (2015). *Patronal politics: Eurasian regime dynamics in comparative perspective*. Cambridge University Press.

Harasymiw, B. (2019). Civil society as an anti-corruption actor in post—Euromaidan Ukraine. *Canadian Slavonic Papers/Revue Canadienne des Slavistes*, *61*(3), 288–320.

Hellman, J. S., Jones, G., & Kaufmann, D. (2003). Seize the state, seize the day: State capture and influence in transition economies. *Journal of Comparative Economics*, *31*(4), 751–773.

International Monetary Fund. (2021a, October 18). *IMF team and Ukraine's authorities reach staff-level agreement on the first review of the Stand-By Arrangement* [Press Release]. https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2021/10/18/pr21301-ukraine-imf-team-and-ukraines-authorities-reach-staff-level-agreement-on-first-review-of-sba

International Monetary Fund. (2021b, January 14). *Transcript of IMF press briefing* [Press Release]. https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2021/01/14/tr011421-transcript-of-imf-press-briefing

International Monetary Fund. (2021c, March 11). *Transcript of IMF press briefing* [Press Release]. https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2021/03/11/tr031121-transcript-of-imf-press-briefing

International Monetary Fund. (2021d). *Ukraine—First review under the Stand-By Arrangement* (Country Report No. 2021/250). https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2021/11/23/Ukraine-First-Review-Under-the-Stand-By-Arrangement-Requests-for-Extension-and-Rephasing-of-509855

Jee, H., Lueders, H., & Myrick, R. (2022). Towards a unified approach to research on democratic backsliding. *Democratization*, *29*(4), 754–767.

Khan, M. (2000). Rent-seeking as a process. In M. Khan & K. S. Jomo (Eds.), *Rents, rent-seeking and economic development* (pp. 70–144). Cambridge University Press.

Knott, E. (2018). Perpetually "partly free": Lessons from post-Soviet hybrid regimes on backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe. *East European Politics*, *34*(3), 355–376.

Králiková, M. (2022). Importing EU norms: The case of anti-corruption reform in Ukraine. *Journal of European Integration*, *44*(2), 245–260.

Kudelia, S. (2014). The maidan and beyond: The house that Yanukovych built. *Journal of Democracy*, *25*(3), 19–34.

Kupatadze, A. (2015). Political corruption in Eurasia: Understanding collusion between states, organized crime and business. *Theoretical Criminology*, *19*(2), 198–215.

Leshchenko, S. (2020, November 8). Constitutional court becomes a collective Yanukovych. *KyivPost*. https://www.kyivpost.com/article/opinion/op-ed/sergii-leshchenko-constitutional-court-becomes-a-collective-yanukovych.html

Lutsevych, O. (2016). Civil society versus captured state: A winning strategy for sustainable change. *Development in Practice*, *26*(5), 646–656.

Moe, T. M. (2015). Vested interests and political institutions. *Political Science Quarterly*, *130*(2), 277–318.

Nasuti, P. (2016). Administrative cohesion and anti-corruption reforms in Georgia and Ukraine. *Europe–Asia Studies*, *68*(5), 847–867.

Nitsova, S., Pop-Eleches, G., & Robertson, G. (2018). *Revolution and reform in Ukraine: Evaluating four years of reform*. PONARS Eurasia.

Nizhnikau, R. (2020). Love the tender: ProZorro and anti-corruption reforms after the Euromaidan revolution. *Problems of Post-Communism*, *69*(2), 192–205.

Palyvoda, L., Kuprii, N., & Bikla, O. (2018). *Status and dynamics of civil society organizations development in Ukraine in 2002–2018: Report on survey findings*. Creative Center Charitable Foundation.

Pikulik, A. (2019). Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine as post-Soviet rent-seeking regimes. In H. E. Hale (Ed.), *Stubborn structures: Reconceptualizing post-communist regimes* (pp. 489–506). Central European University Press.

Pleines, H. (2019). The political role of business magnates in competitive authoritarian regimes: A comparative analysis. *Jahrbuch Fur Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, *60*(2), 299–334.

Razumkov Center. (2020). Ukraina-2020: *Nevypravdani ochikuvannya, neochikuvani vyklyky. Pidsumki roku u dzerkali gromadskoi dumki (gruden 2020)* [Ukraine 2020: Unjustified expectations, unexpected challenges. The results of the year in the mirror of public opinion (December 2020)]. https://razumkov.org.ua/napriamky/sotsiologichni-doslidzhennia/ukraina 2020-nevypravdani-ochikuvannia-neochikuvani-vyklyky-pidsumky-roku-u-dzerkali-gromadskoi-dumky-gruden-2020r

Samokhvalov, V., & Strelkov, A. (2021). Cross-dimensional network of democracy promotion: Public administration reform in post-Euromaidan Ukraine. *Journal of European Integration*, *43*(7), 799–814.

Sorokin, O. (2020, November 6). Constitutional court judges live far beyond their stated means. *Kyiv Post*. https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/constitutional-court-judges-live-far-beyond-their-stated-means.html

Transparency International Ukraine. (2020a). *Constitutional court judges must resign*. https://ti-ukraine.org/en/news/constitutional-court-judges-must-resign

Transparency International Ukraine. (2020b). *Draft laws to restore NACP powers: Legal analysis*. https://ti-ukraine.org/en/news/draft-laws-to-restore-nacp-powers-legal-analysis

Transparency International Ukraine. (2020c). *Ways to resolve constitutional crisis proposed by MPs*. https://ti-ukraine.org/en/news/ways-to-resolve-current-constitutional-crisis-proposed-by-mps

Transparency International Ukraine. (2020d). *What makes proposed law on criminal liability for false declarations so dangerous*. https://ti-ukraine.org/en/blogs/what-makes-proposed-law-on-criminal-liability-for-false-declarations-so-dangerous

Transparency International Ukraine. (2021a). *Amendments to the law on NABU: Legal analysis*. https://ti-ukraine.org/en/news/amendments-to-the-law-on-nabu-legal-analysis

Transparency International Ukraine. (2021b). *Big blast of constitutional court proceedings: A year later*. https://ti-ukraine.org/en/blogs/big-blast-of-constitutional-court-proceedings-a-year-later

Venice Commission. (2020). *Urgent joint opinion of the Venice Commission and the Directorate General of Human Rights and Rule of Law (DGI) of the Council of Europe on the legislative situation regarding anti-corruption mechanisms, following Decision No. 13-R/2020 of the Constitutional Court of Ukraine/Urgent opinion on the reform of the constitutional court* (Opinion No. 1012/2020). https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?opinion=1012&year=all

Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine. (2020). *Okrema dumka suddi Kolisnyka V.P. stosovno Rischennya KSU no. 11-p/2020* [Dissenting opinion of Judge Kolisnyk V. P. concerning the Decision of the CCU No. 11-p/2020]. https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/nb11d710-20#n2

Vorobiov, M. (2020). The pro-Russian forces behind Ukraine's constitutional crisis. *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, *17*(165). https://jamestown.org/program/the-pro-russian-forces-behind-ukraines-constitutional-crisis

VOX Ukraine. (n.d.). *iMore index* [Data set]. http://imorevox.org

Waldner, D., & Lust, E. (2018). Unwelcome change: Coming to terms with democratic backsliding. *Annual Review of Political Science*, *21*(1), 93–113.

Way, L. A. (2021). The party of power: Authoritarian diaspora and pluralism by default in Ukraine. *Democratization*, *28*(3), 484–501.

Wilson, A. (2021). *Faltering fightback: Zelensky's piecemeal campaign against Ukraine's oligarchs*. European Council on Foreign Relations. https://ecfr.eu/publication/faltering-fightback-zelenskys-piecemeal-campaign-against-ukraines-oligarchs

Wolczuk, K. (2018). Demystifying the association agreements. In M. Emerson, D. Cenusa, T. Kovziridze, & V. Movchan (Eds.), *The struggle for good governance in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova: The struggle for good governance in Eastern Europe* (Vol. 1, pp. 278–298). Centre for European Policy Studies.

Worschech, S. (2017). New civic activism in Ukraine: Building society from scratch? *Kyiv-Mohyla Law and Politics Journal*, *2017*(3), 23–45.

Zinets, N., & Polityuk, P. (2020, November 2). Back me or put IMF loans and EU visa-free deal at risk, Ukraine's president warns. *Reuters*. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-politics-imf-idUSKBN27I2JN

About the Author

Michael Martin Richter is a research fellow at the Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen and PhD scholar at the Bremen International Graduate School of Social Sciences within the European Union–Marie Skłodowska-Curie Innovative Training Network "Markets" programme (Horizon 2020 Grant Agreement No. 861034). He graduated in the political economy field from the College of Europe, the Higher School of Economics, the University College London, the ESB Business School, and the Jagiellonian University. His research focuses on political economy in the pan-European space, EU–Ukraine relations, and democracy promotion in the Eastern Partnership.

Politics and Governance (ISSN: 2183–2463)
2023, Volume 11, Issue 1, Pages 16–27
https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v11i1.5883

Article

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

Márton Gerő [1,2,*], Anna Fejős [2,3], Szabina Kerényi [2], and Dorottya Szikra [2,3]

[1] Faculty of Social Sciences, Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary
[2] Centre for Social Sciences, Hungary
[3] Central European University, Democracy Institute, Hungary

* Corresponding author (marton.gero@tatk.elte.hu)

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

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

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

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

1. Introduction

The impact of democratic backsliding on civil society has lately gained considerable interest in political science and political sociology. Some refer to these processes as "shrinking," or "closing" space, in which the legal and political environment for civil society organisations (CSOs) is increasingly hostile (Carothers, 2016; Pospieszna & Pietrzyk-Reeves, 2022). The "shrinking space" phenomenon was originally observed in autocracies (Dupuy et al., 2016), but similar tendencies have recently been identified in established democracies (Bolleyer, 2021). Our article focuses on Hungary, which is a clear case of de-democratisation and has been considered the first undemocratic country within the European Union (Bogaards, 2018; Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018; Delbois-Corfield, 2022).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.1. Governmental Strategies and Civil Society Organisations' Reactions

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.1. Human Rights Organisations

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.2. Environmental Organisations

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.3. Women's Organisations

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. Civil Society Actors' Responses

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

SMO-isation and community organising aim to (re-)engage with the local population or seek specific target groups. Especially environmental and HROs support or even organise campaigns and protest activities. Among women's organisations, we have observed the launching of new and often informal civil society groups, and the return to grassroots activism. Community organising has been increasingly important in all three sectors. Rather than direct political protest, these activities establish long-term commitments to one specific community to empower it. SMO-isation is also connected to organisations' new fundraising strategies, applying more crowdfunding or seeking individual donors and emphasising campaigns to collect 1% of people's personal income tax designated to CSOs.

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

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

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

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

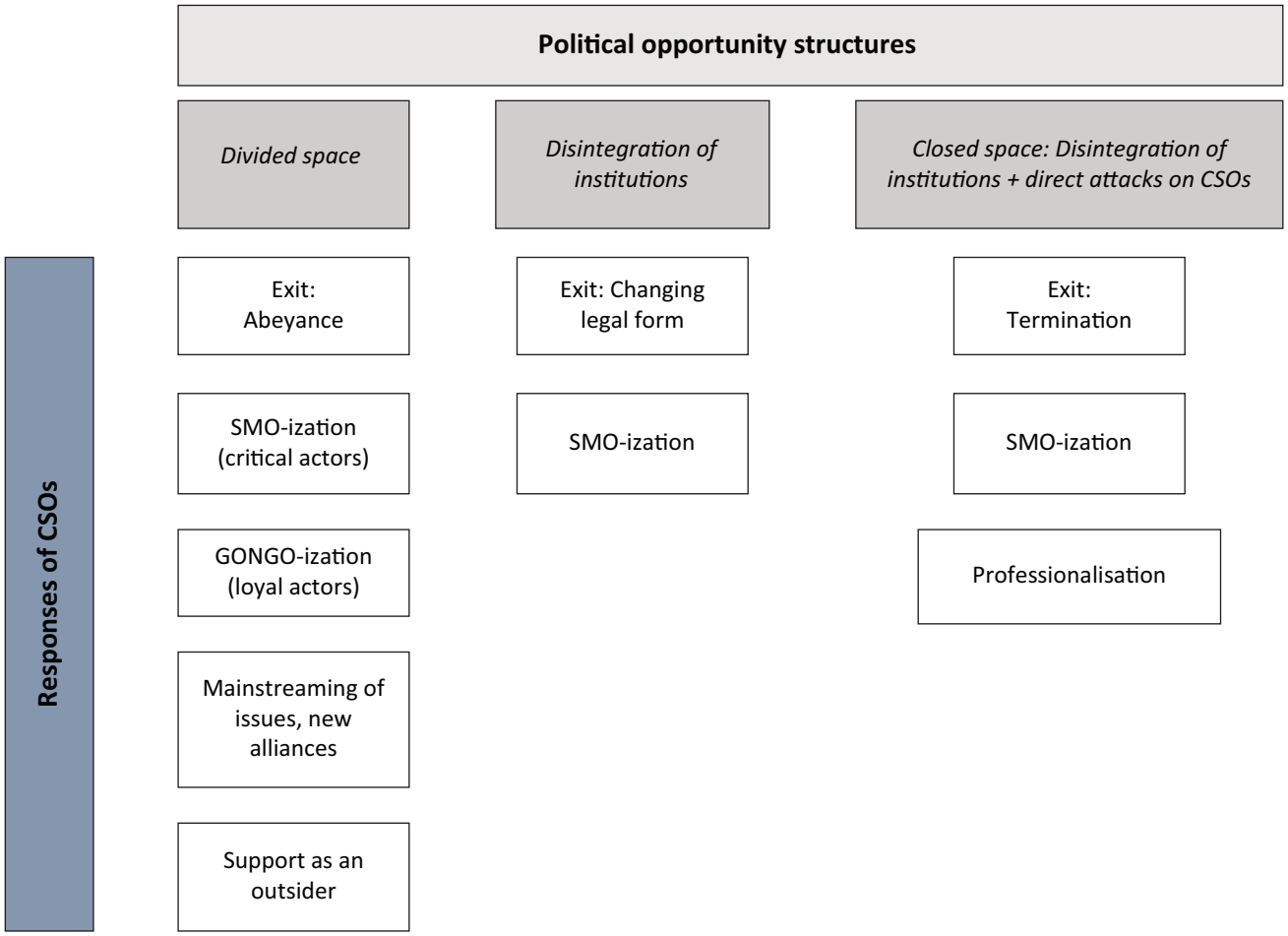

Figure 1. Types of closed POS and typical civil society organisation's responses.

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

5. Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and the editors for their work. The development of this article was made possible by the support of the Centre for Social Sciences (Incubator Grant No. 06013609 "De-Democratization and the Trajectories of Civil Society" and the International Publication Fund of the Centre for Social Sciences). Szabina Kerényi's contribution was also supported by projects of the National Research Development and Innovation NRDI 138020 and FK-135215 and Márton Gerő's work was partially funded by the project NKFIH-134768. Anna Fejős and Dorottya Szikra's research was supported by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

Alexander, J. C. (2006). *The civil sphere*. Oxford University Press.

Anheier, H. K. (2004). *Civil society: Measurement, evaluation, policy*. CIVICUS Earthscan Publications.

Arató, K., & Mikecz, D. (2015). Civil társadalom, szociális partnerek, társadalmi mozgalmak [Civil society, social partners, and social movements]. In A. Körösényi (Ed.), *A magyar politika negyedszázad után* [Hungarian politics after a quarter century] (pp. 307–331). OSIRIS.

Bocskor, Á. (2018). Anti-immigration discourses in Hungary during the "crisis" year: The Orbán government's "National Consultation" campaign of 2015. *Sociology*, *52*(3), 551–568. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038518762081

Bogaards, M. (2018). De-democratization in Hungary: Diffusely defective democracy. *Democratization*, *25*(8), 1481–1499. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2018.1485015

Bolleyer, N. (2021). Civil society, crisis exposure, and resistance strategies. In A. Sajó, R. Uitz, & S. Holmes (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of illiberalism* (pp. 939–956). Routledge.

Bozóki, A., & Hegedűs, D. (2018). An externally constrained hybrid regime: Hungary in the European Union. *Democratization*, *25*(7), 1173–1189. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2018.1455664

Buzogány, A. (2015). Representation and participation in movements: Strategies of environmental civil society organizations in Hungary. *Comparative Southeast European Studies*, *63*(3), 491–514. https://doi.org/10.1515/soeu-2015-630308

Buzogány, A., Kerényi, S., & Olt, G. (2022). Back to the grassroots? The shrinking space of environmental activism in illiberal Hungary. *Environmental Politics*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2022.2113607

Caiani, M., & della Porta, D. (2018). The radical right as social movement organizations. In R. Jens (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of the radical right* (pp. 327–347).

Oxford University Press.
Carothers, T. (2016). Closing space for international democracy and human rights support. *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, *8*(3), 358–377. https://doi.org/doi.org/10.1093/jhuman/huw012
Chambers, S., & Kopstein, J. (2001). Bad civil society. *Political Theory*, *29*(6), 837–865. https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591701029006008
Chronowski, N. (2021). The post-2010 "democratic rule of law" practice of the Hungarian Constitutional Court under a rule by law governance. *Hungarian Journal of Legal Studies*, *61*(2), 136–158. https://doi.org/10.1556/2052.2020.00267
CIVICUS Monitor. (2022). *Watchlist: Tracking conditions for citizen action*. https://monitor.civicus.org/Watchlist
Cohen, J. L., & Arato, A. (1992). *Civil society and political theory*. The MIT Press.
Csengery, L. (2020). *The equal treatment authority will be abolished from 1 January 2021*. CEE Legal Matters. https://ceelegalmatters.com/hungary/15413-the-equal-treatment-authority-will-be-abolished-from-1-january-2021
Delbois-Corfield, G. (2022). *Interim report on the proposal for a Council decision determining, pursuant to Article 7(1) of the Treaty on European Union, the existence of a clear risk of a serious breach by Hungary of the values on which the Union is founded* (Report No. A9-0217/2022). European Parliament. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2022-0217_EN.html
della Porta, D. (2013). Political opportunity/political opportunity structure. In D. A. Snow, D. della Porta, B. Klandermans, & D. McAdam (Eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell encyclopedia of social and political movements*. Blackwell Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470674871.wbespm159
della Porta, D. (2020). Building bridges: Social movements and civil society in times of crisis. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, *31*, 938–948. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-020-00199-5
della Porta, D., & Steinhilper, E. (2021). Shrinking spaces and civil society contestation: An introduction. In D. della Porta & E. Steinhilper (Eds.), *Contentious migrant solidarity* (pp. 1–18). Routledge.
Diani, M. (2015). *The cement of civil society: Studying networks in localities*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316163733
Dobbins, M., Horvath, B., & Labanino, R. P. (2022). Exploring the domestic and international drivers of professionalization of Central and Eastern European interest groups. *European Political Science Review*, *14*(2), 263–280. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773922000054
Donáth, A. J. (2021). *Report on the shrinking space for civil society in Europe* (Report No. A9-0032/2022). European Parliament. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2022-0032_EN.html
Dupuy, K., Ron, J., & Prakash, A. (2016). Hands off my regime! Governments' restrictions on foreign aid to non-governmental organizations in poor and middle-income countries. *World Development*, *84*, 299–311. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2016.02.001
Edwards, M. (2009). *Civil society*. Polity.
European Commission. (2021). *2021 rule of law report—Communication and country chapters*. https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/upholding-rule-law/rule-law/rule-law-mechanism/2021-rule-law-report/2021-rule-law-report-communication-and-country-chapters_en
Fábián, K. (2009). *Contemporary women's movements in Hungary: Globalization, democracy, and gender equality*. Johns Hopkins University Press; Woodrow Wilson Center Press.
Fagan, A., & Wunsch, N. (2019). Fostering institutionalisation? The impact of the EU accession process on state–civil society relations in Serbia. *Acta Politica*, *54*(4), 607–624. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41269-018-0093-1
Fejős, A. (2022). Vírusverte viszonyok.: Nő- és családszervezetek a pandémia idején [Virus-ridden conditions: Women and family organisations during the pandemic]. In A. Fejős & D. Szikra (Eds.), *Támogatás és támadás: Női civil szervezetek az illiberális demokráciában* [Attacked and supported. Women's organisations in an illiberal democracy] (2nd ed., pp. 141–152). Balassi Kiadó.
Fejős, A., & Néményi, M. (2020). Család, munka és női test: Nőkkel és családokkal foglalkozó civil szervezetek egy változó társadalmi-politikai környezetben [Family, work, and the female body: Civil society activism related to women and families in a changing social and political environment]. In A. Fejős & D. Szikra (Eds.), *Támogatás és támadás: Női civil szervezetek az illiberális demokráciában* [Attacked and supported. Women's organisations in an illiberal democracy] (pp. 77–106). Társadalomtudományi Kutatóközpont.
Garbaye, R. (2004). Ethnic minority local councillors in French and British cities: Social determinants and political opportunity structures. In K. Kraal, S. Vertovec, & R. Penninx (Eds.), *Citizenship in European cities: Immigrants, local politics and integration policies* (pp. 39–56). Ashgate.
Gerő, M., & Kerényi, S. (2020). A civil társadalom változó szerepei és a társadalmi integráció [The changing roles of civil society and social integration]. In I. Kovách (Ed.), *Integrációs mechanizmusok a magyar társadalomban* [Mechanisms of social integration in Hungarian society] (pp. 195–230). Argumentum; Társadalomtudományi Kutatóközpont.
Gerő, M., Susánszky, P., Kopper, A., & Tóth, G. (2020). Strategies for survival: Human rights organizations' responses to the closing of political opportunity

structures in Hungary. *Politologicky Casopis*, *27*(2), 119–139. https://doi.org/10.5817/PC2020-2-119

Gerometta, J., Haussermann, H., & Longo, G. (2005). Social innovation and civil society in urban governance: Strategies for an inclusive city. *Urban Studies*, *42*(11), 2007–2021. https://doi.org/10.1080=00420980500279851

Guasti, P. (2016). Development of citizen participation in Central and Eastern Europe after the EU enlargement and economic crises. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, *49*(3), 219–231. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2016.06.006

Hasmath, R., Hildebrandt, T., & Hsu, J. Y. J. (2019). Conceptualizing government-organized non-governmental organizations. *Journal of Civil Society*, *15*(3), 267–284. https://doi.org/10.1080/17448689.2019.1632549

Hooghe, M. (2005). Ethnic organisations and social movement theory: The political opportunity structure for ethnic mobilisation in Flanders. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *31*(5), 975–990. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830500177925

Horváthová, B., & Dobbins, M. (2019). Organised interests in the energy sector: A comparative study of the influence of interest groups in Czechia and Hungary. *Politics and Governance*, *7*(1), 139–151. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v7i1.1784

Khan, I. (2021). *Report of the special rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression*. United Nations. https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G22/338/64/PDF/G2233864.pdf?OpenElement

Kopper, Á., Susánszky, P., Tóth, G., & Gerő, M. (2017). Creating suspicion and vigilance. *Intersections*, *3*(3), 108–125. https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v3i3.366

Kriesi, H. (2004). Political context and opportunity. In D. A. Snow, S. A. Soule, & H. Kriesi (Eds.), *The Blackwell companion to social movements* (pp. 67–90). Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470999103.ch4

KSH. (2021). *KSH statinfo v39—A nonprofit szervezetek adatai* [KSH statinfo v39—Nonprofit organizations' data]. http://statinfo.ksh.hu/Statinfo/haViewer.jsp

Láng-Pickvance, K., Manning, N., & Pickvance, C. G. (Eds.). (1997). *Environmental and housing movements: Grassroots experience in Hungary, Russia and Estonia*. Avebury.

Lewis, D. (2013). Civil society and the authoritarian state: Cooperation, contestation and discourse. *Journal of Civil Society*, *9*(3), 325–340. https://doi.org/10.1080/17448689.2013.818767

Lorch, J., & Bunk, B. (2017). Using civil society as an authoritarian legitimation strategy: Algeria and Mozambique in comparative perspective. *Democratization*, *24*(6), 987–1005. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2016.1256285

Merkel, W. (2004). Embedded and defective democracies. *Democratization*, *11*(5), 33–58. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510340412331304598

Petrova, T., & Tarrow, S. (2007). Transactional and participatory activism in the emerging European polity: The puzzle of East-Central Europe. *Comparative Political Studies*, *40*(1), 74–94. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414006291189

Polyák, G. (2019). Media in Hungary: Three pillars of an illiberal democracy. In P. Eva & B. Charlie (Eds.), *Public service broadcasting and media systems in troubled European democracies* (pp. 279–303). Springer.

Pospieszna, P., & Pietrzyk-Reeves, D. (2022). Responses of Polish NGOs engaged in democracy promotion to shrinking civic space. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, *35*(4), 523–544. https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2022.2027869

Sebestény, I. (2016). Fél évtized egészen új környezetben [Half a decade in a completely new environment]. In A. Antal (Ed.), *A civilek hatalma—A politikai tér visszafoglalása* [The power of civil society—Re-occupation of the political space] (pp. 61–84). Noran Libro.

Smismans, S. (2008). New modes of governance and the participatory myth. *West European Politics*, *31*(5), 874–895. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402380802234540

Sombatpoonsiri, J. (2020). "Authoritarian civil society": How anti-democracy activism shapes Thailand's autocracy. *Journal of Civil Society*, *16*(4), 333–350. https://doi.org/10.1080/17448689.2020.1854940

Szabó, M. (2012). Changes in the institutional context of the Ombudsman system in the Republic of Hungary in 2012. *Beijing Law Review*, *3*(3), 112–120. https://doi.org/10.4236/blr.2012.33015

Szikra, D., Fejős, A., Neményi, M., & Vajda, R. (2020). *Civil society activism related to women and families since 2010 in Hungary*. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

Szikra, D., & Vajda, R. (2020). Női civil stratégiák az illiberális kormányzás tükrében [Women's civic strategies in the face of illiberal governance]. In A. Fejős & D. Szikra (Eds.), *Támogatás és támadás: Női civil szervezetek az illiberális demokráciában* [Attacked and supported. Women's organisations un an illiberal democracy] (pp. 107–130). Társadalomtudományi Kutatóközpont. https://szociologia.tk.hu/uploads/files/2021/tam_tam.pdf

Taylor, V. (2013). Social movement participation in the global society: Identity, networks and emotions. In J. Stekelenburg, C. Roggeband, & B. Klandermans (Eds.), *The future of social movement research: Dynamics, mechanisms, and processes* (pp. 37–57). University of Minnesota Press.

Toepler, S., Zimmer, A., Fröhlich, C., & Obuch, K. (2020). The changing space for NGOs: Civil society in authoritarian and hybrid regimes. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, *31*(4), 649–662. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-020-00240-7

Torma, J. (2016). A norvég-ügy—Civil szervezetek elleni

kormányzati támadássorozat Magyarországon (2013 és 2016) [The Norway case—A series of government attacks on NGOs in Hungary (2013–2016)]. In A. Antal (Ed.), *A civilek hatalma—A politikai tér visszafoglalása* [The power of civil society—Re-occupation of the political space] (pp. 266–282). Noran Libro.

VonDoepp, P. (2019). Civil society. In G. Lynch & P. VonDoepp (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of democratization in Africa* (pp. 364–377). Routledge.

About the Authors

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

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

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

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

cogitatio

Politics and Governance (ISSN: 2183–2463)
2023, Volume 11, Issue 1, Pages 28–38
https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v11i1.5859

Article

Challenges Facing Organised Interests Under a Populist Right-Wing Government in Slovenia

Meta Novak * and Damjan Lajh

Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

* Corresponding author (meta.novak@fdv.uni-lj.si)

Submitted: 3 June2022 | Accepted: 17 August 2022 | Published: 13 January 2023

Abstract
The development of organised interests (OIs) during the socialist period in Central and Eastern Europe was considerably limited, if not frozen. This was also somewhat the case in Slovenia, where it was mainly OIs close to the government that could operate. In the early 1990s, the interest group system in the now independent country was already recognised as vibrant with the number of OIs growing each year ever since. Yet, Europeanisation processes in particular have led to additional opportunity structures being created for OIs to become involved in policymaking. The biggest obstacle to the development of such interests has become the low level of its professionalisation, given that most are run voluntarily. Around the end of 2020, the political environment for the activities of OIs remained quite favourable, with a few isolated drops in their public image and political attacks on mostly environmental organisations. The change in government in March 2020 saw the backsliding in democracy become more apparent. This included liberal OIs being publicly discredited, the obstruction of largely environmental OIs, and attacks on the media. In this article, we examine how democratic backsliding in Slovenia has affected the articulation, representation, and intermediation of interests. To unravel this puzzle, we analyse the changing conditions for OIs' operations between March 2020 and April 2022 as introduced by the populist right-wing Slovenian government to help better understand the democratic backsliding seen in the country.

Keywords
democratic backsliding; organised interests; populist right-wing government; Slovenia

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

1. Democratic Backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe

Despite countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) having made successful democratic transitions after the Iron Curtain fell in the 1990s, evidence of a deterioration in democracy is observable. In 2004, eight countries with a post-socialist transition (Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia) joined the EU and sought to become liberal democracies. Hungary and Poland in particular have since been accused of not following the rule of law, limiting the operations of civil society, nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and social movements, and interfering in the mass media. According to Freedom House analysis, since 2019 Hungary is the sole EU member state to be characterised as a hybrid regime, while Poland is a semi-consolidated democracy (Smeltzer & Buyon, 2022). Similar results arise from V-Dem democracy data where Slovenia, Poland, Slovakia, Czech Republic, and Lithuania are classified as electoral democracy regimes and Hungary as an electoral autocracy. The only exceptions are Estonia and Latvia, which are classified as liberal democracies (Boese et al., 2022). The deterioration of democracy is seen almost across the whole region, having in the last two years also become more pronounced in Slovenia, which was previously considered a democratic-transition success story. Larger regional

differences are noted in the robustness of civil society where the V-Dem core civil society index for Estonia, Latvia, and the Czech Republic is 0.9 or higher on a scale from 0 to 1, for Slovakia 0.82, Slovenia 0.74, and Poland 0.69. Once again, Hungary has the lowest score (0.44) in the region (Boese et al., 2022).

The illiberal and anti-democratic practices emerging in CEE often target and hinder the activities of OIs in the various countries there. All at once, the available opportunity structures are shrinking while political issues important for OIs are appearing on the agenda. The governing elite in countries seeing a deterioration of democracy attempts to weaken OIs, thwart their ability to influence, limit their opportunities to participate in the policy process and represent their members, and undermine watchdogs (Pospieszna & Vetulani-Cęgiel, 2021). Yet, undemocratic governments do not address all OIs equally. While seeking to maintain the appearance of a democracy, their attacks are often only directed at particular groups either critical of the government or that represent interests ideologically distant from the political party in power. The closure of the civic space is thus selective (Roggeband & Krizsan, 2021).

Still, a vibrant civic culture and civil society add to the quality of democracy and citizen representation (De Tocqueville, 1840; Lijphart, 1984) and is a sign of a "healthy" democracy (Pietrzyk-Reeves, 2008). OIs help link the citizens with the government, transmit information from citizens and the public to decision-makers, and represent citizens and their voices (Carmin, 2010; Levin-Waldman, 2012), while also keeping the government politically accountable. A vibrant civil society positively impacts democracy in various ways, even though the benefits of policy representation are limited to the particular issue domain of an OI (Rasmussen & Reher, 2019). The level of citizens' involvement in OIs and the functioning of the system of OIs may thus be seen as a relevant indicator of a functioning democracy (Novak & Hafner-Fink, 2015).

Nevertheless, the democratic deterioration in CEE has not produced a paralysis of OIs since they are still actively defending their views and positions. In some ways, over the 18-year democratic decline in CEE OIs have become more vibrant and are promoting the civic participation of citizens (Smeltzer & Buyon, 2022). Different strategies such as indirect strategies, networking with similar organisations from abroad, and cooperation between OIs are used to cope with backsliding to maintain involvement in policymaking (Pospieszna & Vetulani-Cęgiel, 2021).

The focus of this article is on how the introduced policy changes and practices in the direction of an authoritarian regime have influenced OIs. While Slovenia's exit from the transition period is a success story, the financial crises it experienced have created increasing political division and distrust in political institutions and democratic arrangements leading to the alternation of centre-left and right coalition governments and the success of newly established parties (Krašovec & Lajh, 2021). We analyse particularly how between March 2020 and April 2022 the former populist right-wing Slovenian government made changes that have led to democratic backsliding. While especially some OIs on one hand lost financial support, their image in the public dropped and their policymaking involvement became more difficult while, on the other hand, their activities were strengthened by protest activities, used media strategies, the forming of a coalition of the OIs—the Glas ljudstva (Voice of the People)—and policy changes achieved through opportunity structures and increasing political participation at elections. At the same time, we argue that the characteristics of the population of OIs in Slovenia enabled them to deal with the new challenges quite successfully since they show low levels of competition and mortality anxiety. Despite the deterioration of democracy, OIs have maintained their capacity to mobilise and remain strong (Pospieszna & Vetulani-Cęgiel, 2021), but this could change if the unfavourable conditions continue for a longer period. The new government (elected in April 2022) promises to govern in dialogue with representatives of OIs and stop the autocratisation processes that emerged over the last two years.

2. Obstruction of Organised Interest Activities in Slovenia

Slovenia faced the biggest drop in the quality of its democracy in 2021 according to Freedom House's *Nations in Transit* (Smeltzer & Buyon, 2022), which also affected OIs. The population of OIs in Slovenia was acknowledged to be vibrant and well-developed despite its low professionalisation, lack of financial and human resources, and largely voluntary status (Fink-Hafner et al., 2015; Novak & Fink-Hafner, 2019). Around 28,000 NGOs are active in Slovenia (CNVOS, 2021a) while Slovenian citizens' civic participation is comparable to other CEE countries and higher than in the Western Balkan region (Novak & Hafner-Fink, 2015). The large population of OIs in Slovenia can be seen as reflecting the relatively easy way new OIs can be registered and established, the tradition of OIs and voluntary work as well as their predominantly voluntary character. For OIs to successfully function, they need financial resources, access to the policymaking process, and functioning opportunity structures, together with the possibility of expressing their position. In this section, we focus on how these conditions have been obstructed during the last two years.

A report on the Sustainability Index of Civil Society Organisations for Slovenia in 2019 found a stronger advocacy role of OIs compared to the previous year as they had succeeded in several advocacy campaigns and their activities were increasingly present in the media (United States Agency for International Development [USAID], 2020). However, in March 2020 the change in government from a centre-left to a populist right-wing government triggered the deterioration of the conditions for

the operations of OIs, the health of the civic space, and the rule of law in quite a short time. Following the resignation of Prime Minister Marjan Šarec, Janez Janša, the long-time leader of the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS), managed to obtain a third mandate to form a government. Janša is one of the most recognisable and experienced politicians in Slovenia. He held a visible role during the transition period, has been a member of parliament since 1990, the Minister of Defence, three times prime minister, and led both of Slovenia's presidencies of the Council of the EU. His party is the oldest right-wing party with the biggest electorate base. His unpopular politics and populist positions have seen especially centre and left parties refusing to collaborate with him. We can label the SDS party as being of the political populism type, which often stresses nationalist beliefs and conservative positions closer to extreme right-wing populism (Fink-Hafner, 2019).

With the change in government in 2020, the civic space in Slovenia was soon downgraded from "open" to "narrowed" by the CIVICUS Monitor. The lower score for fundamental freedoms and the state of civil society means that democratic liberties in Slovenia like freedom of expression, peaceful gathering and association were violated by the right-wing government (CNVOS, 2020a). In the first year of this government, the legal environment in which OIs were operating deteriorated. The laws passed in response to the pandemic were unclear, leading to uncertainty and administrative burdens. They also often contained lasting changes unrelated to the management of the pandemic. The organisations' financial situation was under pressure as organisations had fewer opportunities to sell goods/services while simultaneously public funds became less available. The government was less open to communication, while attacks on organisations by the prime minister, ministers, and members of parliament grew (USAID, 2021). Alongside the Covid-19 crisis, OIs faced several obstacles created by the deterioration of democracy. Yet, the crisis also meant the need for OIs to become active increased and introduced hurdles that encouraged OIs to mobilise. We next explain how democratic backsliding is evident in the OIs' activities.

2.1. Limiting Protests and Demonstrations

Protest actions began already upon the appointment of the new, populist right-wing government. These protests were initially individual, or took place on balconies and social media, following the closure of the country soon after Covid-19 arrived. The partial re-opening of the state saw such protest activities move to the city centres, persisting in the capital Ljubljana until the April 2022 elections. From the outset of these protests, the government attempted to silence them (European Civic Forum, 2021). The protesters were generally tightly controlled by the police despite the gatherings being peaceful, the Republic Square before the National Assembly was fenced off, and surveillance and social media technologies were used to track, sanction, and fine protesters (Kovač, 2020). Police used physical force against and detained protestors, issued fines, recorded protest activities, referred protestors to the state prosecutor's office for using the protest slogans "Death to Janša-ism" (*Smrt janšizmu*), and identified individuals who may have intended to participate in the protests (Petković, 2020a). Among others, police fined protesters because they wrote calls for resignation in chalk on the footpath (Košir, 2020). Fines were given for jumping over protection fences and reading the Constitution in front of the parliament. When the protests included cars due to the ban on gathering during the epidemic, protesters were fined for honking. Protesters then began to collect voluntary contributions for the solidarity payment of the fines handed out to the protesters (Kosmač, 2020; "Police officers," 2020). The best-known case was when police fined students from the prominent Maribor Gymnasium who had protested to reopen their school in violation of the law on infectious diseases and summoned minors to court ("Sviz and teachers," 2021). In October 2021, police also used tear gas and water cannons at protests, described by many as the use of excessive force (CNVOS, 2021b). Jaša Jenull, the informal leader of the Friday Protests, even received a request to pay EUR 34,340.56 for police security costs for the peaceful protests when the protestors were reading the Constitution in Republic Square (Kramberger, 2022). The police and the government's attitude showed disrespect for the freedom of assembly. The government sought to portray the protestors as disobedient and mischievous individuals who wished to prevent the government from running the country and protecting the citizens from Covid-19.

Here we must point out that individual governmental actors mainly opposed protest activities that advocated liberal positions, while the activities of the conservative "yellow vest" protestors and activities of far-right organisations like the Društvo za promocijo tradicionalnih vrednot (the Society for the Promotion of Traditional Values) were tolerated by the very same governmental actors. This shows that one intention of the measures imposed by the populist right-wing government was to strengthen OIs that ideologically support the positions of its parties and are in line with the values of their electorate. The population of OIs in Slovenia is very diverse and covers all ideological positions on the continuum from libertarian to traditional, whereas almost one-third position themselves in the middle (Beyers et al., 2020).

2.2. Attacking the Public Image of Organised Interests

Social media, especially Twitter, became the space for government actors to make accusations about OIs. Such actors included the prime minister, other ministers, and members of parliament from the governing party (CNVOS, 2022a; Petković, 2020b). Both protestors and

the Constitutional Court were blamed for increases in the Covid-19 infection rate while the OIs that represented the interests of migrants, refugees, LGBTQ+ communities, human rights, the environment, gender equality, etc., were blamed for draining the state budget (Kovač, 2020). Among others, the prime minister labelled the OIs "partners" of the left-leaning parties that "breed on the work blisters of taxpayers" (Petković, 2020b). Although attacks on OIs in social media are common, it is particularly concerning when such attacks come from the ranks of officials and politicians who should be working for all citizens. Besides social media, traditional media close to the ruling party were systematically attacking OIs' activities, notably in the fields of human rights, equality, multiculturalism, and environment, while some attacks were also directed at individual intellectuals critical of the government (e.g., Rudi Rizman, Svetlana Slapšak, Boris A. Novak; see Petković, 2020a).

On top of attacking the public image of OIs, the right-wing government systematically confronted the media, making threats to journalists and independent media. Such attacks were generally directed at national radio and television broadcasters. Already at the start of its term, it proposed amendments to the three main laws governing the media by changing the leadership of the Slovenian Press Agency, slashing funds, and changing the leadership of the national television broadcaster, and financing media close to the ruling party with state funds. According to Media Pluralism Monitor, Slovenia's media pluralism is under a medium threat (Petković, 2020b). The conditions for independent media collapsed when, for almost one year, the government refused to pay the Slovenian Press Agency ("Signed contract," 2021). In the last two years, the government managed to fill the national television broadcaster's supervisory board with its own cadre, change their leadership, and interfere in informative programming—several changes included the cancelling of established informative programmes with a high rating. Simultaneously, government-friendly media like Nova24 and Planet TV received additional funding from parties and individuals close to Viktor Orban, the Hungarian prime minister (CNVOS, 2020a). On the same day as the composition of the new parliament was convened in May 2022, SDS submitted new amendments to the Radiotelevizija Slovenija Act and thereby took over and hampered the coalition's proposed new amendments for that Act ("SDS overtook the coalition," 2022). In May 2022, national television journalists called for a warning strike. Their main demand was to depoliticise public broadcasting and comply with professional and ethical standards ("This leadership," 2022). Media appearances can be an important strategy of OIs when participating in a public policy process (Beyers, 2004). Especially when decision-makers cannot be reached by individual organisations, OIs can use the media to draw attention to their positions. Media control and negative reporting on OIs can thus significantly impact the influence of OIs.

Slovenian OIs on average devote much more time to indirect strategies than direct ones. The activities most frequently engaged in to influence policies are publishing positions on their websites, followed by contacting journalists to boost media attention, active involvement in media debates such as giving interviews, writing editorials and opinion letters, and organising conferences of experts and press conferences (Beyers et al., 2020). Reliance on outside strategies like protest activities, demonstrations, public gatherings, as well as media appearances remain important OI activities for coping with the situation of backsliding. In addition, over 60% of Slovenian OIs are also members of international "umbrella organisations" (Beyers et al., 2020). This matters because OIs with international ties show lower levels of existential threats (Kamiński & Riedel, 2021).

2.3. Suspension of Funding

A survey among the Slovenian population of OIs showed that most OIs operate with a small budget. Almost 45% has an annual operating budget of just EUR 10,000, while a further 27% operates with an annual budget of EUR 10,000 to EUR 50,000. Around 58% of OIs work voluntarily and have no employees. Membership fees were the most widespread source of funding; only 14.4% of OIs were not funded by membership fees. Other funding sources include contributions from charities and sponsors, donations by individuals, services, sales, savings and national governmental funds (39 percent; see Beyers et al., 2020). In terms of funding sources, Slovenian OIs are thus largely autonomous as they generally rely on internal funding sources (Gray & Lowery, 1997). The voluntary aspect of Slovenian OIs makes them vulnerable to social and political challenges and changes. However, their strong grassroots nature makes them also more resilient to democratic deterioration, with the same survey (Beyers et al., 2020) revealing that just 12.6% of OIs state it is highly likely their organisation will face a serious challenge to their existence in the next five years. A further 22.5% believe this is likely to happen. In comparison, data for Poland show higher levels of mortality anxiety with 24% stating this is highly likely and another 33% stating this is likely. At the same time, notwithstanding the high numbers of active OIs in Slovenia, perceived direct competition, which can influence mortality anxiety levels (Gray & Lowery, 1997), is not very high. No organisation believes there is very strong competition from like-minded organisations when attracting members, donations, and subsidies: 17% find the competition strong and an additional 32% find that the competition is moderate. For comparison, in Poland, perceived direct competition is much higher in the population of national OIs since 12.5% find the competition very strong, 30% strong and a further 31% moderate (Beyers et al., 2020). Yet, the survey was conducted in Slovenia in 2016 when a centre-left government was in power and the environment for OIs' operation was favourable,

while in Poland the survey was conducted in 2017, two years after democratic backsliding had been underway (Pospieszna & Vetulani-Cęgiel, 2021) and these circumstances can especially effect OIs' perceived anxiety.

Nevertheless, the public funding OIs manage to obtain remains important for their functioning. Official statistics show that between 2009 and 2020 public funds accounted for 35% to 47% of all OI revenues (CNVOS, 2021a). While the right-wing government in Hungary has stigmatised any OIs funded by foreign donors (Roggeband & Krizsan, 2021), in Slovenia populist right-wing politicians have accused OIs of draining the state budget. In the last two years, some government measures affecting OIs have also included limiting their funding.

Soon after the new populist right-wing government took office in 2020, some project contractors approved by the Government Communication Office to conduct projects concerning respecting and accepting different ethnic groups, refugees, migrants, and media literacy were told, in a letter, to voluntarily withdraw from their contract and give up their project funding. The Government Communication Office stated that the key reason for this demand was that their funds were needed to fight Covid-19. The project tender was worth just EUR 107,000 (CNVOS, 2020b), immediately raising suspicions that the government simply wanted to avoid supporting activities in the fields of multiculturalism and in fighting against fake news (Petković, 2020b).

In October 2020, the Ministry of Culture requested the eviction of OIs from Metelkova 6 in Ljubljana in order to renovate the premises. Since 1994, Metelkova 6 has been home to 18 OIs and six libraries known to promote cultural, scientific research, and advocacy activities on premises owned by the Ministry of Culture. Forced eviction attempts were understood as undermining independent, autonomous and free creative production and a political reckoning of critical, thoughtful and creative voices/institutions, especially given that the renovation work is only planned for 2023 while OIs were asked to leave the premises by 2021. Further, they were not offered alternative premises, despite provisions for that in the lease agreement ("The Ministry of Culture," 2020).

Yet what is most worrying was the attempt to abolish the Fund for the development of NGOs under the Determining Intervention Measures to Assist in Mitigating the Consequences of the Second Wave of the Covid-19 Epidemic Act (ZIUZEOP, after the original title). In 2018, the Ministry of Public Administration set up a budget fund for the development of NGOs to finance projects and programmes of OIs and volunteering. The funding sources are personal income tax funds that have not been used by taxpayers to finance public-benefit purposes. Funds are allocated to OIs based on public tenders. The fund is the sole systemic funding source for OIs and finances professionalisation, enables development investments, and strengthens the quality of OIs' services. An important role of the fund is to co-finance European projects. Between 2018 and 2020, 194 organisations from all Slovenian regions received funds (CNVOS, 2020c). Both the attempt to abolish the fund and to include this measure in the ZIUZEOP without prior announcement or public discussion were controversial. By sending letters to members of parliament and addressing the public and the media, OIs were able to draw attention to the proposal's harmfulness. They managed to persuade the coalition partners Modern Centre Party and New Slovenia not to support the proposal. Still, this was not the ruling party's only attempt to abolish the fund (CNVOS, 2020d).

Attacks on OIs by curtailing their funds also entail individual cases. One example is the environmental organisation Lutra, Institute for the Preservation of Natural Heritage, which is actively opposed to the building of a hydroelectric power plant on the lower Sava River. In 2020, the Institute was awarded a project under a LIFE programme call financed by the European Commission. Since the EU is only co-financing the project and OIs must find an additional funding source, Lutra successfully applied for co-financing with the Ministry of Environment. However, the minister refused to sign the co-financing agreement, presumably because the state no longer needed the services to be provided by the organisation within the project. Yet, the whole case raised suspicion that minister Andrej Vizjak was taking revenge on the organisation for having obstructed the hydroelectric power plant's construction on the Sava River, a project that he was interested in (CNVOS, 2022b).

Similarly, the results of a 4-year programme call by the Ministry of Culture to select public cultural programmes in the fields of music, intermedia, and performing and visual arts excluded from funding certain well-established non-governmental cultural organisations. Some of these organisations had been involved in this co-financing mechanism since the start of the Ministry of Culture's programme and held strong references in their field of activity (Kocijančič, 2022; Svetec, 2022). By controlling the funds available to an OI, the state can easily jeopardise its existence. This is especially when organisations are small and operate on a limited budget. Slovenian OIs generally have balanced sources of funding from public to private funds and their own services (CNVOS, 2021a). Unlike in some other CEE countries, Slovenian OIs are not considerably financed by foreign donations.

2.4. Administrative Obstruction of Organised Interests

The obstruction of OIs' functioning was best seen in the field of the environment. Environmental organisations in the past had pointed to the harmful environmental impacts of the planned construction of industrial facilities, hydroelectric power plants or other high-profile foreign investments, which led to negative media coverage of environmental interests (USAID, 2018, 2020). However, until 2020 environmental organisations had

mostly faced accusations about obstructing development and negative attitudes, even though no measures were taken to formally prevent environmental OIs from participating in policy processes. The right-wing government sought to avoid OIs' opposition to planned new investments by introducing fresh administrative obstacles. In the ZIUZEOP framework, it added new conditions for OIs regarding their involvement in the process of issuing building permits. These new conditions were so strict that practically even the most active and recognisable environmental organisations from Slovenia would have been unable to meet them, largely because the rules were retrospective and organisations should have met those conditions two years before. The conditions determined the minimum number of active members with proven regular membership fee payments and participation at members' meetings, the number of full-time employees with a professional higher education and work experience, and the minimum assets (CNVOS, 2020e). The Constitutional Court then withheld the enforcement of these conditions. The same conditions for the involvement of OIs were proposed regarding obtaining the status of acting in the public interest in the nature conservation field under the Environmental Protection Act (CNVOS, 2020f), although ultimately the "retrospectivity" of these conditions was not included in the Act. These new conditions also apply to OIs that had already received the status of acting in the public interest (CNVOS, 2020g). In addition, the government proposed that OIs are excluded from the environmental impact assessment process. Environmental organisations could only appeal against a decision after it had been taken. Within the framework of the Spatial Management Act, the government proposed to withdraw an article that enabled individuals and environmental organisations to appeal against harmful interventions in space. The government thereby wanted to enable all investments without consideration of their effect on the environment (Umanotera, 2021; Weiss, 2021). Although in previous governments environmental organisations had been attacked in the media for interfering and obstructing a new investment project, the right-wing government introduced legal amendments that prevented environmental organisations from watching over planned interventions in nature.

While, on one hand, the populist right-wing government took measures that largely affected OIs that are perceived as "left-leaning"—that are more in tune with issues of multiculturalism, fake news, human rights, equality, etc.—on the other hand, environmental organisations also encountered obstructions because of their different views on economic development and investments. The ruling party's intention with the measures taken against OIs could be understood as strengthening their ideological position in line with the values of their electorate and enabling effective and quick policy decisions without the need to consider OIs that held the potential to slow the process down.

2.5. Suspension of Social Dialogue

The neo-corporatist model of representation, whereby trade unions and employers have institutionalised contacts with decision-makers within the Economic-Social Committee (ESC) and through established social dialogue, has strong foundations in Slovenia. The ESC was established in 1994 and permits the equal representation of representatives of employees, employers and government. Its main aim is to address issues and measures concerning economic and social policy by participating in the initiating and formulating of legislation. ESC decisions are binding for all authorities and working bodies of all three partners and the ESC holds a real "economic and political influence" (Krašovec & Johannsen, 2017). Despite income policies being the committee's chief focus over the years, other topics have been discussed that led to the adoption of social and other pacts (Krašovec & Novak, 2021), while social dialogue in the ESC framework has proven to be durable and adaptable to good and hard economic times (Krašovec & Johannsen, 2017). Cooperation with the ESC and the establishment of social pacts has also added to the legitimacy of governmental decisions, especially before elections (Krašovec & Johannsen, 2017). Despite the strong role of trade unions and employers' associations, during the last populist right-wing government both employers and employees' representatives warned about the lack of dialogue and collaboration with the ESC. The first ZIUZEOP was formulated without social dialogue and cooperation with the trade unions, while due to the lack of dialogue trade unions walked out of the negotiations for the fifth ZIUZEOP package in protest (Kovač, 2020). In July 2021, ESC chairman Mitja Gorenšček, the Executive Director of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Slovenia, called for the social dialogue to be revived and noted the harmful consequences of the social partners' inactivity and inconsistency since several new acts had been adopted without an ESC meeting (ESC, 2021). A similar concern regarding the 1.5-year absence of social dialogue and wilful misconduct of the ESC's rules was raised in October 2021 by representatives of the biggest trade unions. According to them, the government had submitted to parliament draft laws about the national demographic fund, income tax package, health legislation, and packages of legislation to help the economy and people during the coronavirus epidemic, but without any prior coordination with the social partnership, namely in violation of the ESC's rules ("A year and a half without social dialogue," 2021). Although the institutionalisation and formalisation of neocorporatist models mean that they are more difficult to destroy during a backsliding (Pospieszna & Vetulani-Cęgiel, 2021), this example clearly shows that one strategy of the populist right-wing government for curtailing OIs was to interrupt the social dialogue and ignore the neo-corporatist structure.

2.6. Exclusion of Organised Interests From Policymaking

The National Council is the upper house of parliament and the peak corporatist institution in Slovenia that represents indirectly elected social, economic, professional, and local interests. While it is often pointed out that the National Council only has a minor role in Slovenian policymaking, it retains the power of a suspension veto. When new legislation is passed by the National Assembly, the National Council can, with its suspension veto, demand that fresh voting be held in the Assembly, but this time voting with an absolute majority is applied. This may be an important policymaking mechanism when a ruling coalition has a minimum majority, as was the case with the last populist right-wing government. The most striking example is an amendment to the Water Act from 2021 that included the controversial Article 37 allowing public areas to be privatised and the fencing of and restricted access to surface waters. On 30 March 2021, despite mass support for the petition for drinking water, the National Assembly adopted these controversial amendments. The civil initiative then immediately collected 9,000 signatures in support of a legislative referendum. The initiative to call a legislative referendum was filed on 6 April 2021. Still, on that day, the National Council did not vote against the amendments to the Water Act despite the petition having been signed by over 50,000 citizens and organised by the environmental organisation Eko krog (Eco Circle) and the civil initiative Danes (Today), Mladi za podnebno pravičnost (Youth for Climate Justice), Smetumet, and Inštitut 8. marec (Institute 8 March; see Malovrh, 2021).

The Water Act amendments were not only controversial regarding Article 37 but also in a procedural way. The amendment to the Act was only up for public debate for just one week, whereas the government's own rules of procedure provided a minimum deadline for the public's response of 30 to 60 days. Moreover, the disputed changes were made following a public debate on the Ministry of the Economy's initiative (with the consent of the Ministry of the Environment), which breaches the Aarhus Convention (Malovrh, 2021). Regular monitoring of public involvement in the drafting of legislation reveals that all governments have violated the agreement on the public's involvement in terms of there being no public debate, no deadlines for comments, or the deadline being too short. While the government of Marjan Šarec breached the provisions on public involvement in 60% of cases, the last right-wing government of Janez Janša breached them in 70% of cases (CNVOS, 2022c). Inštitut 8. marec also warned that the parliament's internal rule that foresees the presentation of opinions on a given topic by OIs had, in practice, been violated and almost no organisation was invited to parliament (Kovač, 2020).

3. Enhanced Actions of Organised interests

The situation during the Covid-19 crisis encouraged active citizenship and the need for voluntary assistance to be given to weak and vulnerable members of society. Volunteers helped in hospitals, collected computer equipment for distance learning, made purchases and deliveries for vulnerable groups of people, provided free transport to vulnerable groups and medical workers, sewed protective masks, and prepared disinfectant. Despite the limits the democratic deterioration imposed on OIs' activities, they undertook various actions to cope with the backsliding situation. We detected several forms of response: indirect strategies like mobilising and organising protests, signing petitions, participating in the media, and networking with like-minded organisations from Slovenia. Yet, at the same time, they also reached out to opposition parties, notably in 2022 before the elections, and used opportunity structures for citizens such as a referendum and the forming of legislative proposals.

OIs have been very active in mobilising the public. Although during the Covid-19 crisis most EU member states limited the public space and the right to gather, a need was expressed for the right of people to protest and establish a dialogue between the government and the public. The most visible mobilisation attempts during the Covid-19 crisis were the Friday Protests on bicycles that gathered every Friday for two years from April 2020 to the elections in April 2022. A series of protests were also organised on Tuesdays to draw attention to the status of culture during the pandemic, the Tuesdays for Culture. Moreover, several actions were organised by environmental OIs such as hiking for nature along the Sava River (Balkan River Defence, 2020).

Several petitions were signed over the last two years, including the "We Are Not Giving Our Nature Away" in response to the obstacles introduced concerning environmental organisations' involvement in decisions about new building investments, a petition in support of the informative television shows *Studio City*, *Tednik*, and *Tarča*, a petition on behalf of public radio and television broadcasters, as well as autonomous journalism, and a petition by academics against government interference in education. Media participation along with statements given to journalists and posted on websites were used to inform the public about any irregularities the OIs were experiencing.

Different OIs started to network together. This was most evident during the campaign for the Water Act and just before the elections when a network encompassing over 100 OIs—the Glas ljudstva (Voice of the People)—was established. Glas ljudstva actively called on the public to participate in the elections. It also prepared 100 demands to improve the social, political, economic, and environmental situation in Slovenia. Demands were also sent to political parties to ask them to commit themselves to the changes needed. This information was also available to voters, yet only left-wing parties responded

to the invitation (Glas ljudstva, 2022). Also due to the OIs' activities, the turnout for the National Assembly elections in April 2022 rose to 70.97%, a considerable increase over the 2018 elections when the turnout was just 52.64% (Državna volilna komisija, 2022). Without an increase in voter turnout, with the large steady electoral base of the SDS party and devoid of a strong party on the left, the populist right-wing government could have received another mandate.

However, OIs did not limit themselves simply to indirect strategies but also used all of the opportunity structures available to citizens. The two biggest successes of OIs under the populist right-wing government were the Water Act referendum and the proposed amendment to the Criminal Code. OIs managed to mobilise citizens and first collect enough signatures for a referendum and then enough votes at the referendum to prevent the harmful amendments to the Water Act coming into force ("The quorum is exceeded," 2021). Inštitut 8. marec prepared a draft amendment to Criminal Code to redefine the crime of sexual assault and rape according to the "Only Yes Means Yes" model, which received sufficient parliamentary support and was thus adopted ("Model,'' 2021).

Following the elections in April, Inštitut 8. marec submitted to the National Assembly a proposed law against the harmful measures taken by the previous government, supported by 15,000 collected signatures. With this proposal, it wishes to repeal 11 legal provisions adopted by the last government that are opposed by experts, beneficiaries, and the general public. The proposal includes preventing Uber from entering Slovenia, reducing the influence of local politics in schools and kindergartens, preventing the police from being politicised, enabling nature conservation organisations to engage in nature conservation, and restricting the Minister of Culture from arbitrarily allocating public funds. Before the election, the parties that later won the election supported this legislative proposal (Dernovšek, 2022).

4. Conclusion

The process of democratic deterioration and the altered conditions for OIs' operations and activities over the last two years of populist right-wing government led by SDS and Janez Janša was summarised by Tina Divjak, head of advocacy at the Centre for Information Service, Cooperation, and Development of NGOs, as follows: "We went to sleep in Slovenia and woke up in Hungary" (European Civic Forum, 2021). With the constant improvement of the legal environment for OIs' operations before 2020, which included the adoption of the Non-Governmental Organisations Act and the establishment of a fund for NGOs in 2018, the financial situation also improved and the number of active organisations every year increased. The year 2020, with the appointment of a new populist right-wing government and the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, was a turning point in the conditions facing OIs. Measures against NGOs grew, new legal obstacles and administrative demands were introduced, while several attempts were made to reduce financial support for OIs and their services.

Our analysis shows the closure of civic spaces selectively happened at the same time by targeting certain organisations (especially organisations in the areas of the environment, culture, and human rights) that shared different positions, value orientations, and ideologies than the ruling party and its electorate, as well as generally with some attempts like the proposal to withdraw fundings for NGOs that would affect all OIs. The government attempted to limit OIs' activities by intervening in their financial resources, legal framework, and public image to make quick and effective policy decisions without needing to consider the positions of OIs.

Ironically, during the Covid-19 epidemic, the need for the services of OIs rose rapidly while the obstruction of these interests encouraged the further mobilisation of citizens. Some of the greatest successes of OIs came during this period, namely the referendum on the Water Act, the amendment to the Criminal Code, and the rise in political participation. Set to commence its term at the start of June, the newly elected centre-left government promises to govern in close cooperation with civil society's OIs. Despite the OIs' success, any continuation of the right-wing government, especially due to its increasing influence on the national radio and television broadcaster, would probably have seen the civic space close even more and OIs being less likely to repeat their successes. How the relationship between the new government and OIs develops has yet to be seen. Still, it is very clear that OIs will continue to be "mischievous" (as claimed by the right-wing government) if any further democratic deterioration occurs. On its first day under the new leadership, the Ministry of the Interior withdrew its consent for lawsuits filed against Jenull to reimburse police security costs from unreported protests over the past two years ("The ministry withdrew," 2022).

While the measures imposed to limit OIs by aiming to more effectively adopt policies in the interest of the government may seem an isolated and specific case, the result of the analysis is not just limited to Slovenia and the studied government. This case also shows that when the OI population experiences neither strong competition nor high mortality anxiety they can respond to the introduced limitations by reinforcing their indirect strategies, encouraging mobilisation, and extensively using opportunity structures to bring about changes. Nevertheless, we believe it is harmful if, due to democratic backsliding, OIs must focus on their survival instead of providing services for members and beneficiaries. Future research is particularly needed in terms of the long-term impact of the limitations experienced by OIs in the last two years and how likely such deterioration is with other governments.

Acknowledgments

The authors acknowledge the financial support from the Slovenian Research Agency (research core funding no. programme P5–0136 and research project no. J5–2563).

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

A year and a half without social dialogue: the trade unions demand an extraordinary session of the National Assembly committee. (2021, October 15). *N1 Slovenija*. https://n1info.si/novice/slovenija/leto-in-pol-brez-socialnega-dialoga-kako-bodo-ukrepali-sindikati

Balkan River Defence. (2020). *Za naravo ob Savo* [Hiking for nature along the Sava River]. https://balkanriverdefence.org/za-naravo-ob-savo

Beyers, J. (2004). Voice and access: Political practices of European interest associations. *European Union Politics*, *5*(2), 211–240.

Beyers, J., Fink-Hafner, D., Maloney, W. A., Novak, M., & Heylen, F. (2020). The comparative interest group-survey project: Design, practical lessons, and data sets. *Interest Groups & Advocacy*, *9*(3), 272–298.

Boese, V. A., Alizada, N., Lundstedt, M., Morrison, K., Natsika, N., Sato, Y., & Lindberg, H. T. (2022). *Autocratization changing nature? Democracy report 2022*. V-Dem Institute.

Carmin, J. (2010). NGO capacity and environmental governance in Central and Eastern Europe. *Acta Politica*, *45*(1/2), 183–202.

CNVOS. (2020a). *Sloveniji znižana ocena zaradi omejevanja državljanskih svoboščin* [Reduced rating for Slovenia due to restrictions on civil liberties]. https://www.cnvos.si/novice/2679/sloveniji-znizana-ocena-zaradi-omejevanja-drzavljanskih-svoboscin

CNVOS. (2020b). *Nujno obvestilo za izbrane izvajalce na razpisu UKOM 2020* [Urgent notice for selected contractors in the Government Communication Office 2020 tender]. https://www.cnvos.si/novice/2496/nujno-obvestilo-za-izbrane-izvajalce-na-razpisu-ukom-2020

CNVOS. (2020c). *Podpišite apel poslancem: proti ukinitvi sklada za razvoj* [Sign the appeal to MPs: Against the abolition of the development fund]. https://www.cnvos.si/novice/2693/podpisite-apel-poslancem-proti-ukinitvi-sklada-za-nvo

CNVOS. (2020d). *Sklad za NVO ostaja!* [The fund for NGOs remains!]. https://www.cnvos.si/novice/2692/sklad-za-nvo-ostaja

CNVOS. (2020e). *Izjava nevladnih organizacij glede 42. člena novega proti-koronskega zakona* [Statement of non-governmental organizations regarding article 42 of the new anti-corona law]. https://www.cnvos.si/novice/2509/izjava-nevladnih-organizacij-glede-42-clena-novega-proti-koronskega-zakona

CNVOS. (2020f). *Vojna napoved ohranjanju narave* [A declaration of war on nature conservation]. https://www.cnvos.si/novice/2523/vojna-napoved-ohranjanju-narave

CNVOS. (2020g). *Kako obdržati status delovanja v javnem interesu na področju ohranjanja narave?* [How to maintain the status of acting in the public interest in the field of nature conservation?]. https://www.cnvos.si/novice/2554/kako-obdrzati-status-delovanja-v-javnem-interesu-na-podrocju-ohranjanja-narave

CNVOS. (2021a). *NVO sektor: Dejstva in številke* [The NGO sector: Facts and figures]. https://www.cnvos.si/nvo-sektor-dejstva-stevilke

CNVOS. (2021b). *Pridružujemo se pozivom, naj policijsko uporabo sile nad mirnimi protestniki previri varuh človekovih pravic* [We join calls for an ombudsman to investigate police use of force against peaceful protesters]. https://www.cnvos.si/novice/2914/pridruzujemo-se-pozivom-naj-policijsko-uporabo-sile-nad-mirnimi-protestniki-preveri-varuh-clovekovih-pravic

CNVOS. (2022a). *S premierjevimi putinovskimi prijemi se ne bomo znebili Putina* [We will not get rid of Putin with the Prime Minister's Putinist tactics]. https://www.cnvos.si/novice/3003/s-premierjevimi-putinovskimi-prijemi-se-ne-bomo-znebili-putina

CNVOS. (2022b). *Če jim nasprotuješ, se ti bo maščevalo: Primer Lutra* [If you oppose them, you will be avenged: The case of NGO Lutra]. https://www.cnvos.si/novice/3019/ce-jim-nasprotujes-se-ti-bo-mascevalo-primer-lutra

CNVOS. (2022c). *Števec kršitev resolucije o normativni dejavnosti* [Counter of violations of the resolution on normative activity]. https://www.cnvos.si/stevec-krsitev

De Tocqueville, A. (1840). *Democracy in America: Volume 2*. J. & H. G. Langley.

Dernovšek, I. (2022, April 25). Inštitut 8. marec vložil zakon proti škodljivim ukrepom oblasti [Institute 8 March filed a law against the harmful measures of the authorities]. *Dnevnik*. https://www.dnevnik.si/1042987896

Državna volilna komisija. (2022). *Volitve v državni zbor* [Elections to the National Assembly]. https://www.dvk-rs.si/volitve-in-referendumi/drzavni-zbor-rs

Economic-Social Committee. (2021). *Predsedujoči Ekonomsko-socialnemu svetu poziva k oživitvi socialnega dialoga* [The chairman of the Economic and Social Council calls for the revival of social dialogue]. http://www.ess.si/ess/ess-si.nsf/ekonomsko-socialni-svet/seja%20Ekonomsko-socialnega%20sveta

European Civic Forum. (2021). *Civic space in the European rule of law framework*. https://civicspacewatch.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Report-Civic-

Space-in-the-European-Rule-of-Law-Framework.pdf
Fink-Hafner, D. (2019). *Populizem* [Populism]. Fakulteta za družbene vede.
Fink-Hafner, D., Hafner-Fink, M., & Novak, M. (2015). Civil society since the 1980s on the territory of Slovenia. In D. Fink-Hafner (Ed.), *The development of civil society in the countries on the territory of the former Yugoslavia since the 1980s* (pp. 69–94). Faculty of Social Sciences.
Glas ljudstva. (2022). Glas ljudstva [Voice of the People]. https://glas-ljudstva.si
Gray, V., & Lowery, D. (1997). Life in a niche: Mortality anxiety among organized interests in the American states. *Political Research Quarterly*, *50*(1), 25–47.
Kamiński, P., & Riedel, R. (2021). When illiberalism looms-mortality anxiety and the perceived existential threat among Polish and Slovenian interest groups. *Interest Groups & Advocacy*, *10*, 454–477.
Kocijančič, G. (2022, March 4). Strokovna šlamastika [Professional mess]. *Mladina*. https://www.mladina.si/214596/strokovna-slamastika
Košir, I. (2020, June 3). Ko pisanje s kredo postane prekršek [When writing with chalk becomes violation]. *Mladina*. https://www.mladina.si/198830/ko-pisanje-s-kredo-postane-prekrsek
Kosmač, G. (2020, August 28). Protivladni protestniki za Bežigradom ustanovili svoj "Trg republike" [Anti-government protesters outside Bežigrad set up their own "Republic Square"]. *MMC RTV SLO*. https://www.rtvslo.si/slovenija/protivladni-protestniki-za-bezigradom-ustanovili-svoj-trg-republike/534580
Kovač, N. (2020). Illiberal government takes over the country. In European Civic Forum (Eds.), *Activizenship no. 5: Civic space watch report 2020* (pp. 140–148). European Civic Forum.
Kramberger, U. Š. (2022, May 20). Jenull je prejel še tožbo za 34.000 evrov [Jenull also received a lawsuit for 34,000 euros]. *Dnevnik*. https://www.dnevnik.si/1042989538
Krašovec, A., & Johannsen, L. (2017). Social dialogue between transition and the great recession [Special issue]. *Teorija in praksa*, *54*.
Krašovec, A., & Lajh, D. (2021). Slovenia: Tilting the balance? In G. Verheugen, K. Vodička, & M. Brusis (Eds.), *Demokratie im postkommunistischen EU-Raum, Erfolge, Defizite, Risiken* [Democracy in the post-communist EU area, successes, deficits, risks] (pp. 161–174). Springer.
Krašovec, A., & Novak, M. (2021). Democracy, party politics and relations with the EU. In C. Hagemann (Ed.), *Slovenia 30 years after independence* (pp. 16–32). Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft.
Levin-Waldman, O. (2012). Rising income inequality and declining civic participation. *Challenge*, *55*(3), 51–70.
Lijphart, A. (1984). Democracies: Patterns of majoritarian and consensus government in twenty-one. Yale University Press.
Malovrh, P. (2021, April 6). Državni svet ni izglasoval veta [National Council did not vote on the veto]. *Delo*. https://www.delo.si/novice/slovenija/drzavni-svet-danes-o-odlozilnem-vetu
Model "only yes is yes" is adopted; non-state actors: This is a clear message about total intolerance of violence. (2021, June 4). *Multimedijski center Radiotelevizije Slovenija*. https://www.rtvslo.si/slovenija/model-samo-ja-je-ja-nevladniki-to-je-jasno-sporocilo-o-popolni-netoleranci-nasilja/582970
Novak, M., & Fink-Hafner, D. (2019). Slovenia: Interest group developments in a postsocialist-liberal democracy. *Journal of Public Affairs*, *19*(2). https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.1867
Novak, M., & Hafner-Fink, M. (2015). Social participation, political participation and protests on the territory of the former Yugoslavia: Comparative view based on social survey data. In D. Fink-Hafner (Ed.), *The development of civil society in former Yugoslavia since the 1980s* (pp. 23–40). Faculty of Social Sciences.
Petković, B. (2020a). *Značilnosti napadov na civilno družbo v Sloveniji* [Characteristics of attacks on civil society in Slovenia]. Mirovni inštitut.
Petković, B. (2020b). *Slovenija: Napadi nove vlade na nevladne organizacije in medije* [Slovenia: Attacks by the new government on non-governmental organizations and the media]. Mirovni inštitut. https://www.mirovni-institut.si/slovenija-napadi-nove-vlade-na-nevladne-organizacije-in-medije
Pietrzyk-Reeves, D. (2008). Weak civic engagement? Post-communist participation and democratic consolidation. *Polish Sociological Review*, *1*(161), 73–87.
Police officers issued fines to protesters in cars for honking their horns. (2020, November 27). *Mladina*. https://www.mladina.si/203187/policisti-protestnikom-v-avtomobilih-pisali-kazni-zaradi-hupanja
Pospieszna, P., & Vetulani-Cęgiel, A. (2021). Polish interest groups facing democratic backsliding. *Interest Groups & Advocacy*, *10*, 158–180.
Rasmussen, A., & Reher, S. (2019). Civil society engagement and policy representation in Europe. *Comparative Political Studies*, *52*(11), 1648–1676.
Roggeband, C., & Krizsan, A. (2021). The selective closure of civic space. *Global Policy*, *12*, 23–33.
SDS overtook the coalition with a package of legislative proposals: "This will slow down the proceedings for a month or two." (2022, May 13). *Multimedijski center Radiotelevizije Slovenija.* https://www.rtvslo.si/slovenija/sds-prehitel-koalicijo-s-sveznjem-zakonskih-predlogov-to-bo-postopke-upocasnilo-za-mesec-ali-dva/627281
Signed contract between Government Communication Office and Slovenian press agency. The agency will receive 2 million euros for this year. (2021, November 8). *Multimedijski center Radiotelevizije Slovenija* https://www.rtvslo.si/slovenija/podpisana-pogodba-med-ukomom-in-sta-jem-agencija-bo-prejela-2-milijona-evrov-za-letos/600348

Smeltzer, M., & Buyon, N. (2022). *Nations in transit 2022: From democratic decline to authoritarian aggression*. https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/NIT_2022_final_digital.pdf

Svetec, P. (2022, January 10). Kljub ustreznim referencam nekatere nevladne organizacije ostale brez sredstev [Despite proper references, some NGOs were left without funds]. *MMC RTV SLO*. https://www.rtvslo.si/kultura/kljub-ustreznim-referencam-nekatere-nevladne-organizacije-ostale-brez-sredstev/608116

Sviz and teachers of II. Maribor high schools call for a halt to proceedings against students. (2021, March 5). *Multimedijski center Radiotelevizije Slovenija.* https://www.rtvslo.si/slovenija/sviz-in-ucitelji-ii-gimnazije-maribor-pozivajo-k-ustavitvi-postopkov-zoper-dijake/571879

The Ministry of Culture "evicts" non-governmental organizations, which "do not intend to leave" Metelkova 6. (2020, October 20). *Multimedijski center Radiotelevizije Slovenija*. https://www.rtvslo.si/kultura/drugo/ministrstvo-za-kulturo-delozira-nevladne-organizacije-ki-pa-metelkove-6-ne-nameravajo-zapustiti/539717

The ministry withdrew its consent to lawsuits regarding undeclared protest rallies. (2022, June 2). *Multimedijski center Radiotelevizije Slovenija*. https://www.rtvslo.si/slovenija/ministrstvo-umaknilo-soglasje-za-tozbe-glede-neprijavljenih-protestnih-shodov/629619

The quorum is exceeded, the law is decisively rejected. (2021, July 11). *Delo*. https://www.delo.si/novice/slovenija/zakon-o-vodah-na-preizkusnji

This leadership made such bad television that they lost the election. (2022, May 23). *Delo*. https://www.delo.si/novice/slovenija/na-rtv-slovenija-poteka-stavka

Umanotera. (2021, January 12). Pogroma nad okoljem še ni konec: Vlada bi ukinila še zadnje ključne varovalke pred škodljivimi projekti [The pogrom over the environment is not over yet: the government would abolish the last key safeguards against harmful projects]. *Umanotera*. https://www.umanotera.org/novice/sporocilo-za-javnostpogroma-nad-okoljem-se-ni-konec-vlada-bi-ukinila-se-zadnje-kljucne-varovalke-pred-skodljivimi-projekti

United States Agency for International Development. (2018). *2017 civil society organization sustainability index for Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia* (21st ed.). USAID.

United States Agency for International Development. (2020). *2019 civil society organization sustainability index for central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia* (23rd ed.). USAID.

United States Agency for International Development. (2021). *2020 civil society organization sustainability index for Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia* (24th ed.). USAID.

Weiss, M. (2021, January 25). Na okoljskem ministrstvu je napačen minister [There is a wrong minister in the Ministry of the Environment]. *Mladina*. https://www.mladina.si/204608/na-okoljskem-ministrstvu-je-napacen-minister

About the Authors

Meta Novak is an associate professor of policy analysis at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, and a researcher at the Centre for Political Science Research, where she was part of the INTEREURO project and the Comparative Interest Groups Survey project. Her main topics of research are interest groups, lobbying, and civil society organisations.

Damjan Lajh is a professor of policy analysis at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, and the head of the Centre for Political Science Research. He is the coordinator of the master programme on comparative public policies and administration and the PhD programme of European studies at the same faculty. His research interests include policy analysis, EU policymaking, cohesion policy, democratic transition, and interest groups. He has led several national and European research and applicative projects.

Politics and Governance (ISSN: 2183–2463)
2023, Volume 11, Issue 1, Pages 39–49
https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v11i1.5863

Article

Interest Group Strategic Responses to Democratic Backsliding

Danica Fink-Hafner * and Sara Bauman

Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

* Corresponding author (danica.fink-hafner@fdv.uni-lj.si)

Submitted: 3 May 2022 | Accepted: 27 September 2022 | Published: 13 January 2023

Abstract
In this article, we offer insights into the plurality of interest groups' strategic responses to the socially, politically, and economically transformative phenomenon of democratic backsliding. For the purpose of the article, the term "ideational plurality" has been coined to refer to a plurality of interest groups' ideas leading their activities in general and their choice of strategies concerning the government in particular (attitudinal and behavioural aspects). Two policy fields and two types of interest groups engaged in an institutionalised social partnership—advocacy NGOs (operating in the environmental policy field) and economic groups (trade unions)—are studied comparatively in Slovenia using a mixed-methods approach. The key findings are that strategic responses to democratic backsliding vary between environmental NGOs and trade unions, as do their ideational plurality, and that environmental NGOs' ideational plurality damages their potential to struggle against democratic backsliding. In contrast, trade unions' ideational homogeneity enables them to jointly struggle against governmental destruction of one significant segment of democratic order (institutions of social partnership) without demanding that the government step down for misusing the Covid-19 pandemic to establish a system of governance that resonates with Viktor Orbán's ideas of illiberal democracy.

Keywords
Covid-19; democratic backsliding; environment; interest group strategies; NGOs; Slovenia; social partnership; trade unions

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

1. Introduction

In this article, we offer insights into the plurality of interest groups (IGs) strategic responses to the socially, politically, and economically transformative phenomenon of democratic backsliding (Bermeo, 2016; Luhrmann et al., 2020). More precisely, the article further develops research on the "missing middle" in a post-socialist context (Dobbins & Riedel, 2021). We join research on IGs in post-socialist countries while taking into account the ongoing tendencies to democratic backsliding (Pospieszna & Vetulani-Cęgiel, 2021; Riedel & Dobbins, 2021; Rozbicka et al., 2021).

The unique approach of our research is in looking at the contextual overlap of two system-wide "events" or "shocks" (Kingdon, 1995; Sabatier, 1988): the Covid-19 pandemic and the sharp decline in democracy within a particular country, namely Slovenia, where democratic backsliding swiftly evolved over a period of two years (April 2020–April 2022). This makes it relevant for both the study of IGs' responses to democratic backsliding and the development of knowledge on changes in IGs' strategies in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g., Junk et al., 2022).

One of the contributions is related to the previous findings that advocacy groups tend to compete among themselves and, in the process, weaken their own position vis-à-vis the government (Pospieszna & Vetulani-Cęgiel, 2021). More precisely, our key finding is the revelation that IGs' ideational plurality is a factor which may diminish civil society's potential to struggle against democratic backsliding. For the purpose of this article, we define ideational plurality as a plurality of IGs' ideas leading their activities in general and their choice of

strategies concerning the government in particular (attitudinal and behavioural aspects).

As IGs' characteristics vary among policy fields, in our research, we take into account three factors of IGs' strategic responses. Firstly, we take the ideational plurality of the IGs found within a single policy field (Gough & Shackley, 2001, pp. 341–345; Pilgrim & Harvey, 2010) as a separate factor. Ideational plurality in terms of an abundance of ideas that are often conflicting is especially characteristic of environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOs; Gough & Shackley, 2001; Pilgrim & Harvey, 2010). ENGOs' various—more or less radical—ideational orientations contribute to the co-existence of ideational variations or even conflict within the same national milieus (see, e.g., Barter & Bebbington, 2012; Hultgren, 2018; Plehwe, 2022). In contrast, trade unions (TUs) share very similar ideas about defending workers' everyday experience of capitalism while not challenging the capitalist mode of production per se, domestically or internationally. More precisely, in the EU context, their aims and priorities lie with social capitalism, social dialogue, and workers' rights (Darlington, 2014).

Secondly, we consider the two contrasting positionings of IGs in relation to the government and other IGs—as expressed in two paradigms for studying IGs—pluralism and corporatism (Bianchi, 2001). Cause groups (including environmental groups) have been found to more intensively pursue indirect strategies of influence (Binderkrantz, 2005). TUs, as groups that are often involved in social partnerships, have a privileged position vis-à-vis decision-makers. This means that they primarily tend to pursue direct strategies of influence (Binderkrantz, 2005).

Thirdly, we build on previous findings that the predominant means of managing the Covid-19 pandemic has been an important factor in deepening the democratic backsliding already underway (Edgell et al., 2021; Guasti, 2020). Indeed, the Covid-19 pandemic has not only proven to be an important driver of change in lobbying access but has also been shown to affect economic and non-economic interests differently. Public IGs, which usually represent social, environmental, and similar causes, were not able to increase their access as much as business organisations, labour unions, or professional organisations (Junk et al., 2022).

Based on previous research, it is plausible to hypothesise that the ideational plurality within the same cluster of IGs (e.g., ENGOs) will impact their (various) perceptions of the relevance of democratic backsliding for fulfilling their (more or less radical) goals as well as their strategic adaptations to democratic backsliding. On the contrary, we expect ideationally more homogeneous IGs in a particular policy field (e.g., TUs) to interpret the relevance of democratic backsliding and adapt their strategies to it in a more homogeneous way. This is why they may potentially act as a cluster of collaborating actors pressuring the government to respect institutionalised social partnerships. Collaboration of ideationally heterogenic groups in relation to the government is more likely to make such clusters of groups weaker in resisting (particular elements of) democratic backsliding.

The article adds to the understanding of (a) IGs' perceptions of how democratic backsliding affects their access to policymakers, (b) how IGs adapt their strategies in a democratic backsliding setting, (c) how IGs' ideational plurality affects their strategic adaptation in the democratic backsliding setting, and (d) how the ideational plurality of IGs within a single policy field affects the weakening of their position vis-à-vis the government.

The case study of Slovenia is valuable for several reasons. Firstly, Slovenia has only experienced democratic backsliding tendencies in the context of the recent Covid-19 pandemic. The situation was misused by the centre-right government (led by Janez Janša) to implement the Second Republic programme, which is similar to Orbán's illiberal ideas (e.g., empowerment of the executive, electoral rule change, abolition of certain state institutions, judicial reform; SDS, 2013).

Secondly, Slovenia's comparative closeness to Ireland, the UK, and the eastern part of Germany in terms of associational involvement (the share of citizens involved; see van Deth & Maloney, 2014) makes it an interesting case in general and also among post-socialist countries in particular.

Thirdly, the case study of Slovenia offers good opportunities for studying two contrasting policy fields: the environmental field, with pluralist characteristics (Novak, 2019), and the socio-economic field, with comparatively strong corporatist traditions (Avdagic, 2003; Bohle & Greskovits, 2007; Krašovec & Johannsen, 2017).

Fourthly, the context of Slovenia also offers a natural laboratory for a comparative study of two IG types: advocacy NGOs (those operating in the environmental policy field, i.e., ENGOs) and economic groups (TUs) engaged in an institutionalised social partnership.

We consider this research an explorative basis for further research. First, we present a theorisation of democratic backsliding and IGs, followed by a section on the mixed methodology used to gather data on and from IGs. We start the empirical analysis with an overview of the impact of the specific Slovenian context, which is characterised by the overlap of the Covid-19 pandemic and democratic backsliding in the period 2020–2022, on the IG sphere. After analysis of empirical data gathered via interviews with the selected IGs, we comment on the findings in relation to the literature in the field.

2. Democratic Backsliding and Interest Groups

So far, research has shown that democratic backsliding involves the limiting of the political rights and freedoms of citizens (particularly the freedom of association and assembly), the restriction of the public space, and the shrinking of the civic space, as well as effects on the strength and the scope of IGs' political activities (Buyse,

2018; Pospieszna & Vetulani-Cęgiel, 2021; Toepler et al., 2020). Democratic backsliding has been associated with tendencies that produce the processual decomposing of a democratic system (Fink-Hafner, 2020; Guasti & Bustikova, 2017; Kotwas & Kubik, 2019), a decline in consultative politics, and political pressures on civil society actors—such as cutting their resources, legal restrictions, or their demonisation as foreign agents (Buyse, 2018; Toepler et al., 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic has been shown to be an important factor in deepening the democratic backsliding already underway (Edgell et al., 2021; Guasti, 2020); however, in the Slovenian case, the pandemic actually opened a window of opportunity for an intensive democratic backsliding in a short period (from taking over the government after the dissolution of the centre-left government in March 2020 to the April 2022 national elections). It has been shown that the overlap between democratic backsliding and managing the Covid-19 pandemic has led to a decrease in individual rights, including association and protest, damage to the interest intermediation by limiting the access of IGs to policy-making, as well as to attacks on IGs' resources, and hostile government speech against IGs (Junk et al., 2022; The Civicus Monitor, 2020a, 2022).

Our expectation that different IGs may be affected by democratic backsliding differently rests on several previous research findings. Firstly, different group types are associated with different statuses and behaviours (e.g., Dür & Mateo, 2013; Maloney et al., 1994). Secondly, in general, it is believed that cause groups (i.e., NGOs) tend to have bigger problems with resources compared to sectional IGs (i.e., economic groups). Thirdly, in general, the strategies of these groups tend to differ. Fourthly, as a rule, cause groups do not have access to decision-makers comparable to that of sectional IGs, although there are some exceptions (Dür, 2009). Fifthly, the strength of various IGs and their opportunity for political activity depend on the IG regime (neo-corporatist or pluralist) that dominates in a country once it starts to democratically backslide (Willems et al., 2021). This argument takes the following into account: (a) two contrasting paradigms of studying IGs, pluralist and corporatist (Bianchi, 2001), as well as (b) the ideational plurality of the IGs found within a single policy field (Gough & Shackley, 2001; Pilgrim & Harvey, 2010).

However, IGs may not be just objects of democratic backsliding. For their active role, IGs' perceptions of their position and the choice of strategies vis-à-vis the government matter (Pospieszna & Vetulani-Cęgiel, 2021). In Poland, it appears that, despite cooperation, there is still a lot of competition between like-minded cause groups due to their competing for the same pool of members, donations, and subsidies (Pospieszna & Vetulani-Cęgiel, 2021). Contrarily, sectional groups were found to network even with groups that have conflicting interests. We use the example of Slovenia to demonstrate how democratic backsliding may affect both pluralist and neo-corporatist segments of governing. In addition, we also demonstrate that the ideational fragmentation of ENGOs makes networking among such organisations more difficult than networking among TUs.

3. Methodology

In line with the general hypothesis presented in the introduction, we expect that, in Slovenia, differences between IGs' perceptions of democratic backsliding and their strategic adaptations arise from ENGOs being ideationally heterogeneous and TUs being ideationally homogeneous. We used a mixed-methods approach to achieve the following detailed research aims:

1. Mapping the overlapping situation of the Covid-19 pandemic and democratic backsliding in Slovenia (based on the existing research on Slovenia, reports from the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, The Civicus Monitor, Eurofund, Freedom House, Transparency International, and the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Slovenia and information published by Slovenian public national radio and TV);
2. Mapping of IGs' (a) perceptions of democratic backsliding in the environmental and socio-economic fields, (b) strategic adaptations in the context of democratic backsliding (both based on interviews held with representatives of the participating IGs), and (c) ideational plurality within both groups of the studied IGs (based on interviews held with representatives of the participating IGs and on information published on IGs' official webpages and Facebook pages).

3.1. Selection of Interviewees and Data Collection

In order to identify relevant IGs for interviews, several approaches were used: (a) a review of the official data on the composition of the Economic and Social Council (TUs' membership in the formalised institution of social partnership) and the official information published by the Ministry for Environment and Spatial Planning on ENGOs that it granted the status of ENGOs working in the public interest, in the environmental area; (b) a review of RTV online news articles including the information on IGs' activity; and (c) asking for information from the interviewees on the other IGs active in their field (snowball sampling).

We included several different types of IGs, ranging from well-organised ones with a number of employees to less organised ones that were based more on volunteer work; spatially, they had headquarters in the capital city of Ljubljana, a range of places in Slovenia, and even abroad (only in the case of ENGOs).

This way, 27 TUs and 32 ENGOs were identified; eight TUs (four being members of the Economic and Social Council and four active TU non-members of that council) and 15 ENGOs (those based in Ljubljana were more

responsive regardless of the size and level of internal organisation) accepted the invitation to the interview.

Between September 2020 and May 2022, interviews were conducted with the representatives chosen by the IGs; for the most part, they were the leading figures in the IG (presidents and general secretaries). The interviews were conducted based on a pre-prepared set of questions covering the following topics: questions about the IGs' main goals and activities; IGs' relations with other actors (political and non-political); the pressures with which they are dealing; their strategies; including the comparison of strategies used before and after the Covid-19 pandemic; IGs' attitudes towards the protests in Slovenia; and IGs' perceptions of the overall situation in Slovenia.

4. Analysis

4.1. Democratic Backsliding in Slovenia and Its Overall Impact on Interest Groups

In Slovenia, democratic backsliding started rather suddenly within a particular window of opportunity—a combination of the dissolution of the centre-left government and the start of the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic. The democratic backsliding overlapped with the period of the Janša government (from taking over the government, following the dissolution of the centre-left government in March 2020, to the April 2022 national elections), and it has involved all the main aspects of democratic backsliding simultaneously. In 2021, a report on the state of democracy (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2021) specified that Slovenia was among the most worrying examples of backsliding (joined by Brazil, India, the US, Hungary, and Poland; Boese et al., 2022).

Since its establishment, Janša's government exploited the Covid-19 crisis to diminish the interest intermediation process in general and, more specifically, to hinder the work of cause IGs in particular. For ENGOs, this process was reflected in one of the more prominent issues: the adoption of a law that made it more difficult for ENGOs to participate in institutionalised environmental policy-making (The Civicus Monitor, 2020a). ENGOs were targeted not only by limiting institutional opportunities for them to challenge construction projects based on environmental impact but also by funding cuts and being burdened with further barriers to their work (The Civicus Monitor, 2020a, pp. 8–9). These measures were not temporary. ENGOs faced significant funding challenges from the government, including in the adoption of the state budget for 2022, with projections for 2023 and 2024 (the parliament adopted it on December 8, 2021). No funds were allocated for environmental projects for 2022 or 2023. In addition, the climate fund for which ENGOs are eligible has been reduced by 70%. Therefore, ENGOs have not only strongly experienced the negative impact of the pandemic on the relative openness of the political system but have also experienced resource constraints.

For economic groups (in addition to TUs, this includes representatives of the employers), this hindering of work was most prominently visible in the sudden exclusion of the Economic and Social Council from the governing process. The Economic and Social Council is somewhat unique to Slovenia in the Central-Eastern European setting (Bohle & Greskovits, 2007; Fink-Hafner, 2011), although it is an institutionalised social partnership organised in line with the International Labour Organisation model of tripartism (Economic and Social Council, 2022).

Contrary to several examples of active engagement of social partnership in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic in other countries (The Global Deal, 2020), the neo-corporatist arrangements in Slovenia ceased to function. The fast-track legislative procedures (an issue also found in Poland and Slovakia) and the political circumstances (the radical change in government) severely limited the involvement of social partners, which caused social partners' dissatisfaction (Eurofound, 2021, pp. 10–11, 24–31).

Slovenia also faced other issues that were indicators of democratic backsliding. The Constitutional Court of Slovenia ruled that the government's limitations to people's rights to association and movement during the pandemic were unconstitutional, as they had no basis in law (Constitutional Court of the Republic of Slovenia, 2021, 2022). Such restrictions by the government resulted in the general civic space rating in Slovenia being downgraded from "open" to "narrowed," meaning that democratic freedoms, such as the freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, and association, had been increasingly violated (The Civicus Monitor, 2022a, 2020b). The government pressure on the civic space (The Civicus Monitor, 2020a) and the decline in civil liberties that was clearly detected also included NGOs' freedoms, while TUs and similar professional or labour organisations were estimated to have retained full freedom (Freedom House, 2022); however, they lost their position as partners to the government. It is also important to note that, in 2021, Slovenia's corruption perception index score was the worst since 2013 (Transparency International Slovenia, 2022).

4.2. Interest Groups' Perceptions of Democratic Backsliding

In order to understand changes in IGs' strategies, it is important to understand how IGs reflected on the contextual change and circumstances of the diminishing opportunities for using the strategies they had used before the period of the Janša's government and the Covid-19 pandemic. Firstly, the interviewed IGs explicitly pointed out the overlapping of the Covid-19 pandemic and democratic backsliding. Secondly, the prevalent perception of those interviewed was that political pressure during that time increased significantly.

Interviewed ENGOs reported political pressure from repressive institutions, from particular ministers, and via adopted laws, which diminished their rights and access to the governing process. One of the interviewees described the changes in laws as "barbaric" (anonymous interviewee 4, November 11, 2020). A number of those interviewed also mentioned ENGOs' being discredited by various media sources close to the government and social media pressure in the form of hostile comments and claims, discrediting, and generally unpleasant content. Despite feeling the political pressure, less than half of the interviewed ENGOs evaluated their relationships with state actors as negative; however, almost half noticed that their relations with state actors had been changing lately. One of them pointed out that the politics of the governing party were "less inclined to cooperation" (anonymous interviewee 6, October 16, 2020). Only a couple of the interviewees assessed their relationship with state actors as positive (ENGOs, which combine taking care of nature and managing particular animal species in Slovenia in collaboration with the state).

In addition to political pressures, the interviewees also talked about social pressures. They recognised them as (a) demands from the public that ENGOs act upon a particular issue, while they often do not have the resources and staff to do so; (b) general hostility towards environmental civil society; (c) pressures related to the pandemic; (d) anonymous messages; (e) occasional pressures from economic actors; (f) disrespect of agreements; (g) loss of resources; and (h) pressures related to lawsuits coming from legal offices.

TUs, first of all, criticised Janša's government for terminating social dialogue in the Economic and Social Council. The interviewees did not see the absence of cooperation with the government during this time as being caused by the pandemic but rather as a result of the government's misuse of the pandemic circumstances to achieve particular political goals. One of the interviewees clearly summarised the overall evaluation by stating that "the democratic deficit in decision-making has radically deepened with the arrival of the new government" (anonymous interviewee 17, April 13, 2022). Furthermore, criticism of the government coming from TUs was—as reported by the interviewees—very badly received. TUs were accused of "being a political party" or "being subordinate to a political party." The interviewees did not see these kinds of pressures as the usual political pressures on TUs but rather as extraordinary ones. What stood out was the fact that pressures were coming from the governing parties, mostly through social media (Twitter) and mass media that were known to be close to the leading party's ideology. Such media posts did not shy away from attacking TU representatives and even individual TU members.

TUs also mentioned a variety of other types of pressure on them, including the misinterpretation of information and fake news, especially regarding the salaries of TU leaders, verbal threats, attempts to gain control over TUs by various institutions, work-related legal sanctions, and one-sided decisions in the field of collective agreements. There were also attempts to directly prevent TU activities, obstruction of TUs leaders' activities, threats of dismissal toward TU leaders (in the case of TUs representing state employees), and even an attempt to prohibit the activities of a TU. Several interviewees used the term "government's revanchism" to describe its reactions to the TUs' public exposure of the government's wrongdoings and joining particular protests. In some cases, political pressure also came from local governments, which one interviewee described as "never seen before" (anonymous interviewee 22, April 25, 2022). It is not surprising that the interviewees nearly unanimously evaluated TU relations with state actors as negative. Interestingly, only a couple of TUs representatives stood out by stressing "the pressures coming from the capital in general" and from "capital owners in particular" or "pressures coming from partly from the public and partly from other TUs."

When it comes to IGs' resources, as a rule, dependence on government funding makes some (but not the overall cluster of) cause groups (ENGOs) more vulnerable than sectional ones (TUs). ENGOs' reported reasons for a worsening trend in the financial situation included the pandemic, which limited some of the usual activities that used to bring them income. In contrast, TUs are financially autonomous due to membership fees, and none of them disclosed a worsening financial situation related either to democratic backsliding or the health crisis.

4.3. Adaptation of Interest Groups' Strategies

Despite the fact that all of the interviewees from the ENGOs estimated that the pandemic had not affected their working priorities, a majority confirmed that their strategies had changed in some ways during the overlap of the pandemic and the democratic backsliding. The explanation was that before the pandemic, they had predominantly combined insider lobbying strategies (when attempting to influence public policies) and various approaches with the goal of consciousness-raising, educating and informing the public regarding environmental issues. Indeed, even before the pandemic, outsider lobbying strategies had been predominantly, but not solely, used by ENGOs that had less access to decision-makers and did not have open channels of communication with them. The most notable change, however, was diminished success in some ENGOs' direct lobbying due to the worsening of relations with the relevant ministries.

Nevertheless, the pandemic also affected ENGOs' activities, bringing about two changes. Firstly, it encouraged ENGOs to increase their use of technology (e.g., their social media, Zoom, etc.). Increased working from home resulted in higher usage of technology for communication. Secondly, about half of the interviewees pointed out that the pandemic had also affected their

day-to-day activities, resulting in them organising fewer events and having fewer projects on which to work.

TUs, in contrast, rather consistently confirmed changes in strategies during the studied period despite sticking to the same leading ideas for their day-to-day work and their regular securing of help for union members in need. The shift from the social dialogue as a form of insider lobbying to using outsider lobbying strategies being the priority occurred because governments cancelled the social dialogue—TUs were turning more directly towards the public. They reported that they had organised more press conferences, written public letters, published opinions in mass media, appeared in public discussion events, collected signatures for petitions, and selectively participated in public protests and demonstrations. Furthermore, they also used judicial institutional possibilities (mostly constitutional evaluation) in connection with the laws that Janša's government had adopted during the pandemic.

The pandemic influenced TU work in two main ways. Firstly, they started to increase their use of various technologies, especially for communication, due to a shift to working from home. Secondly, the pandemic also led to TUs somewhat changing their work priorities in terms of shifting from their previous primary focus on solving systemic problems to focusing on reacting to the emergency policy interventions related to the pandemic.

It is also important to note that IGs generally showed technological adaptation of their internal organisational strategies; two big IGs also pointed out that the Covid-19 pandemic exposed internal conflicts and issues of internal democracy related to ideological differences among members (e.g., regarding vaccination and rights related to this issue) and the recognition of the need for leadership to work more with its members.

As shown in Table 1, there are similarities and differences in ENGO and TU strategies used in the context of the overlap of democratic backsliding and the pandemic.

TUs changed their strategies regarding communication with the government and work priorities more prominently than ENGOs. A shift towards greater use of outsider lobbying strategies stands out, particularly

Table 1. Changes in IGs' strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic and democratic backsliding as reported by interviewees from TUs and ENGOs.

		TUs	ENGOs
Insider strategies	*Institutional access*	Pressuring the government to restore the social dialogue	Attempts to keep or (re)gain influence in relation to the relevant ministries
	Public policies	Attempts to influence decision-making on pandemic laws relevant for employees using various means, including judiciary (the Constitutional Court); temporary shift of attention from major systemic issues to ongoing policy-making	Attempts to influence decision-making on pandemic laws, which included relevant issues for ENGOs
Outsider strategies	*Their use, in general*	Major shift from insider lobbying strategies towards more outsider lobbying strategies	A variety of strategic adaptations depending on the (various) ENGO's relations with the relevant ministries
	Information	Increase in communication with the public, aiming to inform and put pressure on the government by using press conferences, public letters, and publications on their own web pages	Communicating with the public, aiming at consciousness-raising, educating, and informing, mostly by using new technologies
	Protests	Major shift in favour of the use of protest	A variety of ENGOs' attitudes and behaviours
Internal organisational strategies	*Technological innovation*	Major increase in using new technologies for internal organisational maintenance and adaptation	Major increase in using technologies for internal organisational maintenance and adaptation
	Continuity of internal activities	Doing day-to-day activities uninterrupted	Doing day-to-day activities uninterrupted

in the case of TUs as opposed to ENGOs. The main reason for these differences is that TUs had regularly participated in the formally organised social dialogue before the start of Janša's government. In contrast, ENGOs as a cluster of IGs had never had a formal institution comparable to the Economic and Social Council. Even ENGOs with access to the government had always predominantly depended on the responsiveness of a particular ministry. Contrarily, both clusters of IGs shifted toward more intensive use of technology for their activities.

4.4. Ideational Plurality and Interest Groups' Choice of Strategies

The thesis that ENGOs tend to be ideationally heterogeneous was confirmed by their international connections and by the interviewees' responses. Different ideational groupings are visible in ENGOs' linkages with transnational groups and networks, which constitute the more ambitious global mainstream (e.g., Climate Action Network, Friends of the Earth) and the more moderate global mainstream group (e.g., BirdLife International, European Federation for Transport and Environment). The more ambitious global mainstream includes a number of well-established transnational ENGOs and networks that have radical ideas, especially regarding electricity generation (e.g., opposition to nuclear energy generation). In contrast, the moderate global mainstream is less radical regarding specific policies and generally advocates nature conservation. Indeed, several of the interviewees from ENGOs clearly stated that they belong to different ideational groupings. They differed so much that these differences, in some cases, even led to mutual conflicts (in the interview characterised as mild). Some interviewees pointed out that there was a group of ENGOs that were better positioned vis-à-vis the government, which—in addition to having more influence—allowed them to get more funding. Ideationally, heterogeneity among the analysed ENGOs was visible in differing general goals, policy goals, and even in ENGOs' attitudes toward the political system. Some interviewees saw Slovenia's political system as a good system within which they could achieve their goals; others believed it needed to be significantly changed. Several ENGOs stood out with demands that the predominant social values and the capitalist economic and political systems need to be radically changed to achieve environmental goals.

Among TUs, however, there was a lot less ideational plurality compared to ENGOs. Slovenia's TUs are internationally integrated into various TU associations, which share ideas of social dialogue and workers' rights. This homogeneity is also present in Slovenia's domestic milieu, where they all favour institutionalised consultative politics in general and the Economic and Social Council in particular, and mostly just desire better implementation of existing policies as opposed to radical policy change. The ideational homogeneity of TUs functions as a counterweight to numerous political accusations of being an extension of certain political parties.

Regarding views of the political system, the interviewees agreed that the system is good as it is, and many of them pointed out TUs' apolitical stance towards politics in general. Also, TUs did not focus on democratic backsliding per se, but rather on representing their members' interests. One of the interviewees clearly stressed the need to amend Slovenia's constitution in order to diminish the opportunities for political involvement in the work of the repressive state apparatus (anonymous interviewee 18, May 3, 2022).

Despite ideational homogeneity and the prevailing collaboration among TUs, disagreements among them might occur (as noted by one of the interviewees (anonymous interviewee 22, April 25, 2022) because they, in fact, represent the interests of various groups of the employed. The interviewee explained that when TUs do get into a conflict among themselves, it is due to conflicting particularistic economic interests.

An interesting indicator of differences in ideational homogeneity among ENGOs and TUs is the attitudes toward the protests in Slovenia at the beginning of 2020 ("Tukaj smo, ker ste prelomili svojo obljubo," 2020). These protests were mostly organised against the new (Janša's) government. In the context of backsliding, IGs' attitudes and actions gained special importance, particularly their relations to protests.

ENGOs' attitudes towards the protests varied a lot. A few interviewees said their ENGO did not support the protests at all because "we did not understand these protests as being about nature and climate justice." Some expressed strong support for the protests, while others only supported segments of protests related to issues concerning nature. For example, an environmental protest with the slogan "Hands off Nature" was organised in reaction to the new law on nature conservation, which included stricter criteria for ENGOs' inclusion in decision-making procedures (Daugul, 2020a). ENGOs also protested against the adoption of the third anti-pandemic law in front of the Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning (Daugul, 2020b). Many of the interviewed ENGOs expressed mixed feelings about the protests; despite supporting the protest message, they did not see protests as "constructive" but rather as "having too much of a political undertone." Some of the interviewees also questioned the effectiveness of protests.

Contrarily, the interviewed TUs were more homogeneously supportive of the protests. All but one of the interviewees (the one who had pressured the government to grant the professions it represented a special status concerning the public sector salary system) clearly supported a segment of protests related to interests represented by TUs. However, while their TUs decided to participate in the wave of protests exposing particular TUs' interests and demands (they joined the civil society initiative the Voice of the People), they did not demand that Janša's government step down.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Our research findings suggest that both clusters of IGs were affected by democratic backsliding, which, in the case of Slovenia, overlapped with the period of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, IGs' perceptions of democratic backsliding varied, and we believe they need to be considered as a factor in IGs' reactions to democratic backsliding. TUs generally noticed democratic backsliding as a pressing issue, while the level of concern varied among ENGOs. Similarly, TUs were all aware of the reduction in institutional venues for their involvement in political decision-making processes, while the cluster of ENGOs was not.

Under Janša's government, sectional IGs (TUs) have not proven to be more integrated into political processes than cause ones (ENGOs). Indeed, the Slovenian example questions not only the openness of decision-makers to pluralist IG activities but also the stability of neo-corporatist arrangements in general and the accessibility of policymakers for TUs as sectional (economic) IGs in particular. This contrasts with findings on TUs regaining access in other countries dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic (Junk et al., 2022) while also raising the question of how to measure changes in access and the impact on government decision-making.

As both clusters of IGs recognised the idiosyncratic political and health circumstances in various ways and were more or less affected by them, their strategic responses to them also differed. While ENGOs adapted their work strategies only slightly and more or less still used the same strategies as before the democratic backsliding had started, TUs radically shifted towards outsider lobbying strategies by significantly expanding their communication with the public and turning to protests (usually reserved for extraordinary situations). Such differences did not come as a surprise when we consider that ENGOs had never had institutionalised access to the government comparable to that of TUs'. These research findings somewhat refine the argument from the literature that cause groups are more likely to go public with their activities, while sectional groups are more likely to rely on advocacy.

Our research findings favour the expectation that different strategic responses to democratic backsliding resonate with the differences in IGs' ideational plurality. We found this not only between the two clusters of IGs but also within the cluster of ENGOs. TUs tend to stick to the idea of struggling for their members' socio-economic and professional benefits within the existing economic and political system. As ENGOs differ in attitudes towards the economic and political system and their strategic approaches, it is no surprise that there is less cooperation and more conflict among ENGOs compared to TUs. When conflicts among TUs appear, they are considered to be consequences of the particularistic economic interests of TUs and not the consequence of disagreements about the basic ideational foundations of TU politics. Overall, TUs' homogeneity in their ideational sense and actions contributes to maximising their strength in relation to the government. In contrast, ENGOs' heterogeneity and mutual conflict can only damage the strength of ENGOs as a specific cluster of IGs in relation to the government. This may be relevant for answering general questions on the role of IGs in stopping/reversing democratic backsliding.

Our findings resonate a great deal with research by Pospieszna and Vetulani-Cęgiel (2021), but they also differ from the works of both Pospieszna and Vetulani-Cęgiel (2021) and Willems et al. (2021) in their estimation of the endurance of sectional groups' better integration into political processes than cause groups. In Slovenia, sectional groups (TUs), in fact, lost access to the government. Organisational resources did not appear to matter with regard to Janša's government, which was more or less open to particular IGs. It does not, then, come as a surprise that in the context of democratic backsliding in Slovenia, both IG clusters used outside strategies related to the public and some also participated in protests. Nevertheless, even in using outside strategies, TUs primarily followed their traditional interests and goals. They did not demand a change of government or any significant changes to the political system, while several segments of the ENGOs favoured radical social, economic, and political changes.

The Polish experience (Pospieszna & Vetulani-Cęgiel, 2021), being a crowded environment where organisations may avoid alliances with other groups to enhance their reputations and to distinguish themselves from others who represent similar interests, does not resonate well with the Slovenian case. In Slovenia, a lack of alliances among ENGOs appears rather to be primarily based on their ideational fragmentation. It also may be hypothesised that less radical ENGOs are more ideationally acceptable for the government and may be treated differently in terms of access and financing for that reason. This resonates with findings by Horváthová and Dobbins (2019).

The findings from Slovenia contradict several findings by Pospieszna and Vetulani-Cęgiel (2021) in the context of democratic backsliding: (a) IGs are further weakened and made more vulnerable vis-à-vis the government (we found important differences between ENGOs and TUs in this regard), (b) democratic backsliding further strengthens the neo-corporatist model and weakens the pluralist one (in Slovenia both were weakened), and (c) advocacy groups might not diminish in number, but the plurality might be further diminished (in Slovenia, the plurality of ENGOs has not diminished but rather strengthened).

Compared to Hungary, where only one dominant party appeared to critically matter for IG politics (Czarnecki & Piotrowska, 2021), Slovenia's experience with only two years of democratic backsliding under the coalition government had not led to IGs noticing the comparable circumstances. However, our research does point to the closing of governmental decision-making

for consultative politics as part of the changing macro characteristics of governing. As in the case of Hungary (Transparency International Hungary, 2014), it has been shown that the government has been increasingly linked primarily to companies that are selected based on political criteria to join the inner circle of close allies of the governing political elite and to create distinctive IG-governing party relations as part of state capture and crony capitalism (Martin & Ligeti, 2017). Additional comparable research in Slovenia and other countries would need to include business–governing party relations and relations between IGs and parties more broadly.

All in all, the overlap of democratic backsliding and the pandemic also revealed both the importance of context (Lisi & Loureiro, 2022) and that of internal organisational strategies, both of which were also noted by the interviewees from large, complex IGs. Here, a difference between the democratic backsliding and the pandemic was seen as a difference between the change in governance (including the misuse of some policies declared to be anti-Covid-19 measures in favour of Janša's party programme of the second republic) and a health crisis measures to contain the spread of Covid-19.

To conclude, our findings call for further research involving broader international comparisons in the following fields: (a) the impact of IGs' ideational plurality, IGs' resources, and the internationally backed strength of national civil society on stopping and reversing the democratic backsliding within a particular country; and (b) answering the question concerning whether/how collective actions contribute to combating the effects of the pandemic (as previously noted by Hattke & Martin, 2020) and democratic backsliding.

Acknowledgments

This research was funded by the Slovenian Research Agency Grant No. P5–0136.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

Avdagic, S. (2003). *Accounting for variations in trade union effectiveness: State-labor relations in East Central Europe* (Discussion Paper No. 03/6). Max-Planck-Institut für Gesellschaftsforschung.

Barter, N., & Bebbington, J. (2012). Environmental paradigms and organisations with an environmental mission. *International Journal of Innovation and Sustainable Development*, *6*(2), 102–145. https://doi.org/10.1504/IJISD.2012.046945

Bermeo, N. (2016). On democratic backsliding. *Journal of Democracy*, *27*(1), 5–19. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0012

Bianchi, R. R. (2001). Organized interests as social development partners: Concepts and techniques. In R. R. Bianci & S. A. Kossoudj (Eds.), *Interest groups and organizations as stakeholders* (pp. 3–16). World Bank. http://web.worldbank.org/archive/website00522/WEB/PDF/SDP_35.PDF

Binderkrantz, A. (2005). Interest group strategies: Navigating between privileged access and strategies of pressure. *Political Studies*, *53*(4), 694–715. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2005.00552.x

Boese, V. A., Alizada, N., Lundstedt, M., Morrison, K., Natsika, N., Sato, Y., Tai, H., & Lindberg, S. I. (2022). *Autocratization changing nature? Democracy report 2022*. Varieties of Democracy Institute. https://v-dem.net/media/publications/dr_2022.pdf

Bohle, D., & Greskovits, B. (2007). Neoliberalism, embedded neoliberalism and neocorporatism: Towards transnational capitalism in Central-Eastern Europe. *West European Politics*, *30*(3), 443–466. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402380701276287

Buyse, A. (2018). Squeezing civic space: Restrictions on civil society organizations and the linkages with human rights. *The International Journal of Human Rights*, *22*(8), 966–988. https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2018.1492916

Constitutional Court of the Republic of Slovenia. (2021). *Poročilo o delu 2020* [Report on work 2020]. https://www.us-rs.si/publikacije

Constitutional Court of the Republic of Slovenia. (2022). *Poročilo o delu 2021* [Report on work 2021]. https://www.us-rs.si/publikacije

Czarnecki, S., & Piotrowska, E. (2021). Interest groups and political parties in Central and Eastern Europe. *Interest Groups & Advocacy*, *10*, 376–398. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41309-021-00139-8

Darlington, R. (2014). The role of trade unions in building resistance: Theoretical, historical and comparative perspectives. In M. Atzeni (Ed.), *Workers and labour in a globalised capitalism: Contemporary themes and theoretical issues* (pp. 111–139). Palgrave McMillan.

Daugul, L. (2020a, May 12). Odbor podprl zaostrovanje pogojev za okoljevarstvene organizacije [The committee approved tighter conditions for environmental organisations]. *RTV Slovenija*. https://www.rtvslo.si/okolje/odbor-podprl-zaostrovanje-pogojev-za-okoljevarstvene-organizacije/523498

Daugul, L. (2020b, May 26). Protestniki: V tretjem svežnju tudi "demontaža sistema varovanja okolja, narave in zdravja ljudi" [Protestors: In the third bundle there is also "dismantling the system of protecting the environment, nature and human health"]. *RTV Slovenija*. https://www.rtvslo.si/okolje/protestniki-v-tretjem-sveznju-tudi-demontaza-sistema-varovanja-okolja-narave-in-zdravja-ljudi/525133

Dobbins, M., & Riedel, R. (Eds.). (2021). *Exploring organized interests in post-communist policy-making: The "missing link."* Routledge.

Dür, A. (2009). Interest groups in the European Union: How powerful are they? *West European Politics*,

31(6), 1212–1230. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402380802372662

Dür, A., & Mateo, G. (2013). Gaining access or going public? Interest group strategies in five European countries. *European Journal of Political Research*, *52*(5), 660–686. https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12012

Economic and Social Council. (2022). *Economic and Social Council: Home*. http://www.ess.si/ess/ess-eng.nsf

Edgell, A. B., Lachapelle, J., Lührmann, A., & Maerz, S. F. (2021). Pandemic backsliding: Violations of democratic standards during Covid-19. *Social Science & Medicine*, *285*, Article 114244. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.114244

Eurofound. (2021). *Industrial relations: Involvement of social partners in policymaking during the Covid-19 outbreak*. https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ef_publication/field_ef_document/ef20035en.pdf

Fink-Hafner, D. (2011). Interest representation and post-communist parliaments over two decades. *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, *17*(2), 215–233. https://doi.org/10.1080/13572334.2011.574027

Fink-Hafner, D. (2020). The struggle over authoritarian pressures in Slovenia in the context of the Covid-19 epidemic. *Politički Život: Časopis za Analizu Politike*, *18*, 20–32.

Freedom House. (2022). *Slovenia: Freedom in the world 2022 country report*. https://freedomhouse.org/country/slovenia/freedom-world/2022

Gough, C., & Shackley, S. (2001). The respectable politics of climate change: The epistemic communities and NGOs. *International Affairs*, *77*(2), 329–345. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3025544

Guasti, L., & Bustikova, P. (2017). The illiberal turn or swerve in Central Europe? *Politics and Governance*, *5*(4), 166–176. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v5i4.1156

Guasti, P. (2020). The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in Central and Eastern Europe: The rise of autocracy and democratic resilience. *Democratic Theory*, *7*(2), 47–60. https://doi.org/10.3167/dt.2020.070207

Hattke, F., & Martin, H. (2020). Collective action during the Covid-19 pandemic: The case of Germany's fragmented authority. *Administrative Theory & Praxis*, *42*(4), 614–632. https://doi.org/10.1080/10841806.2020.1805273

Horváthová, B., & Dobbins, M. (2019). Organised interests in the energy sector: A comparative study of the influence of interest groups in Czechia and Hungary. *Politics and Governance*, *7*(1), 139–151. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v7i1.1784

Hultgren, J. (2018). 21st century American environmental ideologies: A re-evaluation. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, *23*(1), 54–79. https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2017.1397916

International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. (2021). *The global state of democracy 2021: Building resilience in a pandemic era*. https://www.idea.int/gsod/sites/default/files/2021-11/the-global-state-of-democracy-2021_1.pdf

Junk, W. M., Crepaz, M., Hanegraaff, M., Berkhout, J., & Aizenberg, E. (2022). Changes in interest group access in times of crisis: No pain, no (lobby) gain. *Journal of European Public Policy*, *29*(9), 1374–1394. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2021.1968936

Kingdon, J. W. (1995). *Agendas, alternatives, and public policies*. HarperCollins.

Kotwas, M., & Kubik, J. (2019). Symbolic thickening of public culture and the rise of right-wing populism in Poland. *East European Politics and Societies*, *33*(2), 435–471. https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325419826691

Krašovec, A., & Johannsen, L. (2017). Social dialogue between transition and the great recession. *Teorija in Praksa*, *54*, 30–44. https://www.dlib.si/details/URN:NBN:SI:DOC-5J8YJ2RZ

Lisi, M., & Loureiro, J. (2022). Interest group strategies and policy involvement: Does the context matter? Evidence from Southern Europe. *Interest Group and Advocacy*, *11*, 109–135. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41309-021-00145-w

Luhrmann, A., Maerz, S. F., Grahn, S., Alizada, N., Gastaldi, L., Hellmeier, S., Hindle, G., & Lindberg, S. I. (2020). *Democracy report 2020: Autocratization surges—Resistance grows*. Varieties of Democracy Institute. https://www.v-dem.net/static/website/files/dr/dr_2020.pdf

Maloney, W. A., Jordan, G., & McLaughlin, A. M. (1994). Interest groups and public policy: The insider/outsider model revisited. *Journal of Public Policy*, *14*(1), 17–38.

Martin, J. P., & Ligeti, M. (2017). Hungary. In A. Bitonti & P. Harris (Eds.), *Lobbying in Europe: Public affairs and the lobbying industry in 28 EU countries* (pp. 177–193). Palgrave McMillan.

Novak, M. (2019). The development and role of environmental NGOs in Slovenia. *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen*, *2019*(5/6), 142–157.

Pilgrim, S., & Harvey, M. (2010). Battles over biofuels in Europe: NGOs and the politics of markets. *Sociological Research Online*, *15*(3), 45–60. https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.2192

Plehwe, D. (2022). Reluctant transformers or reconsidering opposition to climate change mitigation? German think tanks between environmentalism and neoliberalism. *Globalizations*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2022.2038358

Pospieszna, P., & Vetulani-Cęgiel, A. (2021). Polish interest groups facing democratic backsliding. *Interest Groups & Advocacy*, *10*, 158–180. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41309-021-00119-y

Riedel, R., & Dobbins, M. (2021). Towards a better understanding of organized interests in Central and Eastern Europe. *Interest Groups & Advocacy*, *10*, 307–320.

https://doi.org/10.1057/s41309-021-00137-w
Rozbicka, P., Kamiński, P., Novak, M., & Jankauskaite, V. (2021). *Achieving democracy through interest representation: Interest groups in Central and Eastern Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan.
Sabatier, P. A. (1988). An advocacy coalition framework of policy change and the role of policy-oriented learning therein. *Policy Sciences*, *21*(2), 129–168. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00136406
SDS. (2013). *Predsednik Janez Janša: "Bo Slovenija druga ali socialistična republika?"* [President Janez Janša: "Will Slovenia be the second or socialist republic?"]. https://www.sds.si/novica/predsednik-janez-jansa-bo-slovenija-druga-ali-socialisticna-republika-2702
The Civicus Monitor. (2020a). *Government uses the Covid-19 pandemic as a pretext to curtail civic freedoms*. The Wayback Machine. https://web.archive.org/web/20210929173909/https://monitor.civicus.org/updates/2020/06/19/government-uses-covid-19-pandemic-pretext-curtail-civic-freedoms
The Civicus Monitor. (2020b). *Slovenia downgraded as civic freedoms deteriorate*. https://findings2020.monitor.civicus.org/rating-changes.html#slovenia
The Civicus Monitor. (2022). *Country update: Slovenia, overview of recent restrictions to civic freedoms*. https://civicus.org/documents/SloveniaCountryBrief.6April2022.pdf
The Global Deal. (2020). *Social partnership in the times of the Covid-19 pandemic*. https://www.theglobaldeal.com/resources/Social-Partnership-in-the-times-of-the-COVID19-pandemic-Global-Deal.pdf
Toepler, S., Zimmer, A., Fröhlich, C., & Obuch, K. (2020). The changing space for NGOs: Civil society in authoritarian and hybrid regimes. *International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, *31*(4), 649–662. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-020-00240-7
Transparency International Hungary. (2014). *Lifting the lid on lobbying: National report of Hungary*. https://transparency.hu/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Lifting-The-Lid-On-Lobbying-National-Report-of-Hungary.pdf
Transparency International Slovenia. (2022). *CPI 2021: Slovenija najslabše po letu 2013* [CPI 2021: Slovenia the worst after the year 2013]. https://www.transparency.si/novica/cpi-2021-slovenija-najslabse-po-letu-2013
Tukaj smo, ker ste prelomili svojo obljubo [We are here, because you broke your promise]. (2020, February 28). *RTV Slovenija*. https://www.rtvslo.si/slovenija/tukaj-smo-ker-ste-prelomili-svojo-obljubo/515706
van Deth, J. W., & Maloney, W. A. (2014). Participation and associationism in Europe. In J. M. Magone (Ed.), *Routledge handbook of European politics* (pp. 826–843). Routledge.
Willems, E., Beyers, J., & Heylen, F. (2021). Interest representation in Belgium: Mapping the size and diversity of an interest group population in a multi-layered neo-corporatist polity. *Politics of the Low Countries*, *2*(1), 1–39. https://doi.org/10.5553/plc/.000006

About the Authors

Danica Fink-Hafner is a professor of political parties, interest groups, and policy analysis at the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Ljubljana and head of the political science research programme at the same faculty. She has published in journals such as the *Journal of European Public Policy*, *Europe-Asia Studies*, and *East European Politics & Society*. Recent publications include the co-edited special issue (with Thomas Clive) of the *Journal of Public Affairs* (2019) on interest groups and public affairs in the contemporary Balkans.

Sara Bauman is a junior researcher at the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Ljubljana and a doctoral student of policy analysis at the same faculty. Her research interests include interest groups, policy analysis, and democracy.

cogitatio

Politics and Governance (ISSN: 2183–2463)
2023, Volume 11, Issue 1, Pages 50–64
https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v11i1.5899

Article

The Representative Potential of Interest Groups: Internal Voice in Post-Communist and Western European Countries

Joost Berkhout [1,*], Jan Beyers [2], and Marcel Hanegraaff [1]

[1] Department of Political Science, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands
[2] Department of Political Science, University of Antwerp, Belgium

* Corresponding author (d.j.berkhout@uva.nl)

Submitted: 13 June 2022 | Accepted: 10 October 2022 | Published: 13 January 2023

Abstract
Why do some interest group systems provide group members with more elaborate voice opportunities than other systems? We argue that evaluating membership voice is important for understanding the representative potential of interest group systems. An adequate understanding of "voice" forms the basis of "context"-embedded assessments of benchmarks such as interest group bias, interest group representational distortion, and interest group-driven policy overload. We examine two competing hypotheses on the differences in internal voice in Eastern and Western Europe. Primarily, case-specific arguments lead us to expect a weaker internal voice in post-communist Eastern Europe compared to Western Europe. Conversely, some theoretical approaches, such as population ecological organisational theory, lead us to expect a relatively weak membership voice in the organisationally saturated Western European systems. We assess these two hypotheses on the basis of an international survey of interest group leaders and observe, in line with the population ecological hypothesis, that members of Western European interest groups, compared to those in post-communist countries, are perceived as having less influential voices in internal decisions on policy positions. We conclude, neither optimistically nor pessimistically, that there is a meaningful representative potential of interest group systems supporting democratic societies, also, or even especially, in the post-communist countries studied.

Keywords
democratic backsliding; Eastern Europe; interest groups; post-communist countries; representation; Western Europe

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

1. Introduction

One core question in political science concerns the relation between organised interest representation and democratic governance. In the early 1950s, American scholars aimed to explain democratic performance in order to ultimately advise Western governments on their foreign policy in relation to non-democratic countries (Almond, 1958). In the view of Almond and other scholars, the intermediate position of interest groups between public opinion, parties, and government makes interest groups crucial for "a more complete and systematic conception of the political process as a whole" (Almond, 1958, p. 271). The central idea is that a conceptual difference exists between countries on the basis of group politics rather than "only" in terms of formal governmental procedures. By implication, the quality of group politics positively shapes the quality of democratic politics. However, this central attention to groups contrasts sharply with some contemporary views on politics. For instance, the core challenge (or solution) to democracies, currently labelled "democratic backsliding," is firmly identified as being outside of "group politics" but clearly in the area of party politics ("populism") or executive politics (authoritarian leadership; e.g., Waldner & Lust, 2018). Interest group politics is

seen as secondary to other systemic characteristics or are viewed as a problem (Mounk, 2018), not a solution, for democratic governance.

In this article, we extend earlier studies (e.g., Berkhout, Hanegraaff, & Maloney 2021; Binderkrantz, 2009; Bolleyer & Correa, 2022; Stavenes & Ivanovska Hadjievska, in press), further develop a so-called organisational view on interest group politics and situate interest groups more centrally in an understanding of the quality of democracy. This contribution of the study is especially relevant due to the process of democratic backsliding that is currently occurring across several EU countries. Interest groups are notoriously absent in debates on these developments. For instance, prominent "democracy" indices, including the Freedom House (2022) Index and the index of the V-Dem project (see Section 3.6.0.5 of Coppedge et al., 2021), only include important (e.g., Bolleyer, 2021) but relatively superficial and low-impact measurements on the regulation of civil society organisations and do not consider professional or business interest associations. From one perspective, interest groups may actively try to challenge democratic backsliding by mobilising citizens and public opinion. In this way, these groups may counteract the centralisation of power within states and strengthen the societal control of the state (e.g., Acemoglu & Robinson, 2019). Conversely, interest groups may increasingly come under subtle executive control and serve as top-down extensions of one or a select number of powerful political leaders. In this case, the groups become an extension of the state, which may be increasingly single elite-dominated, and they may not act as a societal constraint on state power to the same extent. In the latter scenario, membership participation decreases in importance, and this may reinforce processes of democratic backsliding. The degree to which interest groups play these roles in different contemporary democracies remains unclear.

This article provides a first and partial answer regarding some issues related to this question. More precisely, we analyse the representative potential of interest groups across Western and Eastern European countries by investigating the extent to which these groups provide their members with the opportunity to voice their policy preferences. Our starting point is that democratic governance may profit from a vibrant interest group system. Following Hirschman's (1970) notions of membership *exit* and *voice*, such vibrant systems combine two important characteristics: at the macro-level, competition among groups with different political views (hence, plurality and diversity), and, at the meso-level, the internal voice of members in organisational decision-making (hence, participation). A diverse system provides free choice to the potential members to join a group of their liking, and an internal voice in organisational decision-making ensures that the groups remain sufficiently independent from state actors. A lack of external competition and internal voice make interest group systems vulnerable, whereas the presence of these two features strengthens the interest group systems as representatives of society.

Former research has shown that the Western European interest group systems are denser and more diverse compared to those in Eastern Europe (Hanegraaff et al., 2020), which suggests that citizens in the West have more choices for joining groups. However, the extent to which membership involvement varies across Western and Eastern countries is much less clear. Hence, we seek to explain the varying patterns of involvement between countries. Our *explanatory* model juxtaposes two plausible research outcomes. Firstly, we discuss the argument that interest groups in post-communist systems have a relatively weakly developed responsive internal organisational culture due to the relatively limited interest on the part of (potential) members. Secondly, in contrast, population ecology approaches predict that post-communist European groups may be more responsive to their members because these organisational systems have had a shorter time to develop a wide variety of organisational forms with varying degrees of membership involvement. Our empirical analysis relies on Comparative Interest Group Survey data from eight European countries. In this article, we first elaborate on the relation between interest group systems and democratic governance. Subsequently, we discuss the two main hypotheses, after which we test them using several multivariate analyses. We find that organisational representatives in post-communist countries, most notably Poland and Lithuania, more frequently identify members as influential compared to the organisational representatives in the other studied countries. This contrasts with accounts indicating the weak nature of civil society in post-communist Europe. We end by presenting several concluding remarks and certain avenues for future research.

2. What Does a "Democratic" Interest Group System Look Like?

The contemporary research on interest groups is rooted in the notion that the quality of interest representation largely relies upon and can be explained by its relationship to several institutional, issue-specific, or broader "contexts" (e.g., Klüver et al., 2015; Lowery & Gray, 2004). In order to qualify as "democratic," interest group systems should be "unbiased" in relation to salient interests in society (e.g., Lowery et al., 2015), avoid encouraging divisive political party polarisation (e.g., Berkhout, Hanegraaff, & Statsch, 2021), and be congruent with large majorities of the public (e.g., Rasmussen, 2019). These contingent and contextual implications are assumed to vary across different stages of the so-called influence production process (mobilisation, population, strategies, influence). Methodologically, this variation creates a plethora of potentially relevant benchmarks for assessing the democratic role of organised interests.

In addition, these "contextual" benchmarks force scholars to explore or assume the potential outcomes of group politics relatively far down the causal chain—for instance, Olson's (1982) "sclerosis" hypothesis.

We think that it is more productive to identify a benchmark that is proximate to interest groups rather than a characteristic of politics or society more broadly. Therefore, we aim to conceptually develop and empirically assess the characteristics of interest groups themselves. Instead of analysing substantive benchmarks, such as the diversity of the group system in terms of policy views and preferences, we explore the organisational mechanisms. More precisely, we investigate how interest groups involve their members in internal decision-making processes, which is referred to as "internal voice." Before outlining our focus on "internal voice" in greater detail, we first discuss some context-oriented norms of democratic group politics. We cluster these norms into three categories: biased representation, distorted representation, and policy output-centred representation. Although this discussion may seem somewhat removed from our main objective, which is to explain why some interest groups provide more internal voice than others, we discuss these contextual benchmarks at length to illustrate that, ultimately, they all rely upon the conceptual and empirical existence of "a transmission mechanism" of interests, for which membership involvement is critical.

Firstly, the most commonly discussed norm relates to *bias*. Interest group scholars routinely rely on variants of Schattschneider's identification of "bias" in interest group politics and his challenge of the earlier pluralist idea that the interest groups system should more or less reflect the salient interests in society (see discussions in Lowery et al., 2015). Such bias may arise at several stages; for example, citizens may not be fully aware of their interests, latent interests may not be organisationally articulated, citizens may be out-voiced by business interests, policymakers may be selective in their hearing, and status-quo policy programmes (and their supporters) may be resistant to change. All these mechanisms reduce the likelihood of societal concerns being adequately heard in politics or transmitted by the group system. Instead of reflecting societal interests, the group system may reinforce the unequal distribution of benefits that may arise from public policy programmes. Hence, "bias" may provide information about the quality of interest representation (e.g., Lowery et al., 2015). However, it is also a demanding benchmark given that it always requires the identification of a meaningful connection between the issues publicly voiced in group politics and citizen preferences. Establishing this connection empirically is not an easy task as it requires the operationalisation of the connection between public opinion data and interest group positions (e.g., De Bruycker & Rasmussen, 2021; Flöthe & Rasmussen, 2019). Therefore, often, these connections are based on theoretical assumptions, such as qualifying "business bias" as normatively problematic. In situations of "democratic backsliding," political bias in interest group systems may be assumed to arise from the strategic initiatives of officeholders that aim to reduce the policy access and voice of political opponents by means of restrictive regulation or other state action.

Secondly, Klüver (2020, p. 980) noted that "if interest groups manage to influence party policy at the expense of voters, democratic representation is seriously undermined by lobbying." Therefore, interest groups *distort* the representational activities of other organisations, especially political parties, as well as other intermediary institutions, such as the media (e.g., Trevor Thrall, 2006) or consultation venues established by governments (e.g., Arras & Beyers, 2020; Binderkrantz et al., 2021; Fraussen et al., 2020). Indeed, political representatives may receive "signals" from interest groups and mistakenly interpret these signals as support from public opinion (e.g., Rasmussen & Reher, 2019). Instead of representing their "true" constituency (for instance, voters), policymakers represent group positions. Hence, elected politicians are not political representatives but policymakers acting on behalf of some specialised interest group. As with bias, this benchmark also conceives the democratic quality of the interest group system as being external to interest groups themselves because it must be seen in relation to the responsiveness of political parties or other representative institutions. This contextualised benchmark of "distortion" is also empirically and conceptually demanding to analyse, especially in cross-country comparisons.

Thirdly, interest groups may be judged by the plausible outcomes of their engagement in the policy process. In broad terms, scholars have noted that interest groups are instrumental for the realisation of broadly agreed public policy objectives, such as economic growth or low unemployment; however, they may also make the policy process inefficient and inflexible to changing circumstances (e.g., Anderson, 1977; Olson, 1982; Schmitter, 1977, 1981). According to Anderson (1977, p. 148), "interest representation is legitimate only insofar as it is instrumental to the achievement of stipulated public objectives." Olson (1982) assumed that "nations" want to "rise" economically and suggested that any group activity, according to his "institutional sclerosis hypothesis," is unlikely to be instrumental in that regard as it would interrupt the efficient allocation of (public) resources. Similarly, Schmitter (1977, 1981), took economically efficient public policy as a meaningful benchmark. In his view, interest groups, particularly when they are "encompassingly" organised into associations, potentially create opportunities for the effective management of economies. This debate has resurfaced in recent studies on stakeholder engagement in, for instance, regulatory consultations (e.g., Fraussen et al., 2021). As with distortion and bias, interest groups are primarily judged on the basis of consequences, such as policy outputs or, in contemporary terms, regulatory

legitimacy (e.g., Braun & Busuioc, 2020), that are external to the interest organisation itself.

These three contextually based benchmarks of interest representation (bias, distortion, and policy output) depart from the idea that interest groups ultimately *connect* important societal interests with public policy. We think that an alternative assessment of the representative quality of group politics should focus on organisational qualities that facilitate such an intermediary function. Such a perspective can be conceptualised independently from the plausible causes and implications of interest group politics. In simple terms, interest groups should be able to respond to changes in the relationship with their members, supporters or, more broadly, their constituents.

Hirschman's (1970) *Exit, Voice and Loyalty* presents a classic conceptualisation of organisational responsiveness that can be used in interest group studies (e.g., Barakso & Schaffner, 2008; Berkhout, Hanegraaff, & Maloney, 2021). Hirschman noted that consumers of a good respond to dissatisfaction by choosing alternative suppliers and exiting or discontinuing a prevailing relationship (see also Warren, 2011). For instance, Richardson (1995) noted that in the "market for political activism" in the 1970s and 1980s, large numbers of citizens quit the presumably overly traditional, formal, and materialistic political parties in favour of social movements focussing on "new" issues and offering more informal, low-threshold participatory options. Similar competition for members occurs among interest groups. Organisational leaders are incentivised to prevent exit and invest in means to improve the long-term engagement of members, such as through membership magazines, outreach, and opinion research, often combined with continuous membership recruitment campaigns (Jordan & Maloney, 1998). This exit mechanism works at the level of organisational communities of "like-organisations.'' For instance, environmentally concerned citizens may move from supporting one environmental NGO to supporting another environmental NGO (but not to support a business association). Organisational leaders can respond more effectively if they address the potential threat of members exiting their organisation in favour of a similar one. We concur with these arguments on exit, but as this hypothesis has been already broadly tested in the literature (for an overview, see Berkhout, Hanegraaff, & Maloney, 2021), we further develop the second component voice of Hirschman's model in this article, namely "voice."

We conceptually and empirically focus on associations with firm or citizen members and on organisations with supporters that are (potentially) politically active (Baroni et al., 2014; Beyers et al., 2008). This research concerns organisations that claim to be representative of their (potential) members, as reflected in some organisational characteristics and procedures (Jordan et al., 2004; Warren, 2001). We also include organisations that derive their legitimacy largely from the cause they represent (e.g., Montanaro, 2017; Nuske, 2022), which are sometimes labelled "solidarity organisations" or "cause groups" (Halpin, 2006), even though the internal voice provided may have a somewhat different function in these organisations: As observed by Berkhout, Hanegraaff, and Maloney (2021), these types of internal voice are not fundamentally incomparable in empirical terms. We exclude a plethora of organisations (such as firms and semi-public agencies) that are active in the policy process and act as pressure participants (Jordan et al., 2004) but have internal processes that are not directly comparable with the membership voice practices within associations.

3. Internal Voice as an Indicator of Representative Norms Within Interest Groups

Hirschman's understanding of voice implies that when the consumers of a good, in our case members of interest groups, are not fully satisfied, they do not choose to quit the association but may voice their views internally. For example, when a general practitioner and a member of a professional association of doctors experience a lack of qualified interns, they may become active in a relevant sub-committee within the professional association and make the internship issue a higher priority of the association. As noted by Warren (2003, p. 48), "the associational way of organizing common purposes is inherently legitimate, since people choose their collective projects and willingly engage with others," and, again according to Warren, associations outperform faceless markets and representation-based forms of political deliberation, since "deliberative elements of a democracy can only be organised along associational lines."

We are not alone in our focus on voice practices as an important benchmark for the representative quality of interest groups (e.g., Albareda, 2018; Bolleyer & Correa, 2022; Fraussen et al., 2021; Heylen et al., 2020; Warren, 2001). Voice is understood to have both formal and behavioural components. Formal voice refers to the organisational rules on the control that the membership has over important decisions (board appointments, strategic policy decisions, etc.), and behavioural components include the extent to which substantial parts of the membership are actively involved in decision-making, including at lower levels, such as in local branches or topic-specific committees.

Several studies have identified professionalisation (e.g., Bolleyer & Correa, 2022; Heylen et al., 2020) and political accommodation as threats to (e.g., Schmitter & Streeck, 1999) or incentives for (e.g., Grömping & Halpin, 2019) membership involvement. Business and professional associations also seem to offer more voice to members than citizen groups do (Berkhout, Hanegraaff, & Maloney, 2021), and the multi-layered nature of EU politics creates particular challenges and opportunities regarding membership involvement (Albareda Sanz, 2021; Hollman, 2018; Ronit, 2018). Membership

involvement increases the congruency between interest group public policy positions and public opinion (Willems & De Bruycker, 2019). Voice, as conceptually noted by Hirschman, heavily depends on exit options. When voting with one's feet by moving to a different group is not possible, such as if there are few alternative groups to join, one is forced into using voice as the only active means of response (Warren, 2011). In organisational communities with effective alternatives, it is, thus, more common to find organisations with only limited internal voice options (Berkhout, Hanegraaff, & Maloney, 2021). In this article, we use organisational voice at the aggregate level of national interest group communities in order to assess the nature of interest group politics and its potential contribution to democratic governance.

In short, internal voice opportunities increase the responsiveness of interest organisations to critical membership environments. More responsive interest organisational communities in which the average group shows high membership involvement improve the intermediary function of interest groups in democracies. In this case, the intermediary structure of the interest group system may be strengthened, thus making it less dependent on the state and more society-driven to such an extent that it might counter tendencies towards democratic backsliding. Many decades ago, Truman (1959, p. 491) identified the role of an "intermediate structure" as an indispensable part of democracy and noted that organisational leaders are responsible for reducing the vulnerability of the democratic system to "demagogic leaders whose actions may constitute a threat to the system of procedures." Responsible association leaders require support from their members; specifically, when the leadership is heavily incentivised to follow the opinions and preferences of the organisational members it is less likely to become a spokesperson of some political elite. Concurrently, groups are also places of power politics where, as a "voluntary" exchange, if the members are heard and are involved in developing a group position, they may consent to follow the leaders. According to Streeck and Kenworthy (2005), groups behave in a disciplinary manner, meaning they exchange meaningful voice for control over important decisions. Indeed, interest organisational systems with effective internal voice mechanisms are more likely to engage in democracy-defending roles, thus, in the long-term, guaranteeing some meaningful diffusion of power away from state actors (e.g., Acemoglu & Robinson, 2019). Hence, internal voice opportunities are important for stabilising democratic systems and preventing democracies from backsliding into authoritarian modes of governance. The descriptive differences between countries in the degree of membership voice are, thus, valuable in and of themselves. Given that there is currently a lack of systematic comparative interest group studies, there is also relatively limited system-level theory regarding country differences with respect to internal voice. Moreover, the "classic" typologies of pluralism and corporatism are too encompassing to derive observable implications from, do not easily match the wide range of contemporary European countries, and, in countries commonly identified as typically pluralist or corporatist, also seem decreasingly valid in answering research questions on the structures of organisations or policy access (e.g., Aizenberg & Hanegraaff, 2020).

Why do some interest group systems provide more elaborate voice opportunities to members compared to other systems? In light of the limited system-level theory, we depart from the idea that the fall of communism in 1989 critically affected the interest group systems in Eastern Europe but affected those in the rest of Europe to a lesser extent, if at all. We identify case-specific circumstances that partially arose from the particularities of the pre-1989 systems present in Eastern Europe. We label these countries "post-communist" and "Western" systems in line with the main division within Europe during the Cold War era. We distinguish between "qualitative" implications, related to the characteristics of the pre-existing regimes and the nature of the transition, and "quantitative" implications resulting from the actual time passed since the transition.

Firstly, scholars have identified important *qualitative* characteristics of the 1989 political revolutions that may have important consequences for organised interests: (a) relatively low levels of political participation among citizens and (b) relatively "unsophisticated" internal voice structures due to the relatively limited dependence on membership fees. To start, as noted by Howard (2011, p. 134; see also Howard, 2003), "after the 'revolutionary' moment had passed, people left the streets and their civic organizations, leaving their societies largely passive and depoliticized." In the Eastern European waves of the World Value Survey between the early 1990s and the following decades, citizens indicated relatively low levels of membership, participation, and trust in several types of social, political, and civil associations. Comparative protest event data indicate relatively weak development of social movement protest activity independent from party politics (Borbáth & Hutter, 2021). These patterns seem to be a recurring finding, though there is scholarly discussion regarding the exact magnitude, causes, and consequences of these patterns of low participation (e.g., Ekiert & Kubik, 2014; Ekiert et al., 2017; Meyer et al., 2020; Navrátil & Kluknavská, 2020).

Furthermore, in terms of the organisation of interest groups, there is an important body of recent studies on interest groups in Central and Eastern Europe (e.g., Riedel & Dobbins, 2021; Rozbicka et al., 2021). In direct conversation with the scholarship on "Western" systems but with limited direct empirical comparison with "the West," these studies compared post-communist countries among themselves. These studies indicate that there are relevant reasons to expect system-level differences related to aspects such as policy access (e.g., Cekik, 2022; Hanegraaff et al., 2020; Rozbicka et al., 2021, pp. 161–180), Europeanisation (e.g., Borragán, 2004;

Cekik, 2017; Czarnecki & Riedel, 2021; Fink-Hafner et al., 2015; Obradovic et al., 2008), and relations to political parties (e.g., Císař & Vráblíková, 2019; Czarnecki & Piotrowska, 2021).

Related to our study of internal voice, Novak and Komar (2020, p. 650) noted that interest groups contribute positively to democratic governance when the "members are actively included in the internal decisions of interest groups" (in addition to the inclusion of groups in policy processes, which is another important benchmark of democratic governance). Comparing Montenegro and Slovenia, they concluded that "Montenegrin interest groups have been a tool of influence and democratisation primarily on behalf of the international community, [and subsequently] their internal democracy is less sophisticated than is the case in Slovenia" (Novak & Komar, 2020, p. 650). The transitional status of post-communist countries led to the presence of European and international subsidies that were commonly intended to support the democratic transition process because interest groups were seen as vehicles for democratic governance. These subsidies may have plausibly affected the internal processes of associations to a greater extent than the (also substantial) "domestic" subsidy programmes in Western European countries (also note the complex relationship with professionalisation; see, e.g., Dobbins et al., 2022; Europeanisation, Cekik, 2017). However, the greater reliance on external donors has made many groups less dependent on their membership. The aspiration to receive financial support from and be responsive to European and international donors among important parts of interest group communities in post-communist countries may potentially reduce the internal voice of the members. These qualitative implications of the 1989 transitions in terms of high external organisational dependency (donors) and potentially passive membership attitudes lead to the following hypothesis:

> H1: Interest groups in post-communist countries offer fewer internal voice opportunities to their members than interest groups in Western Europe.

A second hypothesis follows from the fact that the 1989 start of the transition period means that, *quantitatively*, there has been relatively little time for the maturation of the organisational system in post-communist systems compared to Western countries with a longer time period of systemic stability. We use arguments from population ecological studies about the effect of time on changes in organisational systems. To start, in earlier studies, interest group system "maturation" was identified as a mechanism that explains differences between group systems in Eastern and Western Europe (e.g., Hanegraaff et al., 2020). Specifically, organisational systems require time to develop, both regarding the number of organisations up to a saturation point and the organisational diversity in terms of filling particular organisational niches (e.g., Aldrich et al., 1994; Gray & Lowery, 1996). We assume that the start date of interest organisational systems largely mirrors the political-institutional upheaval of 1989. This assumption is similar to Olson's (1982) choice to use the end of the Second World War as the starting date for investigating the German interest group system (see also Labanino et al., 2021; Unger & van Waarden, 1999). This choice means that the Central and Eastern European systems have had around 30 years to develop, whereas the systems of the other countries studied have had around 70 years (although the "age" of the Portuguese system in our sample falls somewhat outside this pattern).

How does system maturation affect internal voice? Increasing maturation is related to competition and associated specialisation, and this commonly increases the variety of organisational formats (Aldrich et al., 1994). This variety of organisational formats increases the likelihood of relatively democratic associations, such as organisations with strong membership involvement, being outcompeted by less democratic ones. This competition in terms of membership voice arises from variations in the wishes of potential members who may sometimes seek expressive benefits and internal voice and, at other times, may be satisfied with donating only. As argued by Hirschman (1982), citizens shift their participatory preferences; under some circumstances, at certain moments of a "cycle," they may wish to voice their views, whereas, at other times, they may not feel the need to be involved in the associations of which they are members. These fluctuations in dissatisfaction within individuals and, plausibly, between individuals produce a fertile ground for important diversity in organisational forms, including non-collective action, top-down structured associations and "flat" personal network-like organisational formats.

An important source of organisational diversity arises when cause groups are established that seek citizen donations rather than voting membership fees to offer low-threshold engagement opportunities to citizens, as well as when a professionally run "non-membership advocacy organisation" enters an interest group population (e.g., Minkoff et al., 2008; Walker et al., 2011). Similar dynamics may occur in relation to business interest representation. To illustrate, at the height of a cycle of attention, firms, while keeping their membership to a specialised association, may establish a public affairs department and start lobbying outside of business interest associations. Subsequently, such diversification practices may trigger a wider variety of organisational forms in a given population (e.g., Aizenberg, 2021; Salisbury, 1984). Increasing variation takes time, as "cycles" of societal niche formation occur only sporadically, and organisational leaders develop organisational forms on a trial-and-error basis. The long-term nature of the trend towards increasing diversity in organisational form leads us to expect that interest organisations from post-communist countries may be more responsive to their

members. Indeed, in post-communist countries, there has been less time for less democratically organised interest groups, such as professionalised associations driven by experts, to embed themselves in the organisational populations to the same extent as has happened in Western Europe, which leads to an alternative to our previous hypothesis:

> H2: Interest groups in post-communist countries offer more internal voice opportunities to their members than interest groups in Western Europe.

4. Design

We used data from the Comparative Interest Group Survey (2020), which comprises evidence collected from surveying Dutch, Belgian, Portuguese, Swedish, Polish, Slovenian, and Lithuanian interest groups (Beyers et al., 2020). The country surveys were in the field for a couple of months in the time period between 2016 and 2018. The respondents had leading positions in national membership associations of individuals or companies with potential interests in public policy. The respondents were asked about organisational characteristics, political strategies, and their relations with political parties, parliament, government ministries, and agencies. The survey questionnaire was translated from an English language EU-oriented version by each of the research teams and adapted to the respective national contexts. Overall, the response rate to the survey was 36%, which is relatively high compared to other online surveys in this field (Marchetti, 2015).

The concepts introduced earlier were operationalised as follows (see Table 1 for summary statistics of the indicators used). The dependent variable "internal voice" was operationalised as the ability of members to "influence the policy positions of interest groups." We focused on how organisational leaders perceive the impact of members on the policy positions of the organisation with regard to the political agenda rather than in relation to "internal" issues. The internal consensus formation among members on policy positions potentially may involve several subsections of the association and may affect the success of interest groups in policy circles (in terms of access see Grömping & Halpin, 2019; in terms of policy influence see Truijens & Hanegraaff, 2021). Specifically, we asked interest group leaders the following question: Thinking about your organisation's position on public policies, how would you rate the influence of your membership? The respondents could indicate that the members were *very influential*, *somewhat influential*, *not very influential*, or *not at all influential*. We considered social desirability bias among the particular respondents, with some leaders potentially emphasising their own vision and control (and, thus, underestimating members' influence) and others potentially wishing to highlight their democratic credentials. Indeed, some group leaders may, because of a normative bias, overstate the membership influence, whereas others may underestimate the membership influence. We are reasonably confident that such social desirability is unlikely to be very problematic, as our indicator strongly correlated with a number of other questions, such as those related to the influence of members on the strategies of the organisations (r = 0.61, p = 0.000) or membership elections for the executive boards. Precisely, stronger formal opportunities for members were associated with higher perceived membership influence. This correlation supports the validity of our measurement for assessing the formal (opportunities for influence), behavioural (actual use of these opportunities), and anticipated (leadership expectations regarding the possible views of members) components of "internal voice." The correlation also increases our confidence that our operationalisation is comparable to that of earlier studies, such as those based on executive board elections (Stavenes & Ivanovska Hadjievska, in press), several formal organisational features (e.g., Albareda, 2018, p. 1218), and some combination of statutory formal membership influence indicators and leadership perceptions regarding the involvement of members (e.g., Binderkrantz, 2009, p. 669; Bolleyer & Correa, 2022).

Our main *independent* variable was the geographical region in Europe: a post-communist or a Western country. For Western countries, we clustered the responses of the following countries: the Netherlands,

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the dependent and independent variables.

Variable	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
DV: Internal voice	3.158	0.835	1	4
H1: Country	N.A.	N.A.	0	1
C1: Group type	N.A.	N.A.	1	8
C2: Professionalisation	4.033	1.272	1	6
C3: Staff size (logged)	0.305	2.320	0	8.69
C4: Lobby/service	0.600	0.489	0	1
C5: Insiders	2.573	1.061	1	8
C6: Policy field	0.586	0.492	0	1

Note: DV = dependent variable; H = hypothesis; C = control variables.

Belgium, Portugal, and Sweden. For post-communist countries, we grouped the responses of the Lithuanian, Slovenian, and Polish participants. We had more participants from Western European countries compared to post-communist European countries, with 1,710 and 707 participants, respectively.

We *controlled* for group type, professionalisation, resources, identifying as a lobby or service provision organisation, the access of the organisations, the level of competition experienced by the organisations, and whether organisations were active in social policy areas or not. As identified in the studies noted earlier and below, each of these variables could explain the variation in membership voice. Firstly, the group type variable was coded based on the organisational websites by the researchers from the respective national teams. The coding scheme included eight categories (in parentheses are the number of observations for the all-countries sample): business groups (n = 549), professional associations (n = 512), labour unions (n = 119), identity groups (n = 296), cause groups (n = 542), leisure groups (n = 261), associations of institutions (n = 79), and "other" (n = 59). Berkhout, Hanegraaff, and Maloney (2021) found that business organisations give more voice to their members compared to citizen groups, so we controlled for this. Secondly, we controlled for the level of professionalisation by considering the way the organisation made decisions, the criteria used when hiring staff, the staff training, and whether the employees were inclined to pursue a career within the organisation. More professionalised organisations may prioritise managerial decision-making over "inefficient" membership co-decisions (e.g., Bolleyer & Correa, 2022; Heylen et al., 2020). For resources, we utilised a question identifying the number of paid staff in the organisation. We conducted a log transformation on this variable due to the skewed nature of the responses. Larger organisations may be less responsive to individual members because of bureaucratisation, which is referred to as Michels' "iron law of oligarchy," among other reasons (e.g., Rucht, 1999). We also controlled for organisations identifying as lobby organisations or as being more service driven. This distinction was based on a question in the survey that asked the organisations to identify whether they were involved in a set of activities, including lobbying, research, promoting volunteering, and many more. If organisations indicated that they do not lobby, we treated this as an organisation whose main aim is to deliver a service to its members. There are inconclusive theoretical arguments on this distinction, but Bolleyer and Correa (2022) found that organisations that are more service-driven are less likely to be responsive and open to members. The fifth control variable was the access of the organisations to the policymaking process. We utilised a question examining the frequency of interest groups' access to policymakers (being invited by policymakers to provide policy input), including having contact with policymakers on a *weekly*, *monthly*, *quarterly*, or *yearly basis*, or *no contact* with policymakers. We included this variable as insiders are much closer to the policy process, might be more vulnerable to "co-optation" by policymakers, and, thus, become less responsive to the members (Bolleyer & Correa, 2022). Conversely, membership involvement in these organisations may provide such groups with additional political leverage and, thus, gives leaders an incentive to organise "voice" practice (e.g., Grömping & Halpin, 2019). The sixth control variable was the amount of competition faced by the groups to acquire resources. As discussed in the theoretical section, organisations that are in more competitive environments are less likely to provide a voice to their members. As the density in a system increases, organisations have to specialise in lobbying to achieve better results, which leads to less voice for the members (Berkhout, Hanegraaff, & Maloney, 2021). Finally, organisational features vary substantially between policy fields (e.g., Berkhout et al., 2017). We distinguished between social and economic policy fields, expecting the existence of closer relationships with members in the social field compared to the economic policy field. This variable was based on a question that asked respondents to indicate the policy fields in which the organisations are active. The first group (social policy) included health policy, gender policy, social policy, consumer protection, citizen's rights, and human rights. The second group (economic policy) included economic policy, fiscal and monetary policies, energy policy, foreign policy, defence policy, transport policy, and agricultural policy.

5. Results

In this section, we discuss our empirical findings. We utilised OLS regressions with robust standard errors. The results presented in Table 2 provide a clear demonstration of the factors that are important for internal voice. As found by other researchers (e.g., Berkhout, Hanegraaff, & Maloney, 2021), internal voice is more apparent among business organisations compared to citizen groups, such as identity and public interest groups. Moreover, resources are an important factor for voice. When groups become larger, they also become more detached from their members. The same pattern was identified for competition; specifically, as groups face more competition, they become more detached from their members, which is in line with Hirschman's argument on the relation between exit and voice, the neocorporatist argument on the logic of membership in the context of representational monopolies (e.g., Streeck & Kenworthy, 2005), and recent studies on internal voice (e.g., Berkhout, Hanegraaff, & Maloney, 2021). Similar to earlier studies, such as by Bolleyer and Correa (2022), we found that organisations that identify as advocacy/lobby organisations and those that are more frequent participants in policy (political insiders) are more likely to provide their members with a voice. Finally, organisations

Table 2. Linear regression predicting the level of internal voice.

	Regression coefficient	Clustered standard errors
Eastern countries	0.209***	0.000
Business (ref.)	Ref.	
Professional	–0.137***	0.000
Union	0.014	0.848
Identity	–0.214***	0.000
Public interest	–0.288***	0.000
Leisure/hobby	–0.281***	0.000
Institutional/public	0.092	0.320
Rest	–0.300***	0.013
Professionalisation	–0.013	0.387
Budget	–0.016*	0.076
Competition	–0.031**	0.026
Lobby organisations	0.148***	0.000
Insider	0.093**	0.030
Policy field	0.079**	0.000
Constant	3.013***	0.000
Observations	2,441	
R^2	0.06	

Note: * $p = 0.1$; ** $p = 0.05$; *** $p = 0.01$.

active in social policy fields are more responsive to their members compared to similar types of organisations active in economic fields.

Next, we discuss the answer to our main question regarding whether organisations in Western countries are more responsive to their members compared to their counterparts in post-communist countries. We found that, contrary to our hypothesis (H1), organisations in Western countries are not more responsive to their members than those in Eastern countries. This is clear from the positive and significant coefficient reported in the top row of Table 2. Figure 1 indicates the strength of the effect by means of a plot of the predicted values. Indeed, we observed that interest groups in Western countries scored on average 3.08 for the amount of voice members have, while in Eastern countries, this score was 3.31.

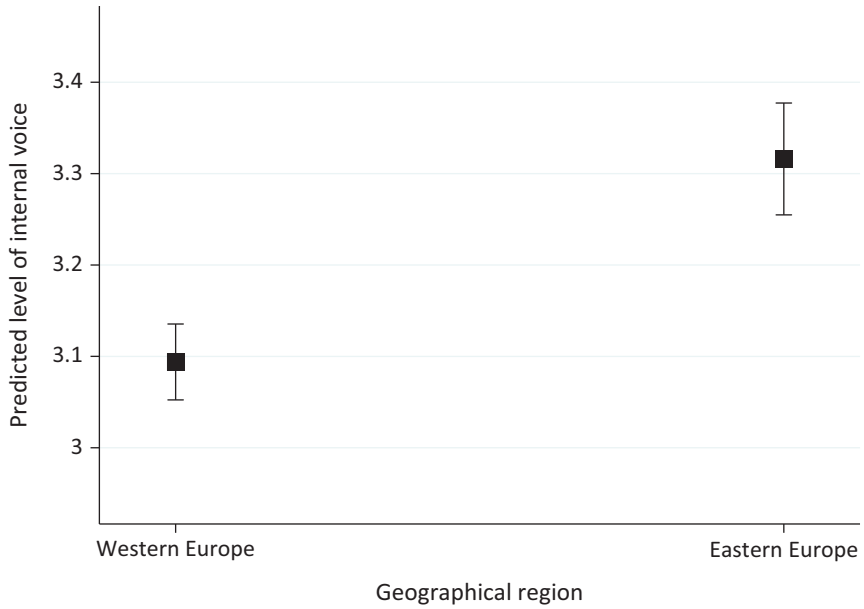

Figure 1. Predicted level of internal voice in interest groups in Western and Eastern countries.

The difference corresponds to roughly a third of a standard variation in the answers respondents gave, which is not a very large difference but still represents a substantial effect. These findings support the population-ecological hypothesis focusing on the maturation of the group system and suggest that the particular characteristics of the 1989 transition have not limited the participatory voice practices of group members.

Importantly, we assessed whether all countries in post-communist Europe differ from all countries in Western Europe. Specifically, we examined the argument that Slovenia's Cold War experience (as "socialist" rather than "communist") may have been different from the experience of the other two post-communist countries, which may make it more likely for Slovenia to have a more diverse organisational system with greater variation in voice options (Fink-Hafner, 2015; Novak & Fink-Hafner, 2019). In terms of our selection of Western European countries, we focused on Portugal, as its shorter time for organisational system maturation may have limited the variation in organisational format, with "standard" membership-controlled associations potentially being more dominant. To this end, we conducted a separate regression analysis (see Supplementary File) in which we used individual country dummies. Lithuanian organisations provide the most voice to their members of all organisations by a significant amount. Additionally, Polish organisations provide, on average, the second highest level of voice to members across all the studied countries (for an interesting interpretation see Pospieszna & Vetulani-Cęgiel, 2021). This result fits the population-ecological "maturation" theory and confirms our main analysis. However, the results, indeed, indicate that Slovenia is an outlier. Organisations in this country provide the fifth lowest level of voice to their members, with the level being close to the average level of voice in Western European countries. In particular, organisations in Slovenia provide more voice provided than those in Belgium and Portugal but less voice than those in Sweden and the Netherlands. The particularities of the organisational development in Portugal (with strong political party ties) seem to have produced organisations with limited voice (e.g., Lisi & Loureiro, 2022). Overall, this critical addition shows that researchers should pay attention to country differences within Eastern Europe as well. While the overall trends may support the argument provided in this article, there are some critical differences across countries. Therefore, new research should analyse these nuances and specificities. Indeed, this work confirms the relevance of the several studies in this thematic issue that looked into such variation.

6. Conclusion

We started this article by identifying the need to more explicitly understand the quality of group politics in assessments of the quality of democracy. We suggest that one most productive way to do so is by focusing on the organisational transmission qualities of interest group politics rather than, or at least prior to, aspiring to measure the plausible outcomes of interest group activities in terms of bias, distortion of representation, or policy overloading. We used Hirschman's classic argument of organisational *voice* and effective *exit* in order to conceptualise the key dimensions of transmission qualities in interest group politics.

Our research design focused on "voice" and compares post-communist and Western European countries. This comparison allowed us to investigate case-specific arguments on the historical persistence of practices that began in the time period surrounding the 1989 revolution, namely the communist legacy of "passivity" on the part of members in post-communist Europe and the organisational resource dependency on external donors rather than membership. By comparing post-communist countries with Western Europe, we also explored the effects of the different levels of system maturation, with comparably higher levels of interest group competition and specialisation present in Western Europe.

Our findings indicate that we should reject the core implications of the hypothesis that emphasises the particular qualitative characteristics of the 1989 transition. The findings suggest that, for interests organised into interest groups, members of interest groups in Eastern European countries have more internally organised influence on policy-related organisational decision-making compared to their Western counterparts. This is in contrast to existing empirical studies (e.g., Novak & Komar, 2020) and somewhat pessimistic case-specific accounts of the (limited) vibrancy of post-Communist interest group systems (e.g., Howard, 2011). Concurrently, the outcome supports the theoretical arguments on organisational maturation (Hanegraaff et al., 2021); in the plausibly more saturated systems in Western Europe, we observed a lower degree of internal voice and lower levels of membership influence on policy-related decision-making.

There is no simple answer to the question of whether our findings imply that the internally more representative and potentially more democratic Eastern European interest groups form an effective barrier against any tendency towards backsliding. Firstly, there are reasons to be optimistic. The interest group population in post-communist countries comprises a substantial number of groups that are largely controlled by active members. The substantial internal voice indicates a strong commitment to internal democracy within interest groups. This commitment should eventually strengthen the legitimacy of interest associations and may encourage the independence of interest groups in relation to the state and the dispersion of power away from the executive.

Conversely, and more pessimistically, our results also show that internal voice is weaker in the more competitive interest group systems in Western Europe. In this case, citizens may have a greater degree of choice among

alternative interest groups. However, this more competitive system may reduce the strength of interest groups individually and collectively as a force for systemic stability and a counterbalance to executive power concentration and tendencies towards backsliding. Furthermore, our "static" comparative research does not allow us to evaluate the dynamics of backsliding (or the counter processes). Most importantly, we assume that the entry to the organisational communities studied through the establishment of associations or the development of political interests on the part of existing organisations is relatively open. However, in light of earlier studies on the shrinking civil space in some countries (e.g., Bolleyer, 2021), there may be a basis for pessimism in case this assumption of open entry does not apply to all countries.

It is clear that these processes deserve more scholarly attention and future study. For instance, it might be useful to understand more about the relative coverage of interest groups in different countries. For instance, in terms of professional associations, it would be useful to determine whether most professions are well-organised and represent the full breadth of a given profession. Another potential drawback of our analysis is that we focused mostly on group leaders. Indeed, it might be interesting to learn more about the extent to which members practically make use of their (perceived) influence and "voice" their views within their association. With regard to "exit," further studies are needed to assess whether the anticipation of membership "exit" leads organisational leaders to be more responsive to (perceived) membership views. If that is the case, it would be possible to be relatively optimistic about competitive interest group communities, even in cases where voice mechanisms are limited.

Finally, previous interest group studies have broadly assessed "influence" in terms of preference attainment in relation to specific public policies. Much less research has been conducted at the system level and in relation to the overall functioning of democratic systems, meaning these topics require further study. For instance, when rioters stormed the US Capitol, lobbyists on the ground could do very little. However, interestingly, practically the whole Washington lobby community condemned the riot (e.g., National Institute for Lobbying and Ethics, 2021) and, to some extent, sought ways to support the democracy-saving elements in both parties, with several major corporations discontinuing the funding for individual Republican lawmakers who voted against the ratification of the election outcome. It could be studied how interest groups can support or undermine democratic institutions, especially because these responsibilities are something individual lobbyists are sufficiently aware of only infrequently. Indeed, as noted by Truman (1959, p. 489), the "holders of power" in the intermediate structure may consequently be "unaware of their positions' special vulnerabilities. Foremost among these is the possibility that the members of these elites will not see a threat to the system for what it is."

Acknowledgments

The data collection for this study was funded by the Research Foundation-Flanders (Grant No. G032814N), the H2020 European Research Council (Grant No. ERC-2013-CoG 616702-iBias), and the Slovenian Research Agency (Project N5-0023 and Program P5-0136). In addition to this, the authors would like to acknowledge the contribution and help of many colleagues in the participating countries.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online.

References

Acemoglu, D., & Robinson, J. A. (2019). *The narrow corridor: How nations struggle for liberty*. Penguin Books.

Aizenberg, E. (2021). *Lobbying alone: A study of political access and lobbying behavior of corporations in Western Europe* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Amsterdam]. UvA-DARE. https://hdl.handle.net/11245.1/156c53c8-84a6-4a26-9b93-68828fa39a88

Aizenberg, E., & Hanegraaff, M. (2020). Is politics under increasing corporate sway? A longitudinal study on the drivers of corporate access. *West European Politics*, *43*(1), 181–202.

Albareda, A. (2018). Connecting society and policymakers? Conceptualizing and measuring the capacity of civil society organizations to act as transmission belts. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, *29*(6), 1216–1232.

Albareda Sanz, A. (2021). *Unpacking interest groups: On the intermediary role of interest groups and its effects for their political relevance* [Doctoral dissertation, Leiden University]. Leiden University Scholarly Publications. https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3213547

Aldrich, H. E., Zimmer, C. R., Staber, U. H., & Beggs, J. J. (1994). Minimalism, mutualism, and maturity: The evolution of the American trade association population in the 20th century. In J. A. C. Baum, & J. V. Singh (Eds.), *Evolutionary dynamics of organizations* (pp. 223–239). Oxford University Press.

Almond, G. A. (1958). A comparative study of interest groups and the political process. *American Political Science Review*, *52*(1), 270–282.

Anderson, C. W. (1977). Political design and the representation of interests. *Comparative Political Studies*, *10*(1), 127–152.

Arras, S., & Beyers, J. (2020). Access to European Union agencies. Usual suspects or balanced interest representation in open and closed consultations? *Journal*

of Common Market Studies, *58*(4), 836–855.
Barakso, M., & Schaffner, B. F. (2008). Exit, voice, and interest group governance. *American Politics Research*, *36*(2), 186–209.
Baroni, L., Carroll, B. J., William Chalmers, A., Marquez, L. M. M., & Rasmussen, A. (2014). Defining and classifying interest groups. *Interest Groups & Advocacy*, *3*(2), 141–159.
Berkhout, J., Hanegraaff, M., & Braun, C. (2017). Is the EU different? Comparing the diversity of national and EU-level systems of interest organisations. *West European Politics*, *40*(5), 1109–1131.
Berkhout, J., Hanegraaff, M., & Maloney, W. A. (2021). Looking for "voice" in business and citizen groups: Who's being heard? *Political Studies*. Advance online publication.
Berkhout, J., Hanegraaff, M., & Statsch, P. (2021). Explaining the patterns of contacts between interest groups and political parties: Revising the standard model for populist times. *Party Politics*, *27*(3), 418–429.
Beyers, J., Fink-Hafner, D., Maloney, W. A., Novak, M., & Heylen, F. (2020). The comparative interest group-survey project: Design, practical lessons, and data sets. *Interest Groups & Advocacy*, *9*(3), 272–289.
Beyers, J., Maloney, W., & Eising, R. (2008). Researching interest group politics in Europe and elsewhere: Much we study, little we know? *West European Politics*, *31*(6), 1103–1128.
Binderkrantz, A. S. (2009). Membership recruitment and internal democracy in interest groups: Do group–membership relations vary between group types? *West European Politics*, *32*(3), 657–678.
Binderkrantz, A. S., Blom-Hansen, J., & Senninger, R. (2021). Countering bias? The EU Commission's consultation with interest groups. *Journal of European Public Policy*, *28*(4), 469–488.
Bolleyer, N. (2021). Civil society, crisis exposure, and resistance strategies. In A. Sajó, R. Uitz, & S. Holmes (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of illiberalism* (pp. 939–956). Routledge.
Bolleyer, N., & Correa, P. (2022). Member influence and involvement in civil society organizations: A resource dependency perspective on groups and parties. *Political Studies*, *70*(2), 519–540.
Borbáth, E., & Hutter, S. (2021). Protesting parties in Europe: A comparative analysis. *Party Politics*, *27*(5), 896–908.
Borragán, N. P.-S. (2004). EU accession and interest politics in central and Eastern Europe. *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, *5*(2), 243–272.
Braun, C., & Busuioc, M. (2020). Stakeholder engagement as a conduit for regulatory legitimacy? *Journal of European Public Policy*, *27*(11), 1599–1611.
Cekik, A. (2017). Adapting to Europe? Business interests and civil society groups in accession countries. *West European Politics*, *40*(5), 1066–1087.
Cekik, A. (2022). Interest groups' access in new democracies: Evidence from North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia. *Interest Groups & Advocacy*, *11*(1), 46–74.
Císař, O., & Vráblíková, K. (2019). National protest agenda and the dimensionality of party politics: Evidence from four East-Central European democracies. *European Journal of Political Research*, *58*(4), 1152–1171.
Comparative Interest Group Survey. (2020). *Comparative Interest Group Survey: About*. https://www.cigsurvey.eu
Coppedge, M., Gerring, J., Knutsen, C. H., Lindberg, S. I., Teorell, J., Altman, D., Bernhard, M., Cornell, A., Fish, M. S., Gastaldi, L., Gjerløw, H., Glynn, A., Hicken, A., Lührmann, A., Maerz, S. F., Marquardt, K. L., McMann, K. M., Mechkova, V., Paxton, P., Pemstein, D., . . . Ziblatt, D. (2021). *V-Dem codebook v11*. V-Dem. http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3802627
Czarnecki, S., & Piotrowska, E. (2021). Interest groups and political parties in Central and Eastern Europe. *Interest Groups & Advocacy*, *10*(4), 376–398.
Czarnecki, S., & Riedel, R. (2021). Analyzing varieties of (post-enlargement) Europeanization in CEE advocacy organizations across policy fields. *Interest Groups & Advocacy*, *10*(4), 430–453.
De Bruycker, I., & Rasmussen, A. (2021). Blessing or curse for congruence? How interest mobilization affects congruence between citizens and elected representatives. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, *59*(4), 909–928.
Dobbins, M., Horvath, B., & Labanino, R. P. (2022). Exploring the domestic and international drivers of professionalization of Central and Eastern European interest groups. *European Political Science Review*, *14*(2), 263–280.
Ekiert, G., & Kubik, J. (2014). The legacies of 1989: Myths and realities of civil society. *Journal of Democracy*, *25*(1), 46–58.
Ekiert, G., Kubik, J., & Wenzel, M. (2017). Civil society and three dimensions of inequality in post-1989 Poland. *Comparative Politics*, *49*(3), 331–350.
Fink-Hafner, D. (Ed.). (2015). *The development of civil society in the countries on the territory of the former Yugoslavia since the 1980s*. Založba FDV.
Fink-Hafner, D., Hafner-Fink, M., & Novak, M. (2015). Europeanisation as a factor of national interest group political-cultural change: The case of interest groups in Slovenia. *East European Politics and Societies*, *29*(1), 287–305.
Flöthe, L., & Rasmussen, A. (2019). Public voices in the heavenly chorus? Group type bias and opinion representation. *Journal of European Public Policy*, *26*(6), 824–842.
Fraussen, B., Albareda, A., & Braun, C. (2020). Conceptualizing consultation approaches: Identifying combinations of consultation tools and analyzing their implications for stakeholder diversity. *Policy Sciences*, *53*(3), 473–493.
Fraussen, B., Albareda, A., Braun, C., & Maloney, W.

(2021). A matter of information, discussion and consequences? Exploring the accountability practices of interest groups in the EU. *Interest Groups & Advocacy*, *10*(2), 114–136.

Freedom House. (2022). *Nations in transit methodology*. https://freedomhouse.org/reports/nations-transit/nations-transit-methodology

Gray, V., & Lowery, D. (1996). *The population ecology of interest representation lobbying communities in the American states*. University of Michigan Press.

Grömping, M., & Halpin, D. R. (2019). Does group engagement with members constitute a "beneficial inefficiency"? *Governance*, *32*(3), 511–529.

Halpin, D. R. (2006). The participatory and democratic potential and practice of interest groups: Between solidarity and representation. *Public Administration*, *84*(4), 919–940.

Hanegraaff, M., van der Ploeg, J., & Berkhout, J. (2020). Standing in a crowded room: Exploring the relation between interest group system density and access to policymakers. *Political Research Quarterly*, *73*(1), 51–64.

Heylen, F., Willems, E., & Beyers, J. (2020). Do professionals take over? Professionalisation and membership influence in civil society organisations. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, *31*(6), 1226–1238.

Hirschman, A. (1970). *Exit, voice and loyalty: Responses to decline in firms, organizations and states*. Harvard University Press.

Hirschman, A. O. (1982). *Shifting involvements: Private interest and public action*. Princeton University Press.

Hollman, M. (2018). *Interest group organisation in the European Union: How internal organisational structures shape interest group agency*. Routledge.

Howard, M. M. (2003). *The weakness of civil society in post-communist Europe*. Cambridge University Press.

Howard, M. M. (2011). Civil society in post-communist Europe. In M. Edwards (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of civil society* (pp. 134–145). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195398571.013.0011

Jordan, G., Halpin, D., & Maloney, W. (2004). Defining interests: Disambiguation and the need for new distinctions? *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, *6*(2), 195–212.

Jordan, G., & Maloney, W. A. (1998). Manipulating membership: Supply-side influences on group size. *British Journal of Political Science*, *28*(2), 389–409.

Klüver, H. (2020). Setting the party agenda: Interest groups, voters and issue attention. *British Journal of Political Science*, *50*(3), 979–1000.

Klüver, H., Braun, C., & Beyers, J. (2015). Legislative lobbying in context: Towards a conceptual framework of interest group lobbying in the European Union. *Journal of European Public Policy*, *22*(4), 447–461.

Labanino, R., Dobbins, M., & Horváthová, B. (2021). Explaining the density of post-communist interest group populations—Resources, constituencies, and regime change. *Interest Groups & Advocacy*, *10*(4), 321–344.

Lisi, M., & Loureiro, J. (2022). Interest groups, business associations, and unions. In J. M. Fernandes, P. C. Magalhães, & A. C. Pinto (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of Portuguese politics* (pp. 423–439). Oxford University Press.

Lowery, D., Baumgartner, F. R., Berkhout, J., Berry, J. M., Halpin, D., Hojnacki, M., Klüver, H., & Schlozman, K. L. (2015). Images of an unbiased interest system. *Journal of European Public Policy*, *22*(8), 1212–1231.

Lowery, D., & Gray, V. (2004). A neopluralist perspective on research on organized interests. *Political Research Quarterly*, *57*(1), 164–175.

Marchetti, K. (2015). The use of surveys in interest group research. *Interest Groups & Advocacy*, *4*(3), 272–282.

Meyer, M., Moder, C., Neumayr, M., & Vandor, P. (2020). Civil society and its institutional context in CEE. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, *31*(4), 811–827.

Minkoff, D., Aisenbrey, S., & Agnone, J. (2008). Organizational diversity in the US advocacy sector. *Social Problems*, *55*(4), 525–548.

Montanaro, L. (2017). *Who elected Oxfam? A democratic defense of self-appointed representatives*. Cambridge University Press.

Mounk, Y. (2018). *The people vs. democracy: Why our freedom is in danger and how to save it*. Harvard University Press.

National Institute for Lobbying and Ethics. (2021, January 7). *Lobbying profession condemns violence at the U.S. Capitol* [Press Release]. https://www.lobbyinginstitute.com/post/lobbying-profession-condemns-violence-at-the-u-s-capitol

Navrátil, J., & Kluknavská, A. (2020). Civil society trajectories in CEE: Post-communist "weakness" or differences in difficult times? *Politologicky Casopis*, *27*(2), 101–118.

Novak, M., & Fink-Hafner, D. (2019). Slovenia: Interest group developments in a postsocialist-liberal democracy. *Journal of Public Affairs*, *19*(2), Article e1867.

Novak, M., & Komar, O. (2020). The organisational development of interest groups in Montenegro and Slovenia: Do they contribute to more inclusive democracy? *Politics in Central Europe*, *16*(3), 647–665.

Nuske, J. (2022). Approaching the legitimacy of self-appointed representatives: From responsiveness to reflexivity. *Interest Groups & Advocacy*, *11*(1), 416–433.

Obradovic, D., Fischer, S., Schroeder, H. H., & Pleines, H. (2008). *The capacity of Central and East European interest groups to participate in EU governance*. ACIL Press.

Olson, M. (1982). *The rise and decline of nations*. Yale University Press.

Pospieszna, P., & Vetulani-Cęgiel, A. (2021). Polish interest groups facing democratic backsliding. *Interest*

Groups & Advocacy, *10*(2), 158–180.
Rasmussen, A. (2019). Policy representation in Europe: The 2018 Peter Mair lecture. *Irish Political Studies*, *34*(3), 327–349.
Rasmussen, A., & Reher, S. (2019). Civil society engagement and policy representation in Europe. *Comparative Political Studies*, *52*(11), 1648–1676.
Richardson, J. (1995). The market for political activism: Interest groups as a challenge to political parties. *West European Politics*, *18*(1), 116–139.
Riedel, R., & Dobbins, M. (2021). Towards a better understanding of organized interests in Central and Eastern Europe. *Interest Groups & Advocacy*, *10*(4), 307–320.
Ronit, K. (2018). *Global business associations*. Routledge.
Rozbicka, P., Kamiński, P., Novak, M., & Jankauskaitė, V. (2021). *Achieving democracy through interest representation: Interest groups in Central and Eastern Europe*. Springer.
Rucht, D. (1999). Linking organization and mobilization: Michels' iron law of oligarchy reconsidered. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, *4*(2), 151–169.
Salisbury, R. H. (1984). Interest representation: The dominance of institutions. *American Political Science Review*, *78*(1), 64–76.
Schmitter, P. C. (1977). Modes of interest intermediation and models of societal change in Western Europe. *Comparative Political Studies*, *10*(1), 7–38.
Schmitter, P. C. (1981). Interest intermediation and regime governability in contemporary Western Europe and North America. In S. D. Berger (Ed.), *Organizing interests in western Europe* (pp. 285-327). Cambridge University Press.
Schmitter, P. C., & Streeck, W. (1999). *The organization of business interests: Studying the associative action of business in advanced industrial societies* (Discussion Paper No. 99/1). Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies.
Stavenes, T., & Ivanovska Hadjievska, M. (in press). Insider status-membership involvement offer trade off? The case of green parties and environmental organisations. *Political Studies*.
Streeck, W., & Kenworthy, L. (2005). Theories and practices of neocorporatism. In T. Janoski, R. R. Alford, A. M. Hicks, & M. A. Schwartz (Eds.), *The handbook of political sociology: States, civil societies and globalization* (pp. 441–461). Cambridge University Press.
Trevor Thrall, A. (2006). The myth of the outside strategy: Mass media news coverage of interest groups. *Political Communication*, *23*(4), 407–420.
Truijens, D., & Hanegraaff, M. (2021). The two faces of conflict: How internal and external conflict affect interest group influence. *Journal of European Public Policy*, *28*(12), 1909–1931.
Truman, D. B. (1959). The American system in crisis. *Political Science Quarterly*, *74*(4), 481–497.
Unger, B., & Waarden, F. V. (1999). Interest associations and economic growth: A critique of Mancur Olson's *Rise and Decline of Nations*. *Review of International Political Economy*, *6*(4), 425–467.
Waldner, D., & Lust, E. (2018). Unwelcome change: Coming to terms with democratic backsliding. *Annual Review of Political Science*, *21*(1), 93–113.
Walker, E. T., McCarthy, J. D., & Baumgartner, F. (2011). Replacing members with managers? Mutualism among membership and nonmembership advocacy organizations in the United States. *American Journal of Sociology*, *116*(4), 1284–1337.
Warren, M. E. (2001). *Democracy and association*. Princeton University Press.
Warren, M. E. (2003). The political role of nonprofits in a democracy. *Society*, *40*(4), 46–51.
Warren, M. E. (2011). Voting with your feet: Exit-based empowerment in democratic theory. *American Political Science Review*, *105*(4), 683–701.
Willems, E., & De Bruycker, I. (2019). Balancing constituency and congruence: How constituency involvement affects positional congruence between organized interests and the general public. *Governance*, *34*(1), 107–126.

About the Authors

Joost Berkhout is an associate professor of political science at the University of Amsterdam. His research and teaching include interest group politics, comparative politics, lobbying, collective action, and representation.

Jan Beyers is a professor of political science at the University of Antwerp. His research and teaching cover advocacy and political representation, institutional theories, comparative politics, and research methods.

Marcel Hanegraaff is an associate professor of political science at the University of Amsterdam. His research and teaching include interest group politics, comparative politics, lobbying, and research methods.

Politics and Governance (ISSN: 2183–2463)
2023, Volume 11, Issue 1, Pages 65–79
https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v11i1.5882

Article

Multilevel Venue Shopping Amid Democratic Backsliding in New European Union Member States

Rafael Labanino * and Michael Dobbins

Department of Politics and Public Administration, University of Konstanz, Germany

* Corresponding author (rafael.labanino@uni-konstanz.de)

Submitted: 4 June 2022 | Accepted: 19 September 2022 | Published: 13 January 2023

Abstract
Recently, various Central and Eastern European countries have experienced a regression of democratic quality, often resulting in the emergence of competitive (semi-)authoritarian regimes with an illiberal governing ideology. This has often been accompanied by a closing political space for civil society groups. Based on a survey of more than 400 Polish, Hungarian, Czech, and Slovenian interest organizations, we explore, in the context of backsliding, the conditions under which organized interests shift their lobbying activities to alternative, i.e., EU or regional levels. Our statistical analyses indicate that it is rather exclusive policy-making in general than a lack of individual group access to domestic policy networks that motivate organizations to engage in multilevel lobbying. However, it appears that organizational self-empowerment and inter-group cooperation are the "name of the game." Even under the adverse conditions of democratic backsliding, organizations that are accumulating expertise, professionalizing their operations, and cooperating with other organizations not only can sustain access to (illiberal) national governments but also branch out their operations to the European and regional levels.

Keywords
Central and Eastern Europe; democratic backsliding; European Union; multilevel lobbying; organized interests; post-communism

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

1. Introduction

Recently, democratic quality has declined in parts of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Semi-authoritarian regimes with an illiberal governing ideology have emerged. This has often been accompanied by what Sata and Karolewski (2020) call "caesarean politics": Instead of promoting pluralist democracy, such governments may engage in patronage by deliberately allocating rewards to political allies and punishing and/or demonizing political adversaries. This is accompanied by state monopolization of public institutions and media, but often also by privileging informal contacts over formal interest intermediation forums (Labanino, 2020). The "battle against the establishment" proclaimed by various national-conservative populist governments has often resulted in further political centralization. Such developments are particularly pronounced in Hungary and Poland (Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018; Tworzecki, 2019).

So far, though, the ramifications of democratic backsliding for civil society, in general, and specific civic organizations remain unclear. Olejnik (2020) argues that various CEE governments are characterized by elaborate systems of rewards and punishments, the predominance of informal networks, and state capture. Moreover, illiberal governments are engendering their own new illiberal civil societies (Ekiert, 2019; Greskovits, 2020). Instead of "hollowing out" civic activism through overt oppression, governments are re-engineering civic organizations aligned with authoritarian-nationalist objectives to generate grassroots support.

Indeed, the literature on civil society and organized interests in the region has boomed recently (Dobbins & Riedel, 2021; Novak & Fink-Hafner, 2019; Rozbicka et al., 2020). Scholars have covered, among other things, population ecologies (Rozbicka & Kamiński, 2021) and advocacy strategies (Czarnecki, 2021) while also exploring state-interest group interactions (Olejnik, 2020; Ost, 2011) and lobbying regimes (Vargovčíková, 2017). Yet we still know little about how individual interest organizations are navigating the new environment. A recent contribution by Pospieszna and Vetulani-Cęgiel (2021) indeed demonstrated that disadvantaged Polish interest groups are coalescing and doubling down on their networking strategies to navigate the increasingly authoritarian context. Yet the closure of the political opportunity structure (POS) might prompt groups to withdraw from policy-makers altogether (Gerő et al., 2020).

Against this background, we explore how the closing political space affects the relative importance of the levels organizations lobby on. Is there a shift from the national to the regional and/or EU level? Multilevel venue shopping across Western EU member states has previously been addressed by Beyers and Kerremans (2012), while Poloni-Staudinger (2008) explored how the relative openness of the domestic POS affects EU-level lobbying. We move beyond these accounts, however, by factoring in the reality of democratic backsliding both at the contextual as well as organizational and inter-organizational levels.

Our study sheds light on how the changing political environment has pushed organizations into a mode of "defiant responsiveness" through strategic choices on where to lobby (national vs. EU or regional levels), as well as by enhancing their internal and external capacities. Thus, we provide new insights into the responsiveness of organizations in a region historically characterized by weak civil society and distorted patterns of political participation. The centerpiece of the analysis is a survey of more than 400 interest groups operating in the healthcare, energy, and higher education sectors in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovenia.

In the next section, we set up the theoretical framework and the hypotheses. In Section 3, we describe the sample and survey underpinning the analysis and explain the research design in detail. Section 4 contains the descriptive and statistical analyses. Section 5 discusses the results and future research avenues.

2. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

One of the most basic strategic choices for an organization is in which venues and at what level (e.g., regional, national, international) it lobbies. Particularly in multilevel polities such as a federal state or the EU, this choice is affected by contextual factors such as the system of national (that is, member state) interest representation or the general openness of the political system towards societal interests (Beyers & Kerremans, 2012; Poloni-Staudinger, 2008). European integration has opened a multitude of transnational lobbying opportunities (Mahoney & Baumgartner, 2008). However, Europeanization also strengthened the regional level, even in unitary states. The economic, administrative, and entrepreneurial capacities of subnational territorial entities have gained significance, as most CEE countries have undergone substantial territorial reforms (Pitschel & Bauer, 2009). Europeanization and regionalization processes thus offer interest associations the opportunity to assert their demands in alternative venues.

Indeed, several authors argue that a compensation logic is at work: If groups are constrained in articulating their preferences in an institutional context, they will seek to do it elsewhere (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009; Guiraudon, 2000). Another perspective, however, emphasizes that European integration reinforces the national constellations and rewards strong and influential groups (Eising, 2007). That is, those groups with strong access to national policy-making venues and abundant organizational and financial resources will also be the ones engaging in multilevel lobbying in EU institutions.

Testing different multilevel governance accounts, Beyers and Kerremans (2012) show that the two perspectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Whereas organizational resources and strong access to national policy-making venues are indeed among the best predictors for multilevel venue shopping, the structure of the national polity and system of interest representation also matter. Interest groups from federal and/or neo-corporatist states are more likely to engage in EU-level lobbying. Beyers and Kerremans (2012) show that national-level exclusion does not necessarily induce a flight to the EU level. However, the compensation hypothesis cannot be entirely rejected. Interestingly, higher proximity to peripheral (as opposed to relevant) opposition parties—as a proxy for a group's distance from the political mainstream—leads to more extensive multilevel venue shopping. Indeed, in her study of French, German, and UK environmental NGOs, Poloni-Staudinger (2008) found that groups use EU action to bypass undesirable national conditions. As national POS closed, groups were more likely to target their activities to the EU.

Democratic backsliding can also be conceptualized as a closure of the POS as the political space for independent organizations may shrink. Illiberal incumbents may restrict funding and harass interest groups opposing their policy agenda (Bromley et al., 2020; Buyse, 2018; Carothers, 2016) and weaken or abolish formal interest intermediation mechanisms (Olejnik, 2020). Hence, the closure of the POS associated with backsliding forces organized interests to recalibrate their lobbying strategies.

Following these theoretical considerations, our first hypothesis looks at a set of organizational factors explaining venue shopping. Financial and organizational resources were found to be among the most important predictors of accessing the EU level (Bernhagen & Mitchell, 2009; Eising, 2007). Having professional staff,

trained lobbyists, and fundraising capacities, that is, being a professionalized organization is key to access to policy-makers (Albareda, 2020; Beyers, 2002).

> H1: The more organizational resources a group possesses, the more likely it engages in lobbying at every level (regional, national, EU).

However, Beyers and Kerremans (2012) found that relational aspects such as gaining access to domestic policy-makers are a strong predictor of interest groups' political strategies). According to this "persistence hypothesis,'' the skills that organizations invest in and accumulate by lobbying at one level may boost their ability to expand to other areas (Beyers, 2002). Moreover, personal ties cultivated at one level may better enable organizations to branch out to other levels. At the same time, the representativeness and legitimacy which organizations gain by accessing the national level may make policy-makers at alternative levels more receptive to interactions with them (Dür & Mateo, 2014).

> H2: The greater the access interest groups have to domestic policy-makers, the greater are their regional and EU-level activities, too.

It is also conceivable, however, that organizations unable to exert influence in a closing political space may compensate by turning to the regional or EU levels (Beyers & Kerremans, 2012; Poloni-Staudinger, 2008).

> H3: Interest groups excluded from national-level policy networks turn to the regional and EU levels.

Conceptualizing backsliding at the organizational level is everything but straightforward (see Section 3.2). Lacking access to national policy networks is not necessarily a sign, let alone a measurement, of backsliding. The closure of the POS and diminishing access are, of course, related phenomena, but they cannot be naively treated as the two sides of the same coin. Therefore, we will employ several variables to test the effect of backsliding differently than access.

> H4: Interest groups under pressure from illiberal incumbents will intensify their regional and EU-level lobbying activities as opposed to the national level.

We test several control variables, which should alleviate the effects of resources, access, and backsliding at the organizational level, but simultaneously also affect multilevel lobbying strategies. In line with the findings of Beyers and Kerremans (2012) for the supranational level, we expect neo-corporatism to have a positive effect on both EU and regional level lobbying, Moreover, intergroup cooperation is a key strategy organizations can employ to reduce "environmental uncertainty" (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). Hanegraaff and Pritoni (2019) find that groups with decreasing influence and at risk of organizational failure are more likely to cooperate with other groups. We also test domestic networking and national and EU umbrella organization memberships and expect to find a positive relationship between intergroup cooperation and national and EU-level lobbying. Expertise—legal, economic, technical/scientific—is also a significant exchange good for interest groups for access and influence both at the national and EU levels (Bernhagen, 2013; Chalmers, 2011; De Bruycker, 2016). Interest groups not only may disburden policy-makers from the complexities of all the pieces of legislation they simultaneously juggle but, as voices of civil society, may also provide information on how their constituents are affected by policies (Bouwen, 2002). However, expertise provision might be an additional resource for already privileged organizations, particularly in the context of backsliding. Indeed, Horváthová and Dobbins (2019) found that, in Hungarian energy policy, the government relies heavily on the expertise of numerous preferred business groups with frequent access, while opponents of governmental policy are largely excluded. We also include organizational longevity as a control, as it is treated in lobby research as a decisive factor explaining access and influence (Kohler-Koch et al., 2017).

3. Sample, Data, and Research Design

3.1. Sample and Data

First, we applied Eising's (2008) definition of interest groups while identifying relevant organizations. He defines three attributes of interest groups: organization, political interest, and informality. They strive to "influence policy outcomes…. Political interest refers to attempts…to push public policy in one direction or another on the behalf of constituencies or a general political idea" while "informality relates to the fact that interest groups do not normally seek public office but pursue their goals through informal interactions with politicians and bureaucrats" (Eising, 2008, p. 5). Based on these criteria, we compiled population ecologies of all Czech, Hungarian, Polish, and Slovenian healthcare, higher education, and energy policy organizations currently active on the national level. The three selected policy areas—healthcare, higher education, and energy—are diverse and not interrelated, thus increasing the generalizability of the findings. All represent a large portion of public budgets and include both public, non-state, and business interest groups.

As a rule, we collected data from public registries of civil society organizations. We cross-checked the data with internet searches and lists from parliaments and different ministries that invited organizations to various committees and meetings. We identified a total of 1,345 interest organizations on the national-level active as late as 2019 and conducted an online survey targeting the active organizations between March 2019 and May 2020

in the four national languages. The multiple-choice survey questions addressed their interactions with parties, parliaments, regulatory authorities, and policy coordination with the state. We sent 1,264 invitations and received 427 responses, which corresponds to a 33.7% response rate (with strong country variations: Slovenia 51.8%, Hungary 35.3%, Czech Republic 33.6%, Poland 24.6%). Organizations perceived as critically important (e.g., large students' organizations, labor unions, medical chambers, and energy business organizations) were contacted more intensely and nearly all responded. For a detailed description and the two datasets see Dobbins, Labanino, et al. (2022).

The country selection also controls for the system of interest representation and lobbying regulation. Slovenia is a model neo-corporatist state (Jahn, 2016) and arguably CEE's most coordinated market economy (Bohle & Greskovits, 2012), but lobbying regulation is weak. The Czech Republic exhibits a very weakly regulated market economy and lax lobbying regulations (Šimral, 2015). The Polish economy is also relatively weakly coordinated. However, extensive lobbying regulations exist, which may stymie the influence of interest groups (McGrath, 2008). Hungary exhibits stronger market coordination (Duman & Kureková, 2012), and elections are publicly funded, lobbying activities, however, have only been loosely regulated since 2010 (European Commission, 2020; Laboutková et al., 2020).

The four countries also represent different levels of democratic backsliding. Hungary and Poland, but arguably also the Czech Republic and Slovenia, have embraced authoritarian governance styles (Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018; Hanley & Vachudova, 2018; Przybylski, 2018). The *2021 Nations in Transit* report by Freedom House reveals that Hungary and Poland underwent the steepest decline in democratic quality ever recorded (Csaky, 2021). Hungary was downgraded first from a stable to a semi-consolidated democracy and in 2020 to a "transitional hybrid regime." Freedom House still rates Poland as a semi-consolidated democracy. Although still considered a consolidated democracy, the quality of Czech democracy declined somewhat under the Babiš government (Buštíková, 2021). Democratic quality also deteriorated in Slovenia under Janez Janša's premiership since 2020 (Lovec, 2021). Nevertheless, our survey period mostly preceded his government forming (and only in a few cases coincided with the first weeks of his being in power). However, during 2021 and 2022, voters resoundingly ousted both the Babiš and Janša governments, whereas Viktor Orbán retained his constitutional majority for the fourth time since 2010.

While we cannot thoroughly engage here with the country-specific complexities of the regionalization of fiscal, administrative, and policy-related competencies, it is safe to say that all four countries emerged from the socialist era as unitary states but then experienced a profound strengthening of subnational governance, not least due to Europeanization processes. While Poland and the Czech Republic led the way (Yoder, 2003), Hungary (Temesi, 2017) and Slovenia (Setnikar-Cankar, 2010) also experienced a shift towards more regional autonomy. Regionalization was generally driven by regionalist political movements, the devolution of social services by the central state, and often pressures from wealthier regions for more economic control (Yoder, 2003). The European Commission also strongly pushed for a governance model based on autonomy for subnational entities in order to receive EU structural funds (Pitschel & Bauer, 2009). However, backsliding meant a significant re-centralization of governance structures and policy competencies (Antal, 2019; for healthcare, see Mikuła & Kaczmarek, 2019; Szigetvári, 2020; for energy, see Szulecki, 2020; Temesi, 2017; for higher education, see Vlk et al., 2021). Despite this, there is still a strong argument for subnational activities of organized interests. First, healthcare and higher education services are, by nature, provided at the regional and local levels, while major sources of energy are often derived from peripheral regions (e.g., the Polish coalmine basin in Silesia, the Temelín nuclear reactor in southern Bohemia). Yet, more importantly, EU cohesion funds are generally distributed by subnational authorities, meaning that—despite different country-specific polity-related dynamics—regional authorities remain potent actors and potential points of access for organized interests despite centralization trends.

3.2. Research Design

Our dependent variables are based on a survey item asking respondents to evaluate how the importance of the following levels of representation has changed compared to 10–15 years ago: the regional, national, and EU-levels. The respondents gave their answers on a five-point scale for each level ranging from 1 (*much less*), 2 (*less*), 3 (*the same*), 4 (*more*), and 5 (*much more*). We estimated models for all three separately. However, we also created two new variables expressing the relative importance of the national and the EU and the national and regional levels for representation, respectively. We recoded the EU and the regional level variables: *much less importance* takes the value −2, *less* −1, *the same* 0, *more* +1, and *much more* +2. The variable on the importance of the national venue is coded as a mirror image of the EU and the regional variable. That is, if the importance of the national level for an organization has increased *much more*, it takes the value of −2; if it increased *more*, it takes the value −1; if it became *less important*, it takes the value +1; if it became *much less important*, it takes the value +2; finally, if it is *the same*, it takes the value 0. We summed up the recoded national and EU and the national and regional variables and created two new variables: National vs. European levels and National vs. regional levels. These two new variables range from −4 to +4, negative values indicating that the national level has gained in importance relatively

to the EU or regional levels, whose importance did not change or decreased. Positive values indicate the opposite: The EU or regional levels gained importance relative to the national level. The value 0 indicates that *the national level gained in importance exactly as much as the EU* or the *regional levels lost their importance*, respectively, or that *there was no change* (Table 1). This operationalization highlights the relational importance of the three representational levels and grasps the move in relative terms towards or away from the national level to either the regional or EU levels.

Access to policy-makers is a composite variable of five survey questions measuring interest group access to different venues. Our respondents rated the difficulty of accessing regulatory authorities, parliamentary committees, governing parties, opposition parties, and a general assessment of policy coordination between the state. The questions are measured on a 1 to 5 scale, 1 being *no access* or *extreme difficulties in access*, and 5 being *full access* or *very easy access*. We summed the scores, which resulted in a continuous scale from 1 to 25. Nevertheless, as a robustness test, following Beyers and Kerremans (2012), we also estimate our models with access to parties in general and subsequently to governing and opposition parties, respectively. In POS models, the legislature is treated as an especially important venue explaining the openness of a political system to societal interests because legislators have a direct democratic mandate giving them incentives to seek contact with civil society actors (Kitschelt, 1986). Thus, we also test our models with only access to parliament.

Our most important variable measuring organizational resources is a composite variable, professionalization. The variables are based on a survey item asking respondents to evaluate on a five-point scale (from *much less* to *much more*) to what extent their organization focuses on the following activities as opposed to 10–15 years ago: (a) organizational development, (b) human resources development, (c) fundraising, (d) strategic planning, and (e) evaluation of efficiency and effectiveness. Following Klüver and Saurugger (2013), we included staff in our composite variable of professionalization, as we believe having paid employees reflects organizational development. We operationalize financial resources using a variable measuring the financial planning horizon of an organization on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*less than one year*) to 5 (*more than five years*).

Backsliding is first measured with country dummies, with Slovenia being the baseline. We capture these country-level processes with country dummies and simultaneously control for omitted variable bias at the country level. The country- and policy-field dummies also enable us to account for particularities in interest group activity driven by varying levels of regionalization and subnational policy competencies.

Additionally, we introduce an organizational-level proxy for backsliding based on a survey item measuring the perceived frequency of governmental meetings in an organization's respective area of activity (not between the organization and the government). That is, the answers give a general assessment of the frequency of government consultations measured on a five-point scale: *never*, *once a year*, *twice a year*, *monthly*, and *weekly*. There are pronounced differences across countries in this measurement (Figure 3). For the analysis, we created a new dichotomous variable, which takes the value 1 for organizations reporting *no* or *only yearly consultations* in their field of activity, and 0 for all other organizations in the dataset.

We measure intergroup cooperation with three variables: two on the national and one on the EU levels, respectively. For national and EU umbrella memberships, we have two dichotomous (dummy) variables taking the value 1 for *membership* and 0 for *non-membership*. For domestic cooperation, we created a composite variable from four survey items measuring different forms of cooperation between interest groups in fundraising, representation on advisory boards, issuing joint statements, and formulating joint political strategies. For each answer *never* we assigned the value 0; for *occasionally* we assigned the value 1; for *frequently* we assigned the value 2. That is, we received a continuous scale ranging from 0 to 8.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the two relational dependent variables (national vs. EU levels/national vs. regional levels).

	National vs. EU level	No.	%	National vs. regional level	No.	%
National level is more important	–4	3	1	–4	2	1
	–3	7	2	–3	3	1
	–2	28	9	–2	25	9
	–1	74	25	–1	78	27
The same/no change	0	119	40	0	138	48
EU/regional level is more important	1	54	18	1	30	11
	2	7	2	2	7	2
	3	2	1	3	2	1
	4	2	1	4		
Total		296	100		285	100

We also asked organizations to evaluate the importance of four types of expertise for policy influence: technical/scientific, legal, economic, and impact assessment (De Bruycker, 2016). We created a composite expertise index, which takes the value 0 for any type of expertise evaluated as *unimportant* by the respondents in their interactions with policy-makers, 1 evaluated as *somewhat important*, and 2 marked as *very important*. Thus, the composite expertise index is a continuous scale between 0 (if all four types of expertise were marked as *unimportant*) and 8 (if all were marked as *very important*). Finally, longevity is operationalized as organizational age (logged). See Table 1 in the Supplementary File for a summary of variables.

4. Analysis

4.1. Descriptive Analysis

To explore our dependent variables, we first depicted the means of the variables measuring the change in the importance of regional-, national-, and EU-level representation per policy field and country (Figure 1). The bar charts reveal that, on average, all representational levels became somewhat more important compared to a decade ago (3 means *no change*, 4 means *more importance*, 5 means *much more importance* on the scale). However, there are clear differences between countries and policy fields.

Hungarian respondents, on average, reported the lowest increase in importance of any representation levels, and Slovenian and Czech respondents reported the highest (Slovenians slightly more). Interestingly, Hungarian energy policy organizations report the least positive change in the importance across all levels of representation. This lends support to the findings of Horváthová and Dobbins (2019) that the government provides access to a few influential business groups while excluding others. The graphs do not indicate a flight from the national level of excluded groups.

In the other three countries, the EU level has become particularly important for energy groups. In all four countries, the regional level gained the least in importance. However, despite recentralization processes, the balance is positive even for the regional level except for Hungarian higher education groups, for whom it became less important. This is likely a sign of the increasing government control and weakening academic freedom in Hungarian higher education (Kováts, 2018).

We also plotted our relational dependent variables (Figure 2). Here the differences are more pronounced between the four countries. As expected, it is neo-corporatist Slovenia where the national level gained the least importance relative to the European and regional levels (with a relatively large increase in importance at all three levels; see Figure 1). However, the numbers are more difficult to interpret for the other three countries. It is Hungary where the national level gained the least

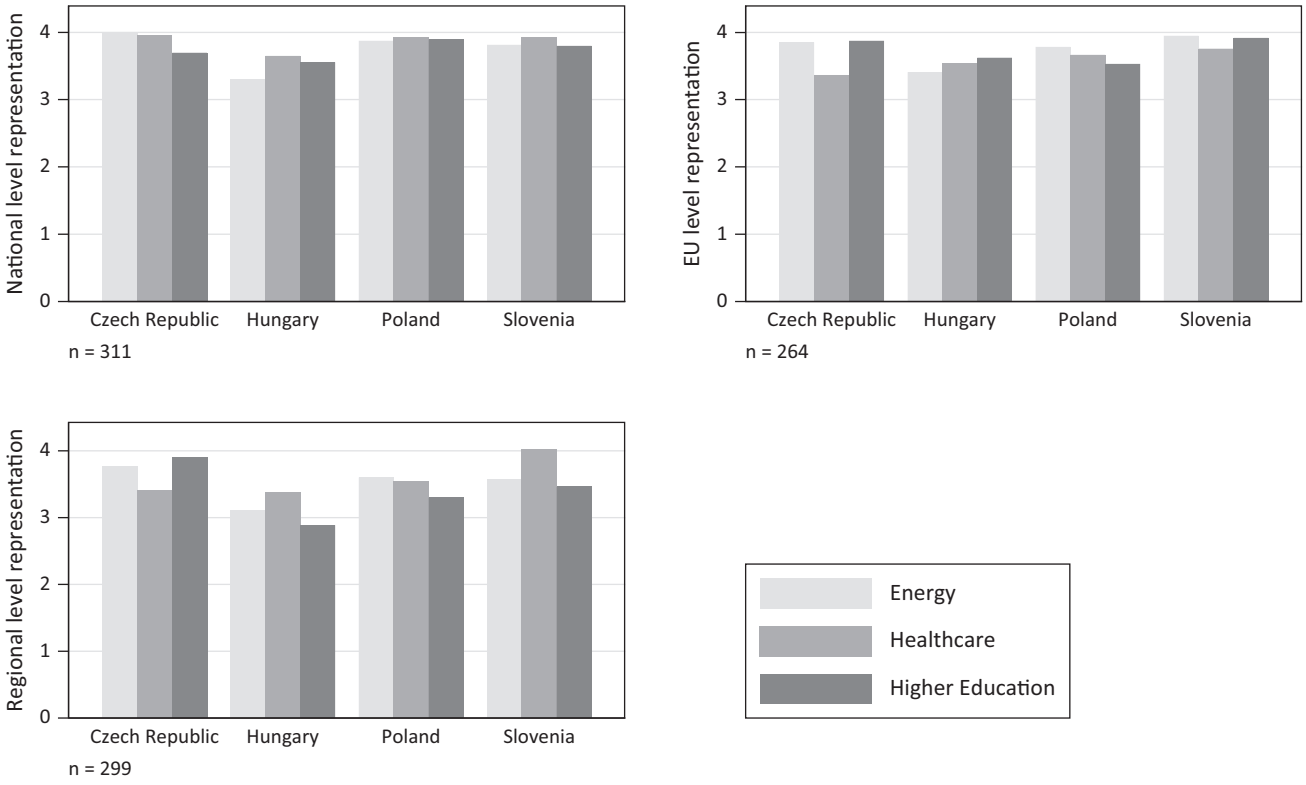

Figure 1. Mean change in the importance of regional-, national-, and EU-level representation levels compared to 10–15 years ago per country and policy field.

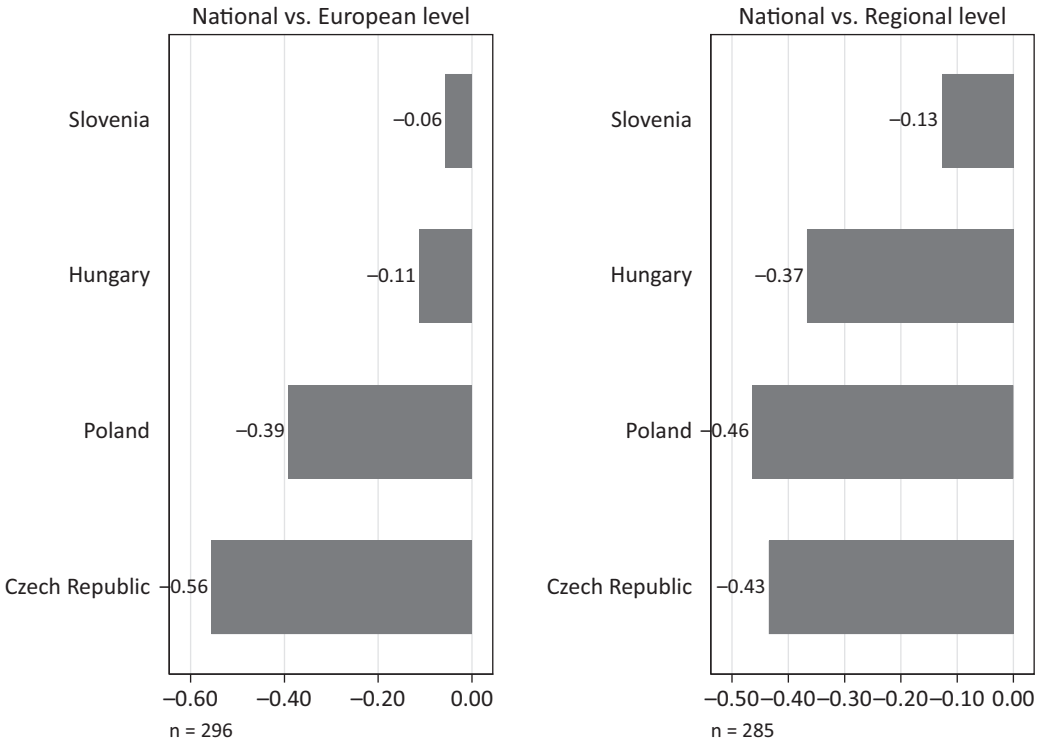

Figure 2. The relative importance of the European and regional level of representation vis-à-vis the national level compared to 10–15 years ago.

importance relatively after Slovenia compared to both other levels of representation, much less than either Poland or the Czech Republic. Now, looking at the previous graphs in Figure 1, this result is somewhat less surprising. After all, Hungarian interest groups reported the least increase in importance across all three levels for representation. However, we need to estimate multivariate models to better understand these patterns.

It is important to also look at the dispersion of our individual level proxy for backsliding, a variable indicating the respondents' assessment of the frequency of government consultations in their field of activity on a five-point scale where 1 is *no consultations*, 2 is *once a year*, 3 is *twice a year*, 4 is *monthly*, and 5 is *weekly* (Figure 3). The boxplots show that Slovenian groups report the least frequent governmental consultations in their field of activity. This again might be an effect of neocorporatism, whereby there are formal interest representation forums and bigger, encompassing organizations enjoy an advantage over smaller ones. Hungarian and

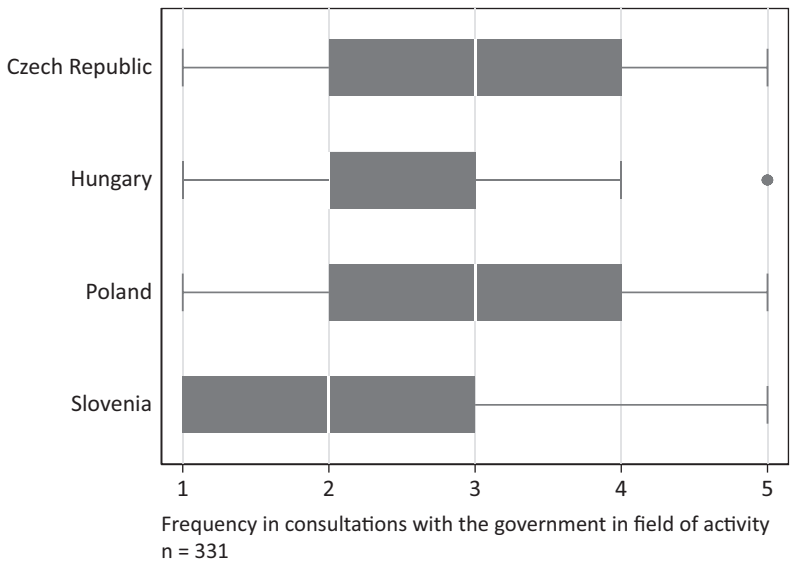

Figure 3. The frequency of governmental consultations in the field of activity.

Slovenian respondents have the same median; however, the interquartile range is narrower for Hungarian ones. Czech and Polish organizations report more frequent consultations than Hungarians or Slovenians. Again, we do not know whether more frequent consultations translate to easier access and more frequent participation, let alone higher policy influence. As already elaborated above, we use a dichotomous variable based on this measure in our multivariate models to better highlight the effect of exclusive governmental policy-making.

4.2. Statistical Analysis

We estimated seven multivariate OLS models to explore the determinants of the changes in the importance of the levels of representation. In every model, we control for country (baseline Slovenia) and policy field (baseline higher education). For each model, we plotted the kernel density over the normal distribution and estimated the variance inflation factor (for each coefficient and the mean for the model as a whole) to control for multicollinearity.

In Models 1, 2, and 3, we estimated the three levels separately. Access to domestic policy-makers is in a positive relationship with an increased importance for the national level lobby activity, whereas in a negative one with both the EU and regional levels. That is, closer proximity to national level policymakers does not seem to induce higher EU or regional level lobby activity (H2). On the contrary, groups with lower domestic access seem to value the supra- and subnational levels somewhat more (H3). However, we do not find support for either hypotheses, as the coefficent for the composite access index remains insignificant in all three models. Estimating the models with party access in general, or access to governing and opposition parties, respectively, or access to parliament does not change the results (see Supplementary File, Tables 2–5).

At the national level, the coefficient of the dummy for having no or only yearly governmental consultations in the field of activity—our proxy for backsliding at the organizational level—is negative and significant (H4). However, at the regional and EU levels, it loses statistical significance. In Model 1, the coefficient of the composite expertise index is significant and indicates a positive relationship. That is, expertise provision has a positive effect of placing greater importance on national-level representation compared to 10–15 years ago. However, expertise provision loses significance at the EU and regional levels.

Turning to the effect of organizational resources (H1), professionalization has a positive and significant effect at all three levels, suggesting that professionalization is a key organizational resource. More professionalized organizations engage in more active lobbying not only at the national but also at the EU and regional levels. We plotted the effect of professionalization on the change in importance for EU-level representation (Model 2). The marginal effect plot clearly reveals a substantial and robust effect (Figure 4). Organizations that did not invest in enhancing their organizational capacities in the past 10–15 years place less importance on EU-level representation than those that did.

While the policy field itself turned out to be insignificant in all models, national differences indeed are pronounced at the EU and regional levels: Hungarian organizations place less importance on both levels, whereas Polish groups are less active only at the regional level. Hence, Polish organizations seem to be adapting to the general trend towards centralization (Rozbicka et al., 2020) while—unlike their Hungarian counterparts—also still branching out to the EU level. Organizational age is a positive predictor for more EU-level lobbying and a negative for regional lobbying (the coefficient is negative but not significant at the national level). This might indicate that older, more influential organizations have turned to the EU level in the past 10–15 years. From our inter-organizational variables, only EU umbrella membership has a significant effect, a positive one at the EU level (unsurprisingly).

These models, however, do not tell us how the different representation levels relate to each other. To answer this question, first, we regressed the national level on the EU and the regional level, excluding access from the models but leaving all other variables in. Models 4 and 5 lend support to H2. The main driver for placing more importance on both EU and regional level representation is indeed increased importance for the national level. We learned from Model 1 that these are privileged, highly professionalized organizations providing expertise to national policy-makers active in policy fields with relatively frequent governmental consultations.

To model what determines organizations to move towards or away from the national level, either to the EU or regional levels, we need a different, relational operationalization of the dependent variable. For a detailed description of the two relational variables, please refer to Section 3 and Table 1. As a reminder: The two variables range (potentially) from −4 to +4. Negative numbers indicate higher importance for the national level and, at the same time, no change or reduced importance of the EU or the regional level, while positive numbers indicate just the opposite. Models 6 and 7 clearly show that our proxy variable for backsliding—the perceived frequency of governmental consultations in the area of activity—affects a move toward the EU and regional levels away from national representation positively. That is, organizations reporting no or only yearly government consultations place more importance on both EU and regional level representation compared to 10–15 years ago. This lends support to H4. The coefficient for access is, however, still insignificant in both models suggesting that a general closure of the POS—a structural condition, that is—is more important in explaining the strategic choice of moving toward the supra- or subnational levels than individual group inclusion/exclusion. It is also interesting that domestic inter-group cooperation becomes significant

Table 2. Determinants of the change in the representational levels compared to 10–15 years ago.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
	Importance of national level for representation vs. 10–15 years ago	Importance of EU level for representation vs. 10–15 years ago	Importance of regional level for representation vs. 10–15 years ago	Importance of EU level for representation vs. 10–15 years ago	Importance of regional level for representation vs. 10–15 years ago	National vs. European level	National vs. regional level
Composite political access index additive	0.00346 [0.0123]	−0.00347 [0.0149]	−0.00612 [0.0130]			−0.00334 [0.0157]	−0.0100 [0.0139]
No or yearly government consultation in the policy field	−0.368** [0.122]	−0.0270 [0.152]	−0.102 [0.132]	0.157 [0.143]	0.0845 [0.114]	0.339* [0.158]	0.329* [0.140]
Professionalization	0.0303** [0.0103]	0.0442** [0.0134]	0.0387*** [0.0115]	0.0305* [0.0125]	0.0129 [0.0104]	0.0217 [0.0135]	0.0147 [0.0119]
Financial planning horizon	0.0506 [0.0401]	−0.00663 [0.0482]	0.0662 [0.0414]	−0.0296 [0.0457]	0.0525 [0.0366]	−0.0418 [0.0512]	0.0296 [0.0446]
Composite expertise index	0.0731** [0.0255]	−0.0208 [0.0324]	0.00871 [0.0274]	−0.0553 [0.0312]	−0.0279 [0.0242]	−0.0913** [0.0336]	−0.0777** [0.0296]
Cooperation with other domestic groups	−0.0425 [0.0337]	0.0652 [0.0412]	0.0281 [0.0351]	0.0791* [0.0377]	0.0260 [0.0297]	0.0873* [0.0429]	0.0896* [0.0392]
National umbrella membership	−0.00678 [0.120]	−0.264 [0.145]	0.0617 [0.127]	−0.276* [0.137]	0.0718 [0.112]	−0.254 [0.153]	0.0697 [0.137]
EU umbrella membership	0.0802 [0.118]	0.526*** [0.145]	0.00452 [0.126]	0.510*** [0.137]	−0.0366 [0.110]	0.454** [0.152]	−0.0355 [0.135]
Age (logged)	−0.151 [0.0876]	0.304** [0.103]	−0.183* [0.0919]	0.363*** [0.0988]	−0.0928 [0.0816]	0.440*** [0.112]	−0.0537 [0.0980]
Energy	−0.0628 [0.169]	0.188 [0.201]	0.157 [0.175]	0.202 [0.191]	0.204 [0.155]	0.257 [0.219]	0.188 [0.188]

Table 2. (Cont.) Determinants of the change in the representational levels compared to 10–15 years ago.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
	Importance of national level for representation vs. 10–15 years ago	Importance of EU level for representation vs. 10–15 years ago	Importance of regional level for representation vs. 10–15 years ago	Importance of EU level for representation vs. 10–15 years ago	Importance of regional level for representation vs. 10–15 years ago	National vs. European level	National vs. regional level
Healthcare	0.00633 [0.153]	−0.0868 [0.182]	0.117 [0.158]	−0.0662 [0.171]	0.164 [0.138]	−0.0952 [0.196]	0.0888 [0.170]
Higher education	0 [—]	0 [—]	0 [—]	0 [—]	0 [—]	0 [—]	0 [—]
Czech Republic	0.0410 [0.159]	−0.145 [0.199]	−0.283 [0.169]	−0.180 [0.188]	−0.218 [0.150]	−0.244 [0.205]	−0.330 [0.180]
Hungary	−0.0778 [0.167]	−0.481* [0.205]	−0.460** [0.176]	−0.490* [0.192]	−0.408** [0.153]	−0.366 [0.216]	−0.442* [0.191]
Poland	0.102 [0.171]	−0.106 [0.205]	−0.450* [0.181]	−0.175 [0.195]	−0.466** [0.158]	−0.185 [0.217]	−0.615** [0.194]
Slovenia	0 [—]	0 [—]	0 [—]	0 [—]	0 [—]	0 [—]	0 [—]
Importance of national level for representation vs. 10–15 years ago				0.378*** [0.0756]	0.518*** [0.0626]		
Constant	3.464*** [0.408]	1.775*** [0.503]	3.272*** [0.431]	0.486 [0.532]	1.550*** [0.422]	−1.875*** [0.528]	−0.333 [0.464]
R^2	0.184	0.223	0.159	0.310	0.368	0.189	0.123
Observations	251	214	238	213	233	236	230

Notes: Standard errors in brackets; linear regression models; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

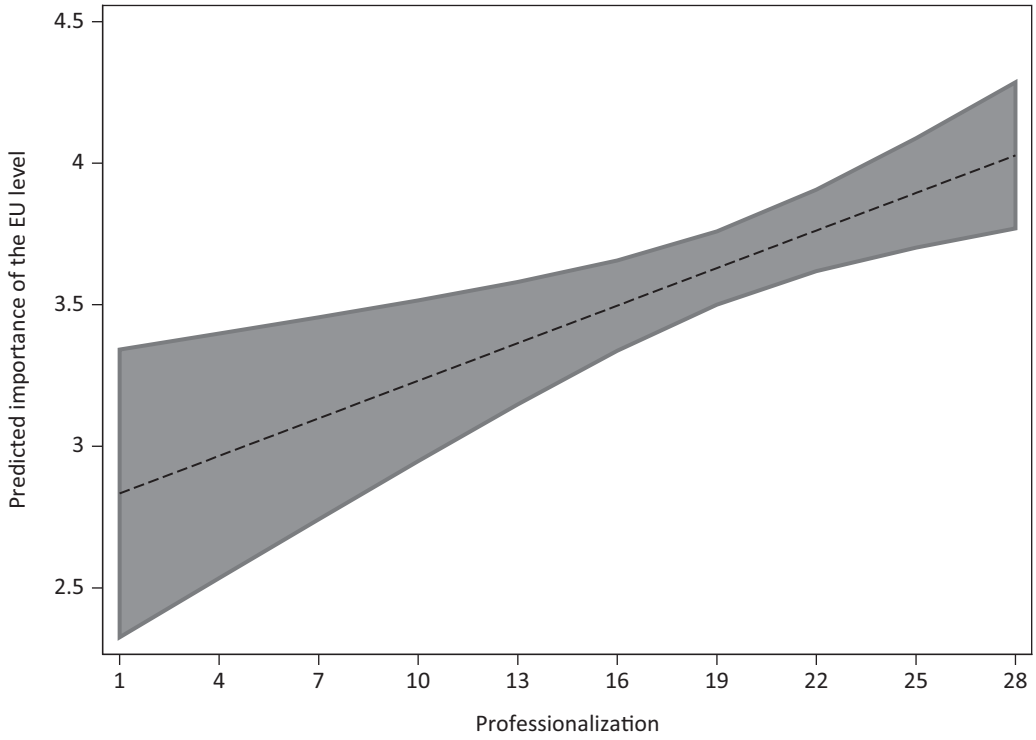

Figure 4. Predictive margins for the change in the importance of EU-level representation as compared to 10–15 years ago for the levels of professionalization, 95% confidence interval.

in these relational models and positive both for the EU and regional levels. This finding tentatively suggests that inter-group cooperation is indeed a "weapon of the weak," an important asset against environmental uncertainties (Hanegraaff & Pritoni, 2019; Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). The significant and negative effect of the composite expertise index strengthens our findings in Model 1. Those organizations engaging in expertise-provision to domestic policy-makers evaluate national-level representation more importantly than 10–15 years ago. It also lends tentative support to H3: As access to policy networks is a necessary condition for information-oriented lobbying, exclusion means a move away from the national towards the EU and regional levels.

5. Conclusions

This article assessed whether organized interests operating amid (varying degrees of) democratic backsliding are "defiantly responding" to the new playing field. Specifically, we explored whether increasing engagement in alternative political venues—i.e., the EU and/or regional level—is driven by organizations' (lacking) individual access to policy networks or rather by a general closure of the POS. We also assessed how multilevel lobbying is influenced by organization-specific variables such as financial resources, professionalization, and expertise, as well as the meso-level of inter-group cooperation.

Are organizations under pressure from illiberal governments "taking their business elsewhere"? First, it depends somewhat on how the question was posed—and the country's context. Our variables linking (lacking) access to national policy-makers with increasing regional and international activity revealed neither a multiplication of lobbying capacity (i.e., better national access = more multilevel lobbying) nor evidence that excluded groups seek alternative lobbying forums. Hence, excluded organizations seem to be coping with or adapting to the situation. Hungary, the country most significantly affected by backsliding, stood out as an extreme case, as Hungarian organizations are even less likely to "go abroad" or regionalize despite the adverse climate. This also holds, to a somewhat lesser extent, for Polish organizations.

However, when we applied our organization-specific proxy variable for backsliding, namely the perceived (lacking) frequency of governmental consultations in the specific policy area and our relational variable for venue shopping (expressing the relative importance of the national vs. the EU or the regional levels, respectively), our regressions indeed reflected a move towards the EU and the regional levels. Once again, though, Hungarian and Polish organizations appear less willing to engage in venue shopping. This ultimately lends evidence to a depressing effect of democratic backsliding on organizational responsiveness (and potentially a positive effect of Slovenian corporatism on EU-level lobbying).

Yet there is hope for organizations operating in backsliding contexts. Nearly all models show that organizational self-empowerment is crucial. Organizations focusing on accumulating expertise, and professionalization, i.e., through training lobbyists, monitoring effectiveness,

and cooperating with other organizations, not only can sustain access to governments but also branch out to other (regional and European) lobbying forums. Hence, the self-induced micro-level development of organizations enables them to react, regardless of their proximity to policy-makers. In other words, "better businesses," i.e., more professionalized, expertise-oriented, and cooperative organizations, appear capable of operating in multiple venues, regardless of whether included or excluded at the national level. On another positive note, our results show a strong correlation between expertise provision and increasing national-level activity, thus indicating that illiberal, populist governments are still interested in gathering expertise from civil society organizations. However, it may also be the case that illiberal governments are specifically propping up such well-endowed, expertise-intensive organizations and potentially even supporting their EU-level activities. In other words, organizational resources and multilevel lobbying capacity may be driven more by symbiotic relationships with governments than own personal initiative (for rather weak evidence for this phenomenon in CEE see Dobbins, Horváth, et al., 2022).

Aside from these complex causal processes requiring further exploration, our perspective opens numerous avenues for future research. Clearly, our bird's-eye quantitative approach somewhat overlooks the dynamics of individual organizations. Thus, case studies might provide more lucid insights into specific organizational decision-making processes, specifically with regard to governments' leverage over organizational development. Importantly, multilevel lobbying might be driven by factors other than democratic backsliding. For example, an increasing density of the organizational population might crowd out the playing field and compel organizations to shift operations elsewhere. Moreover, future scholarship might explore whether targeted funding from the EU or other foreign donors enhances multilevel lobbying capacity among CEE organizations. Finally, authors should also assess whether venue shopping at the European level ultimately strengthens (i.e., due to learning effects) or weakens (i.e., due to administrative overburdening) organizations' influence on national policy-making.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank our colleagues from the research consortium at the University of Opole, Szczepan Czarnecki, Rafał Riedel, and Emilia Szyszkowska, as well as Brigitte Horváth, University of Konstanz, for their invaluable contribution to the creation of the population ecology data set and the survey of organizations. We also would like to express our gratitude to the more than 400 interest organizations that took the time to complete our survey and provide us with so much valuable information and insights. This research was conducted as a part of the research project The Missing Link: Examining Organized Interests in Post-Communist Policy Making of the University of Konstanz, Germany, and the University of Opole, Poland, funded by the Beethoven 2 Polish-German Funding Initiative of the German Research Foundation and the Polish National Science Center under Grant No. DO1590—3/1. We sincerely thank both organizations for the generous funding.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material (four tables) for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

References

Albareda, A. (2020). Prioritizing professionals? How the democratic and professionalized nature of interest groups shapes their degree of access to EU officials. *European Political Science Review*, *12*(4), 485–501. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773920000247

Antal, M. (2019). How the regime hampered a transition to renewable electricity in Hungary. *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, *33*, 162–182. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eist.2019.04.004

Baumgartner, F. R., & Jones, B. D. (2009). *Agendas and instability in American politics* (2nd ed.). The University of Chicago Press.

Bernhagen, P. (2013). When do politicians listen to lobbyists (and who benefits when they do)? *European Journal of Political Research*, *52*(1), 20–43. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2012.02062.x

Bernhagen, P., & Mitchell, N. J. (2009). The determinants of direct corporate lobbying in the European Union. *European Union Politics*, *10*(2), 155–176. https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116509103366

Beyers, J. (2004). Voice and access: Political practices of European interest associations. *European Union Politics*, *5*(2), 211–240. https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116504042442

Beyers, J., & Kerremans, B. (2012). Domestic embeddedness and the dynamics of multilevel venue shopping in four EU member states. *Governance*, *25*(2), 263–290. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0491.2011.01551.x

Bohle, D., & Greskovits, B. l. (2012). *Capitalist diversity on Europe's periphery*. Cornell University Press.

Bouwen, P. (2002). Corporate lobbying in the European Union: The logic of access. *Journal of European Public Policy*, *9*(3), 365–390. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501760210138796

Bozóki, A., & Hegedűs, D. (2018). An externally constrained hybrid regime: Hungary in the European Union. *Democratization*, *25*(7), 1173–1189. https://

doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2018.1455664

Bromley, P., Schofer, E., & Longhofer, W. (2020). Contentions over world culture: The rise of legal restrictions on foreign funding to NGOs, 1994–2015. *Social Forces*, *99*(1), 281–304. https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soz138

Buštíková, L. (2021). *Czech Republic*. Freedom House. https://freedomhouse.org/country/czech-republic/nations-transit/2021

Buyse, A. (2018). Squeezing civic space: Restrictions on civil society organizations and the linkages with human rights. *The International Journal of Human Rights*, *22*(8), 966–988. https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2018.1492916

Carothers, T. (2016). Closing space for international democracy and human rights support. *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, *8*(3), 358–377. https://doi.org/10.1093/jhuman/huw012

Chalmers, A. W. (2011). Interests, influence and information: Comparing the influence of interest groups in the European Union. *Journal of European Integration*, *33*(4), 471–486. https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2011.579751

Csaky, Z. (2021). *Nations in transit 2021: The antidemocratic turn*. Freedom House. https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/NIT_2021_final_042321.pdf

Czarnecki, S. (2021). In search of civic participation: Advocacy tactics in the energy and environmental sector in post-communist Europe. In M. Dobbins & R. Riedel (Eds.), *The "missing link": Exploring organized interests in post-communist policy making* (pp. 79–94). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003049562-4

De Bruycker, I. (2016). Pressure and expertise: Explaining the information supply of interest groups in EU legislative lobbying. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, *54*(3), 599–616. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12298

Dobbins, M., Labanino, R., Riedel, R., Czarnecki, S., Horváth, B., & Szyszkowska, E. (2022). Organized interests in post-communist policy-making: A new dataset for comparative research. *Interest Groups & Advocacy*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41309-022-00172-1

Dobbins, M., Horváth, B., & Labanino, R. P. (2022). Exploring the domestic and international drivers of professionalization of Central and Eastern European interest groups. *European Political Science Review*, *14*(2), 263–280. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773922000054

Dobbins, M., & Riedel, R. (Eds.). (2021). *The "missing link": Exploring organized interests in post-communist policy making*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003049562

Duman, A., & Kureková, L. (2012). The role of state in development of socio-economic models in Hungary and Slovakia: The case of industrial policy. *Journal of European Public Policy*, *19*(8), 1207-1228. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2012.709018

Dür, A., & Mateo, G. (2014). The Europeanization of interest groups: Group type, resources and policy area. *European Union Politics*, *15*(4), 572–594. https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116514532556

Eising, R. (2007). Institutional context, organizational resources and strategic choices: Explaining interest group access in the European Union. *European Union Politics*, *8*(3), 329–362. https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116507079542

Eising, R. (2008). Interest groups in EU policy-making. *Living Reviews in European Governance*, *3*(4), 4–32. http://www.livingreviews.org/lreg-2008-4

Ekiert, G. (2019). The dark side of civil society. In J. Zakowski (Ed.), *Concilium civitas almanach 2019/2020* (pp. 39–59). Concilium Civitas. http://conciliumcivitas.pl/the-dark-side-of-civil-society

European Commission. (2020). *2020 Rule of Law Report: Country chapter on the rule of law situation in Hungary*. https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/hu_rol_country_chapter.pdf

Gerő, M., Susánszky, P., Kopper, Á., & Tóth, G. (2020). Strategies for survival: Human rights organizations' responses to the closing of political opportunity structures in Hungary. *Politologický Časopis—Czech Journal of Political Science*, *2020*(2), 119–139.

Greskovits, B. (2020). Rebuilding the Hungarian right through conquering civil society: The Civic Circles Movement. *East European Politics*, *36*(2), 247–266. https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2020.1718657

Guiraudon, V. (2000). European integration and migration policy: Vertical policy-making as venue shopping. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, *38*(2), 251–271. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5965.00219

Hanegraaff, M., & Pritoni, A. (2019). United in fear: Interest group coalition formation as a weapon of the weak? *European Union Politics*, *20*(2), 198–218. https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116518824022

Hanley, S., & Vachudova, M. A. (2018). Understanding the illiberal turn: Democratic backsliding in the Czech Republic. *East European Politics*, *34*(3), 276–296. https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2018.1493457

Horváthová, B., & Dobbins, M. (2019). Organised interests in the energy sector: A comparative study of the influence of interest groups in Czechia and Hungary. *Politics and Governance*, *7*(1), 139–151. https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.17645/pag.v7i1.1784

Jahn, D. (2016). Changing of the guard: Trends in corporatist arrangements in 42 highly industrialized societies from 1960 to 2010. *Socio-Economic Review*, *14*(1), 47-71. https://doi.org/10.1093/ser/mwu028

Kitschelt, H. P. (1986). Political opportunity structures and political protest: Anti-nuclear movements in four democracies. *British Journal of Political Science*, *16*(1), 57–85. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123400003 80X

Klüver, H., & Saurugger, S. (2013). Opening the black box: The professionalization of interest groups in the European Union. *Interest Groups & Advocacy*, *2*(2), 185–205. https://doi.org/10.1057/iga.2013.2

Kohler-Koch, B., Kotzian, P., & Quittkat, C. (2017). The multilevel interest representation of national business associations. *West European Politics*, *40*(5), 1046–1065. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2017.1303244

Kováts, G. (2018). Trust and the governance of higher education: The introduction of chancellor system in Hungarian higher education. In A. Curaj, L. Deca, & R. Pricopie (Eds.), *European higher education area: The impact of past and future policies* (pp. 651–669). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-77407-7_39

Labanino, R. (2020). State-labour relations in illiberal times: The dissolution of social dialogue in Hungary. In R. Careja, P. Emmenegger, & N. Giger (Eds.), *The European social model under pressure: Liber amicorum in honour of Klaus Armingeon* (pp. 89–106). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-27043-8_6

Laboutková, Š., Šimral, V., & Vymětal, P. (2020). Transparent lobbying in Central and Eastern European countries. In Š. Laboutková, V. Šimral, & P. Vymětal (Eds.), *Transparent lobbying and democracy* (pp. 181–215). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-36044-3_7

Lovec, M. (2021). *Slovenia*. Freedom House. https://freedomhouse.org/country/slovenia/nations-transit/2021

Mahoney, C., & Baumgartner, F. (2008). Converging perspectives on interest group research in Europe and America. *West European Politics*, *31*(6), 1253–1273. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402380802372688

McGrath, C. (2008). The development and regulation of lobbying in the new member states of the European Union. *Journal of Public Affairs*, 8(1/2), 15-32. https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.284

Mikuła, Ł., & Kaczmarek, U. (2019). From marketization to recentralization: The health-care system reforms in Poland and the post-new public management concept. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, *85*(1), 28–44. https://doi.org/10.1177/0020852318773429

Novak, M., & Fink-Hafner, D. (2019). Slovenia: Interest group developments in a postsocialist-liberal democracy. *Journal of Public Affairs*, *19*(2), Article e1867.

Olejnik, M. (2020). A new model of corporatism in states governed by populist political parties: The cases of Poland and Hungary. *Politologický Časopis—Czech Journal of Political Science*, *27*(2), 178–195.

Ost, D. (2011). "Illusory corporatism" ten years later. *Warsaw Forum of Economic Sociology*, *1*(3), 19–49. https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=720437

Pfeffer, J., & Salancik, G. R. (2003). *The external control of organizations: A resource dependence perspective*. Stanford University Press.

Pitschel, D., & Bauer, M. W. (2009). Subnational governance approaches on the rise—Reviewing a decade of Eastern European regionalization research. *Regional & Federal Studies*, *19*(3), 327–347. https://doi.org/10.1080/13597560902957450

Poloni-Staudinger, L. M. (2008). The domestic opportunity structure and supranational activity: An explanation of environmental group activity at the European Union Level. *European Union Politics*, *9*(4), 531–558. https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116508095150

Pospieszna, P., & Vetulani-Cęgiel, A. (2021). Polish interest groups facing democratic backsliding. *Interest Groups & Advocacy*, *10*, 158–180. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41309-021-00119-y

Przybylski, W. (2018). Explaining Eastern Europe: Can Poland's backsliding be stopped? *Journal of Democracy*, *29*(3), 52–64. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2018.0044

Rozbicka, P., & Kamiński, P. (2021). Have they already emerged? Mapping the population of national interest organisations in post-communist Poland. *Europe-Asia Studies*, *74*(5), 789–808. https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2021.1900075

Rozbicka, P., Kamiński, P., Novak, M., & Jankauskaitė, V. (2020). *Achieving democracy through interest representation: Interest groups in Central and Eastern Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-55521-4

Sata, R., & Karolewski, I. P. (2020). Caesarean politics in Hungary and Poland. *East European Politics*, *36*(2), 206–225. https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2019.1703694

Setnikar-Cankar, S. (2010). Slovenia in transition: Decentralization as a goal. In F. Hendriks, A. Lidström, & J. Loughlin (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of local and regional democracy in Europe* (pp. 642–663). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199562978.003.0028

Šimral, V. (2015). *The funding and oversight of political parties and electoral campaigns in Central and Eastern Europe*. Frank Bold. https://pimcore.rekonstrukcestatu.cz/publikace/the-funding-and-oversight-of-political-parties-and-election-campaigns-in-east-central-europe.pdf

Szigetvári, T. (2020). The Hungarian administrative system: From centralization to regionalization and back. *Journal of Administrative and Local Studies*, *3*(1), 23–40. https://doi.org/http://doi.org/10.37460/j.2636-7823/2020.3.1.02

Szulecki, K. (2020). Incumbent stability amid legislative volatility. In E. Lerum Boasson, M. Dotterud Leiren, & J. Wettestad (Eds.), *Comparative renewables policy: Political, organizational and european fields* (1st ed., pp. 126–148). Routledge. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429198144-9

Temesi, I. (2017). The swinging pendulum of decentral-

ization in Hungary. In J. M. Ruano & M. Profiroiu (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of decentralisation in Europe* (pp. 417–441). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-32437-1_16

Tworzecki, H. (2019). Poland: A case of top-down polarization. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *681*(1), 97–119. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716218809322

Vargovčíková, J. (2017). Inside lobbying regulation in Poland and the Czech Republic: Negotiating public and private actors' roles in governance. *Interest Groups & Advocacy*, *6*(3), 253–271. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41309-017-0026-9

Vlk, A., Dobbins, M., & Riedel, R. (2021). Explaining institutional persistence and change in Polish and Czech higher education from a stakeholder perspective. In M. Dobbins & R. Riedel (Eds.), *The "missing link": Exploring organized interests in post-communist policy-making* (pp. 173–193). Routledge.

Yoder, J. A. (2003). Decentralisation and regionalisation after communism: Administrative and territorial reform in Poland and the Czech Republic. *Europe-Asia Studies*, *55*(2), 263–286. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3594527

About the Authors

Rafael Labanino is a research fellow at the Department of Politics and Public Administration, University of Konstanz, in the project "The Missing Link: Examining Organized Interests in Post-Communist Policy-Making.'' His main areas of research are social policy, social dialogue, higher education policy, democratization, and organized interests in Central and Eastern Europe.

Michael Dobbins is an adjunct professor of policy analysis at the University of Konstanz. His doctoral dissertation dealt with higher education in Central and Eastern Europe. His main areas of research are higher and secondary education policy and post-communist transformation processes. He is the co-director of the research project "The Missing Link: Examining Organized Interests in Post-Communist Policy-Making," funded by the German Research Foundation and Polish National Science Center.

POLITICS AND GOVERNANCE
ISSN: 2183-2463

Politics and Governance is an internationally peer-reviewed open access journal that publishes significant and cutting-edge research drawn from all areas of political science.

Its central aim is thereby to enhance the broad scholarly understanding of the range of contemporary political and governing processes, and impact upon of states, political entities, international organisations, communities, societies and individuals, at international, regional, national and local levels.

cogitatio

www.cogitatiopress.com/politicsandgovernance