

# ACTIVISM IN HARD TIMES IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

People Power

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## **POLARIZATION AS DRIVER AND BARRIER TO CIVIC ACTIVISM**

*Dorota Pietrzyk-Reeves and Lisa McIntosh Sundstrom*

Among the phenomena shaping civic activism in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), political and social polarization is one of the most destructive and influential in certain countries. By definition, polarization divides society. The Cambridge Dictionary defines polarization<sup>1</sup> as “the act of dividing something, especially something that contains different people or opinions into two completely opposing groups.” Political polarization occurs when political attitudes diverge to ideological extremes. This can happen in democracies when political parties or political elites more broadly take very strong opposing positions asserting there is no room for deliberation and consensus on policy issues with their political opponents.

A good example to illustrate this phenomenon is the government-sponsored anti-abortion campaign in Poland and the legislative proposal to almost completely ban the right to legal abortion that divided society and prompted the rise of a new social movement called the Women’s Strike in 2016. Following mass protests and a nationwide strike known as Black Monday, organized in 147 towns and cities by the new social movement, the bill was voted down. Rather than trying to pass new legislation, conservative politicians asked Poland’s Constitutional Tribunal to review the existing law, and in October 2020, its judges declared abortion, even in the case of fetal abnormalities, illegal. This effectively eliminated legal abortion in Poland. In response, the movement brought women and men back to the streets in great numbers despite the Covid-19 threat. Once again, the battle over the right to abortion polarized society, with many conservative groups supporting the Courts’ ruling, and although many people turned out to protest the Court decision, they were not able to stop the new, stricter legislation on abortion from coming into force.

This chapter examines how increasing political and social polarization, especially in Poland and Hungary, has affected civic activism. Polarization takes different forms, with varying consequences in these countries. Some of this polarization can be traced back to the populist rhetoric of political leaders, combined with new authoritarian political tactics, which makes it a phenomenon largely constructed by the governing parties rather than a naturally occurring divide. Other divisions have been exacerbated by social media, contributing to the growing significance of identities and identity politics<sup>2</sup> (Kubin & von Sikoriski, 2021). Social media has also contributed to solidifying value orientations of various groups, most notably in rhetoric on gender issues, female reproductive rights, refugees, minority groups, and climate action.

We explore how political and cultural polarization affects civic activism and, in some cases, “pillarizes” activists and movements into different segments that do not interact (Bernhard & Kubik, 2014). In recent years, scholars have observed growing social splits *across* movements which produced, for instance, parallel demonstrations or marches – one in favor of an issue (e.g., reproductive rights of women in Poland), the other against that issue or its supporters. There are also splits within movements due to disagreements about issues that emerge. When society is pillarized into extremely separate groups, fierce debates can emerge more often within movements about how to act most purely in accordance with their group’s principles. In Russian civil society, for instance, there are emotionally charged arguments related to how best to react to the invasion of Ukraine. This debate centers mainly on how much to speak out against the war publicly, and whether to remain in Russia or leave the country – not so much on pro or anti-war battles. Another example is the ongoing debate among activists – at least prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine – about how much to cooperate with the Russian government in response to increasing government repression in Russia. In our activist profiles in this chapter, we ask: to what extent does polarization on certain issues prevent civic activists from cooperating on other issues and gaining the attention of a broad swathe of the public, thus decreasing the chance to be heard by public authorities?

While there is considerable analysis of how political parties, leaders, and media environments are influenced by these processes of polarization, the impacts on civic groups and activism are important but understudied (Vachudova, 2019). Both political leaders and media outlets manipulate public opinion, which often leads to demonization of parts of civil society and mobilization or valorization of others. We link this problem to the growing significance of identities and identity politics. If old battles were largely about socioeconomic policies and reforms, new ones are about migration, nationalism, and gender issues. In Poland, Hungary, Russia, and elsewhere in the region, as governments become more extremely conservative

or one-sided in their views over time, huge political and societal rifts develop over identity issues. Right-wing groups encouraged by right-wing government rhetoric have escalated actions against feminist, LGBTQ, or migrant rights groups, which no longer can apply for public funding and are harassed and marginalized in other ways (Ekiert, 2021).

In this chapter, we look specifically at the impact of top-down, elite-created polarization, which is used instrumentally by those in power. Poland and Hungary have suffered from democratic erosion under their political elites (PiS and Fidesz, respectively) who used several different strategies to maintain power. Among them, polarization through media and the identification of enemies not only in the political sphere but also in civil society, accompanied with anti-liberal rhetoric and disregard for the rights of minorities, have created a climate that made dialogue and compromise on important issues almost impossible. Researchers have warned that divisions within civil society can easily weaken its chance to influence decisions and policies especially if channels for effective communication with decision-makers and dialogue are closed (Ekiert, 2021; Platek, 2023). A divided civil society can be treated instrumentally and lose its potential to protect democracy (Bernhard, 2020). Our findings suggest that, perhaps paradoxically, they can also contribute to the resilience of civic groups or make them stronger in how they rethink their strategies and long-term goals.

A large part of this chapter is devoted to what we learn from activists, their perceptions of the impact of polarization, and the strategies they use to either ameliorate the hostility between sides or try to find common ground wherever possible. The stories of activists from Hungary and Poland, who hold different perspectives and work in different contexts, provide valuable insights into how polarization can be seen as both a barrier to and a driver of civic activism. Our profiles of Veronika Móra (Hungary) and Eugeniusz Gosiewski (Poland) illustrate how polarization can be addressed by civic activists and what strategies their organizations developed to integrate members, supporters, and citizens. They do so in different ways, with Móra attempting to combat polarization directly, and Gosiewski finding ways to work around or accommodate it.

### **Veronika Móra – creating a parallel society in Hungary**

Veronika Móra (see Photo 2.1) has been an environmental activist since her teenage years. For her whole adult life, she worked in civil society organizations involved in environmental issues and later in civil society development. She is a biologist by education and has an MA degree in organizational psychology and a diploma in environmental law. In 1997, she joined Ökotárs Alapítvány<sup>3</sup> (Hungarian Environmental Partnership Foundation or HEPF) and has held the position of the director since 2007. Earlier, she was a national consultant



PHOTO 2.1 Picture of Veronika Móra.

for a Dutch foundation and an ecological foundation in Hungary. In these positions, she has worked on a variety of issues related to ecological consumption, gene technologies, and public participation. Since 2003, she has been leading HEPF's Civil Partner Program, which aimed to improve the legal-fiscal environment for civil society. But she also has experience in managing and overseeing grant programs of various sizes, not least of which is the Hungarian NGO Fund under the European Economic Agreement (EEA) Norwegian Financial Mechanism. In addition, she has voluntary positions in several NGOs, including serving as the chair of the Hungarian Donors Forum, which works on developing corporate philanthropic culture in Hungary.

After 30 years in operation, Ökotárs Alapítvány (HEPF) has a wide range of goals and activities, starting with support for community initiatives that aim to contribute to the development of a democratic and equitable society and institutional system based on citizen participation. It also promotes Hungary's environmental movement, assisting the realization of specific programs by providing grants, training, and assistance. To put it simply, HEPF is involved in "reclaiming civil space" which Móra sees as "broadening the grassroots basis and constituency of civil society, facilitating cooperation and networking as well as bringing the civil society voice to the European level."

For Móra, polarization in Hungarian society is extreme; it is divided between those supporting the government and those who do not support

it, which she says, “are light years from one another... they are living in different realities.” At the same time, civil society is also divided by the government’s rhetoric and communication, which praises charitable and recreational organizations but stigmatizes as enemies those which go beyond such goals. The landscape of civil society in Hungary, as Móra explains, is also populated by GONGOs, or government-organized NGOs established to be “the vocal supporters of the government to create a kind of parallel civil society.” There are also organizations that try to be apolitical, but in Móra’s view, this approach does not make much sense in the present circumstances, because everything is so politicized. As she explains, “It is quite impossible to be apolitical in the sense that even if you do not want to engage in politics, politics engages in you.”

However, independent civil society has not disappeared in Hungary, and it is more important for democracy than ever, even if there are clear tensions within civil society and between civil society and the state. As Móra clarifies, the mission of her organization has not changed and, under the present circumstances, should not change, because civil society “needs support more than ever.” This requires that social organizations are sustained and strengthened. There is a clear need to support existing hubs of knowledge and expertise, to provide financial and non-financial support, and to continue the transfer of knowledge to other organizations. For example, Móra’s organization opened in 2023 a new grant program supported by the European Union’s “Citizens, Equality, Rights, and Values Program,”<sup>4</sup> which will secure new funding opportunities for Hungarian civil society organizations.

Such programs are not, however, a panacea to polarization, which by now is deep. There are no feasible channels for communication with the other side, especially under the present media landscape. According to Móra, what civil society and activists can do instead is to expand their constituency among those who are open to issues and causes that are salient in society. Móra has watched how Hungary’s Fidesz-led government has taken more actions over time to repress liberal groups within civil society. However, she has also been heartened by the reactions of civil society to organize and resist these measures. Hungarian civic activists have responded in four crucial areas. First is the constituency, which involves building stronger ties with society. Second is the community, which is about encouraging active citizens’ participation in public debate and civic action. Third is communication, which is about better and more transparent processes of communicating about what civil society’s work is and gaining support among the citizens. The final area is coalitions, which are focused on building trust and mutual support among civic organizations so that they can cooperate and stand up for each other.

The best example of the last strategy is the coalition *Civilizacio*, which HEPF helped establish in 2017. This network of NGOs was created to enable civil society organizations to support one another and work for a

livable Hungary, where “the conservation of nature, the protection of the disadvantaged and the care of our communities is the common cause.” Importantly, this required broadening the circle of organizations that work together and including those that operate in small towns and villages, encouraging them to also create their own networks.

As NGOs found themselves increasingly attacked by the government, legally and rhetorically, “individual CSOs are most often not strong enough to defend themselves in the face of attacks, and easily become afraid and insecure if they feel isolated.” Cooperation and networking are the main ways to counter this: civic actors together can stand up for one another, express solidarity, and support those most in need. Also, as a coalition, they can show and communicate better and more loudly why and how civil society is important for us all and what organizations do for the public good. According to Móra, “coalition building is absolutely essential in the situations of shrinking space” in Hungary.

In the spring of 2017, *Civilizacio* activists organized several high-profile actions, including the Civic Heart initiative<sup>5</sup> at Heroes’ Square and a silent protest<sup>6</sup> in the Parliament. The civic heart (a heart formed by people, with the word “civil” in the center) became the symbol of the network. The *Civilizacio* coalition fought for over three years against the *LexNGO*, a 2017 Hungarian law that stigmatized organizations receiving foreign funding. The coalition developed into about 40 active members, with an “outer circle” of more than 300 organizations, including human rights, environmental, and education organizations, among many others, all supporting their joint statement in opposition to the law. Móra contends<sup>7</sup> that, counter-intuitively, government’s attacks “have managed to bring NGOs together and enabled them to grow together and be in solidarity with one another.” The collective effort ultimately resulted in the repeal of the law by the European Union’s Court of Justice (CJEU) (2020), and in June 2020, it declared that “the restrictions imposed by Hungary on the financing of civil organizations by persons established outside that Member State do not comply with EU law.” The Hungarian government finally repealed the law in April 2021.

Móra argues that *Civilizacio*’s longevity stems from

the boundaries that we established: we limit our structured cooperation to issues that concern civil society. We do not interfere with what the member organizations do or the way they do it. We must acknowledge that members of *Civilizacio* are very different, not only in terms of areas of work but also in their capacity. We accept that everybody contributes according to their capacity while ensuring that we are all on equal footing.

The coalition’s members also learned important lessons from a 2014 attempt to build a national NGO coalition, which did not survive because of rigid

attempts to unify a diverse set of organizations. Civilizacio members realized that most of all, a sustainable coalition needs to be “less formalized” and “introduce basic cooperation mechanisms, [and] find common ground on certain aspects.” This will be key to its future success.

### **Democratic backsliding and polarization**

Móra’s story illustrates how a Hungarian civic activist has responded to polarization and the surprising decline in quality of democratic institutions and processes in the recent decade in Hungary and Poland, which were once touted democratic pioneers in post-communist CEE. Scholars have called this decline “democratic backsliding” which in both countries was associated with the tenures of their incumbent governments, the Victor Orban-led Fidesz<sup>8</sup> government in Hungary and the Law and Justice (PiS)<sup>9</sup> coalition government in Poland. Despite some important differences, democratic decline in both countries involved decisions and policies that led to the shrinking of public space for civil society actors, especially those associated with liberal or progressive values. It also resulted in deep and persistent social and political polarization. Although there had already been some cleavages in both societies that developed after 1989, none of them was strong enough on their own to cause extreme polarization. Many scholars, practitioners and activists in Hungary and Poland agree that today’s polarization was not bottom up but was instead

driven from the top down by a segment of the political class that donned the cloak of radical populist anti-establishment rhetoric to gain popular support, win an election, and rewrite the constitutional rules of the game to its own benefit.

*(Tworzecki, 2019)*

In Poland, democratic backsliding started in 2015 when the Law and Justice party (PiS) came to power, after various efforts by the government and government-sponsored organizations to limit the public space for certain activities and voices or undermine trust in independent NGOs. The government centralized public funding for civil society organizations in one governmental body, also disrupting the functioning of many social organizations. And some of those regarded as progressive or working in the sphere of human rights or refugees no longer received public funds, including funds which come from the EU and are administered by the Polish government. In addition to legislation and practices that restrict funding for certain NGOs, the government has fostered an environment that allows, enables, and even encourages discrimination against certain groups of people and specific kinds of activism. The result of these laws, reforms, and practices means the narrowing of “civic and political space,” especially for those who



oppose the government's nationalistic-conservative agenda or advocate for liberal, progressive causes.

Civic groups in Hungary and Poland have reacted to democratic backsliding and the related phenomenon of polarization. But the picture that emerges from both countries is mixed. To be sure, there are many NGOs that oppose the governments' actions and democratic backsliding, including the phenomenon of shrinking civic space (Moroska-Bonkiewicz & Domagała, 2023). As Móra mentions, however, on the other side of the polarized political spectrum, there are also many pro-governmental organizations that do support recent policies and thus not surprisingly have preferred status when it comes to the distribution of public funds for civil society and NGOs. At the same time, in both Hungary and Poland, there were more and more attempts among NGOs to build a broader network and international support for their efforts to counteract democratic backsliding and the erosion of the rule of law (Negri, 2020).

In 2020, we interviewed Péter Sárosi, executive director of the Hungarian Rights Reporter Foundation, on the problem of shrinking civic space in Hungary. He indicated that public support for liberal democracy was not strong, even before Orbán's government and Fidesz took power. Sárosi argues that the problem in Hungary is that

the people are expecting the decisions from the state; they don't really understand the concept of democratic participation in decisions. There is no culture of supporting civil society organizations, and people tend to expect strong leaders to manage things, which has long roots in Hungary.

This attitude, he believes, comes from state socialism. The persistence of this attitude is also paradoxical, given that Hungary was among the leaders of liberal-democratic transition that started in 1989 and there was a lot of support for civil liberties in the society before the communist regime collapsed.

Democratic decline in Hungary and Poland has also led to what Grzegorz Ekiert calls the "pillarization" of civil society, which weakens civil society's capacity to contribute to lasting democratic consolidation and democratic quality. Pillarization "is the vertical segregation of civil society into distinct compartments with limited interaction across a dividing boundary (religious, ethnic, political)" (Ekiert, 2021, p. 58). Pillarization tends to fuel social conflicts and political instability. As Ekiert (2021, p. 54) argues, it creates "a zero-sum vision of politics," leading to "political instability and electoral backlash against liberal values and the affiliated political forces," which benefits right-wing parties. This sharp ideological divide of the political elite into two camps (expressed by those in government and those in opposition) can also stimulate similar divisions in society, where political convictions are sorted into roughly two distinct camps, even if opinion is polarized only on a

few issues (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Bafumi & Shapiro, 2009). Elite polarization and social polarization can also occur at the same time, or they can be independent of each other. A central issue in recent studies of political polarization in CEE has been the relationship between elite polarization and social polarization, particularly to see if one is causing the other (Vegetti, 2019).

Some scholars see Hungary as one of the most polarized polities in Europe, stemming initially from the ideological polarization of political parties beginning in the late 1990s (Vegetti, 2019). It is also an example of the “entrenchment” of polarization, in which all dimensions of polarization reinforce themselves in the same direction (Vegetti, 2019). When polarization follows this pattern, we call politics “pillarized,” as like-minded groups become increasingly tightly connected within themselves and hostile to outside groups – a scenario that leads to conflict. The landscape of civil society and politics under Hungary’s Fidesz and Poland’s PiS has been that of a radical division into “tribes” of friends and enemies, supporters and opponents (Krekó et al., 2018). The first group includes civic groups, communities, and individuals who share the governing party’s conservative or anti-progressivist agenda, which is often focused on national values and a new anti-individualistic, sometimes openly anti-liberal rhetoric. Key questions are whether polarization from above can endure at the social level, and how do civil society actors react to it?

In both countries, the government’s extra-constitutional actions were given full support by the public media and private pro-government media outlets, which also helped delegitimize parliamentary opposition, labeling progressive, rights-based NGOs as enemies or traitors. In the case of these NGOs, the most radical measures were taken in Hungary with the so-called Stop Soros law which targets “foreign funding” received by NGOs, as well as criminally charging individuals and organizations involved in any migration-related activity. Consequently, NGOs receiving funds from abroad have been labeled as “agents of foreign influence” and are accused of being politically motivated. Some of them, including Móra’s HEPF, had their offices raided by police in 2014.

Despite these government actions, the voices of some independent NGOs, such as the Hungarian Helsinki Committee,<sup>10</sup> have been amplified, not only domestically but also abroad. A report published in 2014 by the Committee with three other well-established Hungarian NGOs contained a comprehensive assessment of the erosion of fundamental norms and values of a liberal-democratic order along four key dimensions: the rule of law, democratic principles and mechanisms, pluralism, and fundamental rights (Hungarian Helsinki Committee, 2014).

The impact of such civic initiatives which attract attention both domestically and abroad is even more crucial, given the country’s extreme political and social polarization. In addition, in both Hungary and Poland, we agree with

scholars who do not expect that external influences from non-Polish or non-Hungarian sources will have much of an effect or achieve much (Ploszka, 2020). Re-consolidating democracy in these countries without the will of those holding political office is most likely impossible as long as authoritarian and illiberal tendencies have significant support in society. Unfortunately, these dynamics may have a vicious cyclical pattern: Polish and Hungarian civil societies were not strong enough to oppose or reverse these trends when they first materialized, and once civil society organizations are weakened by institutional attacks, such a task becomes even more unrealistic. This suggests that the role of civil society in democracy needs serious rethinking.

While civil society alone cannot reconsolidate democracy, it may be better positioned to reduce polarization. Provoking polarization in society is a strategy used by political parties, especially those in power, to control narratives, distract from politicians' incompetence, vilify opponents, and keep supporters in a state of agitation, often through promoting a "culture war", moralizing rhetoric and division into, as Timothy Snyder (2017) puts it, two distinct "tribes with distinct worldviews, beholden to manipulations." Snyder argues that to counter this tendency, there is a need for more debates and dialogue directly and in person, rather than online, to reduce the echo chamber effect that drives tribalism. Recent research and civic projects indicate that in both Poland and Hungary, these divisions are not as deep as expected, and broad consensus among the Hungarian and Polish people about values and priorities is possible when they are given a chance and are willing to talk to one another (LSE Arena, 2021).

At the same time, some civic activists in Poland and Hungary perceive today's polarization and other difficulties as opportunities: to rethink their mission and strategies, to innovate, to become closer to target groups and to each other, to become independent and diversify funding, and to improve communication with people across the board. This is true of Móra, with her coalition-building efforts to defend the wider civil society space. Moreover, for those civic groups that benefit from state support of one pillarized camp on the spectrum, the situation can appear much more positive. We see this demonstrated in the optimistic views of a Polish patriotic association leader, Eugeniusz Gosiewski.

### **Eugeniusz Gosiewski – overcoming polarization in Poland**

Eugeniusz Gosiewski is a musician by training, but he has been actively involved in civil society in Poland for almost 30 years. Being a social activist has become his real passion, as well as his profession. Before 1989, he was a member of the Independent Students Association, which was created in 1980 as a student society linked with the Solidarity movement. The Odra-Niemen Association,<sup>11</sup> which he and his wife established in 2002, was a natural

result of his activity in Wspólnota Polska (Polish Community association) that supported Poles living abroad. Gosiewski was specifically involved in helping Polish people living in Belarus establish better economic and business cooperation with Polish businesses, and Odra-Niemen was originally set up to support Polish-Belarusian economic exchange. Things changed in 2009 with a project that aimed to support the community of the Polish Home Army (Armia Krajowa)<sup>12</sup> or World War II veterans still living in Belarus. Since then, Odra-Niemen has transformed to focus its activity on helping Poles living abroad in different ways, and especially veterans who are interested in taking care of Polish historical monuments and shaping patriotic values among young Polish people. This fresh start allowed Gosiewski to devote all his time to the work of the organization, and “to combine the hobby and the passion, so that it could at the same time be a job that allows to make a living.”

Odra-Niemen is perhaps the best example in Poland of an intergenerational group that “through patriotic actions” and values “connects people beyond divisions.” Over the years, this “traditional values” organization attracted almost 500 members as well as thousands of volunteers, including a large group of young people. For Gosiewski, the real story of this organization started in 2009 with the initiation of the campaign “Christmas parcels for the Polish Veterans in Eastern Borderlands.” Today called “Compatriots for Heroes,” this initiative takes place every year and involves educating people on Poland’s history, taking care of Polish graves and war cemeteries, monuments, and other places of national remembrance in places that were once Polish, as well as extensive cooperation with veterans’ societies in Poland and in territories that were once part of Poland. Its main symbol is still a parcel with gifts delivered to veterans before Christmas. So far, over 30,000 such parcels have been delivered. This action would not be possible without volunteers, working in several locations in Poland, as well as those who travel to Belarus, Ukraine, Latvia, or Lithuania. These volunteer efforts represent the desire to remember and honor Polish citizens who fought for Poland’s independence on these territories as Polish Army soldiers or serving in the armies of the allies during World War II. Many of these Polish soldiers voluntarily stayed in these territories after the war, while some were prisoners of war or prisoners of Nazi camps and Soviet gulags.

Since 2010, Gosiewski’s efforts have also been devoted to supporting other Polish communities<sup>13</sup> elsewhere in the world. He cooperates with students, youth, activists, educators, seniors, and NGOs on projects that are based on Polish history, patriotism, volunteering, as well as practical activities. And in recent years, another sphere of activity was established, called regranteeing projects. This approach allows the association to distribute public money to small organizations operating among the Polish diaspora and at the regional level to support civic activism by small organizations and informal groups in Lower Silesia. For Gosiewski, regranteeing is a natural way of supporting the

development of social organizations and strengthening cooperation between the regranting organization, in this case Odra-Niemen, and various formal and informal groups which not only receive funds but also technical know-how and can join projects and co-organize events.

In recent years, the Odra-Niemen Association has developed along with the needs of the growing Polish community abroad, and it now supports not only Poles living in Eastern Europe but also those living in Central and Western Europe, New Zealand, and the US. Its primary focus on Polish veteran communities has also transformed, with support extended to activists of the anti-communist opposition, members of the Solidarity movement, and all those who had a hand in fighting for Poland's independence, often risking their life, health, or career. Related to this is Odra-Niemen's involvement in education and building a sense of traditionally understood patriotism among young people, which Gosiewski sees not as something unfashionable but "a very important feature of every nation, every society." The Association has also worked hard on strengthening various social activities, building the third sector environment for all CSOs, helping other organizations and foundations, and thus contributing to the development of Poland's civic community.

It is not surprising that with such a wide spectrum of activities, Odra-Niemen, which is based in Wroclaw, needed to establish branches in other cities in Poland, as well as in Lviv, Ukraine (since there are many Polish people living there). There are nine such associated organizations that share many of the same goals. Over the years, the association's efforts have been well-received by those who benefited from them. In addition, its apolitical, patriotic efforts have contributed to the association's reputation, increasing support among the Polish population, attracting new members, and volunteers. For Gosiewski, Odra-Niemen is an association that seeks to create a supportive atmosphere for those who want to be active and who share its core values of "everyday patriotism." At the same time, it is also an organization where people can have very different opinions on political and social issues, as well as different personal attitudes and identities. This, as Gosiewski explains, makes it unique and resistant to the country's growing polarization. Odra-Niemen attracts many volunteers among young people who find its model of engagement with historical remembrance, contemporary history, and support for Poles living outside the borders appealing.

Gosiewski sees the problem of polarization in Poland mainly as a political issue, a top-down development for which political elites are largely responsible, with the media reinforcing the image of Poland's polarized society. As a result, polarization has become firmly established in the country; it "is very significant at the moment," and it obviously has an impact on public life. Gosiewski adds that one of its obvious consequences is the fact that discussion has disappeared. It is all but impossible to talk and engage in a productive dialogue

or conversation on various public issues, since there are more arguments than discussion. According to Gosiewski, “people do not seek reasoning, they do not listen to argumentation. It is something that sort of kills the possibility of doing important things together.” Even obvious topics that require social and political consensus such as public health or public security are affected by the lack of will to engage in a debate and compromise.

Gosiewski has no doubt that polarization also affects other social organizations since they often take sides in political disputes, and this polarizes their activities to some extent. The best remedy for this challenge, according to Gosiewski, is for Odra-Niemen to stay the course and try to remain apolitical, which is a different strategy from that taken by Móra and her association in Hungary. For Gosiewski, Odra-Niemen focuses on “a fundamental value-system that is unchangeable”; at the same time, it allows members and volunteers to discuss politics and have different opinions if they adhere to the norms of civility, do not offend others, or use methods of discussion that the organization considers unethical (like violence). Gosiewski argues that this apolitical strategy has succeeded for Odra Nieman:

A few years ago it was difficult for us to have a discussion with liberal organizations; these discussions were practically nonexistent. There were only arguments, insults, and avoidance of any real discussion. By contrast, we are currently being invited by various groups, including organizations that have very distant views from us – because we are seen as an authentic NGO which does not represent any political influence or any political ideology.

Cooperation can be possible when civil society actors realize that they all work within the same sector and, regardless of their views or activities, they all care about its condition and its development. Gosiewski asserts that he and his organization are

actively trying to minimize polarization. We try to encourage discussion in the civil sphere, to invite different people to this discussion, and to convince them that this apolitical approach is important, because this is probably the only way for the NGO environment to grow, develop and avoid polarization.

Gosiewski admits that this has not been an easy approach and it requires a lot of effort and work. While agreeing with Ekiert’s analysis of Poland’s pillarization of civil society, he sees the potential to gradually overcome these divisions and polarization through discussion within a framework of shared norms and concerns. He highlights ecology as a topic that both traditional and liberal organizations see as very important. For discussions and even

cooperation, Gosiewski argues that people only need to “disconnect from everyday politics.” When this happens, they can work together in different areas, if they respect their own civic activities and the activities of others. Gosiewski believes that the civic sector is not and should not be “a place of competition” but instead for cooperation. Gosiewski appeals to other social activists and organizations to focus on their social activities and to put politics aside: “politics should be dealt with by politicians, not with social activists.” In this formulation, he does not exclude advocacy organizations, which in his view should also be apolitical so that their work can be done on behalf of citizens at large.

### The faces of polarization

Like Móra and Gosiewski, many activists in the CEE region feel that citizens have little sense of shared community at the national level, especially on political issues. At the same time, there are many well-functioning neighborhood groups, religious organizations, parents’ councils, associations, and social initiatives that exist on the local level and have shared goals based on historical bonds and mutual respect. There is also a growing awareness among those who work in civil society that people can find a common ground more easily when space for dialogue is provided.

A few years ago, Wawrzyniec Smoczyński established The New Community Foundation,<sup>14</sup> which was a direct response to the problem of Poland’s polarization. As the Foundation’s website puts it, “Poland, like so many societies, is fractured. Fear and hatred have gripped the nation, polarizing communities, families and citizens.” Its goal and mission are to “reduce polarization and enable dialogue across divisions” so that Poles can “reclaim their sense of community.” The Foundation’s strategy, even if on a small scale, is to provide a platform for dialogue and honest conversation about what ideas they share and what they disagree about. The Foundation tries to achieve this by offering a platform called “community dialogues,” inviting people from various parts of the country who represent different belief systems, values, and attitudes to social and policy issues to participate. Although community dialogues are a new initiative, launched in 2021, they have already demonstrated that highly polarized groups can have productive conversation – if they are offered an appropriate opportunity and space to talk to each other. Dialogues have been organized on topics such as: how the media influences our perception of reality, legalizing same-sex marriage, the positive and negative roles of social media, and most recently, the meaning of Christmas.<sup>15</sup>

Much commentary today in Hungary and Poland focuses on the rise of right-wing groups, nationalism, nativism, anti-migration sentiment, populism, illiberalism, authoritarianism, and other terms that are all

somewhat interchangeably associated with a conservative drift in popular values.<sup>16</sup> However, the most interesting questions are: *how* do these various conservative groups define themselves and *how* do they perceive their civic goals and agendas? *What* precisely is civic in their civic engagement? As the term “civic” comes from Latin *civicus*, it certainly refers to that sphere of activity which is concerned with the sphere outside one’s household or family and with roles the people have as members of a political community. But in recent centuries, the term has also taken on the connotation of “civility” and that is a certain set of norms that are required for the public engagement of citizens (Ferguson, 2011).

Civil society, almost by definition, is supposed to be liberal, supporting freedoms and institutions that uphold an individual’s freedom of thought and association in the public sphere, and, if necessary, fighting against threats coming from illiberal groups, such as nationalist movements. There is however a significant difference between saying certain NGOs are conservative, patriotic, or even non-progressive and saying that they are uncivil. Today, Polish and Hungarian NGOs are divided along conservative/liberal lines, with conservative groups gaining more visibility under the Fidesz and Law and Justice governments, especially if they were pro-government. Not all these conservative groups and movements, however, should be associated with “the pushback against liberal-democratic norms” (Youngs & Shapovalova, 2018). Unlike insurgent conservative organizations, those who support traditional values such as patriotism, family, or faith do not engage politically and respect others’ preferences. Looking at Odra-Niemen, for example, we see an association that is focused on traditional values and patriotism that strongly supports civic freedom and democratic institutions, as well as independent and sustainable civil society. “Closing space” for activism occurs when ideological polarization in civil society is used by the government to support groups that are loyal and supportive of government policies and to stigmatize or limit NGOs that are critical of their policies.

In both Poland and Hungary, civil society has become weaker, not only because of government attacks on critical voices but also because of a widening gap within the civic sector itself. The first division is between anti- and pro-government organizations. The second division is between large, well-established, often capital city-based NGOs that historically held foreign funding (recently disrupted) and smaller, locally based NGOs that have little foreign funding.<sup>17</sup> In Hungary, these small organizations were affected more severely, because they lost the support of local government, upon which they depended for resources, while this did not happen in Poland. And thirdly, there is the division between progressive, liberal NGOs and conservative or more traditional groups in both countries. As Móra stresses, the existing divisions are further exacerbated by governmental rhetoric, which uses particularly strong language in Hungary, and which differentiates between



the “good” and the “bad” NGOs, often treating the “bad” ones as “foreign agents.” Despite these divisions, there are many attempts in both countries to address and combat polarization.

One final example from Poland is the first civic panel<sup>18</sup> on “energy poverty” that was organized by Jakub Wygnański and the Stocznia Foundation<sup>19</sup> in autumn 2022. Almost a hundred citizens from all over the country gathered in Warsaw to deliberate on the question: “how to counteract the problem of energy poverty in Poland?” Others could participate in local “citizens’ meetings on energy costs,” which were organized in 45 towns and cities and attracted almost 700 participants. People could also express their views via an online survey. Wygnański, a sociologist by training who spent over 30 years in the civic sector and created many mechanisms to strengthen social innovations and civic activism, sees the need to deliberate on public issues and to supplement citizens’ votes (in elections) with actual voice in public debates (Jędrzejczyk, 2022). “As citizens, we are not experts on policy issues,” but “we have the right to say what is right or just, and expressing such opinions is the essence of democracy,” explains Wygnański (Jędrzejczyk, 2022). This cannot be done if people are separated by polarized narratives and do not want to talk to each other. Deliberative innovations, such as civic panels, identify many issues that ordinary people can talk about regardless of their political preferences, opinion, and belief systems. More civic activists are trying to follow this route, designing specific strategies for civic mobilization to address polarization and allow people to talk to each other directly and to search for common ground.

There are similar initiatives in Hungary, often in the form of deliberative citizen juries or citizen assemblies (see Chapter 3). In 2022, a five-year Central Europe Civic Engagement Program<sup>20</sup> was initiated to support citizen engagement in public affairs through advocacy, collective action, representative and deliberative processes, principally at the local level. The program is implemented through partnership of the National Democratic Institute, DemNet in Hungary, and the Institute of Public Affairs in Poland. Observers of Hungarian civil society similarly see the potential for well-crafted public dialogue platforms to ameliorate the mistrust among citizens created by political polarization. As Veszna Wessenauer<sup>21</sup> argues, Hungarian society is characterized by a high level of polarization between groups with different political identities, which leads to an artificial “war-like atmosphere between supporters of different political camps.” Elite political actors use ideological divisions within society to help control and mobilize voters by depicting political opponents as the enemy. Similar to what we hear from activists in Poland, Wessenauer believes that “by creating innovative and appealing ways of participation and supporting citizens in finding ways to make their interests heard and better represented, polarization might start to decrease.”

## Challenges and the future

Despite polarization and pillarization, a lot of civic organizations in Poland and Hungary have found their own space to pursue their goals and overcome these artificial divisions. What is also similar and important is the awareness among NGO communities that they must deal with the situation of shrinking space themselves, working together and resisting the attacks and intimidation, as Móra emphasized. Activists in both countries stress that this problem cannot be solved from abroad, by foreign governments, the EU, foreign NGOs, or international courts.

Instead, more effective strategies can be created and implemented by local activists, and this includes coalition building and networking at home and abroad, and, above all, strengthening social trust in NGOs and making citizens aware of the role, mission, and purposes of civic activism. Average people must learn how important everyday activities and participation are for society's wellbeing and democracy. This requires that organizations are well-rooted in society and engaged with the public sphere, but it also requires working with local authorities wherever possible. Dividing civic groups into liberal and conservative does not help overcoming polarization; a more fruitful way is to think about common issues that what we call traditional and progressive CSOs may share. We are yet to see if the defeat of the PiS governing coalition in October 2023 Polish parliamentary election will lead to a re-opening of the public space for civil society actors no matter whether they stand for progressive or traditional values.

What we learn is that activists in these countries, but also elsewhere in CEE, see polarization as yet another challenge that also provides opportunities to act, despite existing divisions. For Móra in Hungary, the strategy has been to mobilize as broad a coalition of NGOs as possible for a political campaign to combat government restrictions. For Gosiewski in Poland, the strategy has been to build broad support for the values his organization stands for by avoiding politics and controversial issues. His apolitical strategy implies that civic activists can concentrate on issues that are important to people regardless of political divisions. Móra, on the other hand, does not believe that in the current circumstances in Hungary being apolitical is an option since everything has been politicized. These contrasting views on how to deal with polarization are likely rooted in their particular experiences and how they were affected by the government's attacks on civil society groups in recent years. Still others in CEE try to confront polarization in society head-on by designing conversations that address disagreements directly, like those organized by Wygnański to try to build bridges and social dialogue across the divides. All these strategies, which contain both participatory and deliberative components, are important for addressing polarization and the future of democracy not only in Hungary and Poland, but in other CEE countries as well.

## Notes

- 1 Cambridge Dictionary. (n.d.). *Polarization*. Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/polarization>
- 2 Heyes, C. (2020). *Identity Politics*. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity-politics/>
- 3 Ökotárs Alapítvány. (n.d.). <https://okotars.hu/en>
- 4 "Citizens, Equality, Rights, and Values programme." (n.d.). European Commission. <https://shorturl.at/kxRS4>
- 5 "Anti-government demo forms giant heart in Budapest." (2017, April 13). Euractiv. [www.euractiv.com/section/elections/news/anti-government-demo-forms-giant-heart-in-budapest/](http://www.euractiv.com/section/elections/news/anti-government-demo-forms-giant-heart-in-budapest/)
- 6 Reuters Staff. (2017, April 25). *Silent Protesters Block Hungarian Parliamentary Committee*. Reuters. [www.reuters.com/article/us-hungary-law-activists-idUSKBN17R1BJ](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-hungary-law-activists-idUSKBN17R1BJ)
- 7 Schultheis, S. (2017, July 4). *Veronika Móra: "Solidarity is a very strong force."* Heinrich Böll Stiftung. [www.boell.de/en/2017/07/24/veronika-mora-solidarity-very-strong-force](http://www.boell.de/en/2017/07/24/veronika-mora-solidarity-very-strong-force)
- 8 Fidesz. (n.d.). <https://fidesz-eu.hu/en/>
- 9 "Law and Justice." (n.d.). Prawo i Sprawiedliwość. <https://pis.org.pl/partia/law-and-justice>
- 10 Hungarian Helsinki Committee. (n.d.). <https://helsinki.hu/en/ukr/>
- 11 Odra-Niemen Association. (n.d.). Stowarzyszenie Odra-Niemen. <https://odranien.org/>
- 12 Utracka, K. (2019, December 4). *The Phenomenon of the Polish Underground State*. The Warsaw Institute Review. <https://warsawinstitute.org/phenomenon-polish-underground-state/>
- 13 "Polacy na świecie." (n.d.). Stowarzyszenie Odra-Niemen. <https://odranien.org/polacy-na-swiecie/>
- 14 "Depolarization." (n.d.). The New Community Foundation. [www.ncf.org.pl/](http://www.ncf.org.pl/)
- 15 Ten to twelve people who do not know each other meet for three hours and talk about a controversial or divisive issue. Participants have their own views, but the aim of the meeting is a facilitated conversation based on arguments rather than opinions. *Pismo* nr 59, 11/2022: [https://magazynpismo.pl/idee/osobista\\_historia/wawrzyniec-smoczynski-dajemy-glos-milczacej-wiekszosci?seo=pw](https://magazynpismo.pl/idee/osobista_historia/wawrzyniec-smoczynski-dajemy-glos-milczacej-wiekszosci?seo=pw) See also: [www.fnw.org.pl/dialogi](http://www.fnw.org.pl/dialogi)
- 16 Youngs, R., & Shapovalova, N. (2018). *The Mobilization of Conservative Civil Society*. Carnegie Europe, p. 8. <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2018/10/04/mobilization-of-conservative-civil-society-pub-77366>. The authors define conservative civil society as that which promotes any one or a combination of the following: conservative social values, religious values, strong national identities, exclusionary ethnic identities, traditional or customary identities and institutional forms, illiberal political ideology, or a curtailment of liberal personal rights. However, they do not assume that groups situating themselves under a collective banner of conservative civil society are all identical. Indeed, a core aim is to uncover the different varieties of conservative civil society that are ascendant across different countries and regions.

- 17 Open Society Foundation, EU, and various other international funding bodies and EEA grants in Poland are not available in Hungary. “No agreement reached on funding for Hungary,” <https://eeagrants.org/news/no-agreement-reached-fund-ing-hungary>.
- 18 “O panelu.” (n.d.). Narada Obywatelska. <https://naradaoenergii.pl/o-panelu/o-panelu/>
- 19 “About Shipyard.” (n.d.). Shipyard. <https://stocznia.org.pl/en/about-shipyard/>
- 20 “Central Europe Civic Engagement Program (2022–2027).” (2023, January 31). DemNet. <https://demnet.hu/en/projektek/cecep-civil-reszvetel/>
- 21 Wessenauer, V. (2018, January 29). *4 Ideas to Overcome Polarization in Hungary*. Dpart. <https://dpart.org/4-ideas-to-overcome-polarization-in-hungary/>.

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