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Civil Society Capture by Early Stage Autocrats in Well-Developed Democracies – The Case of Austria

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Abstract:

The article presents the results of an empirical study on the current framework conditions for civil society organizations in Austria. The results are linked to findings on how authoritarian governments deal with civil society. The research shows that along with the current government's gradual process towards right-wing populism and authoritarianism, the general political climate has changed with regard to civil society, possibilities of political participation, and the public financing of civil society organizations. The findings are linked to the concept of civil society capture and reflect the overall wave of autocratization discussed by other authors. The analysis of the gradual process of the development of authoritarian politics in a relatively stable and developed democracy reveals the relevance of the findings for current tendencies in many other countries.

Keywords: civil society capture, authoritarian politics, populist politics, repression, participation

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1 Introduction

Authoritarian regimes rarely tend to emerge through military coups or other forms of massive violence, but rather in a creeping process of often small steps. In this process, critical civil society and independent civil society organizations (CSOs) are often among the first targets of authoritarian parties and governments. The question posed in this paper is how right-wing populist governments treat civil society and if their politics can be characterized as authoritarian. The theoretical basis is the model of civil society capture. With a focus on civil society, the model describes the process towards authoritarian regimes and postulates understanding the populist modification of civil society as an indicator for autocratization (Moder and Pranzl 2019).

The paper uses empirical data from an investigation in Austria to illustrate the hypothesis that right-wing populist parties tend to pursue authoritarian policies by restricting the potential scope of action of critical segments of civil society. Austria was ruled by a right-wing populist coalition from 2017 to 2019. This paper examines how the framework conditions for civil society organizations changed during this period, thereby illustrating the model of civil society capture for developed democracies. The findings from a study conducted in 2019 are compared with the findings from a study conducted in 2014.

Civil society's contributions to democracy, trust and social welfare can best be realized under adequate political framework conditions. A current study in eight European countries shows that CSOs are significantly more resilient when there are favourable conditions and cooperation with the state in the respective country is good (Pape et al. 2019). Apart from general civil rights, opportunities for participation in legislative procedures, the government's information policy, the quality of the welfare state and public financial support for civil society organizations play an important role. As populist and right-wing governments are gaining influence in many countries, the conclusions of this paper should be of interest beyond the specific case.

The paper is organized as follows: First, it introduces the theoretical background, the country-specific context and the methodology. Based on that, it presents the findings, and relates them to the current discussion.

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2 Theoretical Background: The Crisis of Liberal Democracies and Consequences for Civil Society

At present, the framework conditions for civil society are becoming harsher in many countries. Already in the last decade, the privatization of social tasks has led to an overall erosion of social stability (Zimmer 2014). The tension between mission and market (Sanders 2015) seems to be increasingly dissolving in favour of market logic. Organizations oriented towards the common good are increasingly met with scepticism (Greiling 2014). As right-wing populist parties gain power, this situation is undergoing a new turn in many countries: civil society participation is being restricted politically.

The model of liberal, representative democracy is in crisis worldwide (Ágh 2015; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Mounk 2018; Schmitter 2015; Urbinati 2016). Numerous indicators of democracy and democratization have been declining for about a decade. The influential “Freedom in the World” Index of the US organization Freedom House, for example, reported in 2019 for the twelfth year in a row a deterioration of the global democratic situation (Freedom House 2008, 2019). Even in the consolidated democracies of Western Europe and North America, a marked decline in confidence in political institutions and political participation is being observed (IDEA 2018).

One aspect of the crisis is the rise of (right-wing) populist parties and increasingly authoritarian governments that undermine democratic institutions and try to restrict civil rights. We find semi-authoritarian politics in post-socialist countries (Kover 2015; Krasztev and van Til 2015), but increasingly also in Western democracies such as France, Germany, Sweden, Norway, Switzerland, Austria (Meyer 2016) and the United States (Eikenberry 2019). The clarity of this trend has prompted researchers to speak of a “democratic rollback” (Diamond 2008), “democratic backsliding” (Bermeo 2016), or even a “third wave of autocratization” (Lührmann and Lindberg 2018). At the latest, since the election of Donald Trump to US President in 2016, the debate about the current “crisis of democracy” has also arrived in the media and public discourse. The International Center for Not-for-Profit Law report “Closing Civic Space” on shrinking civic space gives a good overview of the legal restrictions on civil society and shows, with focus on CSOs in critical development work, that an increasing number of CSOs are faced with restrictions to fully exercising their internationally protected rights (International_Center_for_Not-for-Profit_Law 2016).

The terms “populism” and “autocracy” or “authoritarianism” are often used together and sometimes even synonymously (Freedom House 2008; Mounk 2018). This paper uses the terms as follows:

Populism is defined as politics that appeal to simple, archaic forms of identification such as “the people” (Mouffe 2005) by rhetorically dividing society between the people and its other, suggesting simplified solutions (Panizza 2005). The term “right-wing populism” refers to populism that is ethically, religiously or nationally exclusive (Pelinka 2013). Authoritarianism is understood as anti-democratic, illiberal politics with a substantial de-facto decline of core institutional requirements for electoral democracy, with fewer opportunities for opposition (Lührmann and Lindberg 2018), and with a dominance of the government over most segments of society (Bozóki 2015). There is systematic evidence that contemporary autocracies are typically electoral autocracies (Cassani 2017); they come to power legally by democratic elections and “mainly use legal and gradual strategies to undermine democracies” (Lührmann and Lindberg 2018, 23).

Right-wing populism and authoritarianism are related. Many authors stress the anti-pluralistic character of right-wing populism (Mudde 2004; Müller 2017; Urbinati 2016) and thus its proximity to autocratic procedures (Weyland 2018). Levitsky argues that populism is a major catalyst for the emergence of authoritarian politics (Levitsky and Loxton 2013). Yet, many empirical studies refer to instable democracies, for instance, in Latin America. Although global comparative data show a strong empirical link between the rise of populism and an increase in democratic backsliding (Kyle and Mounk 2018), the relationship of populism and authoritarianism in established democracies with strong institutions remains blurry.

Common features of right-wing populist parties are not only nationalism and racism (Loch and Norocel 2015), they also combine ethno-nationalist xenophobia with anti-political-establishment populism (Rydgren 2005). Problematic aspects are attempts to destabilize institutions, the adoption of aggressive narratives and attitudes, and attempts to weaken all forms of protest and critique. Often, they go along with distinct anti-welfare social policies (Bozóki 2015).

Regarding the relationship between authoritarianism and civil society, there is evidence that modern forms of authoritarianism not only secure their power through censoring and harassing the media, restricting political opponents and undermining the autonomy of election administration bodies, but also by restricting civil society (Lührmann and Lindberg 2018, 8). Scholarly work shows that authoritarian regimes use complex methods to strategically influence, control and incorporate civil society (Froissart 2014; Gilbert and Mohseni 2018; Greskovits 2015), arguing that they try to usurp the autonomy of the civil sphere (Gerő and Kopper 2013) or to capture it (Kover 2015).

In the development of authoritarian regimes, civil society is usually one of the first targets. Restrictions of political rights and civil liberties are often among the first actions of populist-autocratic governments (Cassani and Tomini 2019). In the development process of authoritarian regimes, strategies towards civil society usually take place in different steps. First, discourse and narratives attempt to delegitimize those parts of civil society that are critical of the government. To do this, right-wing populist parties do not need to be in government already. The popularization of polarizing and delegitimizing narratives serves as an essential contribution to the preparation of a political turnaround in their favour. The discourse of “us” and “them”, followed by systematic attacks is a clear symptom for polarization that characterizes populist strategies. Besides restrictions for critical organizations, autocratic governments often establish and support networks of CSOs, which share their basic values (Kover 2015). Second, participation in legislation and political debates is restricted, which is the first manifestation of the implementation of authoritarian practices. Third, this is followed by changes at policy level, in the course of which public funds are channelled along a polarization line from “good” to “bad” civil society, and away from politically independent to dependent CSOs. Civil society is highly vulnerable especially in countries where CSOs are financially dependent on government funding (Van Til 2015). Fourth, the legal framework conditions are changed, in particular, civic rights are restricted. This process is described as civil society capture. Populists and early stage autocrats thus limit public contestation by restricting liberal and pluralist CSO’s activities, on the one hand, while simultaneously fostering CSOs that represent the populists’ understanding of a loyal civil society (Moder and Pranzl 2019, 10).

Hungary’s government under Viktor Orbán, for example, not only massively restricted the independent press, but also made the framework conditions for certain CSOs considerably more difficult. For example, organizations that receive funding from foreign institutions must register officially, which could potentially lead to further restrictions. At the same time, the ruling Fidesz Party systematically built up “civic circles”, which in a sense represent a loyal “civil society from the right” (Greskovits 2017). Civil society is captured both by the state and the church (Kover 2015). Similar trends can be seen to varying degrees in numerous other countries ruled by populists and autocrats. The Turkish government, for example, specifically promoted organizations supporting the government agenda in the field of women’s work, while the critical part of civil society was undermined (Doyle 2016, 2017). In Russia, foreign-financed and/or politically active CSOs are also affected by an increasingly restrictive legal situation (Cheskin and March 2015). In a strategy of “civilized oppression”, the state’s policy towards civil society is dual. Besides repression of activists, authorities institutionalized co-operation with some CSOs. Combined with an increasing use of administrative and legal procedures for controlling CSOs, this strategy has led to a growing depoliticization (Daucé 2014).

Research shows that the relationship of authoritarian regimes and contestation is complex. In part, illiberal regimes do not only repress critique, sometimes they adopt to protest with strategically set frameworks: “Authoritarian governments set the rules of the game, which are – consciously or not – accepted by activists who are not aiming at radical regime change anymore.” (Froissart 2014, 220). Certainly, a common, and inherent feature of populist strategies is the polarization of civil society, i. e. the construction of two antagonistic (civil) social groups; aimed at delegitimizing political opponents and strengthening one’s own claim to power as the “true representatives” of the people (Mudde 2004; Müller 2017). There is evidence that polarization plays an important role in justifying authoritarian measures (Levitsky 2017).

3 Context and Methodology

In Austria, in recent years, there has been a turbulent development with regard to politics and civil society. Following an increase in civil society involvement in the refugee crisis (Simsa 2017), polarization arose around this issue. The tendency towards xenophobia had increased since the 1990s (Wallace 2003), but has now intensified even more. Immigration and security dominated the political discussion. The 2017 National Council election led to a coalition between the conservatives (ÖVP) and the right-wing national conservatives (FPÖ). Both parties had launched a polarizing election campaign strongly focused on the refugee issue. The country has a strong social-democratic tradition. After the Second World War, there were only a few periods without the participation of the Social Democratic Party in government. From 1966 to 1970 there was an exclusively conservative government, and from 2000 to 2006 there were two coalition governments of conservatives and right-wing nationalists. Nevertheless, right-wing populism has a long tradition in Austria, with the FPÖ party having right-wing extremist roots (Pelinka 2019). After the Social Democratic Party had supported neoliberal policies for decades, causing it to largely lose its ideology as well as its core electorate, the refugee crisis intensified xenophobic tendencies and there was a clear shift to right-wing populist parties by 2015, culminating in the coalition of ÖVP and FPÖ in 2017.

Based on the definitions above, this coalition can be characterized as right-wing populist. It presented simple solutions to all kinds of classic social and economic problems, primarily by linking them to the asylum issue. It represented exclusive concepts of solidarity (Hofmann et al. 2019), and “national” became the political primacy. Society was polarized between good (autochthonous) and bad (immigrant) parts. Furthermore, an “anti-elite rhetoric” dominated (Pelinka 2019).¹ With the focus on civil society, the analysis will show that the government also developed clear authoritarian strategies.

Traditionally, CSOs and civil society have been a vital part of Austria, with more than 122,000 CSOs providing welfare services, engaging in advocacy and strengthening community-building (Neumayr et al. 2017). Social movements, particularly workers’, women’s and environmental movements have long traditions, yet, in the last decades they did not act very provocatively – generally the country may be characterized as a consensus democracy (Dolezal and Hutter 2007). In connection with the refugee crisis of 2015, there was a rise in political civil society activism (Simsa et al. 2018). The political framework conditions for civil society organisations in Austria have traditionally been comparatively good. CSOs are valued as an important part of welfare state arrangements, there was a high degree of social stability and quite good relations between government and CSOs (More-Hollerweger et al. 2014). Civic engagement may be assessed as high in Austria. Almost half of the population (46 %) does some kind of volunteer work (Neumayr et al. 2017). About 5% of Austria’s paid workforce is employed in the sector. At over 50 %, public funding accounts for the most relevant share of revenue of the sector (Pennerstorfer, Schneider, and Badelt 2013), many CSOs receive a large share of their income from public sources and provide social services in return.

The present study uses several sources of data. Firstly, literature and document analyses formed the methodological basis. Secondly, between August 2018 and February 2019, a total of 53 interviews were conducted with 8 experts and 45 representatives of CSOs. Experts were lawyers and scholars of the field. The representatives come from various fields of activity; 21 come from the social sector, 9 from the advocacy sector, 8 from arts and culture, 3 from environment work, 3 from the representation-of-interests, 2 from the religions sector, 1 from education and 1 from sports. Representatives of the CSOs were all managers. 15 respondents were managers in umbrella organisations and were therefore able to give an overview of the entire area. The sample consisted of 25 men and 28 women. 42 interviews were transcribed and coded according to key terms.

Thirdly, in February 2019, 310 CSO executives participated in a quantitative survey on changes in resources, the climate and the legal situation. Fourthly, in March 2019, a representative survey on the perception of non-profit organizations in the population was commissioned. The results achieved were discussed and reviewed in two focus groups with altogether 34 CSO representatives. The investigation is an update of the Civil Society Index conducted in 2014 (More-Hollerweger et al. 2014), therefore, current changes can also be analysed.

Both quantitative surveys widely support the findings from the in-depth qualitative investigation. In the focus groups, the validity of the findings and strategies for civil society were discussed, but they did not add much new information. Therefore, the presentation of the findings will refer mainly to findings from the interviews; references to the quantitative surveys will be explicitly marked as such.

4 Findings

In the following, the findings will be presented by applying the model of civil society capture, which postulates four basic steps in the development of authoritarian governments in relatively developed democracies. The first step is the deliberate change of narratives, followed by financial restrictions for critical parts of civil society, by financial restrictions for critical CSOs and by changes to the legal framework.

4.1 Narrative Attempts to Delegitimize Critical Civil Society – “Climatically, It’s an Eruption.” (E39)

As suggested by the model of civil society capture, a clear polarization of discourse can be observed between 2014 and 2019. The delegitimization of civil society action takes place through the devaluation of its activities, and also the increase in a generally negative, exclusionary rhetoric: *“These expressions are used like NGO-madness in the Mediterranean, (...) asylum industry (...). A certain enemy image of civil society organizations is being built up.”* (R07) There is a constant devaluation of certain civil society organizations, especially those that deal with vulnerable target groups. Also, their clientele is deprecated as “cheaters”, “asylum fraudsters” etc. A frequent allegation is that CSOs only work for their own (profit) interest.

The concept of public benefit organizations is under pressure. “Helping isn’t at all cool anymore” (R17). This goes hand in hand with the polarization of civil society into a desirable and an undesirable part: *“There are suddenly the good and the bad in civil society”* (R07). From the perspective of the respondents, the basic consensus on the importance of civil society seems to be eroding: *“There was a basic consensus that we need this civil society.*

It's an important corrective. (...) I no longer see this basic consensus in this form." (R29) The population only partly shares this view. In the representative survey, 81 % (2014: 88 %) attribute a high social value to CSOs. What is remarkable, however, is the significant decline in this assessment among younger people up to 29 years, of whom only 68 % still attach high or very high importance to CSOs (2014: 92 %). However, a large proportion of all respondents take a critical view of CSOs, with 45 % agreeing with the statement that CSOs "have generally lost their reputation recently" and that 20 % believe that NPOs "only serve to enrich themselves by the suffering of others" (not surveyed in 2014).

The devaluation of civil society is systematically carried out by representatives of the two coalition parties and is taken up and reinforced by a large part of the media. Further, CSOs and their representatives are more frequently attacked directly by the government. The nature and severity of these attacks is new and is perceived as a breach of taboo:

The verbal attacks have already become harsher (...) when Kurz (the Chancellor) moves Doctors Without Frontiers in the direction of illegal refugee helpers. This was unthinkable in the Second Republic (...). And this is really a taboo break, I think, because (...) this is the Federal Chancellor who legitimizes this (...) the attacks on the non-profit sector or some of the organizations are getting harder. (R38)

There are also attempts to personally intimidate CSO representatives by the government and the administration by threatening telephone calls, but also of legal action against CSO representatives. These are nothing fundamentally new, but, according to interviewees, have a different, more hostile character than in the past. Taken together, clear strategies towards polarization of (civil) society are evident.

4.2 Restriction of Participation – "We are at the Beginning of a Massive Shift Towards a Democracy without Participation, Without Inclusion." (R10)

Also, the second step of the model of civil society capture, the restriction of participation, is reported unanimously by interview partners. Austria traditionally has had good relationships between civil society and politics (Neumayr et al. 2017; Pennerstorfer, Schneider, and Badelt 2013). CSOs have engaged in dialogue with the government in many areas and have often been involved in legislative processes. Even in the past, participation was not satisfactory for the CSOs, but with the new government there was a clear deterioration in the relationship between civil society and politics. All respondents noticed a reduction in opportunities for participation in political decision-making processes: *"So the government is now not interested in participation, cooperation or exchange. (...) it is a completely different style, where a small group makes the central decisions and everything else is completely insignificant."* (E38)

CSOs are largely and systematically excluded from legislative processes, there is hardly any dialogue between CSOs and the federal government or individual ministries: *"No participation, no involvement, we only learn many things from the media."* (R05) CSOs describe politics as increasingly authoritarian. A clear change is seen in the practice of shorter legislative procedures, which leave little time for comments. *"Deadlines which were previously customary (...) are no longer observed or no longer taken into account."* (R16) The review periods are set very short, often over public holidays, and the motions for bills leave no room for discussion. The aim is obviously to push through laws with little resistance, to get decisions *"pushed through as quickly as possible. And there are as few counter-statements as possible."* (R16) Specifically, regarding controversial topics, attention is *"kept as low as possible, to give as little time as possible to organize broader resistance."* (R09)

Further, the lack of contact persons in politics is often criticised. In the past, CSOs often had direct contacts with ministries, appointments with ministers were possible and public hearings took place. Currently, representatives of politics avoid any direct exchange with civil society. Politics has become less transparent and it hardly communicates with civil society actors any more. Almost all respondents report something similar on this point: *"They don't talk to us. They won't talk to us. That's the new thing. Until now, I've always had the feeling you can still talk to someone."* (R03)

The large number of similar feedbacks reveals a systematic strategy to exclude civil society from political decisions. Most respondents report that CSOs are rarely given attention anymore, that it is often extremely difficult to maintain a dialogue. They simply don't get answers. Often *"there are actually no reactions"* (R04), you have to *"call for months"* (R20) or you get answers *"which are incorrect"* (R29). And this happens *"across the sector, whether it's the environment, or culture"* (R07).

4.3 Cuts in Funding for Critical CSOs – “and This is Actually Starvation. A Systematic Starvation of Institutions.” (R18)

Austria's civil society sector is predominantly funded by public sources: 50 % of the sector's income is derived from contracts with public authorities, while another 17 % comes from public subsidies (More-Hollerweger et al. 2014; Pennerstorfer, Schneider, and Reitzinger 2015). The fields of healthcare, social services, culture, research and development are specifically dependent on public funding sources. Regarding changes in the period investigated, there are no reliable quantitative data on changes in funding to date. According to the (non-representative) quantitative survey of CSO managers of our study, not much had changed regarding the total amount of public funding of CSOs. Overall and in particular by international comparison, the financial situation of most CSOs in Austria is relatively stable.

However, a detailed analysis shows that there are severe changes in funding that obviously affect critical and diversity-oriented CSOs. Particularly in the areas of migration, arts, women, labour market and development policy, these CSOs have experienced existentially threatening restrictions to public funding. A representative of labour market organizations describes this: *“This is already the second year of cuts. (...) now you can see how the organizations are starting to close down.”* (R04)

Massive cuts in the women's sector, which primarily affect autonomous, critical and feminist institutions, are described as an *“ideological reconstruction”* (R14) and as brutal: *“This is something new. Well, I don't think we've ever experienced such brutality before.”* (R23) Dramatic, existentially threatening cuts also affect critical CSOs in the field of development education:

There are cuts (...) that affect some organizations (...) that simply can no longer continue. (...) many cuts are in the so-called development education sector, i. e. in domestic work. It is traditionally rather critical and the cuts are not erratic there. (R21)

In refugee and asylum policy, only part of the severe cuts can be explained by the decline in asylum applications, and in many cases, the care and integration of migrants is also affected, for example, as regards the integration year, apprenticeship training and language teaching. Here, too, a systematic process is observed: *“Massive breaks (...) in the refugee area, massive in legal advice, massive in integration measures. That is their central intention: We don't want any refugees (...) we actually don't want integration at all.”* (R10)

With these cuts, or even their threat, the aim is to prevent criticism:

This is, so to speak, a lever, so how do I take the money from them, how do I cut it, so that I silence these voices (...) either because I cut them completely off or they no longer exist, or because, under threat of cuts, I silence them. (R09)

Although there are thus far no clear quantitative data on systematic changes in funding, the qualitative analysis points to systematic cuts in those areas that belong to the parts of civil society that are characterized as “evil” in the polarizing narratives of the populist parties. These are actors that are critical to government or active in disliked fields of activity, such as immigration, feminism, critical art, and that overall do not fit into the dominant ideology. The strong ideological orientation of funding cuts is new. With regard to funding from the public sector, the 2014 survey found that financial conditions were made more difficult, such as a lack of index adjustments, a lack of planning security or excessive bureaucracy, but no systematic discrimination against critical organisations (More-Hollerweger et al. 2014). Another facet that is characteristic is the existential character of ideologically motivated funding cuts; although some of the cuts were not so dramatic in quantitative terms, for the affected CSOs they were critical for their survival.

4.4 Changes in Legal Framework – “Regarding Freedom of Assembly, The Restrictions are Obvious ...” (R20)

The fourth step postulated by the model of civil society capture are restrictions to civil rights. Generally, fundamental rights are well developed in Austria by international standards (Freedom House 2014; More-Hollerweger et al. 2014). However, the freedom of assembly has been restricted in recent years, particularly by the extension of the notification period for assemblies and the establishment of so-called protected zones. The indirect effects in practice on the exercise of fundamental rights are increased bureaucracy and restricted legal certainty:

Regarding the freedom of assembly (...) that the fact that you now have to register earlier. (...) you can tell it's getting tighter. (...) with it we are much better verifiable or handy. Or it's easier to intervene and say you can't. (R16).

Overall, the legal framework did not change significantly during the period under review. However, interviewees reported a tendency towards a more unfavourable application of current laws. Furthermore, CSOs are also indirectly affected by the stricter legislation applicable to their clients, for example, in immigration and social law.

5 Impact on Civil Society

These policies created pressure and polarization, and many interviewees report significantly increased workloads (e. g. for correcting false reports, dealing with court reports, obtaining information, fund-raising). The CSOs experience polarization in the population, in politics and the media. It requires a greater effort to justify social work due to the dogma that the needy are to blame themselves. The effects on civil society are often uncertainty and increased personal pressure: *“But in principle there is already a climate of fear in all kinds of situations, of no longer saying these things. Yes, fear, insecurity and just a big insecurity overall.”* (R16) Employees of the CSOs are affected by this. For some, the changes in the climate are partially delegitimizing their work, lowering the attractiveness of their profession and adding personal burdens. Employees who a few years ago were proud of their work are criticised as “do-gooders”: *“You need a certain mindset, because you don’t want to lose your nerve. And all those who are a little vulnerable (...) they start to look around for something else.”* (R04) According to respondents, attacks in the social media have also become worse in recent times. *“It also occupies us (...) and of course it also hurts and it hurts when you read something like that.”* (R05) In order not to expose themselves to hatred in social media, some people, often women, withdraw from digital communication channels.

The reactions of civil society to the current situation are manifold. The spectrum ranges from defensive behaviour, such as waiting, being inconspicuous and *endurance*, to new forms of resistance, pro-active work on alternative narratives, and increased solidarity. Some CSOs see the changed climate as a phase that needs to be survived as undamaged as possible. This implies to spare one’s own strength, to wait and see, and to preserve what already exists. As a precaution, demonstrations, for example, are not advertised or less criticism is levelled at the government. However, many interviewees report a strengthening of solidarity, a new *“fighting spirit”* and new mobilizations expressed in creative forms of protest. Civil society has *“grown together”* in a common struggle for democracy: *“I have the impression that actors who would otherwise not express themselves so strongly politically are increasingly saying that borders have been crossed here. This is where I have to speak.”* (R45) In response to the verbal delegitimization of civil society and its clients, respondents see the need to establish positive counter-narratives: *“I believe that it is of crucial importance to hear some other narratives (...) how do we want change, how do we want to live together, how can a society be that does not polarize.”* (R10) Many also emphasize the importance of criticism and resistance: *“The most important thing is not to remain silent, the most important thing is to continue (...) this civil disobedience.”* (R34)

6 Conclusion and Discussion

This paper analyses how right-wing populist governments treat civil society. It builds on the model of civil society capture that argues that restrictions to critical civil society by right-wing populist governments reflect a process of autocratization. There is evidence for the relation of right-wing populism to authoritarianism (Weyland 2018). Literature further shows that a crucial aspect of authoritarian politics are restrictions on critical civil society (Lührmann and Lindberg 2018).

Nevertheless, most empirical evidence of how authoritarian regimes treat civil society refers to unstable democracies (Levitsky 2017). Thus far, the facets of early state authoritarianism and its effects on civil society in well-developed democracies are an under-researched, yet currently highly important topic. The model of civil society capture argues that in the process of the development of authoritarian governments, civil society faces delegitimization, restrictions to participation, politically motivated cuts in funding for critical and independent organizations, and ultimately, restrictions to fundamental civic rights.

Based on data from 2018 and their comparison with a civil society index study from 2014, the paper empirically analyses changes in the framework conditions of civil society in Austria. The country has a well-developed democracy with traditionally strong links between civil society and the government, and relatively high levels of civil society participation. From the end of 2017 to May 2019, Austria was ruled by a coalition government that can be characterized as right-wing populist. The findings correspond to the patterns of civil society capture known from literature. Specifically, the rhetoric polarization between the good and the bad segments of society as well as drastic restrictions to political participation are all very clear. Further, cuts in public funding took place immediately after the government came to power. They were not dramatic in absolute terms, but posed

an existential threat to many critical organizations and led to general fear in the sector. All of these changes can be interpreted as indicators of “autocratization”. In this development towards authoritarian politics, “populists and early-stage autocrats are keeping a democratic façade while seriously undermining democratic principles.” (Moder and Pranzl 2019, 10) Regarding changes in the legal environment, the assumptions underlying the model of civil society capture are not clearly observable. The strengthening and functionalization of parts of civil society that agree with the government (Van Til 2015) could also not yet be observed. This might be an effect of the short duration of the respective government. In 2019, the coalition was suspended after only 1.5 years due to a severe scandal. This is in line with global data that show that populists often leave office early and under dramatic circumstances (Kyle and Mounk 2018). Nevertheless, taken together, as seen in countries that are more advanced in the process of autocratization (Bozóki 2015), immediately after taking office, the government began to deconstruct democratic structures. Civil society was not the only sphere of society affected.

As there is currently a rise of right-wing populist politics in many well-developed countries, these findings may be of significance beyond the investigated case. Nevertheless, it must be taken into account that the steps of civil society capture described are highly dependent on contextual factors such as the country’s history, traditions of civil society and the respective welfare model in place. Literature shows that there are various, increasingly hybrid manifestations of authoritarianism, which cannot be defined by an “overconcentration of power and authority in the hands of a single party anymore, but rather by a subtle coexistence of elements of democracy and authoritarianism” (Froissart 2014, 222). There are manifold ways of channeling contestation towards largely de-politicized forms of participation (Geoffroy 2014). The paper contributes to our knowledge about these forms of capturing civil societies by early stage autocrats in one specific situation. Thus, research on the various and often subtle forms of civil society capture in other democratic countries would complete the empirical picture and give us more information on how the process of autocratization is working in different contexts.

Notes

- 1 <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/interview-populismusforscher-oesterreich-sollte-eine-warnung-fuer-deutschland-sein-1.3711357>, accessed on 4.1.2019.
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