Changing Civic Spaces in the Light of Authoritarian Elements of Politics and the Covid Crisis – The Case of Austria

Abstract: The paper analyzes changing civic spaces in Austrian civil society. Different levels of authoritarian politics in different phases of the last 8 years – the recent phase intertwined with the Covid-19 crisis – are analysed in terms of their impact on civil society frameworks. Empirically, the paper draws on three studies completed in 2014, 2019 and 2021. The results shed light on the complex interplay between civil society and the government. Specifically, they show the steps towards authoritarian governing of early state autocrats related to civil society, in particular the often-unspectacular elements that together form a clear pattern of civil society capture and changing civic spaces. Further, they show both the vulnerability of civil society regarding framework conditions – e.g. posed by the pandemic – and politics but also its strategies of resilience.

Keywords: shrinking spaces, civil society capture, covid-pandemic, civil society, participation

1 Introduction

In the following, we will analyse developments of conditions for the Austrian civil society with a focus on changing civic spaces and give insight into the impact of state-civil society relations under changing context conditions. The research question is how early stage authoritarian governments influence the space for civil society in well-developed democracies and how this process develops when conditions for society change.

The effects of authoritarian regimes on civil society are comparatively well analysed. Yet, we do not know much about the strategies of early state autocrats in well-developed democracies on civil society. Data suggest that in countries that are commonly not seen as authoritarian, a often gradual erosion of civil society space

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is also taking place (Anheier, Lang, and Toepler 2019). Further, scholars are just beginning to analyse consequences of other framework conditions such as the Covid-19 crises on civil society. This paper shall contribute to fill these gaps by presenting a 3-stage research on the situation of the Austrian civil society. Theoretically, the analysis is based on the concepts of shrinking and changing civic spaces. Civic space is understood as a “(...) space to organize, to operate, to have a legitimate voice, to protest and to dissent.” (Hayes et al. 2017, p. 3)

In Austria, the socio-economic and historic framework is comparatively stable. Traditionally, CSOs and civil society have been a vital part of Austria’s society and welfare state. With its more recent developments, Austria offers a good illustration of the interplay between civil society and politics because the country has experienced disruptive changes in the political landscape. After decades of relatively good cooperation of politics with many CSOs, from 2017 to 2019, a right-wing populist government brought about massive changes in the social climate, in civil society’s political participation, and in the economic situation of critical organizations critical of the government. Since 2020, a new government of the conservatives and the Green Party has been in power. Further, the Covid-19 crisis had severe effects on the civil society.

In the following, we will describe the context, the theoretical background and the methods. Based on that, the effects of a right-wing populist government and those of both the following coalition and the pandemic will be analysed. The paper concludes with a discussion and limitations.

2 The Context – Situation of Civil Society and Political Developments in Austria

CSOs in Austria have traditionally been deeply involved in political decision-making and welfare state arrangements. They have engaged in dialogue with the government and have often been involved in legislative processes. Further, they provide social services and receive large shares of their funding from public sources. The Austrian nonprofit sector derives almost 50% of its income from service contracts with public authorities, another 17% comes from public subsidies (Bogorin, More-Hollerweger, and Simsa 2019). CSOs are particularly active in social services, health care and education. Generally, the country had been characterized as a consensus democracy (Dolezal and Hutter 2007).

The Austrian legislative framework is quite favourable for CSOs. In the Rule of Law Index, Austria ranks eighth out of 113 countries in the overall score (World Justice Project 2018). However, this was one place lower than in the
previous assessment in 2016 (Bogorin, More-Hollerweger, and Simsa 2019). In the following, we will describe the development of contextual changes for CSOs with reference to the three empirical studies.

A study conducted in 2014 is the starting point of the analysis. It highlights the stable social situation, much in line with the long-term tradition of the country. The country was ruled by a coalition of the socialist (SPÖ) and the conservative party (ÖVP). Yet, as in other European countries, the conditions for civil society organizations had deteriorated. Besides a shift towards more neoliberal ideologies (Zimmer and Simsa 2014), there has been a slight decrease in public funding (Pape et al. 2019). Public funding had become more unstable. Other problems were slight legal restrictions of civil society activism and the high media concentration. Nevertheless, CIVICUS rated the country as open democracy.

Another study in 2019 showed a major change, due to a right-wing populist coalition of the conservatives and the right-wing national party (FPÖ) that started in 2017. Both parties had run a polarizing election campaign strongly focused on the refugee issue. In the years prior to the elections, civil society involvement had increased dramatically in the so-called refugee crisis of 2015. Civil society actors played an important role in maintaining humanitarian standards and in crisis management (Simsa 2017). Yet, this went along with increasing political polarization around the issue of immigration. The FPÖ party has clear right-wing extremist roots (Pelinka 2019), and can be described as right-wing populist. The social climate in this period showed increasing polarization and a discourse against foreigners and refugees, the unemployed and civil society activists. Social inequalities rose. The study of 2019 shows that this government developed clear authoritarian strategies towards civil society, such as restrictions of participation, delegitimization and financial cuts for critical CSOs. CIVICUS downgraded the state of the democracy from open to restricted. Due to severe political scandals, this coalition ended in 2019.

In 2020, a coalition of the conservatives and the Green Party came to power. This new government was associated with great expectations on the part of civil society representatives, as many of them had good contacts to the Green Party. However, the Covid pandemic, which dominated society, economy and the public discourse, accompanied the changes of the government.

3 Theoretical Background – Changing Civic Spaces

The model of liberal, representative democracy is in crisis worldwide (Ágh 2015; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Mounk 2018; Schmitter 2015; Urbinati 2016). Indicators of democracy and democratization have been declining for about a decade. The
“Freedom in the World” Index, for example, reported in 2019 for the 12th year in a row a deterioration of the global democratic situation (Freedom House 2008, 2019). Even in the consolidated democracies, a decline in confidence in political institutions and political participation is observed (IDEA 2018).

Right-wing populist parties and increasingly authoritarian governments undermine democratic institutions and try to restrict civil rights. Populist politics refer to simple, archaic forms of identification such as “the people” (Mouffe 2005) by rhetorically dividing society, 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 antidemocratic, illiberal politics with a decline of core institutional requirements for electoral democracy, and fewer opportunities for opposition (Lührmann and Lindberg 2018). 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, p. 23).

Right-wing populism and authoritarianism are related (Mudde 2004; Müller 2017; Urbinati 2016). Global comparative data show a strong empirical link between the rise of populism and an increase in democratic backsliding (Kyle and Mounk 2018).

Common features of right-wing populist parties are nationalism and racism (Loch and Norocel 2015), and they 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).

Authoritarian governments secure their power, besides other strategies, by restricting civil society (Lührmann and Lindberg 2018, p. 8; Toepler et al. 2020). They use complex methods to strategically influence, control or capture civil society (Froissart 2014; Gilbert and Mohseni 2018; Greskovits 2015). An often important strategy is the creation of a state-loyal civil society (Fröhlich and Skokova 2020), which in addition to restriction for critical parts of civil society results in a dual strategy of the government (Salamon, Benevolenski, and Jakobson 2015). Other approaches of authoritarian governments are the use of legal instruments to restrict critical CSO activities, and the use of CSOs to gain legitimacy (Toepler et al. 2020; Wischermann et al. 2018). Kövér et al. refer to the manifold means to influence civil society as the "'4C strategy’: Cooptation, Coercion, Crowding out, Creation (the creation of a new, loyal civil society)." (Kövér, Antal, and Deák 2021, p. 93).
In the development of authoritarian regimes, civil society is usually one of the first targets (Cassani and Tomini 2019). Related strategies usually follow four steps. First, discourse and narratives attempt to delegitimize parts of civil society that are critical of the government. Polarized discourses are followed by systematic attacks on civil society. Second, participation in legislation and political debates is restricted. Third, public funds are channelled along a polarization line from critical to government-critical to government-friendly CSOs. Fourth, civic rights are restricted. In this process of civil society capture, populists and early stage autocrats limit public contestation by restricting liberal and pluralist CSO’s activities (Moder and Pranzl 2019, p. 10).

Research in authoritarian regimes often highlights the process of closing civic spaces (Carothers and Brechenmacher 2014) that refers to undermining the voice of civil society by legal or financial restriction of other forms of repression. Recently, scholars argue that the space for civil society may be changing or shifting rather than just closing, referring to the restriction of space for some CSOs while expanding space for others, specifically the service delivering and regime friendly and apolitical organizations (Toepler et al. 2020). In their analysis of changing civic spaces in authoritarian contexts, Toepler et al. distinguish three types of CSOs, namely claims making (or advocacy) organizations, service providers and regime-loyal organizations. They argue that claims making organizations are the primary targets of legal restrictions, bureaucratic harassment and persecution. Service providing organizations may be subjects of co-optation and de-politization but often also engage in advocacy for the sake of their clients (Toepler and Fröhlich 2020). Regime-loyal organizations might also provide social services but further provide government-friendly narratives (Toepler et al. 2020, p. 652).

In the following, we will take up this argument to theorize on different strategies of Austria’s governments. We combine it with the notion that in countries such as Germany or Austria, the space for civil society with respect to mass-demonstrations has grown, while at the same time civic space for most CSOs has shrunken (Alscher et al. 2017).

4 Methods

Besides literature research, this paper is based on three empirical studies. The first study was an assessment of framework conditions for civil society in 2014, performed in line with CIVICUS (More-Hollerweger et al. 2014). In a one-day workshop with an advisory group of civil society representatives, we identified relevant topics and indicators. Topics were democracy, civil rights, tax law,
employment and voluntary work, public procurement law and funding, and the visibility of civil society. The study consisted of two focus groups with representatives of CSOs and 44 interviews with representatives of CSOs and experts in the fields of NPO-research, law and consultancy, and a quantitative survey. Between 2018 and 2019, we performed an update of this study, focussing on effects of a right-wing populist government on civil society (Simsa 2019). The study consisted of three focus groups with civil society representatives, two quantitative surveys and 53 interviews with civil society representatives and experts in the field of NPO-research, law and consultancy. The first focus group included persons that had been interviewees in the study of 2014 and identified important areas of research, based on the question what might have changed since 2014. With the focus on recent changes, topics were the social climate, political participation, public funding and the legal environment of civil society. The other focus groups with civil society representatives helped to evaluate and understand initial results. Between 2020 and 2021, we performed a third study with 27 interviews with representatives of CSOs (Simsa et al. 2021). In this study, the focus was both on changes due to a new government and on effects of the Covid-19 crisis on the civil society, the crucial topics were the same as 2019.

In all three studies, the interviewees work in different fields of activity, mainly in social services, advocacy, sports and culture. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 min, they were recorded and transcribed.\(^1\) The textual data was coded according to main themes that were based on a previous literature analysis, the focus groups, and – in the studies of 2019 and 2021 – on the results of the previous studies. While the study of 2014 serves as a starting point and thus no quotations of interviews are cited here, quotations from the other studies are marked with the year and the interview number. For instance 2019/R07 means respondent number 7 from the study of 2019.

5 Findings

5.1 Effects of Right-Wing Populism on Civil Society

During the period of the coalition of ÖVP and FPÖ, between the end of 2017 and May 2019, the conditions for civil society deteriorated. First, there was a clear polarization of the discourse, with attempts of intimidation, and delegitimization of civil society activities in the media and by politicians. Delegitimization of civil society activities took place, for example, through the insinuation of profit

\(^1\) In 2014, only 16 interviews were transcribed.
interests, devaluation of the work of CSOs, and a generally negative, exclusionary rhetoric. One interviewee expressed: “A certain enemy image of civil society organizations is being built.” (2019/R07).

Official politics constantly devalued critical CSOs, especially those that deal with vulnerable target groups. In addition, their clientele was deprecated as “cheaters”, “asylum fraudsters” etc. The concept of public benefit organizations came under pressure: “Helping isn’t at all cool anymore” (2019/2019/R17). This went along with the polarization of civil society, as expressed in the following statement: “There are suddenly the good and the bad in civil society” (2019/R07). Further, the government frequently directly attacked CSOs and their representatives in the media. The severity of these attacks was new and was a breach of taboo.

Second, the relationship of civil society and politics deteriorated. CSOs were largely and systematically excluded from legislative processes and dialogue with the government or ministries: “No participation, no involvement, we only learn many things from the media.” (2019/R05). The government systematically excluded CSOs from legislative processes. One interviewee summarized this trend: “We are at the beginning of a massive shift towards a democracy without participation, without inclusion.” (2019/R10) CSOs described politics as increasingly authoritarian and intransparent. Almost all interviews revealed a systematic strategy to exclude civil society from political decisions and from dialogue with politicians.

Third, the legal framework regarding civic rights did not change significantly between 2017 and 2019. However, interviewees reported a tendency towards a more unfavourable application of current laws. A lot of room for interpretation increased the possibility of arbitrary state action.

Fourth, public funding changed significantly, there was a clear ideological orientation of funding cuts. Although there was no clear evidence for systematic quantitative changes in public funding altogether, the qualitative analysis showed systematic cuts in parts of civil society that were characterized as “evil” in the polarizing narratives of the populist parties. These were actors, which were critical of government or active in disliked fields of activity, such as immigration, feminism, social justice, and critical art. An interviewee explained the government’s apparent attitude: “This is a lever, so how do I take the money away from them, how do I cut it, so that I silence these voices.” (2019/R09).

These cuts posed an existential threat to many critical organizations and created general fear in the sector and were described as severe: “This is something new. I don’t think we’ve ever experienced such brutality before.” (2019/R23) Many organizations had to close or reduce their activities.
The strong ideological orientation of funding was new. The 2014 survey showed that financial conditions were made more difficult by a lack of index adjustments, a lack of planning security or excessive bureaucracy, but reported no systematic discrimination against critical organizations (More-Hollerweger et al. 2014).

While these developments posed severe problems and stress on CSOs and their members, and thus many of them chose defensive strategies and were quieter than before, strategies of resilience took place as well. Many interviewees reported a strengthening of solidarity, a new fighting spirit, and new mobilizations. They developed creative forms of protest and were more united than before in the attempt to maintain democratic standards: “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 up (2019/R45). In response to the verbal delegitimisation 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” (2019/I10). 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” (2019/I34). The most important strategy was solidarity within civil society: “So we are in several networks (...) where we regularly exchange ideas, develop strategies together (...) we need these alliances more and more” (2019/I14). Another interviewee summarized: “I would say that one of the positive things is that we are cooperating and showing solidarity with many organizations, much more than in the last few years and in a much more cross-thematic way” (2019/I04). In consequence, some existing platforms got stronger, and a new platform, the solidarity pact was founded to support each other: “Should individual population groups or organizations be subjected to state repression, we will jointly and in solidarity provide assistance and take action.”

Meanwhile, almost 90 organizations are members of the pact.

5.2 Effects of a New Government and the Covid-19 Pandemic

The right-wing populist coalition resigned in 2019. Since beginning of 2020, a coalition of Conservatives and the Green Party is in power. Almost at the same time, restrictions on social, economic and cultural life due to the Covid-19 pandemic took place. Restrictions of the movement of the people as well as of large parts of

trade, gastronomy, cultural and sports organizations had a massive impact on society. In the following, we will describe developments regarding the conditions for civil society.

First, compared to the previous period, the general climate and public discourse clearly improved. Defamation and the systematic discrediting of civil society by the governing parties, were hardly reported anymore: “(...) what is no longer the case in comparison to the previous government is definitely that these direct attacks no longer exist. So this deligitimization, this criminalisation of civil society” (2021/I4). On the one hand, this was associated with the Covid crisis. The risk of poverty or topics related to human rights had moved more into the centre of society. People increasingly see related activities of CSOs as important. On the other hand, interviewees relate the better climate to the participation of the Green Party in government, which is more welcoming towards democratic civil society activities. Many respondents still see problems with representatives of the conservatives: “(...) there are still many people in the ÖVP, who do not want to have anything to do with civil society” (2021/I5).

Second, the interviewees largely agree that communication between politics and civil society has improved significantly in the last year: “Well, it has changed insofar as conversations simply take place. That did not happen before. (...) It is somehow more democratic” (2021/I6). However, respondents criticise that particularly the service provision of CSOs is appreciated, while their political work is rather less valued. Specifically, large service organizations benefit from this development.

Nevertheless, some of the increased appreciation also goes beyond social service CSOs and includes advocacy organizations as well, “Because now the whole sector is perceived differently” (2021/I5). In connection with Covid-19, there was strong and media-effective cooperation between public institutions and larger CSOs in the social sector. Some correspondents see attempts of “social washing” (like “greenwashing”) – the attempt to use civil society for legitimization by politicians. This seemed to be important for the government as it had significantly lost trust in the course of the pandemic. However, the improvement of relations between politics and civil society does not always lead to more participation. Experiences differ largely, partly depending on the respective political partners. Again, with “Green” ministries, interviewees report better participation. The core message of many statements is that political involvement only takes place to a very limited degree. This is only partly an effect of the COVID-19 crisis. On the other part, it is the effect of missing an established framework, which ensures, regulates, and supports the interaction of civil society with politics.

The pandemic has limited political participation by civil society in several aspects. The strong thematic focus on Covid was an obstacle. One of the key tools of
civil society influence is public attention and it was very difficult to get attention with other issues. The need to react quickly to pressing developments further limited opportunities for political participation. The government shortened processes with little time for feedback. The high speed in issuing various measures was presumably necessary at the beginning of the pandemic. Later, the government maintained curtailed processes without necessity. For example, the deadline for comments on new regulations in March 2021, after one year of the pandemic, was set at about 4 days. One interviewee criticised: “It has to be fast (…) and that of course massively affects the quality of this process. You could say: Okay, with the first lockdown you can understand that, because that was a new situation, nobody had a clue. But now, one could have expected a different form of involving others” (2021/I5). Further, there was a lot of reticence on the part of the CSOs, especially at the beginning of the pandemic. Many CSOs put back their concerns: “The strong impression of a health risk led people say at the beginning, ‘Let’s swallow everything and maybe not criticize too loudly.’” (2021/I7). Fourthly, informal contacts became more difficult. Before, to a certain extent, they had compensated for non-transparent structures: “I believe that Corona has made many processes much less transparent. (…) In a zoom conference, (…) you aren’t standing together over a cup of coffee while chatting about this and that” (2021/14).

Third, compared with the previous period, the legal framework mainly changed with respect to Covid-related measures. They affected various aspects of human rights, such as curfews and other restrictions of movement, on the freedom of religion, of assembly, of access to education and employment, the rights of immigrants and others. The state is obliged to protect the right to life and health, but measures to this end must be necessary, appropriate and clearly regulated by law. Amnesty International Austria judged drastic measures at the beginning of the pandemic as justified due to a lack of information, but later decrees restricting freedom of movement and contact as non-transparent, with insufficient legal certainty (Amnesty_International 2020). The high discretionary powers of the police in this context were also criticised. In fact, the Constitutional Court overturned many restrictions as too vague or unlawful for other reasons.

A sensitive issue in the face of contact restrictions are demonstrations. The freedom of expression and protest is important, but large gatherings of people pose risks of infection. The handling of demonstrations during the pandemic in Austria was multi-faceted and criticised. In some cases, the government took very restrictive measures: In April 2020, for example, a demonstration by the Austrian Students’ Union with four people was banned, although they had agreed to keep protective measures. Later, a number of assemblies took place, initially usually without major problems. Examples were the solidarity action with Black Lives
Matter, environmental rallies or demonstrations for the evacuation of asylum camps in Greece. They all took place in strict compliance with Covid-measures.

From 2021 onwards, civil society activities increased that did not meet the requirements of plurality, tolerance and discursivity. Specifically, the so-called anti-Corona demonstrations against the government’s measures increased the significance and visibility of exclusive, illiberal, civil-society protest. Although many of them had been banned, they took place anyway with several thousand participants. Right-wing radicals and hooligans infiltrated or “hijacked” these events. They spread conspiracy theories and fought against a so-called “Coronadictatorship”. The demonstrations against the government’s Covid-measures were a striking phenomenon. Between the end of December 2020 and March 2021, 673 Corona-related assemblies took place across Austria. Of these, 113 were not registered, 75 were prohibited. In total, around 85,000 people took part.3 There were frequent violent riots. This relatively new social movement shows a high degree of individual and collective proximity to nationalist, populist and right-wing extremist groups. It also is characterised by a particularly high heterogeneity of supporters and political positions. They are highly polarizing, dividing society into two antagonistic spheres. Alternative beliefs with regard to medicine or the perception of authority, play an important role (cf. Nachtwey, Schäfer, and Frei 2020, p. 51ff.). Despite the diversity, the movement represents a fundamental opposition to liberal democracy. A unifying element is the scepticism towards parliamentary democracy, the media and social and political-economic institutions (cf. Nachtwey, Schäfer, and Frei 2020, p. 52ff.). It is probable, that these attitudes are a consequence of the systematic polarization and the undermining of democratic institutions by the previous government.

Regarding human rights and the question of civic spaces, these protests pose severe challenges. Many of their views are not democratic and often participants did not comply with Covid-measures and thus threatened others, the atmosphere often was aggressive. In addition to anti-Semitic slogans, activists denounced the propaganda of the “fake news press”. The situation often got out of control and thus, civil society activism in fact reduced the civic space for many other people. In the case of some demonstrations, the police recommended families to stay away from the city and the Jewish Association advised their members to stay at home. There was widespread criticism that the police acted with too much restraint during some of these demonstrations. Videos showed that police officers let aggressive demonstrators go ahead and right-wing extremists marched side by side with the police. During the same period, for example, a demonstration against

deportations of asylum seekers took place, where the police had been disproportionately harsh against peaceful demonstrators. The impression was widely shared in the media that the police applied double standards.

Regarding the freedom of expression, there were some unusual incidences in 2021. Members of the government announced multiple and general charges against persons that talked about politicians accused of corruption. Further, the Minister of the Interior considered legal action against a private person who criticised the police on twitter, related to the deportation of migrant teenagers. This was notable because the Ministry published the announcement on its official website showing the full name of the citizen. Legal experts assured that the citizen’s statement in question had no relevance under criminal or administrative law. They argued that it was a clear political intimidation attempt, which could have “chilling effects”, namely that people start to censor themselves out of fear.

Generally, the political situation was very unstable, due to diverse affairs of supposed corruption on the side of ÖVP and FPÖ. The conservative party reacted to the juristic accusations with increased criticism and attacks on legal institutions. Reputable experts in law reacted very critically to accusations and derogatory statements by ÖVP-representatives of the federal government against the judiciary, because they bear the danger of weakening the population’s trust in the rule of law. Since the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis, a decline of trust in democratic institutions took place.

Fourth, regarding public funding, the respondents did not note cuts of public funding for critical CSOs or attempts to “starve” specific areas of funding, as in the period before. However, the cuts made in 2018/2019 were not reversed. The overall picture was diverse, some organizations reported better funding, and others fought with uncertainties or inadequate funding. Others, however, say that the new government made earlier commitments, which avoided liquidity problems. A decisive factor regarding the public funding of CSOs was the Covid NPO-Support Fund of 700 million Euros decided in June 2020 and extended in 2021. It contributed significantly to providing financial security for many CSOs, which suffered financially from the pandemic measures, such as the cancellation of cultural

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festivals or fundraising events (BMLRT 2020). This emergency fund was unique in the history of the country. For the first time, the government officially treated CSOs as an economically and socially relevant group. The fund was developed in close cooperation between politics and CSOs, and raised international interest: "That it was set up, that’s extraordinary. So that, to a certain extent, we are pioneers." (2021/I14). While the fund helped CSOs to survive and was appreciated by civil society, critics called out bureaucratic procedures and a certain preference for well-established CSOs.

While it posed severe challenges for CSOs, the pandemic also made many of them more resilient. Measures regarding the Covid-pandemic strengthened digital activities. For some organizations, this complicated internal networking and the recruitment of new activists. However, others reported advantages. Transnational exchange, for example, became easier and cheaper with digital means. CSOs also implemented new services, which created new opportunities for participation: “We have created digital volunteer programmes. (…) Many people really got involved. We founded a platform that now includes, I think, 14,000 people who participate. (…) people who are really committed” (2021/I15). Especially the better-known CSOs enjoy a lot of interest and a willingness to get involved, some even reported a higher level of participation than before the pandemic. However, other – mostly younger – CSOs report a limited mobilization strength. Further, some new forms of protest activities were emerging as well as new forms of presence: “Well, (…) there was always a single person (…) standing in front of the Federal Chancellery at that time, and they always photographed themselves individually there. Then, they put their photos together and played them on Instagram and Facebook. (…) You don’t have to have all 50 of them there together, but you can experiment with the possibilities.” (2021/I12). In general, however, the effectiveness of advocacy suffered from the distance required during the pandemic, as face-to-face events create a better sense of responsibility and better networking. The potential of digital work could only be realised by those CSOs that had a good digital infrastructure.

CSOs generally continued their co-operation strategies of the previous period, which had strong impact on the establishment of the NPO-support fund. Nevertheless, some found it more difficult to maintain contacts as these had to be shifted to the virtual space.

6 Discussion and Limitations: Aspects of Changing Civic Spaces

Changes for civil society during the right-wing populist regime until 2019 show a clear picture that corresponds precisely to the process of civil society capture in the
development of authoritarian governments known from the literature (Moder and Pranzl 2019). They show activities to limit the critical potential of civil society as well as its participation in political decision-making processes. The government polarized the discourse and devaluated, stigmatized and attacked CSOs working with vulnerable target groups. It also attempted to intimidate CSO-representatives verbally and by legal action and did not maintain contacts with civil society. While restrictions regarding funding had before taken place indirectly and incrementally due to policies of the privatization of social tasks and an economization of political governance (More-Hollerweger et al. 2014; Neumayr et al. 2017), in the period of the right-wing populist governmental coalition, critical CSOs experienced harsh financial cuts. During this time, Austria experienced tendencies towards authoritarian politics and populist modifications of civil society, in line with increasing semi-authoritarian politics in other Western democracies (Meyer 2016). Thus, the space for civil society was clearly restricted and shrinking.

Changes from 2020 onwards are complex and not so easy to interpret as two major factors influenced the development. One factor was the participation of the Green Party in a government that was still dominated by the ÖVP, a party that had governed in a very authoritarian way before. The second factor was the pandemic. Regarding funding, an emergency fund related to the pandemic was vital for many organizations. CSOs were involved in the process of establishing the fund. Nevertheless, it hardly covered small and activism-oriented CSOs. Further, the preceding cuts for critical organizations were not reversed; the authoritarian policies of the previous period had the tendency to persist.

In this period, politics partly follow the pattern elaborated by Toepler et al. (2020) who distinguish between claims making organizations, service providers and regime-loyal CSOs. Specifically service providing CSOs played a vital role in politics related to the pandemic. The government made use of their expertise, networks and legitimization. While respondents did not report de-politization as a problem, they criticized attempts of co-optation of these CSOs. Claims making organizations were not involved much in government strategies, although some report that representatives of the Green Party in government were more open to their claims, specifically regarding climate activism or politics related to poverty or gender topics. Regime-loyal organizations, which play an important role in many authoritarian regimes (Fröhlich and Skokova 2020), so far play a minor role in Austria. Thus, the argument of changing civic spaces (Anheier, Lang, and Toepler 2019) is to a certain extent true regarding Austrian CSOs, with influence and participation shifting slightly from claims making to service providing organizations. Besides the fact that financial cuts for critical CSOs of the period before 2019 had not been reversed, the NPO emergency fund contributed to this trend by favouring large organizations with high regular expenditures.
Another important factor that caused a shift in civil society space are domestic laws regulating the operation of CSOs. Already in 2014, CSO-representatives reported the problem of openness of laws to interpretation, which caused uncertainties. Specifically the rights of freedom of assembly and association leave much room for interpretation. In 2019, respondents told that they often were applied much stricter and to the disadvantage of CSOs. From 2020, a new shift took place. While the pandemic posed general obstacles to assemblies, there is reason to assume that the police applied double standards: They treated violent and often even unauthorized right-wing demonstrations of the so-called Corona-deniers comparatively friendly, while it treated peaceful protesters for the right to asylum disproportionately harshly. Thus, the argument that the space for civil society with respect to mass demonstrations has grown, while at the same time civic space for most CSOs has shrunk (Alscher et al. 2017), must be modified for the situation in Austria: The growing space for mass demonstrations specifically seems to be true regarding right-wing demonstrations. The shrinking of spaces for many other civil society activities results from insufficient legal certainty and transparency, funding strategies that discriminate against small claims making organizations, and little opportunities for political participation granted by large parts of the government.

To conclude, there are tendencies of restricted civic spaces that resemble the “slow process of erosion” that Anheier et al. diagnose for developments of the space for civil society in flawed democracies (Anheier, Lang, and Toepler 2019, p. 4). Some of them reflect long-term developments, specifically the scope of legal discretion regarding protests, the tendency to restrict funding for nonprofit activities and the lack of institutionalized structures to foster voluntary work. Some of these restrictions are the clear impact of right-wing populist politics specifically – but not only – between 2017 and 2019, such as the funding cuts for critical organizations, attempts to delegitimize civil society, to reduce political participation or to undermine democratic institutions. The participation of the Green Party instead of the FPÖ mitigated some of these developments in certain areas but did not achieve a turnaround. Other restrictions are connected with the Covid-19 pandemic, such as reduced opportunities for volunteering or shortened periods for political decisions. Civic space definitely changed in favour of mass-demonstrations and of large scale social service CSOs and in detriment to grassroots and claims making CSOs and activism.

Nevertheless, it seems that strategies of resilience, specifically solidarity among CSOs, the creative development of new forms of activity and cooperative actions gain importance when conditions get more difficult. In both of the studies of 2019 and 2021, interviewees reported not only difficulties but also the growing impact of these strategies. Specifically, the importance of umbrella organizations
for CSOs and networking is an aspect that is highlighted in other studies (Anheier, Lang, and Toepler 2019). The success of joint efforts for example in the development and implementation of the NPO-recovery funds shows the importance of co-operation across different fields of activity.

The paper has many limitations. Due to the intertwined effects of the new government and the Covid crisis, the theoretical interpretation of recent developments is difficult. Although the samples of all three studies include a broad range of civil society activities, regime friendly CSOs are rather underrepresented. Further, more research on new developments regarding undemocratic civil society activism and on phenomena of inertia of authoritarian strategies towards civil society when governments change might be fruitful topics.

References


