

## **Under pressure: organizational responses in the changing civil space of Hungary**

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### **Abstract:**

Nonprofit organizations have been restricted in a variety of both ways and political regimes in recent decades (Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2014; Anheier, Lang and Toepler, 2019). Scholars of the “shrinking,” “closing,” or more recently the “changing space” for civil society have explored the phenomenon from multiple point of views, and they have examined the types of regulations (Gershman and Allen, 2006; Rutzen, 2015; Van der Borgh and Terwindt, 2012), causes behind the restrictions (Christensen and Weinstein, 2013; Dupuy, Ron and Prakash, 2016), and the impact on the independence and democratization potential of civil society among others (Toepler et al 2020; Herrold, 2016; Skokova, Pape and Krasnopolskaya, 2018). By now, they have documented the coping strategies of organizations relatively extensively as well, especially in the case of the more political or claims-making NGOs (Tysiachniouk, Tulaeva and Henry, 2018; Hsu, 2010; Spires, 2011; Moser and Skripchenko, 2018). However, a review of the empirical studies reveals a lack of a coherent theoretical framework of organizational responses in restricted environments.

In her seminal paper, organizational scholar Christine Oliver (1991) combined institutional and resource dependence theories, and proposed a framework to study organizational responses to institutional pressures that has barely been utilized in the nonprofit literature, despite its prominence in organizational science. She proposed five types of strategic responses and enlisted hypotheses around five factors – cause, constituents, content, control, and context – that determine the type of organizational response. Based on her framework, this paper explores how nonprofit organizations, particularly the ones providing services in politically sensitive areas have responded to the formal and informal restrictions on civil society in Hungary.

Preliminary findings from qualitative interviews with organizations working with migrants, LGBTQ, homeless, or drug affected populations have revealed that there is a sixth factor missing from Oliver’s framework that could be highly significant in determining response strategies: organizational identity. Moreover, organizational interconnectedness that was hypothesized to strengthen conformity seems to play out differently than it was expected by scholars. In cases, it gives room for organizations disliked by the regime to hide their activities under the wings of regime-approved nonprofits.

Beyond its theoretical contribution, this paper enriches the conversation on the “shrinking space” by providing data from the understudied region of Hungary. Viktor Orbán’s regime has long been the icon of the illiberal movement in the international media, particularly due to the country’s presence in the European Union and the regime’s constant tightrope walking to minimize critical voices but to keep the benefits of its EU membership. Thus, this article will add a more nuanced perspective on the complex environment and opportunities of nonprofit organizations in hybrid political regimes.