



## Policy-Making Civilians

### *A Review of the Volume*

Attila Antal (ed.): *A civilek hatalma – a politikai tér visszafoglalása*

[The Power of Civilians: Recapturing the Political Space]<sup>1</sup>

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Whose job is policy making?

This becomes an inevitable question when we think about what kind of opinions there are on NGOs in the Hungarian public sphere. It is very thoughtful if the spokesman of a government (in any case; in our case, the Hungarian) declares:

Legitimately, only elected politicians can make politics; so, civil society should not be involved in politics, in public affairs. As if someone who does not hold any political office could be the sole object of politics, no matter what. As if someone who does not hold any political office cannot be a political actor. At the same time, it also must be noted that if an editor addresses a scientific work on civil society specifically to the political left, for those who seek to ‘contribute to the progressive thinking process in Hungary’, it would mean that only the political left may be the key of social progress. This raises serious questions, especially if modern politics is becoming increasingly shattered. (author’s transl.)

The editor and the authors of the volume entitled *A civilek hatalma – a politikai tér visszafoglalása* (The Power of Civilians: Recapturing the Political Space) published their work with the intention to contribute to the redefinition of political space and to help civilian movements in their efforts to recover politics. The texts that make up the volume are divided into three chapters (*I. A civil társadalom elmélete és szerkezete*, *II. Civilek, közhatalom és közbizalom*, *III. Civil esetek* [I. Theory and Structure of the Civil Society; II. Civilians, Public Power, and Public Confidence; III. Civil Cases]), and these are closed by a summarizing

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study by Kuti Éva: *Tartós trendek vagy múló zavarok? Változási folyamatok a civil szférában* (Long-Lasting Trends or Transient Disturbances? Processes of Change in the Civil Sphere).

The first and most significant study of the volume is Attila Ágh's analysis of the defensive society (*Vitairat a „civiliek hatalmáról” – A védekező társadalom, avagy a civilek hatalma: töprengések a magyar civil társadalom helyzetéről* [Discussion Paper on 'The Power of Civilians' – The Power of the Defensive Society, or the Power of Civilians: Reflections on the Situation of Hungarian Civil Society]). As a theoretical introduction, the author returns to the ideas of Locke, Montesquieu, and Tocqueville and refers to Almond, Polanyi, and Habermas to reach one of his fundamental ideas: a member of the civil society is a movement man. Ágh, referring to Donatella della Porta's work (*Social Movements in Times of Austerity*, 2015), claims that nowadays we live the transition from the structure to the action. At the same time, elimination and preservation make up the task, which is a complex one due to the transition. The theory of informal institutions has come to the fore as a sign of the fact that the sharp contrast between the institutions and political culture has been largely resolved. A multilevel pyramid of institutions is drawn, describing the three larger 'floors' as follows: on the top, there are the government/state institutions, in the middle, the large social mediation systems, while at the bottom civil society. At the bottom level, informal behavioural rules, customs, and traditions are essential. The study emphasizes that the basic level of civil society and the fully formalized 'big politics' include public life, or public space, with the systems of mediating political will. Referring to the work of Rupnik and Zielonka (*The State of Democracy 20 Years on: Domestic and External Factors*), the author adds the statement according to which the crisis of democracy in the CEE region can be explained by the fact that informal practices and networks are particularly strong due to the weakness of formal institutions. It is noted that the contrast between formal and informal institutions and the erosion of democracy mirror the weakness of CEE civil society; yet, some new civilian strength is emerging. The following section discusses the thesis of the CEE triple crisis (disintegration as social exclusion, fragmentation, and impoverishment) and an increase in inequalities, an increase in social anomie.

Instead of continuing the thought process, let us stop for a remark. The author considers that the cause of the CEE situation is the different functioning of the mid-level section of the presented pyramid structure compared to Western democracies, but this does not explain the weakness of civil society in CEE countries. If formal institutions are strong, it does not indicate at all that civil society, the base level, as Ágh determines, would become strong. The nature of the relationship between formal and informal institutions does not affect directly the nature of the civil base. Moreover, if the informal nature is strengthened, it may be a chance for civilians.

Referring to Western scholarly literature, the author analyses the development of advanced civil society, the challenges of participatory democracy, the effects of global crisis, and the functioning of the social space. If the existence and nature of democracy were the central issues of the volume and the study, it would be worth following Attila Ágh's comments. But what is more important for us is the situation of civil society. Many have found that the roots of the current crisis of democracy lie in an increasingly unbalanced and unequal relationship between markets, governments, societies, and the media that mediate between them. Concerning this, the analysis elaborated by Attila Ágh is a remarkable one. However, in the present volume, the question concerning the civil society theory and structure is the extent to which it transforms civil society. I am not interested in what happens to democracy in this case but in what happens to civil society. Attila Ágh primarily examines the situation of democracy.

His work is completed by analysing the perspective of bottom-up democracy. The following questions are included in the analysis: Are civilians able to organize themselves into strong movements in Hungary? What does the traditional Hungarian anti-politics mean? How does the new policy relate to the principle of moral superiority? What does democratic opposition politics mean? And then comes a comment: in the paper and the volume, the connection between opposition and democracy is systematically created as if there were a general rule that the matter of democratic power exercising could not be risen at all by the right wing. In the final paragraphs of his work, the author discusses the situation of democracy – he discusses actual chances and does not talk about civil society.

The second study of the volume is written by the editor himself, Attila Antal. His work, *A közjó és a civilek* (Public Good and Civilians), begins with the statement that liberal democracy has become inadequate to represent the public good; it cannot be represented but by institutions alone. According to the author, the Hungarian civil society felt the processes taking place in our time and wanted to protect the public good from the negative effects of representative democracy. The formulation and representation of public good can only be the result of political processes, and the failure of liberal democracy has shown that institutions are only partially suitable for the realization of public good. According to the author, the public good can only arise as a result of a discursive process, and he assumes the existence of a politicized society. There are very interesting explanations about depoliticization (politicizing the theory) as well as its criticism. Among other things, the third chapter of the paper deals with the Hungarian civil society. It is worth quoting the final statement: after 2010, the social forces that were depoliticized and parked on the parking lot in the past two decades could no longer bear the false (Fidesz) promises of 2010. His conclusion is that the public good cannot evolve in a bureaucratized environment or in a context that is massively depoliticized instead of repoliticization.

According to the author, after 2010, the articulation of the public good of civilians has emerged on three levels: mass demonstrations, organizations representing public good on certain issues, and critical professional non-governmental organizations against the government. The author cites a specific example for each one. At the end of his analysis, he concludes that the organizations presented are bound by the rejection of the Orbán government's perception of public good. During the decades of the regime change, there could not be formed a political culture according to which the civil sector would not only be a kind of a 'third sector' but a link between the private and public sectors, which could significantly contribute to the development of public good.

The editor of the book included two further papers in the first chapter. István Sebestény (*Fél évtized – egészen új környezetben. Kormányzati szándék és eredmény a civil szféra NER-konformizálásában* [Half a Decade – In a Completely New Environment. Government Intentions and Results in the NER Conformation of the Civil Sphere]) describes the general situation of the civil sphere and analyses the new civil support system and its effects. Szabina Kerényi (*Mozgalmi ciklusok és az alulról szerveződő mozgalmak strukturális csapdái* [Movement Cycles and Structural Traps of Grassroots Movements]) examines bottom-up movements and their institutionalization in a context where these movements are strengthening at a global level, noting that these movements have difficulties in crossing social cleavages and having serious concerns about their sustainability.

The second chapter consists of four papers. Endre Bíró analyses the legal regulation of non-profit organizations in 2010–2016, Ádám Nagy recalls in his discussion paper the deadly crimes of the Hungarian state against civil society, Daniel Oross discusses the chances of a youth participation model, and Ferenc Péterfi examines the chances of civil society in a time when society has lost balance and trust. The theoretical yield of these papers is moderate, the strength of these works is that, when analysing a certain question or area, we get new examples of why the Hungarian civil sphere does not work well and at what levels it is stressed against power.

The opening study of the third chapter (Fruzsina Tóth: *Hétköznapi ellenállások* [Casual Resistance]) deals with everyday forms of resistance in connection with the housing crisis. Her work is refreshing in the context of the volume as it does not judge power according to a predetermined choreography (see Ádám Nagy's text too); instead, he examines a new situation by presenting the appropriate theoretical framework, while also formulating general questions about different forms of resistance. Further case studies: Orsolya Lehotai analyses genderism, Áron Varga examines the GONGO phenomenon in Hungary, and Péter Zsolt examines groups and certain categories of civil society, raising the question of losers and winners. His interesting analysis is about the possibilities of becoming a community, presenting cooperation in a way that deserves attention. Judith

Torma analyses a number of controversial complexes of proceedings against the Norwegian Fund in a thorough study.

The closing study by Éva Kuti (*Tartós trendek vagy múló zavarok? Változási folyamatok a civil szférában* [Lasting Trends or Transient Disturbances? Changes in the Civil Sphere]) would be a necessary and appropriate ending of the volume if the data used for the analysis were from Hungarian research and not from a university in Vienna or if these data could be compared with the results of a similar Hungarian research.

The image featured by the volume published at Noran Libro about the situation of (Hungarian) civil society is not at all positive, and I myself agree that this is a period of crisis for the civil sphere. The subtitle of the presented volume refers to the struggle to take possession of the political space, and this is an important issue not only for Hungary but also for the Central and Eastern European countries. The inevitable question is: what other signs and movements can be observed beyond the general problem of malfunction?

It is important to pay attention to such theoretical issues and day-to-day work on civilian practice since the interpretation of political space and the analysis of civil roles have the potential to develop the practice of representing the public good in all the relevant actors over time.