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Framing the Environment in a Changing Political Landscape: How Hungarian ENGOs Adapt to a Hybrid Regime

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS submitted by: Gábor OTT for the degree of Master of Science and entitled: Framing the Environment in a Changing Political Landscape: How Hungarian ENGOs Adapt to a Hybrid Regime

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In 2023 Hungary's political climate can be characterized by a polarized media landscape and public agenda, fractured environmentalism, and a hostile environment for civil society. This research focuses on how prestigious Hungarian environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOs) are affected by the political landscape of a hybrid regime. The analysis of how organizations conceptualize and frame their work showed that, above all else, organizations frame themselves as "politically independent" in the context of the autocratization of the regime. This means keeping the distance from party politics and positioning themselves as "experts", even if this could hinder building stronger ties with the public. Their framing is heavily contested by accusations of political partiality by the regime and the profoundly polarized public. While the organizations' reliance on international opportunities strengthened in this challenging situation, cooperation with the Hungarian political regime seems to be their most favorable goal. This finding fits the tradition of transactional activism and the trend of NGO professionalization. The research even highlights the emergence of a new generation of regime-friendly environmental organizations. Thus Hungary brings a strong case for how closing space of civil society can motivate civil organizations to step further away from politics and seek cooperation with the regime simultaneously.

Keywords: non-governmental organisations, framing, closing space for civil society, autocratization, apolitical, framing contest, CEE region

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1 Introduction

1.1 The changing political landscape of Hungary

The period from 2010 brought significant changes in the political system of Hungary. While the debate on the exact typology of the political regime is far from over, the political landscape is arguably different than what it was before this period. The fact that the same party has won the last four elections is a prominent indication of change. Several notable changes are occurring across all levels of the system, which already have enduring consequences. The constitution and the electoral system went through significant modifications (Bánkuti, Halmai, and Scheppele 2012), the democratic checks and balances are continuously eroded (Buzogány 2017), the media landscape of the country have been restructured and polarized align political ruptures (Polyák 2019), civil society became a target of political smear campaigns (Gerő et al. 2020), and how the regime relates to environmentalism is also changing constantly (A. Antal 2021). While this list is far from over, it illustrates the amplitude of the transformation of the political landscape in this relatively short period. The fast-paced transformations in the system pose a challenge to all individuals and entities within it, necessitating swift adjustment. This process is particularly demanding in Hungary due to the closed nature of the system. Thanks to the significant decrease in transparency, ambiguity arguably became one of the most prominent characteristics of the regime.

1.2 Research problem – The status of civil society organizations under a hybrid regime

The changes in the political landscape drastically changed the environment where civil society organizations operate. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in the environmental sector must also adapt to these new conditions. Partially because of the already mentioned hostile attitude towards the whole civil society, but also because of their traditional reliance on cooperation with the regime (Petrova and Tarrow 2007). In Hungary and the young

democracies of the post-Soviet countries, civil society organizations tend to have weaker ties with society than in well-established democracies (Marzec and Neubacher 2020). This is why they developed in a way that cooperation with the regime and with each other is more crucial in their operation. However, environmental NGOs (ENGOs) are traditionally considered institutions with the critical function of being the consultants and "watchdogs" of environmental policy. This leads to a particularly interesting situation for these organizations in the transforming Hungarian political system. On the one hand, the system is less open to criticism, which means they are cutting off the traditional connections with the organizations. On the other hand, ENGOs cannot rely on the public for support because they do not necessarily have existing ties.

The literature shows that sectors of civil society are affected to a different extent by the changing political landscape (Gerő et al. 2023). The environmental sector in Hungary is considered to have "less political importance", meaning less control from the regime. This is why sectors with more political importance, like human rights organizations, gained more attention within Hungary's civil society scholarship. This does not mean however that the environmental sector is untouched by the consequences of the political change. I am conducting my research to contribute to the existing knowledge of the sector.

1.3 Research question

In light of the research problem, my research seeks to answer the question: *How do Hungarian environmental NGOs perceive their constraints and opportunities within the current regime?* Therefore, my research focuses on how Hungarian ENGOs conceptualize or frame their work in the context of an increasingly autocratic regime, how they perceive and react to the counter-framing of the regime, and in their interpretation, what emerging opportunities enable them to operate in the current regime.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

First, I provide a three-layered theoretical framework for my thesis in the "Literature review" section and an overview of the relevant literature. The theoretical framework builds on regime typology to understand why Hungary can be considered an autocratic or hybrid regime. As the next layer, I review the literature on civil society in authoritarian or hybrid regimes, which is essential to map the environment of the ENGOs in my research. The last layer of my theoretical framework is framing theory, describing how it can be used to analyze the ENGOs' activity. The "Literature review" is followed by the "Methods" chapter, where I discuss in detail why and how I conducted a qualitative case study research on a selection of Hungarian ENGOs. After the "Methods" section, I provide more information on the current situation of Hungarian ENGOs through a detailed description of the Hungarian political landscape, how the current political regime polarized media, and the situation of civil society in the regime. The "Case study" chapter also describes environmentalism in Hungary. The final chapter of my thesis discusses the analysis of the data collected with the interviews and document analyses.

2 Literature Review

This chapter of the thesis provides a threefold theoretical framework and the relevant literature I based my research on. The first layer, "Autocracies, autocratization, and hybrid regimes" provides theoretical background to understand the political landscape of my case study on Hungary. It introduces some of the most relevant conceptualizations of autocracies and how they are defined, reviews a current trend of autocratization, and describes what a hybrid regime is. The second layer discusses the situation of civil society and environmental organizations in autocratic or hybrid regimes, focusing on civil society in the Central Eastern European region and the unfolding debate on the closing space of civil society. The last fold of the theoretical framework introduces framing theory, a tool that allows analyzing civil society in the autocratic context. The layer includes a discussion on the conceptualization of framing and highlights the process of framing contest used in the research to describe the relationship between the regime and the ENGOs.

2.1 Autocracies, autocratization, and hybrid regimes

2.1.1 Defining autocracy

Defining Autocracy seems like common knowledge at first glance. According to the widely accepted interpretation, autocracy is a repressive political system where one individual holds all the power. In other words, it is the opposite of democracy. However, defining the political system becomes much more complicated when one tries to go beyond the superficial. In 2022 the European Parliament declared, *"Hungary can no longer be considered a democracy"* (The President of the European Parliament 2022). At the same time, it was defined as a *"hybrid regime of electoral autocracy"* (2022). These declarations lead to two important points. First that autocratic regimes are often characterized by their lack of democracy (Wahman, Teorell, and Hadenius 2013), secondly that recently there has been a growth in regimes that cannot be characterized as purely democratic or autocratic (Bogaards 2009; Diamond 2002; Wigell 2008; Freedom House 2023b). This part of my literature review briefly

reviews the state of the art on these two points. For my research, it is essential to understand what the different regime typologies exactly mean because, as I describe it in the "Case study" section of the thesis, the current regime of Hungary defines itself as a democracy (Orban 2014). In contrast, others, like the European Parliament (The President of the European Parliament 2022), classify it as a form of autocracy. Including regime typology in my theoretical framework facilitates connecting my research on ENGOs to the scholarship on civil society under autocratic or hybrid regimes.

While there are many definitions of an autocratic regime, a good portion includes the regime being non-democratic in some way and missing fair and free elections (Frantz 2016; Przeworski 2000; Diamond 2002). It can be argued that the most essential element of a free election is contestation or competition between different candidates (Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland 2010), with a frequently added caveat that seemingly regular and fair elections do not necessarily indicate a genuinely democratic system. Sometimes it is hard to determine if the official reports on voting are trustworthy and if the will of the voters is genuinely represented in the outcome (Diamond 2002).

Several widely accepted methods of regime categorization operate on a scale where democracy is the starting and autocracy is the endpoint. One frequently used typology is the one developed by Freedom House for the Nations in Transit project (Freedom House 2023b). The annual study follows the status of democracy in Central Europe and Central Asia. Every year it evaluates each country based on seven indicators translated into "Democracy Points"(Freedom House 2023a). According to the points, they can fall into five different regime types. "Consolidated Democracies, Semi-Consolidated Democracies, Transitional or Hybrid Regimes, Semi-Consolidated Authoritarian Regimes, Consolidated Authoritarian Regimes"(2023a). The higher the score, the more democratic the given country is. The Polity IV and the V-Dem dataset provide similar opportunities to follow different nations' levels of democracy (Frantz 2016).

Another typology that offers a classification of regimes based on their openness is the sixfold system of Larry Diamond (2002). This classification came into existence because of the typologically challenging new democracies of the third wave of democratization and consists the democratic categories of "electoral democracies" and "liberal democracies", "competitive electoral authoritarian", "uncompetitive electoral authoritarian", and "politically closed" categories for the various autocratic regimes. The last class, called the "ambiguous regimes", is for the political systems that cannot be fitted to any of the other five categories.

As if today, political science offers a great variety of different theories focusing only on autocratic regimes. One of the more frequently cited is the one developed by Barbara Geddes (Geddes 1999), who initially categorizes the different authoritarian regimes into the four categories of "personalist regimes", "military regimes", "single-party regimes", and the mixture of the previous three. The typology was originally developed to examine different succession in different types of autocratic regimes. It has been updated and used ever since in the greatest variety of studies on autocracy (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014). Another take on categorizing non-democratic regimes is the typology developed by Hadenius and Teorell (Hadenius and Teorell 2007; Wahman et al. 2013). This typology is based on formal institutions of the regimes (Frantz 2016) and differentiates between the six authoritarian regime types of "military", "monarchy", "multiparty authoritarian", "one-party authoritarian", and "non-party authoritarian"(2007).

This list of definitions and typologies aims to illustrate the ongoing discussion on conceptualizing autocracies. None of the methods above claims to be the most effective or perfect tool to categorize different autocratic regimes because, admittedly, the differences between the various types can be hard to register, and more importantly, some of them like Hungary are constantly changing and evolving in real-time.

2.1.2 The current trend of autocratization

It is widely accepted that the advancement of democracy or, in other words, democratization is not necessarily the mainstream trend of the world anymore (Waldner and Lust 2018; Mechkova, Luhrmann, and Lindberg 2017). Something opposite is happening, meaning more and more regimes like Hungary are appearing on the map showing autocratic features (Freedom House 2023b), some already authoritarian regimes are deepening, and some well-established democracies are showing signs of becoming more closed and polarized (Boese et al. 2022). Defining this opposite trend is gaining momentum in political science. While, as I mentioned before, there is a debate on the actual regime type of Hungary, it is arguably a state in transition (Freedom House 2023a; Bozóki and Hegedűs 2018; Bíró-Nagy 2017). Understanding the state of the art on autocratization helps to further connect my research to the global trends of changing political landscapes.

As I mentioned when I discussed the definition of autocracy, traditionally, anything related to autocracies was first addressed from the point of view of democracies. In this case, the transition phenomena were first examined as something opposing democratization (Sinkkonen 2021; Diamond 2008). The topic of a trend opposite to democratization has become a widely discussed topic in the last decade. (Pelke and Croissant 2021; Cassani and Tomini 2020; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). This also means there is not yet a consensus on many aspects of the subject, thanks to the relative novelty of the direction (Tomini 2021).

The growth of the body of work brought many names with it trying to describe the trend. Andrea Cassani & Luca Tomini (2019) offered an impressive collection of these expressions from various sources in their writing, including “collapse”, “death”, “regression”, or “decay”, but I could add “democratic rollback” (Diamond 2008) or “democratic deconsolidation” (Foa and Mounk 2016). Based on the discourse of the conference on Orbán’s regime[1], while there is still no consensus on the one expression that could tag the trend most accurately, by now, two

[1] There is a description on of the conference in the “Methods” chapter.

terms are becoming dominant in the discussion, especially in case of Hungary: "democratic backsliding" and "autocratization" ('Orbán 25 Éve: A Hatalom Bűvöletében [25 Years of Orbán: Under the Spell of Power]' 2023).

Democratic backsliding is usually connected to the work of Nancy Bermeo (2016), who described this trend of regimes becoming more autocratic as *"the state-led debilitation or elimination of the political institutions sustaining an existing democracy"*(2016, 5.). The definition shows that, according to Bermeo, backsliding primarily describes the processes that are happening inside democracies, as in the case of Hungary. Another definition is widening this focus and the concept to any regimes stating that democratic backsliding can describe as *"In democratic regimes, it is a decline in the quality of democracy; in autocracies, it is a decline in democratic qualities of governance."*(Waldner and Lust 2018, 95). Even with this extension, the theory was criticized for focusing too much on democracies (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019).

The other expression and theory of autocratization completely cut ties to the perspective of democracy. Its scholars frequently describe it as the drastic turn that enables it to truly capture the current state of regime shifts (Cassani and Tomini 2020). The term includes three modes to provide a comprehensive definition that allows the theory to cover the broadest scope of regime shifts (Pelke and Croissant 2021). "Democratic recession" describes autocratization processes within democracies, "democratic breakdown" is used when a formerly democratic regime becomes an autocracy, and lastly, "autocratic consolidation" is used in cases of autocratic regimes losing their democratic characteristics (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019).

All of the different theories are trying to capture the gradual change in regimes, first of all, because it allows analyzing the more nuanced differences in regimes, and also because sudden, drastic changes are becoming less and less typical in our age, described by some scholars as the "third wave of autocratization" (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). In their work, Lührmann and Lindberg describe Hungary and Poland as prime examples of "democratic

erosion", a typical tactic of gradually and legally dismantling democratic norms but keeping the democratic institutions (2019). This finding resonates well with the discussion on environmental governance in Hungary in my "Case study" chapter and with the ENGOs' experience of cooperation with the regime described in my results.

2.1.3 Hybrid regimes

We can see that the options to categorize a regime go far beyond democracy or autocracy. Some political systems, like Hungary, are constantly evolving in unknown directions in the present. So the question is how can these regimes in the "grey zone" be named or categorized, and what exactly did the MEPs (The President of the European Parliament 2022) mean when they stated that Hungary is a hybrid regime of electoral autocracy?

To answer this question, one should be able to define hybrid regimes. This type of regime can be considered as something in-between democracy and autocracy, a state in transition (Freedom House 2023b; Armony and Schamis 2005). The already cited freedom house classification uses the terms "transitional states" and "hybrid regimes" as synonyms for the name of one of their categories (Freedom House 2023a). This group of countries is described as "*electoral democracies that meet only minimum standards for the selection of national leaders. Democratic institutions are fragile and substantial challenges to the protection of political rights and civil liberties exist. The potential for sustainable, liberal democracy is unclear."*(Freedom House 2023a). The description shows that it still considers these states democracies where some of the most important institutions are not functioning as they should. It also implies that they might even be on the path to becoming a liberal democracy, but their chances are unclear.

In contrast, a growing number of work describes this type of system as something of its own rather than a "subtype of democracy or autocracy" (Diamond 2002; Mufti 2018; Bogaards 2009; Gilbert and Mohseni 2011). In her review, Mufti highlights the importance of a united stance on defining hybrid regimes. She provides an extensive list of approaches, including

subtypes of democracy and autocracy, transitional states, and misfits of any category. Mufti suggests that these regimes should not simply be labeled autocracies (Mufti, 2018). She summarizes the current discourse in a definition, saying that these regimes show both authoritarian and democratic features; thus, instead of comparing them to democracies, they should be compared with each other (Mufti 2018).

Although it is worthwhile to examine hybrid regimes as a distinct category, it is essential to acknowledge that the systems within this group can vary significantly(Robertson 2010), so it is still challenging for scholars to develop a universal description for them.

Electoral authoritarianism (Wigell 2008; Levitsky and Way 2002; Diamond 2002) is another direction of conceptualization where the institution of voting can be registered in some form. However, the whole regime is considered a subcategory of autocracy rather than a democracy with flaws.

While "illiberal democracy" is a term frequently used to describe hybrid regimes, I did not include it in this chapter because it is very much tied to democracies (Riaz 2019). While as I illustrated in the previous subchapter, the discussion on autocracies diverged from defining itself as the other side of the spectrum of democracy. With my thesis, I wish to join this direction of scholarship, which is why I'm focusing on concepts more tied to autocracies.

The literature on hybrid regimes is already vast, and my goal with this chapter was not to cover everything on the topic but to show how the discourse around conceptualization and typology is still not settled. It is forming in real-time, just like the regimes like Hungary. They are still in motion, and anything trying to adapt to a system like this must adapt to change and insecurity itself.

2.2 Civil society under autocratic or hybrid regimes

2.2.1 Autocratization and civil society

Just like the scholarship on political regimes, the scholarship on civil society and the different actors of it at first was closely tied to democratization and was generally viewed as an essential catalyst of the process (Mercer 2002). Today, autocratization has become a well-documented process in political sciences, and the number of studies on civil society under this type of regime started increasing too (Toepler et al. 2020). Much of the contemporary discourse on civil society under autocratic regimes is connected to East and South Asia (Lewis 2013), with a particular focus on case studies from China (Teets 2014; Qiaoan and Saxonberg 2022; Chen 2020). While these studies bring many great examples of how civil society can function in a non-democratic environment and carry cases of more and less successful cooperation between regimes and civil organizations, it is arguably tied to a different cultural and political landscape than the case study I will present in this thesis.

Besides capturing the state of the art on environmental NGOs' work under autocratic regimes, this chapter aims to provide an overview of the landscape of Hungarian ENGOs. Thus it is not only containing studies on ENGOs but also some of the more general discourses around civil society that are key to understanding the organization's situation in the focus of my thesis. Following this logic, this subchapter focuses on the state of civil society in the Central and Eastern European Region (CEE) area with a particular emphasis on environmental NGOs, followed by some of the most important current global findings. The situation of Hungarian ENGOs will be mentioned here, but there is a more detailed discussion in the “Case study” chapter.

2.2.2 Civil society in the CEE region

A significant part of the literature on the topic discusses the dynamics of civil society in light of the regime change that came with the end of the Soviet Union when the primary trend was democratization in the area (Buzogány, Kerényi, and Olt 2022). However, it can be

argued that autocratization has become the dominant trend in the area since then (Freedom House 2023b), especially in Hungary. Hence even though it is not necessarily about autocracies, it is essential to include this overview of the situation of the civil society in the region to help understand the current situation, which will be discussed in the later part of my thesis.

The first recurring theme from the descriptions of the area's civil sphere is the civil society's weakness (Petrova and Tarrow 2007; Marzec and Neubacher 2020; Gerő et al. 2020; Arato 1990). Meaning that the citizens of these states are overwhelmingly not part of any civil organizations; they are distanced from advocacy and skeptical about their ability to directly affect the policies of their society or, among many other things, cynical about the possibilities lying within civil society (Petrova and Tarrow 2007). What is interesting about this finding is that it contradicts the role of civil society and environmental issues as key drivers in the regime change, especially in Hungary, where the protests against the Bős-Nagymaros dams became a movement for the broader cause of regime change (Mikecz 2017). Also important to note that the weakness of the civil society was understood in comparison with the long-established democratic societies of the West. And it was found problematic because, as I mentioned before, civil society was considered one of the critical factors in keeping the democratic order, functioning as checks and balances or watchdogs for democracy (Toepler et al. 2020).

The arguably weak civil society of the countries did not mean that the different forms of civil organizations did not show up in the CEE area. The democratization of the Eastern European countries brought a wave of establishing West-induced civil movements, non-governmental organizations, and nonprofits (Petrova and Tarrow 2007). While the goal was arguably to strengthen the freshly formed democratic institutions, it supported the narrative that the East's priority was to close up on the West and hindered the organic development of civil society (Gille 2010). This process of NGO-isation which included the environmental sector too (Waller 2010), meant that Western-style organizations were established in the region with a "top-down" approach, so these organizations did not emerge from the given countries' civil

society. Hence they lacked the embeddedness and strong ties to it (Waller 2010). This process, also called the "professionalization of NGOs", was exacerbated by the relatively quick accession of CEE states to the European Union (Börzel and Buzogány 2010). This chain of events created a feedback loop in the region where the NGOs did not have to tighten their connections to the public, resulting in weak embeddedness in society, meaning less support and protection for the organizations (Petrova and Tarrow 2007). The people were also not very active in utilizing these NGOs as a bridge between them and the state. This mechanism is still determining the civil society of the area today.

According to a body of scholarship on the region's civil society, there are countering findings to the trends I described. The presence of grassroots movements has become significant, especially in the urban areas of the region (Jacobsson 2015), just like other new innovative solutions in civil society, which shows a recent advancement away from "NGO-isation" and the creation of an "own way" narrative instead of the discussed "catching up with the West narrative (Fagan and Sircar 2017; Saxonberg 2016). While the trend is more relevant to movements than NGOs, there is a connection since for example in Hungary, there are signs of "social movement-ization" of NGOs (Gerő et al. 2023). This means that some NGOs seemingly pay more attention to community building and step on a path of transformation into social movements. In my research, I analyzed if this is true for the ENGOs I worked with, but I could not find evidence of this transformation.

The weakness of civil society is also challenged by scholars saying that while volunteering and advocacy might not be as common in the region as in more established democracies, the specialized NGOs and movements have something else. Some describe it as a generally good relationship with the elite (Fagan 2005) others describe it as a different style of activism called "transactional activism" (Petrova and Tarrow 2007). According to Petrova and Tarrow's theory, the ties between the nonstate actors, them and the state, and other stakeholders and institutions who are involved in any way in the social scene are just as crucial

as participatory activism, what is the actual people who join a fight for a cause. The theory is especially interesting regarding the current situation of Hungarian ENGOs because, as I describe in my "Case study" section and results, autocratization in Hungary restructured rules of cooperation with the state and other stakeholders. While the theory is widely used as a framework for many studies (Commercio 2022; Soare and Tufiş 2021), critical voices call for more empirical evidence of the theory (Mazák and Diviák 2018).

2.2.3 Closing space for civil society?

One of the main goals of the frequently cited work of Topler et al. (2020) is to provide some insights into how the opportunities of civil society are changing on a global scale. It is a fundamental question of my research as well, but on a much smaller scale; hence the short discussion of the topic should be included in this literature review.

The authors effectively demonstrate that civil society is being subjected to a growing number of laws and restrictions on a global scale (Rutzen 2015). However, the research on civil society under autocratic regimes suggests that this process might only mean the loss of opportunity for one civil society group. They identify them as the "claims-making NGOs"(2020) opposing governments and regimes in different countries. They argue that this change is favoring other groups of civil society who are more willing to adapt their aims and operations to the new rules and who are, above all else, more depoliticized (Kuti and Marschall 2022) and keep the distance from topics that are especially important for the regimes. My research concluded similar findings about the current situation of NGOs under a hybrid regime.

The literature on the status of civil society in Hungary suggests that the above-mentioned "closing space" is significantly affecting the current situation of ENGOs in my research. While I provide further information on the status of civil society and environmentalism in Hungary in the "Case study" section of my thesis, it is essential to discuss the topic here and connect the global trend with the subject of my study.

A recent study by Márton Gerő et al. (2023) discusses in great detail how Hungary's closing political opportunity structure is affecting civil society. In their research, they point out various methods of how the hybrid regime of Hungary advances in controlling civil society and how different organizations are reacting to these advances. They also highlight that these measures are affecting civil sectors differently based on how important they are from a political perspective. For example, as I also discuss later in the "Case study" section, human rights organizations perceive their situation as much more dire (Gerő et al. 2020) than the organizations in the environmental sector (Gerő et al. 2023). The study of Gerő et al. reveals the same dynamics in Hungary and how the closing structure for politically critical organizations can mean a growth in opportunities for organizations closer to the government.

2.3 Framing theory

2.3.1 What is framing?

The last layer of my theoretical framework is framing theory. The theory enabled me in my research to understand what ENGOs are trying to achieve and how they are doing it. Framing is a concept researched in various fields, including psychology, sociology, and communication sciences. To give a comprehensive description of framing, it is worth visiting these three approaches.

From a psychological or cognitive sciences approach, George Lakoff (2010) described framing as how the human brain functions. He summarized the current findings of the field as when humans think, they are usually doing it in "unconscious structures" that the scholars of the discipline call "frames" or "schemas". This means our understanding of everything is based on relations. In the word of Lakoff, *"Frames include semantic roles, relations between roles, and relations to other frames."*(Lakoff 2010, 71). So when we hear or talk about something, it activates not only one frame but other frames too related to that one. This illustrates well why it is so hard to change the well-established frames through communication and why seemingly unrelated topics can be attached to each other. From a communications perspective, Moser

(2016) arrives at the same conclusion. When humans hear or see something new, they heavily rely on their existing knowledge to understand it. This finding can be translated to a communication strategy meaning that communicators should always try to understand what their audience thinks and adapt their messages to it.

From a sociology point of view, Erving Goffman describes the same process as a "schemata of interpretation" that enables people to “locate, perceive, identify, and label"(Goffman 1974, 21) any information that they receive. While this definition elevates the psychological approach into the social sphere, it also highlights that frames are, in fact, interpretations of reality, suggesting everyone can have their own understanding of a given situation. Benford and Snow (2000) defined framing concerning movements as “*meaning work - the struggle over the production of mobilizing and countermobilizing ideas and meanings*.”(Benford and Snow 2000, 613). In my research, I mainly build on this last definition because it highlights the active role of movements or stakeholders in constructing these frames or, in other words, an agency in reality construction (2000).

Conceptualizing framing as meaning work allows understanding of how it is done by different stakeholders. Still building on Benford and Snow, the main tasks of this work when movements do it is to identify the issue that needs solving, explore the potential solutions available, and determine the optimal approach to encourage individuals to take action. Scholars tie the success of framing mainly to what extent it is in “resonance” with the audience or how much it can mobilize its audience, and the main factors of success are credibility and salience of a frame (Snow and Benford 1988).

Finding out how framing is done is also a topic of communication science. The definition of framing by Entman (1993) illustrates this endeavor well. According to his interpretation, framing is *“to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item*

described."(Entman 1993, 52). The definition offers a very practical understanding of framings usually connected to messaging and doing communication tasks. It is also traditionally used in media frame analysis which is included in my research but not the main focus as I describe it in the methods section of my thesis.

As I mentioned, this thesis is building on the more sociological approach because it shows that framing can be different for various individuals or groups, and it is an active process of creating meanings and interpretations through negotiation (Benford and Snow 2000) within and outside the movements and organizations. This is precisely how I can analyze in my research how ENGOs define themselves and their goals and how that is affected by the framing of the regime and other stakeholders.

2.3.2 Framing contests

The review of Benford and Snow (2000) also summarizes the processes of how framings are made. According to them, four processes can be distinguished, and usually, they are used simultaneously in movement framing. These processes are "discursive processes", "strategic processes", "contested processes" and frame diffusion. This thesis focuses on how the framing of the regime affecting the framing of ENGOs, so while all four processes appeared in the research, contested processing is the one that stands out. This type occurs because framing cannot be done independently from its surroundings. The intended frames are constantly challenged by counter-frames from outside, disagreements from inside, and actual events (Benford and Snow 2000).

When the process is examined through media analysis, a concept of framing contests or framing wars emerges (Carragee and Roefs 2004; Ihlen and Nitz 2008). This is basically a back-and-forth through media aiming to develop a dominant frame about a specific topic among a specific audience. These contests or wars, however, are seldom equal for all participants. As Entman (2003) illustrated, there is a hierarchy of power as a "cascading system" in these contests, with the state at the top. Meaning that the agent at the top of the hierarchy with the

most resources will more likely win the framing war and provide the "dominant frame"(Entman 2003). Other scholars describe it as "framing power", which is not only about resources but individual/organizational strengths and vulnerabilities, strategic alliances, and a stock of knowledge and skills (Dan and Ihlen 2011). The system is described as cyclical as well, however, this model emphasizes how agents of the contest affect each other frames', suggesting an equal field of the contest (Olmastroni 2014). The cited literature comprises case studies from countries with higher media freedom. It can be assumed that the framing power is much less diffused in the case of Hungary. This is why, in my research, I rely primarily on the more hierarchical concept of framing power.

This process can result in the temporary emergence of a dominant frame. If that frame is not what the party in focus intended, then some adaptation to the situation must emerge. The concept of frame alignment (Snow et al. 1986) describes this process as when a movement internalizes outside effects. Still, my research shows that sometimes framing contest results in the emergence of frames trying to define themselves outside stronger counter-frames.

2.4 Conclusion of literature review

The first layer of the theoretical framework and the literature review showed that the Hungarian political regime could be considered a hybrid regime based on various typologies, and the changing of the country's political landscape fits into the global trend of autocratization. Reviewing the literature on autocracies served as a base layer that enabled continuing my research on civil society only in autocratic or hybrid systems. The second layer of my literature review showcased the state of the art of scholarship on civil society in autocratic systems globally and their status in the CEE region and Hungary. This subchapter suggests a research gap generally on the civil society in autocratic or hybrid regimes in the CEE region and a gap in research focusing only on long-established ENGOs. The last layer of the theoretical framework provided the theoretical background for a framing analysis to understand how ENGOs conceptualize their work.

3 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

For my thesis, I conducted qualitative research, a case study on Hungarian ENGOs. I chose the participants of my research through purposeful and snowball sampling and collected my data mainly through conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews with the leaders and communications experts of long-established Hungarian ENGOs. Based on the collected information, I also performed document analysis on the campaigns and communications materials emerged as examples during the interviews. To analyze my data, I used coding and performed framing analysis to understand how the decision-makers and participants interpret their situation. The analysis revealed that even though my main focus was communication, the situation itself can be captured better through the description of a framing contest between the state and the ENGOs than communication strategies.

In this chapter, I'm describing in detail how I conducted this research on the case study of Hungarian ENGOs, what sampling methods I used, how I collected and analyzed my data, and at the end, I will mention the limits of my research and the ethical considerations of my research.

3.2 Research design approach

The aim of my research is to understand how the changing political environment affects the work and, initially, the communication of the environmental NGOs. There are many ways to answer this question. Capturing how this specific group of people who are working with these NGOs see or interpret their situation at this particular time is one that can lead to a comprehensive picture of their current situation, the most significant challenges they are facing in their day-to-day work, and also the biggest opportunities they see on their field. All of the decisions they are making can be traced back to their understanding of their situation, and these decisions will be the ones that determine how their organizations will navigate in the current

political situation. This is why I chose to do qualitative research since this type of research aims to understand *"how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world"*(Merriam and Tisdell 2016, 15).

My research question makes it possible to further narrow my research field and focus on a well-limited area. Thus conducting case study research is possible since case studies can be defined as an *"in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system."* (Merriam and Tisdell 2016, 37).

In my research, I am focusing on the Hungarian environmental NGOs. There are three main reasons why this case fits my research question. The first is the constantly changing nature of the political system. In Hungary, the regime is still under drastic changes heading towards an autocratic direction, and what is more important, this change is well documented (A. Antal 2019; Bánkuti, Halmai, and Scheppele 2012; Bozóki and Hegedűs 2018; Bíró-Nagy 2017; Buzogány 2017). The second reason is the existence of long-established ENGOs in the country that were active in the last thirty years, adapting and forming with all the system's changes. I provide a detailed description of both the political changes and the situation of civil society and environmentalism in the "About the case" chapter of the thesis. The plus one reason is that I lived most of my life in the country, which enabled a mutual understanding of the political and cultural context with my research participants.

This whole process of selecting the case can be described as the "first tier"(2016) of sampling, and I chose this case because of the sampling criteria. I decided to discuss the case study separately before the details of sampling to be able to provide sufficient reasoning why I chose to do a case study research.

3.3 Sampling

With the research, my goal is to gain insight and understand this specific case rather than make assumptions on the average. Following the reasoning of Merriam and Tisdell (2016),

an effective way to do this is to look for sources with the most insights on the current situation of ENGOs in Hungary. Thus my method can be characterized as purposeful sampling (2016). I also relied on my interviews to locate the key personnel and organizations of the field, and I was able to include some of them in my research. Thus the form of my purposeful sampling was snowball sampling (2016).

The criteria for finding my key participants were twofold. Because I am interested in Hungarian ENGOs, I had to decide which ones I should include in my research and determine what personnel I should include from each organization. My main criteria were that the organizations I work with should be long-established ones with the longest possible history of salient work in the field. In this case, organizations established and working continuously since the regime change of 1989. For the selection, I relied on various sources (Buzogány, Kerényi, and Olt 2022; Greenpeace Hungary 2017; Zöldcivil.hu 2023) and preliminary interviews. In the end, I settled on contacting three organizations. One of the three did not wish to participate in my research, so I started my interviews with Enargiaklub (Energy Club), an NGO established more than thirty years ago with the purpose of advocating for sustainable energy production and consumption (Energia Klub 2023), and Levegő Munkacsoport (Clean Air Action Group) one of the first environmental NGOs of the country with the purpose of advocating for better air quality and environmental justice in Hungary (Clean Air Action Group 2008). As for the personnel, I was aiming to be able to talk to more than one member of the organizations, at least one who is in a higher level of decision-making because they seemed to be a great source of insights, and one who is working with communications on the daily bases, because as I mentioned initially, that field was the focus of my research.

The snowball sampling method helped to identify other relevant personnel and organizations in the field, and it gave me a reason to broaden my sampling scope from NGOs with Hungarian origins to international environmental organizations. In the end, I included in my research two organizations that were mentioned as significant practitioners of

environmental communications. The first one is MTVSZ (National Society of Conservationists), an umbrella organization of Hungarian environmental organizations and movements, now a member of Friends of the Earth (National Society of Conservationists 2023). The second one is Greenpeace Hungary, the regional bureau of one of the world's best-known campaign-focused environmental organizations (Greenpeace Hungary 2023). Even though, based on the interviews, these organizations are arguably facing different challenges, especially from a financial perspective, they provided relevant insights on the Hungarian situation. The criteria for the sampling of personnel was the same as before.

3.4 Data collection

My research included seven semi-structured in-depth (Merriam and Tisdell 2016) interviews. Two of my interviewees were the leaders of ENGOs, three were the head of communications in their organizations, and two were communications officers. One of the communications officers was not a member of the NGO but an employee of a communications agency working with the NGO. He was recommended by one of the leaders of the NGO and could provide valuable insight as a PR expert and a long-term contributor to the work of the NGO. Thanks to the great variety of the interviewees' positions, I collected data on the point of view of personnel reliable for different levels of decision-making in the organizations.

The interviews were a little longer than one hour, except for two, which were approximately forty minutes long. Five were online because recording the conversations this way was much simpler, one was on the phone, and one was in person. With this last one, I was able to visit the headquarters of Energiaklub in Budapest and gain insight on the working environment of the NGO. The interviews followed five open-ended questions attached to my thesis in Appendix 1. Still, in most cases, the conversation structure followed the emerging themes to extract details, stories, and examples that were more telling about how they interpret their situation.

All the interviews started with informing the participants about my research topic and asking for their consent. For this purpose, a document was made, which was signed during the one live interview. The online and phone interviews started with asking permission to record the conversations and then proceeded with the briefing about the research. All the participants were informed about various anonymity options, and their choices were recorded too. After the conversations transcripts were made on all the interviews but one, when due to some technical difficulties, I could only write notes.

My research also included document analysis on the campaigns and programs brought up during the interviews as examples. These included news articles, social media sites, online videos, websites, and podcasts. A detailed description of these materials is in the results chapter of my thesis.

3.4.1 Participation in the "25 Years of Orbán" conference

I participated in a conference in Budapest in May to get a fuller picture of the state of the art on the regime among Hungarian political scientists ('Orbán 25 Éve: A Hatalom Bűvöletében [25 Years of Orbán: Under the Spell of Power]' 2023). The conference aimed to discuss the Prime Minister's career from his first term in office. Presentations were held by scholars cited in my thesis, like András Bozóki or Attila Antal. It turned out to be very useful in gaining a better understanding of the nature of the regime and seeing what theories and research are considered relevant in understanding and analyzing the political environment of Hungary at the moment.

3.5 Analysis

As the literature suggests, my analysis was done simultaneously with the data collection. It was done by coding my data and conducting a framing analysis of the campaign materials collected for the research. This resulted in finding new directions in my study, including new organizations in my sample and shifting the focus of my interviews from communication strategies to framing contests between the state and the NGOs.

3.5.1 Coding

According to Corbin and Strauss (2008), coding in qualitative research makes sense of the data or elevates raw information into concepts through various rounds of interaction with the data. My analysis follows the methodology of Williams and Moser (2019), including the three main stages of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

The first stage aimed to find the patterns emerging from my data. Since my interviews were semi-structured and based on open-ended questions, I could determine some directions in advance. I used these as a starting set of codes, which helped keep my analysis's general direction. This first round of open coding led to the identification of multiple themes and topics, which were further categorized in the second axial coding (2019) phase of the analysis. In this phase, my main objective was to find emerging topics and finalize my base codes by understanding the emerging codes' relationships. The third and last phase was the selective coding phase (2019), when the dominant themes were further categorized and abstracted to be able to form the "story" of the chase (2019). This last phase revealed that environmental communication might not be the most fitting theoretical frame for my research, as described in the latter part of my methods chapter.

These three stages did not necessarily happen in strict chronological order (2019). As I mentioned, during the open coding phase, I already had some themes and topics because of the structure of my interviews. Also, my continuous visitation of the data through the different steps led to new codes and issues that helped form the final narrative.

As a tool for coding, I used an online software called Delve because its simplicity helped me save precious time on learning a method with a steeper learning curve. Also, since it is a cloud-based technology, it provided extra security for my data. The software works on a monthly subscription system, which raises the question of what happens to my data if I end my subscription, but it is possible to extract the coding from the system and save it in various formats.

3.5.2 Framing analysis

I describe framing theory in the Literature Review chapter of the thesis. Here I only want to highlight the analysis I made on the communications materials mentioned during the interviews as relevant examples of how the organizations communicate about different environmental issues. While the interviews helped me understand how the organizations and the people working at the organizations conceptualize the issues, the framing analysis on the communications materials showed how they articulate the same topics.

3.6 Limitations of the research

The time constraints were significant on the research, so it was only possible to conduct interviews with a limited number of organizations, even though the interviews revealed many more personnel and organizations that could provide valuable insight for my research. Also, as I mentioned, some personnel I originally included in my sample did not wish to participate because they did not feel the focus of my study was relevant to them or simply because they did not have time. Also, as more than one interviewee mentioned that these months was one of the busiest time of the year in the work of an NGO, so conducting more extended interviews were not an option for most participants.

Regarding the sampling, initially, communications was a highlighted part of my research. However, the analysis of my interviews showed that while communications is an excellent tool to see the frames that ENGOs are using, their reaction to the political landscape is not restricted to their work on communications. In other words, if I'm not limiting my analysis to communications, I could give a more precise answer to my research question. However, my sampling still focused on the communications of ENGOs. This is why I chose to work with both communications officers and leaders of the ENGOs.

3.7 Ethical considerations

Because my research touched upon political issues, and there are known examples of personal attacks from the regime on the members of civil society, providing options for anonymity was a priority through my research. Besides a form, I also asked each interviewee on record about how they would prefer to be included in this research. All the participants, except for two, agreed to have their names included, and all agreed to have the names of their organizations included in this thesis. For citing one of the anonym interview, I will use the name “Máté” instead of the interviewee's real name, and for the other one, I will use the “representative of Energy Club” title. When they were asked if they perceive any danger by participating in the research, the answer was overwhelmingly negative.

The interviewees were provided with the opportunity to review the snippets cited from them in the thesis. This was necessary because it provided an extra guarantee of safety and also because the interviews were done in Hungarian, and this way, even the participants could make sure that the translation did not change what they said. Only four participants asked for minor changes in the wording of some of the snippets.

4 Case Study

4.1 Introduction

A basic understanding of their environment is necessary to understand the ENGOs' situation in Hungary. This chapter aims to provide a filtered overview of the Hungarian political landscape, focusing on the dimensions most vital to understand what frames the everyday work of ENGOs. The chapter will cover how the case of Hungary relates to the literature on autocracies and autocratization, what are the primary dynamics behind the "illiberal turn" of the regime with an emphasis on the polarized media landscape and the situation of civil society in the country, and finally how this regime under formation relates to environment currently.

4.2 A regime in transit

As I included in my literature review, Hungary is not considered a liberal democracy at this moment from an international perspective and by the regime itself. When I write "regime" I refer to the current governance of Hungary led by the prime minister Viktor Orban. The difference is that while the European parliament source describes it as an "electoral autocracy" (The President of the European Parliament 2022), the Hungarian prime minister proclaimed it an "illiberal democracy" (Orban 2014). Both capture the hybrid nature of the regime; the difference is framing it as a version of autocracy or democracy. To describe what is behind this categorization, I am outlining some of the practical steps and key moments in Hungary that formed the current political environment. My summary is based on the reports of Miklós Bánkuti and Halmai Gábor (2012), András Bíró-Nagy (2017), and the "25 Years of Orbán" conference I attended in Budapest on May 30th.

To truly understand the current political regime of Hungary, it would be most adequate to start its history at the regime change of 1989 when the social regime ended in the country. Even though this would exceed the extent of this chapter, it is essential to mention that Hungary was considered a frontrunner in democratic consolidation and in EU accession in the region

(Buzogány 2017). The end of the 2000s brought a series of political and economic crises that led to the Fidesz party's overwhelming victory in 2010 (Bíró-Nagy 2017). What came after is perfectly captured in the report of Miklós Bánkuti et al. (2012).

> "What happened in April 2010 amounted to a perfect storm battering Hungarian constitutionalism. The disproportionate election law translated Fidesz's 53 percent vote share into 68 percent of the seats in parliament. And with the easy constitutional-amendment rule, this two-thirds supermajority was big enough to change everything, which is what the ruling party set about doing. In its first year in office, the Fidesz government amended the old constitution twelve times, changing more than fifty separate provisions along the way. Many of these changes were designed to weaken institutions that might have checked what the government was going to do next, which was to impose upon Hungary a wholly new constitutional order using only ideas and votes from Fidesz."(Bánkuti, Halmai, and Scheppele 2012)

The change of the constitution was followed by other significant reforms and personnel changes, including further weakening the checks and balances, reconstructing the electoral system, or halving the number of ministry departments (Bíró-Nagy 2017; Buzogány 2017). The list is far from complete, but I would like to highlight in the following the drastic changes in the media landscape of Hungary and the situation of civil society in the regime because this is what is actively affecting the work of ENGOs.

4.3 Changing media landscape

Just as building a hybrid regime started before 2010, the formation of the media landscape can be dated back to the 90s. During these years and mainly after the first election won by the Fidesz party in 1998, it started to build a narrative on how the media is dominated by the "left-liberals" (Bátorfy and Urbán 2020), which hegemony must be broken. This meant the starting point of building their own "media empire" for the "right", according to their narrative, to counterbalance the domination of the opposite political side (2020). Losing the elections in 2002 and in 2006 made this endeavor even more important. During these years, Fidesz was able to advance with building its media empire, even though up until 2010, this era still can be characterized by "multi-party control over the media" (Bajomi-Lázár 2013). This means that the media rules and regulations guaranteed some influence on the media for all of

the parties, while the regulatory regime was able to step in when one party would have too much influence (2013). Becoming the supermajority in the parliament in 2010 brought the new Media Constitution and a Multimedia Act that regulates the whole of the media, and a new supervising institute called the National Media and Telecommunications Authority (NMHH), which members were selected by the party (2013). This meant that one party practically gained control over the media in Hungary, which, from the point of view of this thesis, most importantly enabled them to frame any topic as freely as possible for the broadest audience.

This centralization of the media landscape reached another critical milestone in 2018 when the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA) was established. Thanks to the declaration of the project as "national strategic importance" the usual media and competition law did not prevent bringing 476 media outlets under one management (Nolan 2019). As Gábor Polyák, the head of Mérték Média Monitor, stated in Dan Nolan's article: "All regional dailies belong to the Fidesz media conglomerate now."(2019). This led to a situation where local newspapers all around the country started to appear with the same front pages (Erdelyi 2019), and nationwide political topics became more prominent than local issues (Nolan 2019). All these changes enabled the regime to broadcast their unfiltered messages and framing to the widest audiences in Hungary while it has also reduced the opportunities to appear the classic media outlets for divergent messages and framings.

Another significant result connected to changing the media landscape is the polarization of the public sphere and society (Polyák 2019). Polyák captures this development precisely in the concluding remarks of his cited essay and points at further implications of the polarization.:

> "Public discourse has become extremely polarised since 2010, and as a result, the respective audiences of government-friendly and of critical media encounter antithetical and mutually contradictory interpretations of reality." (Polyák 2019, 297)

As I describe in the results part of my thesis, these “contradictory interpretations of reality” affect how the audience perceives and thinks about environmental issues or the work of ENGOs and how the environmental organizations adapt to the changing media landscape.

4.4 The situation of civil society

The regime also views civil society organizations and NGOs as unwanted influencers of domestic affairs (Bíró-Nagy 2017). Over the twelve years of the regime, from 2010 until today, the civil society space has arguably become more closed, as I will describe in this paragraph, thanks to the reconstruction of the funding system of civil organizations and the campaign against civil society (Gerő et al. 2020). In my literature review, I discussed the situation of the NGOs in the CEE region. Building on that, I will describe what happened explicitly in Hungary after 2010.

The first significant change towards closing was changing the founding of civil organizations (Gerő et al. 2020; Vándor et al. 2017). Significant milestones of the process are the Civil Act in 2011 that restricted what organizations' work can count as public benefit (Vándor et al. 2017). The title that used to be available for a broad group of organizations became only applicable to civil society organizations whose services can be characterized as a government task (2017). Another significant change in legislation was transforming the National Civil Found (Nemzeti Civil Alapprogram) into the National Cooperation Found (Nemzeti Együttműködési Alap), which meant reduced funding options for civil organizations, just because of the sheer volume of the founding they provided and because the regime chose the leadership of the new body (Gerő et al. 2020). These weren’t the only changes regarding the funding of civil organizations, but they illustrate how seriously the situation of organizations was altered.

The next significant milestone was what is captured by scholars as the harassment of civil organizations (Kopper et al. 2017). The main characteristic of this attack was labeling civil organizations that received foreign funds as “foreign agents” aiming to tamper with the national

affairs of the country and peaked with a public listing of names of the people accused of being on the foreign "payroll" (Gerő et al. 2020). The attack was delivered through political communication, intimidation of the organization through police raids, and climaxed in adapting the "Act LXXVI of 2017 on the transparency of foreign-funded organizations" or "LexNGO" (Bárd 2020). The law's stated aim was to ensure greater transparency on the foreign funds of the organizations and was applicable above a certain, arguably low amount of money received. It included registering the organizations as recipients of foreign support, listing the supporters' names, and the amount of their donations. The organizations had to label themselves as foreign-supported organizations on their websites and releases too (2020). While "LexNGO" was repealed due to its violation of EU law (Amnesty International 2021), another version, the "Act XLIX of 2021 on the Transparency of Organisations Carrying out Activities Capable of Influencing Public Life" or "LexNGO2021" was adopted, that still enables the State Audit Office to carry out irregular inspections on specific organizations (Novoszádek 2022). While, arguably, environmental organizations were less affected by these attacks, the laws affected their operation too.

The previously discussed steps show that the environment for all the civil society organizations, including the ENGOs of my study, has changed. That means, even if the goals and mission of the long-established organization did not change, they were forced to adapt to the new situation and make some adjustments in their operations, especially regarding their source of income, and made searching for new possible partners to cooperate with more critical.

4.5 Environmentalism

How the regime is relating environmentalism is a controversial topic. On the one hand, there is a series of institutional reforms showing how the regime is dismantling environmentalism (Krasznai Kovacs and Pataki 2021); on the other hand, today, the regime openly supports sustainability and addresses climate change (A. Antal 2021). This provides an interesting situation for the ENGOs. While their goals to promote sustainability in various fields

of life in general match with the goals of the regime, as I describe it in the following chapter based on the interviews, but the relaxation of environmental governance hinders public accountability, and the organizations' work can be limited when political decision overwrite ecological concerns.

To back my statement on how the regime has advanced in dismantling environmentalism in Hungary, I list some main structural changes in environmental governance since 2010. After Fidesz became a supermajority, it started restructuring and downsizing the governance. Closing the Ministry of Environment and Water was part of this process, and it is regarded as one of the most drastic steps in restructuring environmentalism in the country (Krasznai Kovacs and Pataki 2021). The ministry did not wholly disappear, but together with nature conservation, it was transferred to the Ministry of Rural Development or Ministry of Agriculture (2021). The structure of environmental governance underwent significant changes during the last five new administrations, but as of today, there is still no independent Ministry of Environment in Hungary. In the process of downsizing, the position of the Ombudsman for Future Generations has been transformed to a deputy-commissioner position under the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights (Environmental Rights Database n.d.). The Ombudsman's role was to challenge the parliament's decisions that threatened the right of future generations to a healthy environment. Thanks to the restructuring, its independence has significantly decreased (A. Antal 2021). According to Antal, since 2010, the nature inspectorates that were independent before have come under political influence as well (2021).

In conclusion, while the regime still addresses environmental issues, the environmental governance's apparent fragmentation guarantees a decreased bargaining power compared to other concerns. ENGOs had to adapt to this new structure as well to be able to deliver their role in policy advocacy. The next chapter covers how they see the current situation of cooperation with the regime.

The absence of discussion on how the previous governments in Hungary handled environmental issues does not mean that they handled them perfectly; it is merely a consequence of this thesis's focus on the current situation of environmental NGOs. Besides, writing the whole history of environmental governance in Hungary would exceed the limits of this work.

2019 marks a year of a "green turn" of the regime. According to Antal, until 2019, the regime had a so-called "anti-green" agenda, partially based on the restructuring of the environmental governance, and also because the regime interpreted climate change as part of the "Western liberal agenda", and as such, something to oppose (A. Antal 2021). By the end of 2019, with climate change becoming a major topic in the public discourse, the regime accepted its legitimacy and created its own climate agenda and the Climate Protection Plan (Vaski 2020), a document covering how the government reacts to the climate crisis. This turn is relatively new, and since then, the overlapping COVID, war, energy, and economic crises overshadowed the topic of environment, so it is still the question of the future if this turn stays within the realm of political communication or reaches the policy level. The ENGOs in my research welcomed these turn of events and overwhelmingly perceived them as positive turn of events, as I will describe in the next chapter.

4.6 Conclusion of case study

To summarize the environment of the ENGOs, they function in a political system currently under formation and going through drastic changes showing characteristics of a closing system with decreasing transparency of decision-making. An essential element of this transforming system is the centralized and highly polarized media landscape with elaborate direct communication channels between the regime and a broad audience and a high level of political content in news cycles. Polarization is not only restricted to the media but the public as well. Civil society is stigmatized as "foreign agents", there is a realistic hazard of harassment by the government, and civil founding has decreased significantly under the current regime.

However, the closing space of civil society affects the environmental field less. The regime is now openly environmentally friendly regarding climate change, but the environmental governance has been drastically changed and weakened by fragmentation since 2010. These changes all happened over the last twelve years and affected the ENGOs' framing position and work. In the next chapter, I describe how.

5 Autocracy and Hungarian ENGOs

5.1 Introduction

> "Well, in today's Hungarian reality, we have to pay attention to what and how an NGO communicates, but we didn't start yesterday." (pers. comm. Máté)

In this chapter, I present the findings of the in-depth interviews and the document analysis. The chapter aims to demonstrate the relevant information extracted from the interviews to answer the question: *"How do Hungarian ENGOs perceive their constraints and opportunities, and how do they conceptualize or frame their work in the context of an increasingly autocratic regime?"*. The structure of the chapter will follow the dynamics of the framing contest between the regime and the ENGOs from the latter's point of view. First, I present how the ENGOs in my research frame themselves and environmental topics as independent from politics and how this enables them to shift between opposition to or cooperation with the regime on different issues. Next, I will discuss how they perceive this position is challenged by the regime through the contest framing of civil society and various environmental topics. Based on the framing and counter-framing of ENGOs, I will describe the power imbalance between the regime and the organization and how this status quo shapes the work of the organizations.

5.2 How ENGOs frame themselves and the environment

All of the organizations in the research described themselves and the whole topic of the environment as something that is not characterized by politics. This framing has three different dimensions for the participants of the research. The first one is how the majority of the interviewees saw the environment itself as something beyond politics. The second dimension is closer to how the organizations define themselves as detached from politics or the political independence of the ENGOs. The third dimension is how most participating organizations describe themselves as res or professionals.

5.2.1 The environment as something beyond politics

At least one interviewee from each NGO mentioned that the environment and their various missions and goals related to environmental issues are or should be "beyond politics". There are several different explanations for what does this exactly mean. András, the communications manager of Greenpeace Hungary, phrased it in a way that implies it should be beyond politics because it affects everyone hence should not be divided by politics*: "In an ideal world, it is everyone's common interest to live on a livable planet."* (pers.comm.). This logic was also present in the other interviews. The mission and main task their organization is working for is the common interest of everyone, while politics was used in this relation as something that divides people. Directly rooted in this logic, on a more pragmatic level, they see framing the environment as something "above" the political sphere, where it does not matter if someone is voting right or left, as a tool to reach the widest audience possible. Or, as Krisztina (pers.comm.) mentioned:

> "Our posts or statements should not be judged based on whether they are right-wing or left-wing because then we will lose one side. Also, a right-winger and a left-winger can be addressed similarly on climate protection and energy efficiency."

Another way to express this separation of politics and environment was to say they are radicals in their principles instead of being radicals as an opposing political force. The world they are working for, which is based on moderation and reducing consumption, is so different from today's situation that it is beyond politics. As Máté (pers.comm.) stated:

> "We say that we are a radical organization only in our principles. Nowadays, it can be said that we should live in moderation and reduce our consumption. But when we said it ten or fifteen years ago, it was not really possible, you could not mention such things in the mainstream political or professional debates."

The third and last perspective on why the environment and working on environmental issues is above politics is because, according to one interviewee, politics is about gaining power, while when someone is working for something perceived as a common good, there is

no one to gain power from. In other words, in their framing, ENGOs do not wish to participate in the fight over power, which according to this perspective, is the very essence of politics. This position can be considered a defense tactic against the accusation and agitation of the regime on civil society, which I covered in the case study section of my thesis. Framing NGOs as "foreign agents" whose real goal is to overthrow the regime legally elected by the Hungarian people is a frequently appearing topic in the media. From the ENGOs' side, declaring that they are not interested in taking power or tampering with the political power, especially in favor of the opposition, is an understandable response to tackle these accusations. On the other hand, having a saying in environmental questions is actually a form of power that they wish to separate from the political parties' power struggle. As I will describe in the counter-framing part of this paragraph, there is little space for separation from the state in a semi-autocratic regime.

5.2.2 The political independence of ENGOs

This distance from party politics becomes even more pronounced when it comes to how organizations define themselves. All the organizations highlighted their "political independence", which again has slightly different meanings for all interviewees. However, stating their independence from both political sides was almost always the first reaction to any topics or questions about current politics.

It was also common among the long-established ENGOs with Hungarian origins that one of their main arguments for their independence was that they worked under many different governments over their existence, and their position did not change. As Katalin (pers.comm.) stated:

> "We emphasize that we are independent and that the best proof is that we are always seen as the opposition. But we have been so in every regime."

Others also brought up the continuity of their work backed with the notion that it is not the ENGOs' work to question the legitimacy of a government that the people elected. They see

their task as keeping a position that lets them "sit down" with any decision-maker who has a say in the environmental topics they are interested in. This means that the decision-makers do not see them as opposition but as partners that can provide practical help and insights. As I will describe in the latter part of this chapter, this usually means that NGOs are not seen as activists but as professionals.

On a tactical level, this means keeping a distance from anything that can indicate commonality or commitment to any political party. Some examples on this matter were not using or mentioning political slogans, not accepting any sponsorships, or not differentiating between the sides of the polarized media.[2] This does not mean that sometimes their aims and goals align with the goals of the ruling or the opposition parties. To keep their credibility in these situations, they prefer to highlight that they are organizations truly supporting the issues, not the parties. The continuity of their work, pursuing the same goals and communicating the same messages over the years can back the claim of independence. On the other hand, as I will describe it in the "Asymmetries of the framing power… section", the public discourse's deep political polarization greatly challenges their frame of independence.

The participants also highlighted that independence works both ways, not only in the direction of the current government. A very telling example of the importance of this independence framing that Ákos and Katalin (pers.comm.) mentioned is the "Új Lánchíd" (New Chain Bridge) campaign ("Új Lánchíd" 2023). The campaign was started by more than twenty civil organizations, professional associations, and informal associations to reframe and challenge the political campaign initiated by the Municipality of Budapest ("Védjük meg Budapestet!" 2023), what is currently led by Gergely Karácsony, one of the most influential politicians of the opposition. The campaign was called the "Budapest Residents' Meeting". The

[2] The interviewees mentioned how sometimes they have exact goals to appear in various newspapers or journals, mostly to be able to address a specific target audience. Here I refer to cases when their aim is to reach the widest audience possible, so, they send out their press releases to a great number of outlets including the ones that are considered to be close to the regime. Then, it is the outlets decision to publish their release or not.

city's campaign was initially about the new traffic order on the freshly renovated Chain Bridge, with the possibility of restricting cars from using the bridge and letting only taxis, public transport, bikes, and pedestrians use it. According to the interviews, the civil sphere decided to start their own campaign and own vote simultaneously with the campaign and vote of the municipality because in the latter, two out of four questions were not about the bridge or the new traffic order, instead it had political messages against the ruling regime. These two extra questions and partially a third one about the bridge were all surveying the opinion of citizens on the increased amount of money that the government is collecting from the city, which, according to the campaign, hazards the uninterrupted functioning of some of the most vital services of the city like public transport or waste management. The civil organizations felt and stated that the aim to include people in the decision on the new traffic order on the bridge had faded, and the opposition's political agenda had taken over the vote. Not to mention the danger of being framed as a part of the opposition in a political sense because some of the organizations were active participants in the preliminary work on the vote of the municipality. A snippet from the declaration on the matter by the Clean Air Action Group perfectly illustrates the position of the civil organizations:

> "POLICY INSTEAD OF PARTY POLITICS!
>
> The city government has not taken a firm decision on the maintenance of the car-free zone. In April, the capital announced the so-called Budapest Residents' Meeting, in which the city government asked for the opinion of Budapest residents not only on the future of the Chain Bridge, but also on other issues.
>
> On behalf of the undersigned NGOs, we declare that we do not wish to play a part in party politics, as our priority is the cross-party political issue of the New Chain Bridge. We want to approach the debate on the Chain Bridge on professional grounds, not along political raptures. We, therefore, note the other questions raised at the Residents' Meeting but remain independent. Our campaign is solely about the New Chain Bridge." (Clean Air Action Group 2023)

5.2.3 Expert or professional framing

All the organizations with Hungarian roots expressed their goal to be seen as "experts" or "professionals" in their field. This frame is related to the global trend of NGO

professionalization (Marberg, Korzilius, and van Kranenburg 2019), what I mentioned in the literature review, and there were some mentions of the trade-off between being an activist and a professional. Still, according to the interviews, it is more about the differentiation from politics, it is also a type of communication, and restricting the focus area of the organization.

Again being an expert seemed like someone who is not following any political agenda, but their work is based on scientific goals and means. This lets one enjoy all the positive outcomes of their independency that I mentioned with the previous framing, but it also enables them to be a reliable or even objective voice in their respective areas. As Máté (pers.comm.) summarized it:

> "I think it is important to avoid party political slogans and to communicate with the appropriate professionalism. I think that to this day, both decision-makers and the public and journalists too, understand our position."

While most of the organizations seemed to seek both strengthening ties with the public and keeping the opportunity open for cooperation with the regime, there were mentions about the trade-off between having strong links to civil society or to the decision-makers. In this sense, the self-frame of "expert" seemed to have an opposite meaning to being an activist. As the representative of Energy Club (pers.comm.) stated:

> "In general, you cannot be an independent, objective, professional organization and be an activist at the same time as these two institutions, their goals and tools, as well as their role and expediency to the society, are very different in their nature."

The last take on being an expert, mainly emphasized by one of the smaller ENGOs, is a strategic approach to limit the scope of their work. The logic behind it is that a limited field of operation lets them achieve more than a broader field of work. At the time of the research, Energy Club was in the second year of implementing a new strategy of focusing on a selection of issues related to sustainable energy, like changing the policy on wind power in Hungary, while according to the interviewees, the organization had much broader goals as advocating for sustainable energy in general. They are also focusing more on the ties with the Ministry of

Energy, aiming to strengthen their position as advisors, which resembles the dynamics of NGO professionalization covered in the literature review. According to them, this kind of professional expert or advising position will more likely leads to real changes through policy.

For many being an expert also meant a communication style towards decision-makers and the public. For some, this meant a hardship because they felt that while it is essential to stay credible in the eyes of the audience and the decision-makers, it is harder to get people's attention or communicate their messages. The dilemma of being "cute" versus being "accurate" seemed to be a shared challenge by many of the organizations, and it showed a high correlation with the importance of expert framing. This problem most of all reflects the hardships in communicating with more than one different audiences at once. It is evident, particularly on the social media platforms of certain organizations, that posts concerning popular or likable subjects tend to receive more likes and views than those addressing technical matters. A good example is two posts coming out on July 14. on the Facebook page of MTVSZ. One was about a bird, a little bittern, with beautiful pictures and a short description of the species. The other one was about a decision of the European Parliament on a crucial step leading to the ratification of the nature restoration regulation. The first post gained above 600 reactions, while the policy post gained 16. This is understandable from the point of view of how social media works and the public's point of view, but a nice post on a cute bird cannot communicate the organization's professionalism as effectively as reporting on an important milestone of environmental policy. This problem is even more visible when it comes to the communication of more specialized organizations like Energy Club. In their case, the field of their work is not making it possible to include communications on popular or easy topics like cute animals.

In conclusion, in the following table, I collected how ENGOs want to be framed and how they are not. This could help discuss what they can achieve through these framings.

ENGOs are…	ENGOs are not…
politically independent	on any political side
experts	activists
professional	"cute"
in opposition under every regime	the opposition in the parliament
partners	"boot-licker"
radical in their values	radicals
working for the common interest	working according to a political agenda

Table 1.: Framing of the ENGOs.

5.3 Cooperation and opposition

The reason why it is so vital for ENGOs to frame themselves independently from the political framing successfully is that it enables them to take the role of both partners and opposition. Being able to do the first one is vital to the success of projects when there is space for cooperation with the decision-makers. The second one is also just as important when there is no opportunity for working together or when they feel the need to criticize decisions or situations. ENGOs' political independence frame secures a broader space for cooperation. At the same time, it does not hinder the credibility of the organizations in the public eye, which is vital for the watchdog role. In the following pages, I will describe in detail how the organizations define themselves as partners or cooperators and opposition.

5.3.1 Cooperation

In their interpretation, it is a unique feature of the environmental field that their goals generally align with the regime's aims. This means that the state also aims to become sustainable or, in more general terms, to create and preserve a healthy environment for the citizens. This, in general, creates more opportunities for cooperation even in a system perceived as relatively closed to civil society by them as well. This difference is especially stark in comparison with other fields of civil society (Gerő et al. 2020). As Máté (pers.comm.) stated:

> "For the other civil sector, we have the ease of communication. Our goal - on a general communication level - is the same as most of the decision-makers: protection of environment, sustainability, and climate protection."

Besides this generally exceptional position within civil society, all organizations reported a current increase in opportunities to cooperate with the regime. This means they were involved in decision-making processes and committees they were not invited before. Some examples are the Anti-Corruption Round Table, the National Climate Plan revision, Monitoring Committee, and the discussion over the National Energy and Climate Protection policy. While most of them welcomed this turn of events, which also dictates that these opportunities are indeed more scarce than they used to be, some implied their concerns about the actual effect on decisions and the longevity of these opportunities. Important to understand the current situation with the EU. At the moment, proportions of the cohesion found and the recovery found are being held back on account of corruption and issues around judicial independence (Sorgi 2023). Some interviewees saw a connection between the increasing number of opportunities for civil society cooperation and the inspection of Hungary.

There are also reported limits on this cooperation. According to the interviewees, one of the main problems is rooted in the ambiguity of the system. Undisclosed information, the political hierarchy, the lack of transparent decision-making, and the overall lack of transparency in the regime were some issues the various ENGOs faced during cooperation with the government. For example, the representative of Energy Club (pers.comm.) mentioned some hardships coming from the undisclosed information on the Paks 2 nuclear energy project, which I will describe in more detail later.

> "Well, I'm also an engineer, so if I say 4 then I can show you that it's 4 because it's 2 + 2. The problem with Paks 2 is that the documents are classified, they don't give out information, so how can I take a credible position on something if I don't know the details myself?"

The difference between "political" and "professional" decisions and dynamics was also important here. From one of the examples of Krisztina (pers.comm.), it turned out that even in

successful cooperation, when the decision reaches a "political level", it becomes unreachable for them. Her example was the discussion on changing the legislation on wind power. In 2016 the Hungarian government implemented legislation forbidding the construction of new wind turbines within a 12 km radius of any human habitat. As a result, it is currently not possible to build any new wind turbines in Hungary (Szőke 2023). There is no geographical point in Hungary that is outside of this zone. According to the representatives of Energy Club, the legislation will indeed change soon, but they could not tell when because of the "political" nature of the decision. Why this very technical question is a political decision, they could only guess. Krisztina's (pers.comm.) summary illustrates the ambiguity of cooperation with the regime well.

> "[...] we have also sent the studies [on wind power in Hungary] to the ministry […]. We have continued discussions with the ministry. But the draft legislation has not been published yet[...]. At the discussions between the ministry and NGOs, what is the situation with the legislation on wind energy. And the answer was: it's already at a higher level of decision-making."

While most of the interviews reported an opening in the cooperation, others also said there is a significant decrease in lobbying. Because of the closeness of the system that I described in the literature review and case study sections, it is hard to tell where and by whom decisions are made. It is virtually impossible to persuade the decision-makers if it's unclear who should be persuaded, and when decisions are made on a "political level", it also means that the main motivations and causes are only known by a small group of top decision-makers (M. Antal 2019). Some even said lobbying and advocacy-based decisions are virtually non-existent in the current regime, but both are much less effective than they used to be. The cause of this contradiction can be the difference between the tactics or personal contacts of the different organizations within the system.

5.3.2 Opposition

During the interviews, the ENGOs defined their position of opposing decisions or policies as something "outside" of politics. As I described before, their emphasis on

differentiation from party politics seemed especially important in expressing criticism. As András (pers.comm.) described it:

> "It's not the parties that are the problem. It's when a political force in power keeps making decisions that go against our common interest, which is the protection of nature."

In the "Coutner-framing specific environmental topics as political" section, I bring examples of topics like "nuclear power" or "transportation in Budapest", which are very close to the political agenda. These examples illustrate the struggles ENGOs are experiencing when they function as "opposition" in issues that are hard to separate from party politics.

The continuity of the position of ENGOs as watchdogs for the environment was used to describe how the organizations frame themselves as opposition and justify their political independence in this position. This means that the fact that they critiqued every government during their existence proves that their position is beyond actual politics. To back their framing, the majority said they would not change the focus of their overall work. Still, some also reported more minor compromises, like changing the timing of the communication of topics when it has too much unwanted political attention. This way, they can avoid being conflated with any parties. An example of this technique is how the Clean Air Action group handled the communication of one of their projects with schools during a wave of protests for education. The case is described in the next section of this chapter.

This role also means that what they do is not only aiming to persuade the political decision-makers, but when cooperation is not possible, they seek other ways to make an impact. This reportedly means looking for different stakeholders who can affect the outcome in a given situation. For example, when Energy Club did not find the growth of renewables satisfactory tried to make more space by working directly with local authorities and municipalities. Or the Clean Air Group reported that they always emphasized the importance of going directly to

people and communicating with them face-to-face. The EU and other international powers are also mentioned as directions to go when there is no openness from the side of the policymakers.

Some interviewees noted that if they imagined an ideal system, the decision-makers would value constructive criticism more. In their understanding, the contestation of ideas should help reach a solution acceptable to a greater number of people.

5.4 Counter-framing the ENGOs position

In the following, I will discuss how the regime contests the framing of the ENGOs. The data I base this part on is also collected through the same interviews, so it is more precise to call it how the ENGOs perceive how the regime frames them. The main finding is that the ENGOs' differentiation from politics is contested on two levels. The first level is contesting or overtaking some of the environmental topics the ENGOs are working with, and the second level is questioning the independence of the organizations.

5.4.1 Counter-framing specific environmental topics as political

Even though the environmental civil sector is not the closest to politics (Gerő et al. 2023), the regime also creates narratives on various environmental topics. As I already mentioned in the "Opposition" section of the chapter, according to the interviews, this can change the timing and the communication of these subjects, or in extreme cases, it can even make some issues "untouchable". During the discussions, counter-framing was mainly talked about through examples of topics that, in the interpretation of the interviewees, were owned by the regime. In the following section, I will discuss some of these examples.

The environment itself was mentioned as an example. According to András (pers.comm.), *"there is a tendency in Hungary to think about the environment as a resource waiting to be exploited"*. This is obviously going against the framing of the civils. One prominent topic reported to be entirely owned by the framing of the regime was nuclear power. Thanks to the controversies around the Paks 2 project, a major expansion of the only Hungarian

nuclear power plant (Péter 2015), and the unyielding determination of the regime to execute the project, open discussion of the topic became impossible. According to the interviews, while the project itself is the single most important decision on the future of energy in Hungary, it became nearly impossible to talk about it as an expert because of the political framing and lack of transparency on the project. As the representative of Energy Club (pers.comm.) said:

> "Paks 2 has become an anti-government symbol. As an energy professional, this is very painful for me because I can no longer speak objectively about it because at that moment, I am either an agent of foreign interest or a puppet of the propaganda."

The citation highlights again that when the ENGOs talk about political independence, they are not only meaning independence from the regime but also from the opposition. Using the topic of transportation for political goals is also an excellent example of this. In recent years, especially in Budapest, transportation has become a focus point of the political agenda and communication. The two Chain Bridge campaigns I described before are a good example, but according to Katalin (pers.comm.), the whole topic of cycling or car use in the cities, a traditional topic of the Clean Air Action group, became a political question. In the campaign leading to the 2022 general elections, a smear campaign was conducted on Gergely Karácsony, a frontrunner candidate of the opposition, centered around the constant traffic jams in Budapest. The campaign included a heavy bombardment of voters in the area with paid advertisement videos on Youtube for example, framing the issue of traffic in the city entirely as it was caused by the "anti-car" agenda of the candidate (Budapest Beszél 2021). This resulted in a situation where the organization's work against incentivizing car usage in densely populated areas gained strong connections to the "left-wing" political agenda in the public eye.

Sometimes the framing of the ENGOs is not directly contested, but other political questions can affect their work. In previous years, there was a sweep of protests and strikes by teachers against low payment and structural changes in education (Askew 2022). The political regime generally did not comply with the claims of the movement. While the topic is not

directly addressed by the organizations in my study and cannot be considered an environmental issue in the classical sense, it still affected the annual Clean Cities Project of the Clean Air Action Group. The project included a demonstration by schools to raise awareness of the importance of car-free zones around schools. According to Ákos (pers.comm.), the organization decided to reduce the scope and change the timing of the demonstration to avoid any possibility of understanding the demonstration for a safer environment around schools as part of the general protest for better conditions for teachers and education.

5.4.2 Counter-framing ENGOs' political independence

The attack on the civil society I described in the "Case Study" chapter also affects green organizations. One of the focus points of the attack was the funding of the organizations. Any foreign funds meant the danger of being framed as a "foreign agent" or simply as the enemy. However, the label stuck to the whole civil society to some extent. "Dark green" and "sorosista" (under the influence of George Soros) were some of the adjectives that were pushed by the regime and were used in different contexts to the organizations in the media or by the people. At the same time, the organizations of the research reported that this enemy framing did not affect them as drastically as some other territories of civil society, like, for example the human rights organizations (Gerő et al. 2020). None of them mentioned personal attacks, but three out of the four organizations brought up some instances when they were characterized as the enemy and used the previously mentioned adjectives on them.

These were described as they were coming from media outlets with strong ties to the regime and from the people mainly through social media or during fieldwork. The closing media space means both fewer opportunities for appearing in media outlets and a wider space for counter-framing of political independence. As Katalin (pers.comm.) explained:

> "We were called regularly, and now, we got this KESMA [the new media conglomerate of news outlets I described in the "Case study" chapter] and so on, we were practically blacklisted."

Even though this view on the decreasing opportunities in media seemed to be a recurring topic in all the interviews, a few examples of successful cooperation with media outlets tied to the regime were mentioned. The whole situation with the polarization of the media did not change their method of sending out news for the widest scope of journals and newspapers. Still, according to the ENGO workers, it changed the number of press releases actually being published by news outlets.

Simultaneously organizations are getting direct feedback from the people, especially through social media. This source can also provide information on how the regime frames the organizations and how the people adapt these framings. While they were not necessarily described as enemies, the accusation of being "left-wing" seemed a shared experience. As Ákos pointed (pers.comm.) out:

> "It's kind of boxed in a little bit and I feel that in social media communication, in the comments, people are very much thinking about any kind of civil organization as a part of the left-wing."

In the discussions on social media and the feedback from people, it was also mentioned that being characterized as right-wing or left-wing of the same organizations could change between different topics. However, thinking about them as part of one side was prominent in this feedback. This positioning of the ENGOs as belonging to one or the other side of the political spectrum greatly depends on the topic. During the discussion of environmental issues owned by the political agenda, I brought the examples of "nuclear power" and the "traffic in Budapest" as examples owned by the regime. According to Krisztina (pers.comm.), or looking at the comment sections of the Clean Air Action Group, posts on these topics frequently generate comments accusing the organizations of being part of the left-wing or at least categorizing their goals as part of the opposition agenda. On the other hand, according to Krisztina (pers.comm.), when the regime was starting to communicate about how to save

energy at the beginning of the energy crisis in 2022[3], and Energy Club also began to share tips on how to save energy, people accused them of connecting to the agenda of the ruling regime. As Krisztina (pers.comm.) said:

> "[…] so there was a layer of people for whom it was difficult to give good advice, and I think they felt a little bit that [...] if we were close to the government and we belonged to the government discourse because the government raised the rates, it was in their interest to advise the people that sorry we raised your utility bills, but this is how you could cut them."

The last thing mentioned in the interviews and shows signs of the counter-framing of the political independence of the long-established ENGOs is the reports on the appearance of a new group of green organizations tied to the regime. For example, one called "Kék Bolygó Alapítvány" (Blue Planet Foundation) was founded in 2016 by the then reigning President of Hungary, János Áder, who was well known for having nature protection on his political agenda ('Blue Planet Foundation - About us' 2023). The foundation has a great variety of educational programs, and awareness raising on climate change is a prominent point of their program. Its leadership consists of former and active high-ranking members of the current government. Another example of the new institutions is the "Klímapolitikai Intézet" (Climate Policy Institute) which is part of the Mathias Corvinus Collegium, a knowledge hub chaired by Balázs Orbán, the current "Political Director of the President". While the discussion on these new organizations was brief during the interviews, having significant financial resources was frequently mentioned in connection to them. It was also noted, this trend is not necessarily only a characteristic of the current regime.

> "Now, it's not really last year, but let's say over the last thirty years that we've had this kind of muddy (mutyi) situation. So, that's always the case. It was that every government is a little bit like that with its own civilians."

[3] Introducing a regulatory price legislation on universal service prices known as "Rezsicsökkentés" (Utility price reduction) was and still is one of the prominent campaign programs of the government since 2010. Its aim was to keep energy prices low for households and it served as a powerful campaign tool as well. With the unfolding energy crisis in 2022, the government had to significantly change the program what ment a drastic jump in the utility prices for many households and businesses.

This notion can be interpreted as a general comment on how corruption and nepotism are an inherent part of Hungarian governance and how people in power always find a way to give positions with good financial benefits to people loyal to them. While this is a very general analysis of the statement, I believe it is an important reminder to look outside the current regime's borders when assessing the Hungarian civil society. While this research does not focus on new organizations, the advancement of these can be a prominent trend in the following years and a big influencer on the work of the long-established ENGOs.

5.5 Challenges and opportunities of the ENGOs

The interviews showed how the ENGOs frame themselves as apolitical and how the regime challenges this framing on different levels. To understand the current situation and opportunities of the organizations, it is necessary to introduce some sociopolitical factors influencing the meaning-work of the organizations. These will illustrate how the regime's hegemony, the polarized media landscape, and the historically weaker civil society results in an asymmetry in the organizations' framing power. Then, based on these findings, I will describe how ENGOs can still reach their goals and what their opportunities are in this contested situation.

5.5.1 How asymmetries of the framing power challenging ENGOs?

In the literature review, I already described the hierarchical structure of framing (Entman 1993). Both approaches indicate that the contestation coming from the regime can be more powerful than the framing done by the ENGOs. The perceived contestation that the organizations face, as described in the previous subchapter, can be understood as proof of this power imbalance. Also, the fact that the organizations have to launch counter campaigns like the Chain Bridge campaign or stop working with some of the topics like nuclear energy suggests the dominance of the political framing.

Another important factor that suggests an asymmetry between the opportunities in "frame sponsorship" (Carragee and Roefs 2004) is the highly polarized media. Or, from the

point of view of the ENGOs, the closing of the media space. I already touched upon this topic in the case study chapter, where I described how the regime built up its own media, and in the counter-framing section, where I mentioned how the decreasing opportunities to reach the public through the classic media is one of the most significant shared hardship among the organizations. As they described, the number of press releases is the same from their side, but the number of newspapers that publish these releases are decreasing. Meanwhile, the number of newspapers tightly connected to the regime is increasing.

The third factor that suggests a power imbalance is the traditionally weak civil society of the region and how the ENGOs see the role of the public. I already discussed the literature on the weakness of civil society in the area and NGOs' relative lack of embeddedness in civil society (Petrova and Tarrow 2007). A lack of strong ties with civil society can mean less protection from any attack and less engagement. How organizations think about the role of the public is not unanimous. While all of the organizations of the research highlighted the importance of informing and including the public in their work, the perceived importance of this task varied greatly between the ENGOs. Some saw the public as an essential actor in environmental questions. As Máté (pers.comm.) described his view on the role of individuals:

> "What can I, as an individual, do in this area? What can I, as a person or a community member, do? And if I can do these two things and I do them, what do I expect from the decision-makers at the same time?"

Greenpeace, as an international campaign organization, also relied extensively on the power of the public on environmental policy. Others indicated that they see the work with the decision maker as a more direct tool to reach their goals. Some mentioned that it would be great to increase communication with the public, but there is no capacity to do it. Also, the comment sections on social media provide space for accusations of political leaning. When the topic came up in the interviews, most organizations stated that they are trying not to pay too much attention to these accusations. However, it still shows how this opportunity is still affected by the political regime. It was also noted that since the advocacy-based decisions of the regime

decreased significantly in the last years, communication is not necessarily able to produce the results they want. In conclusion, it can't be said that there is one specific role that the ENGOs would give to the public, but also there is less evidence for a collective focus on building stronger ties with the public.

Based on my research, polarization of the public discourse also seems to be an obstacle standing in the way of ENGOs building solid ties with the public. The interviews showed that, especially on social media, holding the apolitical position is sometimes challenged by the public, just based on the default political interpretations of some issues. This finding raises questions on the validity of the apolitical framing. If there is a tendency in the public to see every issue, including the environment, as political, and a tendency for the categorization of everything as part of either the left-wing" or the "right-wing", then grasping the concept of "apolitical" seems to become more and more challenging. As I will discuss in the "Further research" section at the end of the chapter, answering this question could be a task of a different study focusing on the public.

These elements together create a situation where the framing of the regime, which is already in a higher hierarchical position, is further amplified by the polarized media, and the embeddedness of the ENGOs in society is less likely to compensate for it. This creates a stronger position for the regime's counter-framing to the ENGOs' framing. Putting together this finding on the power imbalance in framing and the restructuring and fracturing of environmental governance, discussed in the "Case study" section, draws a picture of the totality of control of the regime on environmental issues in Hungary. It also fits well with the tendency of autocratic regimes to break down democratic checks and balances. Thanks to the control over environmental governance, decisions can be made favoring the regime's goals, while the framing power enables these decisions to be accepted by the public. In theory, this totality of control can then be used to reach any short-term or long-term goal of the regime, including complying with the EU sustainability trajectories. Instead, there are signs showing that the

whole system was built to "*aid elite accumulation and questionable development works*" (Krasznai Kovacs and Pataki 2021, 29); in other words, dismantling environmentalism serves economic purposes.

5.5.2 ENGOs' opportunities

The situation of the ENGOs' can be summarized as they have to work in a closing space for civil society with a framing power more minor than the regimes. This is not ideal for their operation, but based on the interviews, they still have opportunities to function. First of all, as I described before, there is a growth in cooperation with the government at the moment, and focusing on more local problems, including collaboration with the municipalities, seems to have momentum among the organizations too. Also, in the last ten years, social media has become an essential and well-known channel for direct communication with the audience. Last but not least, the role of the EU and other international projects is still significant in funding the organizations, but even more, it affects the projects they are working with too.

Cooperation with the government is a recurring theme of this chapter. I already discussed the opportunities for cooperation with the regime and the limits to it, but the continuity of this trend has not been discussed yet. As the case study chapter and the literature review showed, NGOs in the region always sought opportunities to work with the regime in a sort of advisor position. This is no different in the case of most of the organizations of my research, so it is no surprise that most of them are still focusing on cooperation with the regime. For them, it seems to be a possibility partly because the environment is not the most divisive topic in Hungary and because of the recent openness for a discourse from the side of the decision-makers.

Based on the interviews, personal connections seemed to have great importance from the organizations' side. One or two good connections with the right persons can mean a much greater chance to be included in processes that are not too close to politics. An excellent example of this is how the Energy Club was able to participate in the preliminary work on the

new discussion on wind power with the Ministry of Energy because they were already working with them on other projects. One interesting question about cooperation is the appearance of the emerging organization backed by the regime I mentioned before. While my research did not examine these in detail, based on their websites and some mentions in the interviews, these organizations have much stronger ties to the regime, especially regarding personal connections. It is possible that these will be favored when it comes to cooperation, but the assessment of this scenario is not a goal of this research.

It is worth noting that the government is not the only decision-maker in Hungary. Focusing on local problems and programs of smaller scales seemed important for the organizations. The list of other directions to work with is long. There were mentions of cooperation among different civil organizations; for example, the New Chain Bridge project (‘Új Lánchíd’ 2023) or MTVSZ itself is an alliance of various organizations. Working together with local municipalities was also an important opportunity for some organizations. For example, they showed great interest in the question of renewable energy. An important aspect of this question is that Hungary's municipalities’ opportunities are also shrinking (Horváth 2016). Some organizations highlighted the importance of working together with people. As they called it, “going out to the streets” means being present at different events to provide opportunities for a direct conversation on various environmental topics.

Social media has become an important tool for ENGOs in the last ten years. Especially when the opportunities to appear in the classic media are decreasing, it provides a much-needed direct channel to their audiences. All the organizations included in my research rely on it to different extents. It is hard to tell if these alternative channels can balance out the loss of exposure. Still, each participant described it as an effective tool for reaching younger audiences. It is generally true for this type of new media that although it has been around for over a decade, it is a rapidly changing environment. Finding the best use of it means a constant challenge and opportunity. Greenpeace already finds collaboration with influencers a promising direction,

while some organizations feel they need new capacities to follow the field's current trends. Also, as I already described, sometimes keeping the expert communication style and generating the biggest visibility on the different platforms are hard to reconcile.

Currently, the ENGOs rely greatly on international opportunities from the EU. In the literature review, I already touched upon the importance of transnational connections for the NGOs in the CEE region and how it extrapolated the professionalization of the nonprofits. Now in Hungary, these projects seem more critical than ever when the financial opportunities of the ENGOs are reduced. Two of the four ENGOs I included in my study are part of international organizations, while the other two rely greatly on international projects. According to the representative of Energy Club, for example, seventy percent of Energy Club's funding comes from EU projects. Founding from EU projects also seems compatible with the inspection of foreign funds. This type of operation also lets Hungarian organizations connect to international projects, like the Clean Cities Campaign, in which the Clean Air Action Group participated for two consecutive years. Some organizations reported that the available projects themselves affect what they focus on within the borders of their usual activity.

Figure 1. shows the described challenges and opportunities of the Hungarian ENGOs. ENGOs framing is communicated through media and direct communication with the public. However, their framing is contested directly by the regime and through the polarized media, polarized public. While this asymmetry in framing power significantly reduces the space for ENGOs, the channel for cooperation is still open between the ENGOs and the regime. Cooperation is also possible with other stakeholders in environmental issues like the EU and other international organizations, and the Hungarian municipalities. The figure illustrates well why the ENGOs rely greatly on cooperation with the regime, even in an increasingly autocratic system.

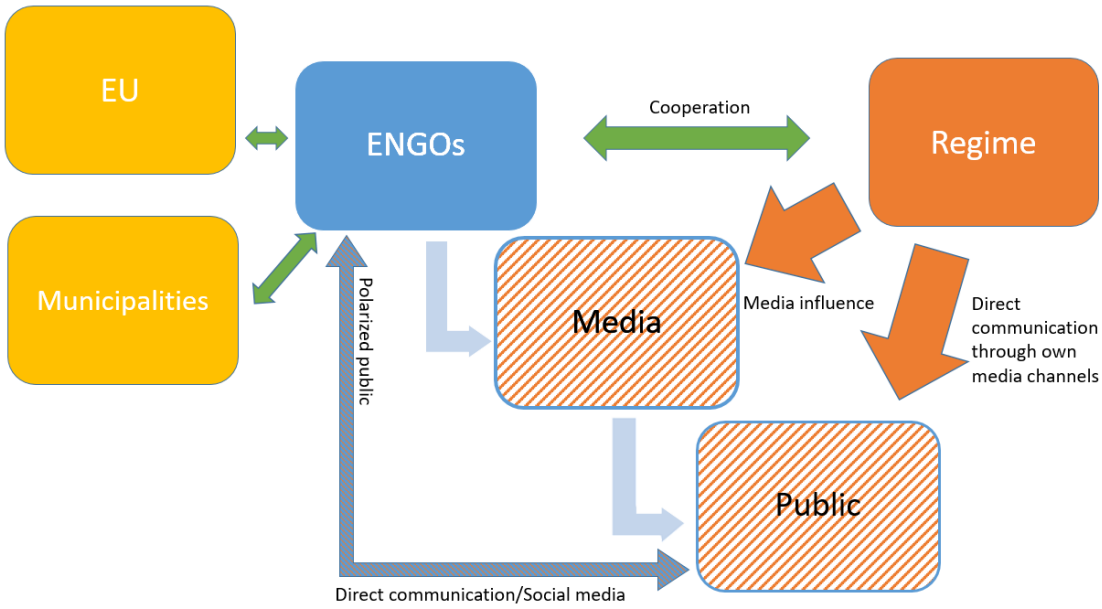

Figure 1.: Challenges and opportunities of Hungarian ENGOs

5.6 Further research

To get a fuller picture of the current situation of the ENGOs and the framing contest between them and the regime. To tell who is winning the different framing contests, a survey or focus group research should be done, including the public or the target audience of the ENGOs. Also, the operations and role of the upcoming regime-backed ENGOs seem to be a topic worth following.

My research on the framing contest between the ENGOs and the regime outlines the need for two directions of further research. One is how the "people" think and feel about various topics framed by both the regime and the ENGOs, and the other one is on the role, goals, and operation of the new regime-backed environmental organizations. The first one focusing on the public could show who is winning the framing contest and could be used to assess what fields and topics are less dominated by the framing of the regime, providing an opportunity for ENGOs to advance in building ties with the public. Also, a research focusing on the public

could shed light on the effectiveness of the apolitical framing. Assessing how the frame of being an expert exists in a polarized public could help determine if it is worth pursuing at all.

The second one focusing on the new organizations could follow relatively new phenomena and their effect on civil society in Hungary. It could connect to the scholarship on civil society in autocratic or semi-autocratic regimes and help to understand the environmental position of the current political regime of Hungary.

6 Conclusion

My research showed that even though the environmental sector is not the closest to politics, the long-established ENGOs are significantly affected by the hybrid regime of Hungary. While there is less evidence of this particular group of organizations drastically changing their operation, several challenges and opportunities can be tied directly to the autocratization of the political system. In the following chapter, I will conclude my findings on how Hungarian ENGOs frame their work and what can be said about their status based on my research.

6.1 How ENGOs frame their work

Based on my research, the prominent goal of long-established ENGOs in Hungary is to declare the independence of their work because this enables them to simultaneously take the positions of "cooperator" or "opposition". For this reason, they are framing the "environment" as something that is not, or should not be tied to any political agenda. During the interviews, the frame of the environment "above" politics emerged, backed by the notion that environmental issues are relevant for all. All the interviewees agreed that they are working for the "common interest", which in itself proofs that they are not part of the "right-wing" nor the "left-wing" political agenda.

"Political independence" of their work was maybe the most prominent frame that emerged from the research. All participating organizations seemed to be significantly invested in declaring their political independence through communication and operation. This means keeping their distance from both the current regime and the political opposition. An interesting argument for their independence emerged during the interviews: they were considered opposition under every government over the last thirty years of their operation. This evidence of credibility can only be used by the long-established ENGOs in the environmental sector since there has been no change of regimes in the last twelve years.

"Expert framing" is not a new phenomenon in the civil sphere of the CEE region but still seems to be favored by the ENGOs. According to the interviews, the expert position enables organizations to cooperate with the broadest group of stakeholders and is an effective tool to keep their credibility. On the other hand, it seems to be an obstacle to building stronger ties with the public. Partly because of the contradiction between being an expert and being an activist but also because my research showed that communicating as an expert does not necessarily resonate well with the broadest public.

The previously mentioned apolitical conceptualizations fit well into the literature on how environmentalism is considered a civil society sector further away from politics. However, the defensive nature of these frames suggests that the organizations are affected significantly by the regime's closing grip on civil society.

6.2 The status of Hungarian ENGOs

The current Hungarian political regime is arguably hostile to civil society. My research confirmed this statement, even though the organizations in my study do not consider the state their enemy, and all of them emphasized the importance of keeping their ability to cooperate with the regime. Still, my research uncovered a significant asymmetry in the framing power of ENGOs and the regime, several examples of how the organizations' work is counter-framed by politics, and what hardships this means for the ENGOs.

My findings showed that counter-framing of the organizations' self-conceptualization is happening on the level of specific environmental topics and on the level of political independence. The most prominent issues that were characterized by the organizations almost impossible to work with were the question of nuclear energy in Hungary and different problems relating to the traffic in Budapest. Both topics were the focus of party politics and political communication in previous years.

Questioning the political independence of the organizations was mainly discussed related to the polarization of media and the public. Autocratization in Hungary brought the polarization of media aligning with ruptures of party politics. The organizations reported attacks and accusations of alliance with the “left-wing” from the media outlets favored by the regime. Besides bad PR, this also means restricted opportunities for cooperation with a significant number of media outlets. The polarized public also became a source of counter-framing of the political independence of the ENGOs. In contrast to the media, accusations coming from the public are not entirely limited to being associated with the "left". There have been accusations of collusion with the regime when the organization’s messages aligned with the regime's messages. While organizations try not to pay too much attention to these voices, open questioning of their independency can corrupt their messages and hinder their ability to reach the broadest audiences.

As for the opportunities of the ENGOs, against all the hostility, cooperation with the regime still seems to be the most favored goal of the organizations. This is in line with the traditional reliance of the organizations of the region on transactional activism. The cooperation is also enabled by the recent “green-turn” of the regime and a current increase of openness to collaboration by the state. However, there is a trade-off between cooperation and independence thanks to the control of the regime over civil society and the framing of the environment. Cooperating with international organizations, participating in EU projects, and strengthening connections with Hungarian municipalities are other ways that have been reported to help organizations function effectively.

The emergence of new regime-backed environmental organizations is seemingly a significant factor in ENGOs' current and future status. At present, based on my research, it is unclear how exactly these organizations affect the operation of other environmental organizations. Some can imagine cooperation with them, and some see them as competition

with vast resources. Finding out more about these organizations and their relationship with the regime and civil society could be an interesting research problem.

6.3 Recommendations

Autocratization created an uncertain environment for civil society in Hungary, and the environmental sector is no exception. There are indeed opportunities for cooperation with the regime, but there are significant limitations to it, and there is no guarantee for the longevity of the current opening of the system. In an ambiguous situation like this, pursuing every possibility that could provide stability for the organizations seems essential. This is why, against all the obstacles, building stronger ties with the public could do a great service for all the ENGOs even when this is not their main trajectory. Polarization media and the public and the changing nature of social media may hinder these advancements. Still, in a closing system like the Hungarian, where the public agenda is dominated by propaganda, every framing contest won by civil society could mean a difference. And the ENGOs working for the common good, for the people, deserve their attention, protection, and support.

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Appendix I – Interview questions

1. Tell me about the work that you do in the organization.
2. How do you develop a communications campaign? What are the main elements to consider?
3. Has politics shaped what you do? If yes, how?
4. Are things better or worse in your job?
5. How do you tackle the new challenges?
6. Can you tell me about a situation or case that you felt like you navigated really well or the exact opposite, failed spectacularly?