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Civic Participation in Hungary, Part 1*

Introduction

Over the last decade, the growing importance of NGOs in the performance of social services (intangible activities dedicated to individuals, families and the local community, aimed at improving the quality of life of inhabitants with the use of local knowledge and resources) and political processes has been observed. Civil society has become a *sui generis* intermediary between society and the state in respect of social services, as evidenced by the development of the third sector, including its various institutions and their objectives. Therefore, it should be noted that civil society and its tasks are positioned between society and the authorities. Researchers agree that the growth of the third sector in developing countries has played a significant role in raising the living standards of citizens, economic development and the introduction of democratic governance.¹ Hungarian society has a fine tradition of social activism dating back to the period of political transformation, so it is undoubtedly rich in resources of civic activism.

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¹ J. Fisher, *The Road from Rio: Sustainable Development and the Nongovernmental Movement in the Third World*, Praeger Publishers, Westport 1993; L.M. Salamon, *The rise of the non-profit sector*, "Foreign Affairs", 1994, vol. 73(4), pp. 109–122.

Due to the increasing involvement of citizens in participatory activities, i.e. civic engagement in non-governmental organisations, in spite of unfavourable intra-state conditions, the need for a comprehensive research on the significance of active citizenship in contemporary Hungarian society arose. It is worth trying to analyse the importance of NGOs in political systems and the role of citizen involvement in decision-making processes or, locally, communication with local authorities. Civic engagement is mainly observed at the level of local and regional public participation and often enhances the quality of life in a citizen's local community.

The aim of both articles of the paper is to examine the level of civil society in Hungary and civic engagement in view of the completed empirical research. The main hypothesis is that the legal measures introduced in Hungary have influenced the state of civil society, but have not reduced the local involvement of individuals. Apart from verifying the research hypothesis, the paper is to answer the following research questions on civic engagement: Are citizens active, despite legal amendments and the impediments to civil society in Hungary? Does the existing system provide citizens with opportunities to get involved, and if so, how? What are relationships between active citizens and local authorities? In seeking to answer the research questions, the empirical method (online surveys), the historical method, the institutional-legal method and the data analysis method were used. The empirical study took place in 2022.

Political transformation and civil society

Civil society actors played an essential role in the process of Hungary's political transformation, creating an active civil society, a public sphere and the third sector. After 1989, Hungarian governments tried to bring in regulations to provide a minimum funding mechanism for civil society organisations. In 1996, when Gyula Horn (MSZP) was Prime Minister, Hungary became the first country in the Central European region to introduce a system of donating 1% of personal income tax to NGOs and church organisations.

Among numerous determinants of civil society, four deserve special attention: a) citizens' political attitudes and behaviour (e.g. voter turnout, political party membership, involvement in social protests and demonstrations, level of public trust); b) civil society activities (number of NGOs, citizens' membership in NGOs); c) legislation on the third sector and civic activity; d) values (democracy, freedom, minority rights, culture, religion, tolerance).²

² E. Kancik-Kořtun, *Democracy and Civic Society in the Countries of the Visegrad Group*, [in:] *30 Years of the Visegrad Group. Volume 2: Basic Project Ideas and International Reality*, red. E. Kancik-Kořtun, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University Press, Lublin 2022.

The term “civil society” is frequently mentioned in public and academic discourse and, therefore, has many definitions, with the phrase being linked to the political and social order of the democratic system. The explanation offered by Wioletta Szymczak seems to be one of the more detailed: “Civil society is an area separated from the state, the economy and private life in which citizens voluntarily, autonomously create associations, foundations, movements and societies oriented towards the expression, defence or fulfilment of their needs and aspirations. Besides, any conscious non-formalised actions taken for the benefit of the local community are civic”.³ The third sector is of profound significance, because associations and foundations are a direct manifestation of civic engagement and local self-governance and for this reason, they justifiably complement the activities of the public administration, especially the local government subsystem.⁴ As Joanna Dźwończyk points out, three areas of activity can be distinguished in a well-functioning civil society:

- a) decision-making and administration at a state, municipal or office level, which is most often referred to as the public sphere,
- b) production, trade, services, i.e. business, i.e. for-profit activity,
- c) third sector, which includes non-governmental organisations (NGOs) operating for the benefit of all, carrying out non-profit activities (associations, organisations).⁵

Active citizenship

In the liberal model of civil society, citizens undertake social and civic activity, recognising its importance for their own role within the community, aware of positive implications of their own or others’ past actions, and treating engagement as an expression of arbitrary will and a sign of inclusion in the social contract.⁶ Authorities should involve citizens in decision-making processes, solving public

³ W. Szymczak, *Znaczenie wartości w tworzeniu społeczeństwa obywatelskiego*, [in:] *Spółeczeństwo obywatelskie. Modele teoretyczne i praktyka społeczna*, red. E. Balawajder, Wyd. KUL, Lublin 2007, pp. 28–29.

⁴ S. Michałowski, *Państwo obywatelskie a przebudowa administracji publicznej w Polsce*, [in:] *Administracja publiczna. Zagadnienia wstępne*, red. A. Pawłowska, Norbertinum, Lublin 1999, p. 181.

⁵ J. Dźwończyk, *Rozwój społeczeństwa obywatelskiego w Polsce po 1989 roku*, [in:] *Czas społeczeństwa obywatelskiego. Między teorią a praktyką*, red. B. Krauz-Mozer, P. Borowiec, Wyd. UJ, Kraków 2006, p. 163.

⁶ W. Szymczak, *Aksjologia liberalnej i komunitarystycznej wizji społeczeństwa obywatelskiego z perspektywy Alfreda Schütza koncepcji motywów działania*, „Zeszyty Naukowe KUL”, 2014, vol. 4(228), p. 138.

and social problems together, and any action they take ought to address the needs of citizens. Public participation can be most generally defined as the process by which representatives of society gain influence as well as, indirectly, control over the decisions of the authorities when these decisions directly or indirectly have an impact on their own interests.⁷ Public participation belongs to a broader phenomenon of civic culture, i.e. a set of accepted values, beliefs, attitudes and behavioural patterns indispensable for the smooth functioning of civil society; it denotes the willingness and ability to cooperate with other actors with respect for the law, work and other people.⁸ Ryszard Klamut expounds the notion of civic engagement as “the social activity of individuals (citizens) inspired by individual motives or grassroots social initiatives furthering the social interest (common weal), undertaken with the awareness of rights and obligations resulting from the functioning of the democratic system, under the conditions provided by this system.”⁹

The involvement of citizens in participatory processes is essential as the decision-making should solve some important local problems related to, e.g. the quality of life, environment, public space, regional development strategy, economy or health. Public participation allows citizens to be engaged in participatory processes, i.e.: elections, referendums, public consultations and e-consultations, contacts and communication with authorities, meetings with inhabitants, citizen panels, protests and demonstrations, notifications posted on authority’s websites, workshops and opinion polls. Obviously, democratic governments should use different tools for public participation.

Maria Lewicka distinguished between spontaneous civic engagement (activities for the local community) and organised civic activity (participation in associations, NGOs, church organisations and political parties).¹⁰ The research discussed in this paper shows that both forms of activity are crucial at the local level. Apart from broadly understood social activity, citizens can, of course, show lack of involvement in social and political life. Social passivity just means a lack of commitment and concern for the public interest. Individuals may also display anti-social behaviour. In any society, social activity is dynamic and changes frequently, which is determined by a number of factors and affects civil society as a whole.

⁷ D. Długoř, J. Wygnański, *Obywatele wespółdecydują. Przewodnik po partycypacji społecznej*, Stowarzyszenie na rzecz Forum Inicjatyw Pozarządowych, Warszawa 2005, pp. 11–12.

⁸ H. Sasinowski, *Spoleczeństwo obywatelskie i jego rola w budowie demokracji*, „Economy and Management” 2012, no. 1, p. 32.

⁹ R. Klamut, *Aktywność obywatelska jako rodzaj aktywności społecznej – perspektywa psychologiczna*, „Studia Socjologiczne”, 2013, vol. 1(208), p. 192.

¹⁰ M. Lewicka, *Kup Pan książkę... Mechanizmy aktywności obywatelskiej Polaków*, „Studia Psychologiczne”, 2004, nr 4, pp. 65–82.

Legal status of civil society institutions in Hungary

The basis for the current legislation on the operation of civil society organisations is provided by the Legislative Act of 1987 and the Act on Assemblies of 1989.¹¹ Since then, the legal provisions have been amended many times. Pursuant to the Act CLXXV of 2011 on the Freedom of Association, Non-profit Status and the Operation and Support of Civil Organizations (Civil Act) currently in effect (*2011. évi CLXXV. Törvény az egyesülési jogról, a közhasznú jogállásról, valamint a civil szervezetek működéséről és támogatásáról*), the Parliament acknowledges voluntary cooperation as essential for the development of Hungary. The legislature accepts that non-governmental organisations are basic units of society which ceaselessly contribute to fostering the common good through daily promotion of values, enforcing freedom of association, and laying the foundations for civic organisations. Therefore, NGO activity should be recognised as socially useful and community-building, and it is in the public interest or for the benefit of society to support it.¹² The Act provides for foundations, associations, public benefit organisations and other entities established by virtue of law. It defines individual segments of the third sector as well as the legal basis for their creation, operation and liquidation. The Act focuses on the financing of NGOs (charter capital, donations, investments, budget support) and the division of the organisations in respect of their scope of operation (local, regional, national, international). It also explains public benefit activities as any activity that directly or indirectly fulfills a public service set out in the by-laws, thereby contributing to meeting the common needs of society and the individual.¹³ The second piece of legislation relating to non-governmental organisations is Act CLXXXI of 2011 on the Court Records and the Related Rules of Procedure of the Non-governmental Organisations (*2011. évi CLXXXI. Törvény a civil szervezetek bírósági nyilvántartásáról és az ezzel összefüggő eljárási szabályokról*), which specifies the requirements and information on the necessity to register an NGO in the court register. In the context of NGOs, the court has the following duties (2. §):

¹¹ J. Szalai, S. Svensson, *Contested forms of solidarity: An overview of civil society organisations in Hungary and their impact on policy and the social economy*, “Working Paper Series”, 2017, no. 10, p. 5.

¹² *2011. évi CLXXV. Törvény az egyesülési jogról, a közhasznú jogállásról, valamint a civil szervezetek működéséről és támogatásáról*.

¹³ *2011. évi CLXXV. Törvény az egyesülési jogról, a közhasznú jogállásról, valamint a civil szervezetek működéséről és támogatásáról*, 2. § 20.

- a) registration of an organisation (registration procedure),
- b) registration, modification and deletion of data, rights and data pertaining to a registered organisation (procedure for amendment of registration),
- c) conduct of other civil non contentious proceedings within the court jurisdiction under this Act,
- d) deregistration of an organisation (deregistration procedure),
- e) maintenance of a register of civil organisations and other non-corporate entities (register),
- f) provision of information on the data of the register – in the manner prescribed by law.¹⁴

It is important to emphasize the institutional subordination of the state body responsible for financing non-governmental organisations in Hungary – A Nemzeti Civil Alap (*A Nemzeti Együttműködési Alap*).

Relationship between politics and civil society

In the two decades following the political transformation, civil society in Hungary functioned effectively and thrived. However, after Viktor Orbán and Fidesz came to power in 2010, the state of civil society began to deteriorate dramatically, while the authorities took further measures to effectively control civil society. The legislative restrictions imposed on civil society institutions, the media, the judiciary or religious associations by the Fidesz government clearly violate the principles of a democratic state under the rule of law. Through the enacted legislation, the Fidesz government has restricted the operation of NGOs, which has led to a decline in a number of public benefit organisations relying on tax donations. The legal amendments adopted by Fidesz primarily changed the rules for financing the non-governmental sector, which has had a significant impact on the structure of the third pillar and has caused the decline of NGOs. Many NGOs have been left without funding, as public funding has been minimised and difficult to get, and foreign funding has been completely banned. The Hungarian government has also failed to agree on funding from the European Economic Area and the Norwegian Funds. The lack of financing has undoubtedly contributed to a slow deterioration of the third sector and civil society. Interestingly, local government-funded offices, resembling NGOs for reporting local and social problems, have been set up in many cities in Hungary to allow public participation. Civic organisations backed by the government

¹⁴ 2011. évi CLXXXI. Törvény a civil szervezetek bírósági nyilvántartásáról és az ezzel összefüggő eljárási szabályokról, 2. § a–f.

are therefore emerging. Those in power have clearly gained total control over civil society thanks to such actions, while media campaigns against NGOs have discouraged many citizens from their involvement.

As Szczepan Czarnecki notes, “during the 12 years under the government of Prime Minister Orbán, many efforts have been made to take control of civil society both by discriminating against some organisations hostile to the government or its policies and by supporting allied organisations”¹⁵

It is worth noting the steady decline of the democracy index in Hungary, where – as indicators point out – the democratic system is now considered a “flawed democracy”.

Table 1. Democracy index in Hungary

Year	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Hungary	6.96	6.90	6.84	6.72	6.64	6.63	6.63	6.57

Source: The Economist, Global Democracy Index, <https://www.economist.com>

One study on the condition of civil society is the Civil Society Organisation Sustainability Index¹⁶ from 2021, which includes data for Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia.

The process of preparing a country report follows Figure 1.

As the report states, “civic space in Hungary, once considered a stable democracy, has deteriorated precipitously since 2010, when a government led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of the centre-right Fidesz party came to power. The legal environment governing Hungarian CSOs deteriorated again in 2021 as a result of the government’s ongoing efforts to pass restrictive legislation. While the parliament finally retracted the infamous 2017 Act on Foreign-Funded Organisations, which stigmatised CSOs based on their funding sources, it introduced a new act governing organisations “capable of influencing public life” with similarly worrying clauses. In addition, although withdrawn after just a few

¹⁵ Sz. Czarnecki, *Rozwój i kondycja społeczeństwa obywatelskiego w Republice Czeskiej, Republice Słowackiej oraz na Węgrzech*, „Prace Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej”, 2022, nr 5, p. 63.

¹⁶ The CSO Sustainability Index uses a seven-point scale from 1 to 7. Lower numbers indicate more robust levels of CSO sustainability. These characteristics and levels are drawn from empirical observations of the sector’s development in the country, rather than a causal theory of development. Given the complex nature of civil society sectors, many contradictory developments may be taking place simultaneously. The levels of sustainability are organised into three broad clusters: Sustainability Enhanced (1 to 3) – the highest level of sustainability, corresponds to a score between 1.0 and 3.0; Sustainability Evolving (3.1 to 5) – corresponds to a score between 3.1 and 5.0; Sustainability Impeded (5.1 to 7) – the lowest level of sustainability, corresponds to a score between 5.1 and 7.0.

weeks, a governmental decree published in June would have obliged all CSOs to list the names of their individual donors in their reports, effectively banning anonymous donations. Meanwhile, state harassment of CSOs continued in various forms, including surveillance, government propaganda, fines, and public smear campaigns¹⁷.

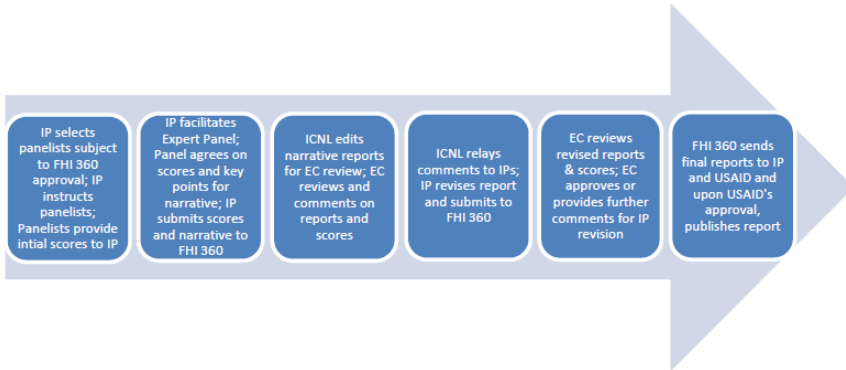


Figure 1. Panel Experts¹⁸

Source: The 2021 CSO Sustainability Index for Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia, p. 248.

OVERALL CSO SUSTAINABILITY: 4.0

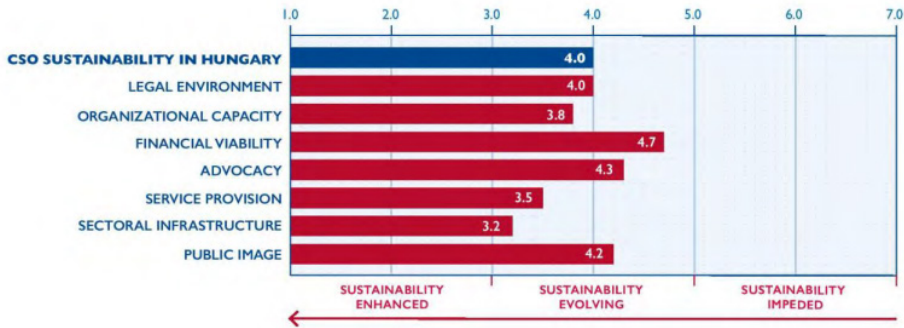


Figure 2. Overall CSO sustainability in Hungary

Source: 2021 Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index.

According to the 2021 Civil Society Organisation Sustainability Index, Hungary has the lowest ranking among the Visegrad countries, and its performance approximates that of countries such as: Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria or Moldova.

¹⁷ 2021 Civil Society Organisation Sustainability Index, p. 6.

¹⁸ Detailed CSOSI methodology is available on pages 248–258.

Methodology of the author's own research

The empirical research was quantitative and qualitative in nature and a survey method was used to carry it out. An online questionnaire served as a research tool. Between 15 June 2022 and 15 July 2022, the author of the present paper conducted an anonymous online survey in Hungary on local government, civic engagement and thus civil society.¹⁹ The survey “Public participation: Are you an active citizen?” (Részvételiség a közeletben: Ön aktív állampolgár?) was carried out in Hungarian. Respondents were sampled using the snowball method.²⁰ The snowball method is a non-probability sampling technique, where existing study subjects recommend other members of the population to take part in the survey. The study involved a total of 339 respondents.²¹ The statistical data gathered during the survey was stored on an online research platform. After the completion of the collection process, full questionnaires were qualified, followed by data downloading in appropriate data formats. First, there was the invitation to respondents to the survey, shown in Figure 3.

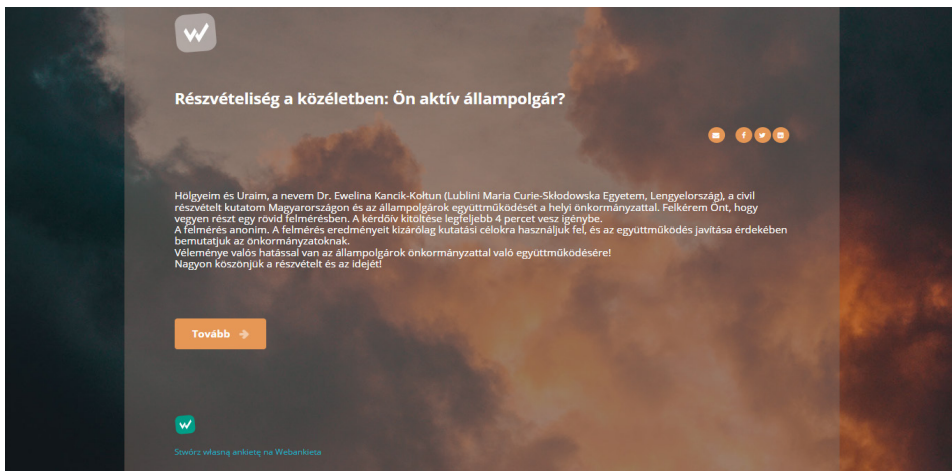


Figure 3. Interface of the website inviting to the survey

The survey included questions on basic and socio-demographic data.

¹⁹ The research funded by the Faculty of Political Science and Journalism of the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University (UMCS) in Lublin was conducted on the online research platform webankieta.pl.

²⁰ A link to survey questionnaires was made available on social media (Facebook) and the websites of offices and non-governmental foundations.

²¹ Only fully completed questionnaires were taken into consideration in the analysis.

Respondents who took part in the survey were aged between 18 and 65+. The breakdown by age was as follows: respondents aged 18–24 constituted 15%; 25–34 – 12%, 35–44 – 16%; 45–54 – 35%; 55–64 – 11% and over 65 – 11%. The largest number of respondents (35%) were aged 45 to 54. The age of the respondents is shown in detail in Figure 4.

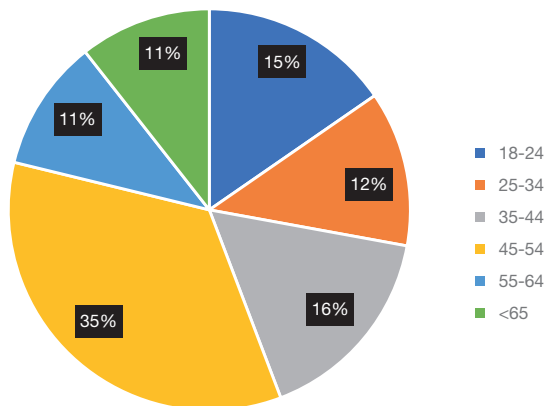


Figure 4. Age of the respondents

Source: Author's own study.

As regards the education of the respondents, 6% had completed primary education, 19% – secondary education, the majority (65%), held a university degree, while 10% were academics. The level of education is shown in Figure 5.

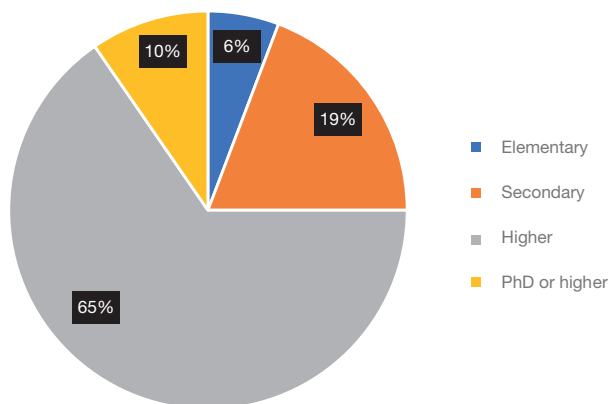


Figure 5. Level of education of the respondents

Source: Author's own study.

The respondents' could choose either a village or a town/city as their place of residence (Figure 6). In the study, small towns meant those with up to 20,000 inhabitants; medium-sized towns: 20,000–99,000 inhabitants; cities: 100,000–500,000 inhabitants; and large cities: more than 500,000 inhabitants. 17% of respondents lived in rural areas, 19% – in small towns, 10% – in medium-sized towns and the highest number of respondents lived in cities – 44%, and finally, 10% in large cities.

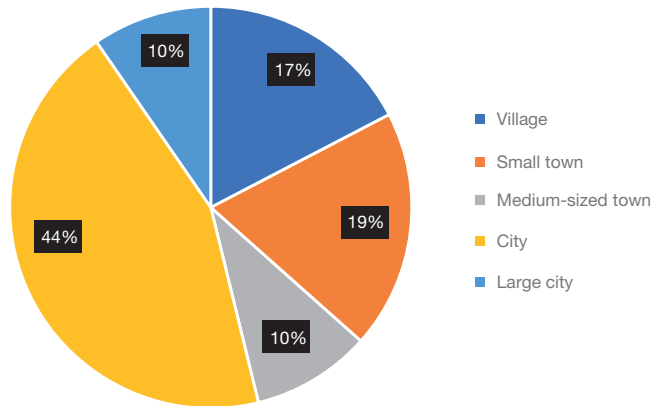


Figure 6. Respondents' place of residence

Source: Author's own study.

Regarding gender, the respondents were 60% women and 40% men (Figure 7).

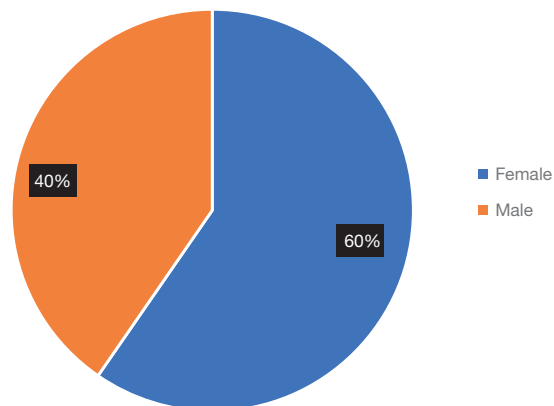


Figure 7. Gender of the respondents

Source: Author's own study.

As far as the professional status of the respondents is concerned (Figure 8), 21% attended school or university, the highest number, 34%, worked as office workers, 4% – manual workers, 10% – managers, 9% – entrepreneurs, 11% – pensioners and 11% followed another occupation.

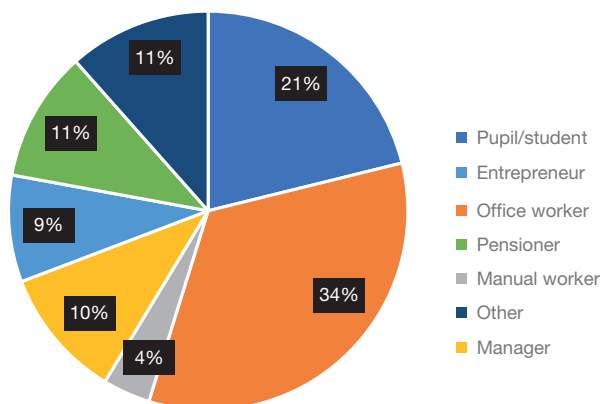


Figure 8. Professional status of the respondents

Source: Author's own study.

Conclusion

Hungary's political situation is very complicated in both international politics (relations with the EU, perception of Russia's war in Ukraine) and domestic politics. Since the election victory of Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Alliance and its securing a parliamentary majority in 2010, right-wing Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has striven for radical and ruthless concentration of power, seeking to reshape the state in line with his own views, which has led Hungary into a phase of nationalism, ethnic hatred, increased corruption and the rise of authoritarian tendencies.²² Hungary, which immediately after overthrowing communism developed its democracy by introducing political, economic and social reforms, as a result of the rule of Fidesz, changed its approach to the perception of the democratic system and amended the constitution, acts (on the judiciary, elections, media, third sector and civil society) thus securing long-lasting far-right rule (in April 2022, for the fourth consecutive time, Fidesz – running in an electoral coalition with the Christian Democratic People's Party – won the elections and Viktor Orbán became Prime Minister for the fifth time (and fourth time in a row).

²² P. Lendavi, *Hungary: Between Democracy and Authoritarianism*, Columbia University Press, New York 2012.

Active civil society in Hungary started to function even before the political transformation and thrived for two decades afterwards. However, the change of government and the coming to power of Fidesz put a stop to progressive changes and even led to a recession of civil society. Civil society in Hungary has doubtlessly shrunk due to the authoritarian measures of the government, as demonstrated, for example, by the reduction in the number of NGOs operating in the third sector. Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that it was citizens who voted in this government in democratic elections, giving it their mandate of trust and consent to bring about changes. The spirit of social activism is certainly still dormant in citizens, because such social behaviour cannot be changed so easily. The level of local citizen participation will therefore indicate the real state of civil society, its determinant factors and relationship with the authorities.

Civic participation is one of the main pillars of the democratic system, where citizens have the opportunity to get involved and participate in public and social life, with everything based on the principle of individual liberty (from involvement to free performance of activities). Local authorities definitely provide such opportunities. This paper is the first part of the text about public participation in Hungary, consisting of theoretical analyses and an introduction to the analysis of the empirical research. The second part of the article will present the result of the empirical research.

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to analyse the state of civil society in Hungary and thus to offer an insight into the theory of civil society and civic engagement. Firstly, the process of political transition and the formation of civil society in Hungary is discussed. The next section gives an overview of the legal status of civil society institutions. Then an attempt is made to present complicated relationships between politics and civil society in Hungary. The article addresses the methodology of the empirical research conducted by the author. Given the collected research material and the conducted empirical research, the paper was divided into two parts.

Keywords: civil society; active citizenship; Hungary; social research

Uczestnictwo obywatelskie na Węgrzech, cz. 1

Streszczenie: Celem artykułu jest dokonanie analizy poziomu społeczeństwa obywatelskiego na Węgrzech, a tym samym przybliżenie teorii społeczeństwa obywatelskiego oraz zaangażowania obywatelskiego. W artykule na początku zostaje omówiony proces transformacji oraz kształtowania się społeczeństwa obywatelskiego na Węgrzech. W dalszej części przybliżony jest stan prawny instytucji społeczeństwa obywatelskiego. Następnie autorka stara się przedstawić skomplikowane relacje pomiędzy polityką, a społeczeństwem obywatelskim na Węgrzech. Artykuł prezentuje metodologię badań empirycznych przeprowadzonych przez autorkę. Ze względu na zgromadzony materiał badawczy oraz przeprowadzone badania empiryczne temat został podzielony na dwa artykuły.

Słowa kluczowe: społeczeństwo obywatelskie; aktywność obywatelska; Węgry; badania społeczne