

## The trajectories of civil society in a de-democratizing context

### Thematic Workshop

**Organizer: ELKH, Centre for Social Sciences, Budapest,**

**Date: 17-19 November, 2021**

**Venue, Budapest, Hungary, Centre for Social Sciences**

*Please note: The workshop is planned to be held in person. In case of a new wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, we might change the venue to online.*

Civil society organizations in and outside of Europe have faced increasing challenges in the past decades. The space for civil society is shrinking not only in autocratic regimes but in the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe and in established democracies as well. A general pattern accompanying the most conspicuous cases is de-democratization, i.e. the gradual deterioration of democratic institutions. It is clear that de-democratization poses a challenge to civil society organizations in general and especially to those committed to protecting human rights or criticizing the newly emerging authoritarian governments. The “populist zeitgeist” in Europe is changing the discourse: particularistic ideas gain popularity, favoring civil society organizations that challenge universal solidarities. Increasing projectification and bureaucratization augment the administrative duties of civil society organizations. This burden is further increased by the so-called anti-terrorist and accountability measures, which instead of blocking terrorist activity impose further difficulties to civil society. To top up the ongoing processes, COVID-19 came handy to governments eager to centralize decision-making processes and undermine the operation of many civil society organizations.

As a result of these developments civil societies are changing. First of all, de-democratization dwindles the resources and power of organizations aiming at controlling governments. Second, there is a proliferation of organizations paving the way for or supporting de-democratizing governments and their particularistic narratives. Third, while many organizations face the possibility that they might cease to exist, other organizations receive generous resources, resulting in rapid professionalization and increasing dependence on the government. Fourth, in trying to handle the existential risk, many organizations might abandon clearly political claims and apply a depoliticized discourse of civil society. Moreover (fifth), new groups are emerging that act in terms of collective commons with no or undefined commitment to politics or democracy or outright urging the reinterpretation of these concepts.

Altogether, these developments do not only lead to a shrinking space for civil society, but to the transformation of civil societies as they were. These transformed civil societies are not necessarily smaller than they were a couple years or a decade ago. The differences, instead, lie in their changed structure and dispositions (e.g. issues and organizational activities represented), weakened power for interest representation and increased dependency on domestic political actors.

This workshop aims to explore

- a) the similarities and differences between the trajectories of civil society in de-democratizing countries,
- b) the policies of governments wanting to increase their control over civil society, the impact of these policies, and the strategies and responses of civil society organizations,
- c) the main explanatory factors of the failure or success of increasing the control over civil society,
- d) the possibilities of civil society organizations for counter-balancing the processes of de-democratization,
- e) new forms of commoning and their impact on the concept of civil society
- f) the possibilities of comparative research on the topics mentioned above.

The participation on the workshop is free. If necessary, the Centre for social Sciences are able to provide financial assistance for travel and accommodation for a limited number of participants.

**To apply, please send us a title of your paper/presentation, along with a short, maximum 300 words long abstract, until the 15th of September, 2021, to the following address: gero.marton@tk.hu.**