


State Memory Institutions and Modes of Civil Society

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Abstract. The literature on civil society acknowledges that civil society plays a very different role at different junctures in the institutional history of any nation. The author of the article discusses the relationship between civil society and state memory institutions using four modalities of civil society: insurgent, institutionalized, anti-democratic, and firewall. Based on examples from the processes characteristic of regime change that have been taking place in Central Europe since 1989, the article attempts to develop a theory that helps to understand this unexplored aspect of memory politics. The study reveals that modes of civil society and the state's relationship with its memory institutions are closely linked to the nature of the current government. The demagoguery that exists today, masquerading as the voice of the people, poses a threat to democracy and provokes the polarization of political views. Such a world puts at risk the professional integrity of the staff of state memory institutions. Political pressure is primarily dangerous to their ability to steward artifacts of the national past according to professional and meritocratic criteria. The politicization of libraries, archives, and universities promotes ignorance rather than knowledge. The safest environment for state memory institutions is a tolerant and pluralistic culture in which they can work without prejudice and be useful to everyone. When illiberal, single-party populist forces rose to power in Hungary and Poland and began to dismantle horizontal accountability mechanisms, their state memory institutions had been under threat of becoming targets in a war of memory, with critics seeking their own political gain.

Keywords: civil society, state memory institutions, regime change, post-communism, backsliding, contentious politics, accountability, Hungary, Poland.

Valstybinės atminties institucijos ir pilietinės visuomenės modeliai

Santrauka. Pilietinę visuomenę tiriančioje literatūroje pripažįstama, kad ši visuomenė bet kurios tautos institucinėje istorijoje veikia labai įvairiai. Straipsnyje aptariami pilietinės visuomenės santykiai su valstybės atminties institucijomis pagal keturis skirtingus pilietinės visuomenės modelius – sukilėlių, institucionalizacijos, antidemokratinę ir apsauginę. Remiantis pavyzdžiais iš režimų pasikeitimui būdingų procesų, Vidurio Europoje vykstančių nuo 1989 m., straipsnyje siekiama sukurti teoriją, padedančią suprasti šį neištirtą atminties politikos aspektą. Tyrimas atskleidžia, jog pilietinės visuomenės modeliai ir valstybės santykiai su jos atminties institucijomis yra glaudžiai susiję su esamos valdžios pobūdžiu. Šiandienos realybėje egzistuojanti demagogija, prisi dengianti tautos balsu, kelia pavojų demokratijai, provokuoja politinių pažiūrų poliarizaciją. Toks pasaulis kelia grėsmę valstybės atminties institucijų darbuotojų profesiniam sąžiningumui. Politinis spaudimas pirmiausia yra pavojingas jų gebėjimui tvarkyti nacionalinės praeities artefaktus pagal profesinius ir meritokratinus kriterijus.

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Bibliotekų, archyvų ir universitetų politizavimas skatina nežinojimą, o ne žinias. Saugiausia aplinka valstybinėms atminties institucijoms yra tolerantiška ir pliuralistinė kultūra, kurioje jos gali be išankstinio nusistatymo dirbti ir būti naudingos visiems. Kai Vengrijoje ir Lenkijoje į valdžią atėjusios neliberalios vienpartinės populistinės jėgos pradėjo ardyti horizontalios atskaitomybės mechanizmus, jų valstybinėms atminties institucijoms kyla grėsmė tapti atminties karo dalyvių, siekiančių politinės naudos iš jų darbo aspektų kritikos, taikiniu.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: pilietinė visuomenė, valstybinės atminties institucijos, režimo pasikeitimas, pokomunizmas, ginčytina politika, atsitraukimas, atskaitomybė, Vengrija, Lenkija.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to explore the range of relationships between state memory institutions (hereinafter, SMIs) and civil society organizations (hereinafter, CSOs). While many studies of memory politics discuss concrete examples of conflict and collaboration between SMIs and CSOs,¹ there has been little systematic consideration of the relationship between these two key players in the politics of memory. This contribution will be an attempt to build a theoretical framework to more systematically consider the relationship between the two.

By state memory institutions, I understand organizations that serve as the repositories of knowledge that the state wishes to make available to the public. They include but are not limited to libraries, archives, museums, heritage sites, monuments, and research organizations.² I understand civil society organizations to be:

*...interest groups, labor unions, religiously inspired organizations (if they are engaged in civic or political activities), social movements, professional associations, and classic non-governmental organizations (NGOs), but not businesses, political parties, government agencies, or religious organizations that are primarily focused on spiritual practices. A CSO must also be at least nominally independent of government and economic institutions.*³

The literature on civil society recognizes that it plays different roles in the institutional and regime histories of any nation. To capture this variation, I use the four different modalities of civil society I coined in a recent piece—insurgent, institutionalized, anti-democratic, and firewall.⁴

Insurgent civil society is the product of authoritarian rule and arises when social movements and other forms of independent organization contest authoritarian rule. *Institutionalized civil society* is the realm of normal interest group politics under democratic rule. Competing interests organize and mobilize to attain their interests by exercising influence over the exercise of power by the institutions of the state.

¹ As exemplary studies that highlight the role of civil society actors see Wüstenberg, J. *Civil Society and Memory in Postwar Germany*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316822746>; Hasunuma, L.; McCarthy, M.M. Creating a Collective Memory of the Comfort Women in the USA. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 2019, Vol. 32, No. 2, p. 145–162, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10767-018-9302-1>; Visser, J. Bangladesh's "Father of the Nation" and the Transnational Politics of Memory: Connecting Cross-Scale Iterations of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 2019, Vol. 32, No. 2, p. 163–179, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10767-018-9301-2>.

² Cf. Stainforth, E. From Museum to Memory Institution: The Politics of European Culture Online. *Museum & Society*, 2017, Vol. 14, No. 2, p. 323–337, <https://doi.org/10.29311/mas.v14i2.646>; Robinson, H. Remembering Things Differently: Museums, Libraries and Archives as Memory Institutions and the Implications for Convergence. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 2012, Vol. 27, No. 4, p. 413–429, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2012.720188>; McQuaid, S.D.; Gensburger, S. Administrations of Memory: Transcending the Nation and Bringing Back the State in Memory Studies. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 2019, Vol. 32, No. 2, p. 125–143, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10767-018-9300-3>.

³ Coppedge, M. et al. "V-Dem Codebook v14" *Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project*. Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg, V-Dem Institute, 2024, p. 201. Retrieved from https://v-dem.net/documents/38/V-Dem_Codebook_v14.pdf [accessed 02/03/2025].

⁴ See Bernhard, M. What Do We Know about Civil Society and Regime Change Thirty Years after 1989?. *East European Politics*, 2020, Vol. 36, No. 3, p. 341–362, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2020.1787160>. In the original, I called *anti-democratic* civil society 'uncivil.' I find the alternative used here more descriptive.

Anti-democratic civil society is composed of organizations and movements that seek to install or maintain authoritarian rule. Under democracy this may include anti-system elements that try to overthrow democracy or semi-loyal organizations that attempt to weaken and undermine democratic norms and institutions. Under authoritarian rule this may include social movements that support the regime, government-organized non-governmental organizations (hereinafter, GONGOS), or transmission belt organizations.⁵ Finally, *firewall civil society* is associated with periods of democratic backsliding and deterioration. When forms of horizontal and vertical accountability associated with democratic rule are enfeebled, civil society organizations can exercise forms of social accountability in support of democracy.

In the discussion that follows, I will explore the relationship between SMIs and CSOs in the context of the dominant dynamic of civil society via the four modes identified above. These modes are embedded in the politics of regime stability and change which will condition the role of SMIs and CSOs. My approach to the question will be descriptive and analytical, not normative, in the hope of framing some contextual theoretical regularities. The examples come primarily from the experience of communist and post-communist Europe with a focus on Poland and Hungary.

1. Insurgent Civil Society

An insurgent civil society is one where CSOs challenge an authoritarian regime. Such challenges are an intrinsic part of democratic transitions, but an insurgent civil society does not automatically lead to democratic transitions.⁶ Transitions can be initiated either by civil society's contention which causes a split in the ruling authoritarian elite or by a split that emerges in the elite for other reasons.

When civil society provokes the split, it is usually due to mobilization and the elite faces the dilemma of whether to reform or repress. The persistence of the Solidarity movement in the 1980s compelled the Polish United Working Party to undertake reforms. When civil society gains the upper hand it can advance reform beyond liberalization to democratization as it did in Poland when Solidarity won a resounding victory in the partially free elections of 1989. When a division in the authoritarian elite leads to liberalization, democracy becomes possible if civil society mobilizes and presses for democratizing reforms. The emergence of Sąjūdis in Lithuania in response to the opening afforded by Glasnost' and Perestroika represents a case where civil society mobilization pushed authoritarian reform into democratic transition.⁷

Under conditions of authoritarianism, SMIs are firmly under the control of the authoritarian incumbents. In the early phases of this struggle, the relationship between the SMIs and oppositional civil society milieus is often antithetic. The role of the SMIs is to defend the state line on the history and culture of the country. In such situations successful civil society insurgencies often create their own alternative memory institutions to contest the interpretation of the past associated with the authoritarian regime.

A good example of the development of alternative memory institutions is provided by the democratic opposition in communist Poland. Already prior to the creation of Solidarity, the democratic opposition of the 1970s created its own infrastructure to contest the official memory narrative of the state. They focused on *białe plamy* (blank spots) in history. Alternative memory institutions created in the period prior to Solidarity included:

⁵ See more *Ruling by Other Means: State-Mobilized Movements* / Eds. G. Ekiert, E.J. Perry, X. Yan. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108784146>.

⁶ See more Przeworski, A. *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

⁷ See Lauristin, M.; Norkus, Z.; Vihalemm, P. On the Sociology's Contribution to Knowledge of the Baltic Way. *Sociologija. Mintis ir veiksmas*, 2011, Vol. 29, No. 2, p. 145, <https://doi.org/10.15388/SocMintVei.2011.2.6129>.

- A Flying University (*Towarzystwo Kursów Naukowych*) which gave lectures on history in private apartments.⁸
- Underground publishing houses that printed books and journals. These included banned books, censored documents, original research on banned subjects, and bulletins of current events and struggles, so-called *bibuła* in Polish.
- Smuggling networks which brought in *tamizdat* books and journals printed overseas, and distributed *bibuła* nationally.

This alternative public sphere allowed for the investigation of issues that were banned or highly constrained in official discourse including:

- The Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact, including its ramifications—Katyń, deportations, etc.
- Non-communist resistance during World War II (hereinafter, WWII).
- Postwar repression of the underground and political parties.
- Polish–Jewish relations.
- Past contentious events under communism—1956, 1968, 1970–1971, 1976, Solidarity.

When contention leads to the liberalization of the dictatorship, new possibilities emerge for SMIs. Increases in freedom of speech allow SMIs to transgress and begin to dismantle the limitations that censorship places on their work. SMI employees, especially those with professional training and intellectual interests, can push on those limits and expand on what is possible to display in museums, to allow researchers in archives greater access, to display and produce previously banned artistic works, and to research questions that were taboo in the past. With liberalization SMIs may become sites of memory contention and the possibility for alliances between the opposition and some reform-oriented employees becomes feasible.

The transformation of the Soviet intelligentsia under Gorbachev is a vivid example of this. It was possible to publish on formerly banned topics in journals and books. Many previously banned books were published. Researchers got to explore questions of the past in new ways as archives allowed greater access to ‘sensitive’ materials.⁹

2. Institutionalized Civil Society

With transitions to democracy, the relationship between civil society and the state changes. The restraints on freedom of organization and expression that existed under dictatorship are relaxed. Civil society moves out of an adversarial mode and begins to constitute a realm of organized interests. An antagonistic relationship to state power is replaced by one characterized by trying to influence the holders of power directly through lobbying and support, and indirectly through influencing public opinion.

The process of democratization also leads to the demonopolitization of state memory institutions. The uniform political criteria that governed their practice are replaced by professional, meritocratic criteria, and respect for freedom of information and equal access. This leads to a reduction in the monocultural politicization of state memory institutions. It does not lead to a complete depoliticization of state memory institutions though. It means that civil society organizations and governments will push memory narratives congruent with their interests. Often in this context memory institutions become

⁸ See more Kunicki-Goldfinger, M. *Towarzystwo Kursów Naukowych 1978–1980*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Księgarnia Akademicka, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.12797/9788383681702>.

⁹ See more Marsh, R. *History and Literature in Contemporary Russia*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230377790>.

sites of public contestation when their public-facing work takes a position on the previously censored subjects and contested controversies in the national memory field.

A good example of how the communist memory monopoly was replaced by a politicized alternative pushed by another political party is the saga of the House of Terror Museum that opened in 2002 in Budapest. Its subject is the commemoration of the victims of the ‘twin totalitarianisms’ of fascism and communism. The building had been previously used as a detention center by the fascist Arrow Cross during the closing phases of WWII. The exhibits were strongly influenced by Maria Schmidt, a historian who served as an advisor to Viktor Orbán and known for her revisionist histories of the Holocaust. While the museum condemns both totalitarianisms, its coverage is unbalanced. Only a few rooms are devoted to the Arrow Cross. The rest of the museum goes into great detail about the crimes committed by the communist party and its successors. There is a conspicuous absence of coverage of the wartime Horthy regime, its collaboration with Hitler, and its anti-Jewish measures.¹⁰

With democratization, the end of state control of the public sphere and its replacement by a pluralist notion of expression has important ramifications for SMIs and civil society organizations. The restraints on many SMIs are relaxed. Theaters, operas, and orchestras are free to control their own programming. State publishing houses no longer worry about censorship and some of them are even privatized. The biggest constraint they face is competition from other firms and other forms of media, not censorship.

In cases where SMIs were controlled closely by nomenklatura appointees and expected to follow party directives and censor sensitive topics, SMIs could become sites of conflict with civil society. Communist-era appointees faced tradeoffs between professional integrity and political considerations that sometimes involved moral dilemmas and compromises. This makes them potential targets in the political struggle of the early transition period. The most highly politicized SMIs were often dismantled or abolished, such as censorship boards and Departments of Marxism-Leninism at universities.

Often in this context memory institutions become sites of public contestation when their work antagonizes actors in civil society.¹¹ The most notorious case of extreme conflict of this type in the immediate wake of the transition was when Stasi employees tried to destroy compromising files in 1989–1990 and were confronted by protestors who occupied the main archive in Berlin and several regional offices. This led to the creation of the Gauck Commission, which brought the files under the control of the state and led to the creation of the Stasi Records agency, which professionally administers a central archive in Berlin and twelve regional centers.¹² These new archives are well-organized, professionally managed, and encourage researchers to make use of their records.

3. Anti-Democratic Civil Society

Anti-democratic civil society exists under conditions of political polarization over regime-type and can exist either under democracy or in competitive authoritarian regimes in which civil society has not been fully compromised. Synonyms for this modality in the literature include “uncivil society,”¹³ “bad”

¹⁰ See more Marszovszky, M. “Die Märtyrer sind die Magyaren”: Der Holocaust in Ungarn aus Sicht des Hauses des Terrors in Budapest und die Ethnisierung der Erinnerung in Ungarn. In: *Die Dynamik der europäischen Rechten: Geschichte, Kontinuitäten und Wandel* / Eds. C. Globisch, A. Pufelska, V. Weiß. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2011, p. 55–74, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-92703-9_4; Rév, I. The House of Terror. In: *(Re)Visualizing National History: Museums and National Identities in Europe in the New Millennium* / Ed. R. Ostow. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008, p. 47–89.

¹¹ About museum as a form of historical culture see Šermukšnytė, R. Rescuing the Jews in Lithuania during World War II: Practices of Creating a Lithuanian Museum Narrative. *Lietuvos istorijos studijos*, 2023, Vol. 52, p. 110–112, <https://doi.org/10.15388/LIS.2023.52.6>.

¹² See Gauck, J.; Fry, M. Dealing with a Stasi Past. *Daedalus*, 1994, Vol. 123, No. 1, p. 277–284.

¹³ See above all, *Uncivil Society?: Contentious Politics in Post-Communist Europe* / Eds. P. Kopecký, C. Mudde. London: Routledge, 2003.

civil society,¹⁴ or “dark” civil society.¹⁵ While all these terms clearly capture the same referent, I choose to use “anti-democratic” because they all share hostility to the rules of the democratic game or attempts to democratize the political system.

It is important to note that many anti-democratic organizations are part of civil society. They are self-organized groups of citizens who pursue their interests. It is just that these interests are antithetical to democracy. This has nothing to do with civility and questions of badness or darkness, which are meaningless without reference to specific value systems.

Under democracy, anti-democratic civil society consists of those civil society organizations allied with political forces that seek to overthrow or weaken democracy. This can be directed at undermining democratic rules, norms, or guardrails; disenfranchising populations of citizens; assisting those in power to weaken the accountability mechanisms that constrain their executive power; or at directly overthrowing democracy. Under competitive authoritarian regimes anti-democratic civil society is composed of those CSOs that actively support the authoritarian incumbent and its efforts to constrain civic space and support its efforts to expand executive power.¹⁶ Not all anti-democratic organizations are parts of civil society. There are also so-called GONGOs directly organized by the incumbents in power¹⁷ and AstroTurf organizations that simulate grassroots organization at the behest of wealthy sponsors.¹⁸

There are differences between disloyal and semiloyal actors as articulated by Juan Linz.¹⁹ Disloyal actors seek to directly overthrow the system. Historically the most common form of seizure of power is the coup d'état, which is often conducted by militaries. Examples that have featured CSOs (in alliance with parties) include Mussolini's March on Rome in 1922 or the Czechoslovak Communist Coup of 1948. However, even in the case of military coups, political parties and civil society groups can provide justification, post-coup support, or the knock on the barracks door that motivated the military.

Semi-loyal actors participate in the system but use their participation to undermine democratic norms and to advance the power of parties not fully committed to the rules of the democratic game. Such parties then use control of state power to overthrow or weaken democracy. The classic case of the use of anti-democratic civil society to seize power legally and then legislate democracy out of existence is Sheri Berman's account of Nazi infiltration and capture of many civil society organizations in Weimar Germany.²⁰

Civil society actors have been important in recent episodes of democratic backsliding in Central Europe. The Polish Gazette Clubs (*Kluby Gazety Polskiej*)²¹ and the Civic Circles (*Polgári Körök*) movement were local discussion and activism clubs set up across Poland and Hungary to push the agendas of both Polish Law and Justice party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, or PiS; hereinafter, PiS) and Fidesz—Hungarian Civic Alliance (hereinafter, Fidesz). On one level they helped to build the electoral machinery that put both parties in taking and holding power and carried their historical and cultural messages into

¹⁴ See above all, Chambers, S.; Kopstein, J. Bad Civil Society. *Political Theory*, 2001, Vol. 29, No. 6, p. 837–865, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591701029006008>.

¹⁵ See above all, Hohler, S. *Fascism in Manchuria: The Soviet–China Encounter in the 1930s*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2017.

¹⁶ For more information on CSOs of this nature, as well as imposter organizations created by the state, see *Ruling by Other Means: State-Mobilized Movements*.

¹⁷ See Hasmath, R.; Hildebrandt, T.; Hsu, J.Y.J. Conceptualizing Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organizations. *Journal of Civil Society*, 2019, Vol. 15, No. 3, p. 267–284, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17448689.2019.1632549>.

¹⁸ See Weiss, M. L. Going to the Ground (or AstroTurf): A Grassroots View of Regime Resilience. *Democratization*, 2016, Vol. 24, No. 2, p. 265–282, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2016.1160059>.

¹⁹ For details, see Linz, J. Crisis, Breakdown and Reequilibration. An Introduction. In: *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes. Vol. 1: Crisis, Breakdown and Reequilibration. An Introduction* / Eds. J. Linz, A. Stepan. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978, p. 1–97.

²⁰ Berman, S. Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic. *World Politics*, 1997, Vol. 49, No. 3, p. 401–429, <https://doi.org/10.1353/wp.1997.0008>.

²¹ *Gazeta Polska* (Polish Gazette) is rightwing daily national newspaper. Access: <https://www.gazetapolska.pl/>.

the public sphere. They functioned as civic memory institutions that contested narratives of democratic transition in both countries.²²

Organizations like the Polish Gazette Clubs and the Civic Circles promulgate revisionist historical positions that flirt with or even embrace rehabilitating past rightwing interpretations of history. They use this nationalist revisionist worldview to stage attacks on SMIs as not fully ‘decommunized’ or for being under the spell of foreign ideologies like “Gender.”²³ They also provide a training or recruiting ground for their own experts to work in SMIs when their politicians take power.

Both Fidesz and PiS waged campaigns to rehabilitate certain political actors who had been discredited during WWII. Fidesz took a much more charitable interpretation of the actions of the Horthy regime and began to openly embrace it as an acceptable national form of moderate dictatorship,²⁴ and to rehabilitate writers like the xenophobic nationalist Cécile Tormay, and Nazi collaborators such as the writers Albert Wass and József Nyírő. Nyírő joined the Arrow Cross. Wass was blatantly antisemitic and was convicted in absentia in Romania of killing Romanian peasants, an Orthodox Priest, and Jews in Transylvania during WWII. While his role in the killings is disputed, his anti-Semitic writings during WWII are not.²⁵

Similarly, PiS supporters used their positions in universities and the National Institute of Memory (hereinafter, IPN) to propound revisionist narratives of history. For example, there was an attempt to resurrect particular groups of so-called “Cursed soldiers” (*Żołnierze wyklęci*), those who continued to resist Soviet occupation after WWII.²⁶ This included the Holy Cross Mountain Brigade of the National Armed Forces who collaborated with the Gestapo and SS during the war both in tracking and arresting Jews, and in turning leaders of the underground Home Army to the Germans.²⁷ While a number of outspoken historians with rightwing sympathies found work in IPN, it would be unfair to characterize the institution as captured. There are historians of many different schools employed there.

²² See more Ślarzyński, M. Rola klubów „Gazety Polskiej” w sukcesie politycznym Prawa i Sprawiedliwości w 2015 roku. Aktorzy lokalni czy aktor ogólnokrajowej sfery publicznej III RP?. *Przegląd Socjologiczny*, 2018, Vol. 67, No. 2, p. 139–158, <https://doi.org/10.26485/PS/2018/67.2/6>; Greskovits, B. Rebuilding the Hungarian Right through Conquering Civil Society: The Civic Circles Movement. *East European Politics*, 2020, Vol. 36, No. 2, p. 247–266, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2020.1718657>.

²³ See more Korolczuk, E.; Graff, A. Gender as “Ebola from Brussels”: The Anticolonial Frame and the Rise of Illiberal Populism. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 2018, Vol. 43, No. 4, p. 797–82, <https://doi.org/10.1086/696691>.

²⁴ See Heinrich, H.-G. From Horthy to Orbán: Neo-Authoritarianism in Hungary. In: *New Authoritarianism: Challenges to Democracy in the 21st Century* / Ed. J. J. Wiatr. Leverkusen-Opladen: Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2019, p. 110–111, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvd08xx.10>; Bennazo, S. Not All the Past Needs To Be Used: Features of ‘Fidesz’s Politics of Memory’. *Journal of Nationalism, Memory & Language Politics*, 2017, Vol. 11, No. 2, p. 202–203, <https://doi.org/10.1515/jnmlp-2017-0009>.

²⁵ For details, see Pető, A. Revisionist Histories, ‘Future Memories’: Far-Right Memorialization Practices in Hungary. *European Politics and Society*, 2016, Vol. 18, No. 1, p. 41–51, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2016.1269442>; Kurimay, A. Interrogating the Historical Revisionism of the Hungarian Right: The Queer Case of Cécile Tormay. *East European Politics and Societies*, 2016, Vol. 30, No. 1, p. 10–33, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325415599194>; Neubauer, J. Albert Wass: Rebirth and Apotheosis of a Transylvanian-Hungarian Writer. In: *The Exile and Return of Writers from East-Central Europe: A Compendium* / Eds. J. Neubauer, B. Z. Török. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009, p. 538–578, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110217742.5.538>; Huszár, Á. Nationalism and Hungarian Education Policy: Are the Literary Works of Cécile Tormay, József Nyírő, and Albert Wass Appropriate for the Hungarian School Curriculum?. *Hungarian Cultural Studies*, 2014, Vol. 7, p. 303–319, <https://doi.org/10.5195/ahca.2014.140>.

²⁶ See The Holy Cross Mountains Brigade (Polish: Brygada Świętokrzyska) of the National Armed Forces. *Institute of National Remembrance*, 26 February, 2018. Retrieved from <https://eng.ipn.gov.pl/en/news/1057/The-Holy-Cross-Mountains-Brigade-Polish-Brygada-Swietokrzyska-of-the-National-Ar.html> [accessed 02/03/2025].

²⁷ For details, see Cooper, L. *In the Shadow of the Polish Eagle: The Poles, the Holocaust and Beyond*. New York, Palgrave. 2000, p. 148–149, 153; Getter, M.; Dobroszycki, L. The Gestapo and the Polish Resistance Movement (on the Example of the Radom District). *Acta Poloniae Historica*, 1961, Vol. 4, p. 85–118; Borodziej, W. *Terror und Politik: Die deutsche Polizei und die polnische Widerstandsbewegung im Generalgouvernement 1939–1944*. Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 1999, p. 128–129; Piotrowski, T. *Poland’s Holocaust: Ethnic Strife, Collaboration with Occupying Forces and Genocide in the Second Republic, 1918–1947*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1998, p. 95–96; Wysocka-Schnepf, D. Prof. Friszke: Gdy więźniowie Dachau czekali na egzekucję, Brygada Świętokrzyska piła szampana z Gestapo. *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 12 August, 2019. Retrieved from <https://wyborcza.pl/7,82983,25081657,prof-friszke-gdy-wiezniowie-dachau-czekali-na-egzekucje-brygada.html?disableRedirects=true> [accessed 02/03/2025]; Wnuk, R. Brygada Świętokrzyska. Zakłamana legenda. *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 25 January, 2016. Retrieved from <https://wyborcza.pl/alehistoria/7,121681,19518952,brygada-swietokrzyska-zaklamana-legenda.html> [accessed 02/03/2025].

4. Firewall Civil Society

Civil society can function as a democratic firewall in situations of democratic backsliding or potential breakdown when illiberal powerholders work to undermine democracy from within. Democracy is self-enforcing because of mechanisms of accountability that allow political actors and citizens to hold those in power responsible for their acts.

Vertical accountability is provided by regularly scheduled elections which allow voters to confirm their confidence in rulers or to turn them out of power. Aspiring dictators seek to undermine electoral freedom and fairness. In Putin's Russia, this process has gone so far that elections no longer determine who will hold power.²⁸ They have been reduced to plebiscitary confirmations of Putin's rule, mere exercises in signaling obedience.

In Hungary, elections are still free but are no longer fair.²⁹ Electoral district boundaries and the system of voting were reconstructed to enhance Fidesz's chances of winning. Further, the incumbent government of Viktor Orbán controls the state media and uses it to its advantage. And given that the vast majority of private mass media outlets are owned by Fidesz's affiliated oligarchs, the ability of the opposition to effectively campaign is highly constrained.³⁰

Horizontal accountability is provided by the division of powers. The judiciary and legislature have the ability to curb the unfettered exercise of power of the executive. Party majority government in support of a prime minister allows the executive's party to push through legislation with impunity. It also allows that party to undermine judicial accountability by appointments and legal reforms. It also permits them to stack other accountability institutions like national banks, boards of public institutions like TV and Radio, and cultural institutions like libraries and theaters, as well as those with auditing functions like control chambers.

Here the contrast between the success of Fidesz in comparison to PiS in Poland is illustrative. Fidesz won constitutional majorities and tailored institutions to lock in their power. They strongly undermined judicial independence, manipulated the voting system, and created special laws that cannot be repealed by future governments without a two-thirds majority.³¹ In Poland, the PiS government elected in 2015 controlled majorities in both the *Sejm* and *Senat*. In 2019, it lost control of the *Senat* and this complicated their ability to move legislation. The ability of Fidesz to avoid horizontal accountability because of its supermajority control of fused executive / legislative power explains its success in undermining democracy and remaining in power. In contrast, PiS was unable to form a third government in 2023 and gave way to the coalition government under the Citizens' Platform.

When both horizontal and vertical accountability are undermined, the last form of constraint on executive power is the social accountability provided by civil society. It can constrain government actions by monitoring and reporting on them, contesting them in the courts, and by protest and other forms of contentious action. It can obstruct some government actions and impose audience costs on the government where elections remain relatively free and fair.³² This is firewall civil society.

²⁸ See more Szakonyi, D. Candidate Filtering: The Strategic Use of Electoral Manipulations in Russia. *British Journal of Political Science*, 2022, Vol. 52, No. 2, p. 649–670, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123420000836>.

²⁹ Cf. Hungary, Parliamentary Elections and Referendum, 3 April 2022: Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions. OSCE, 3 April, 2022, p. 2. Retrieved from <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/hungary/515111> [accessed 02/03/2025].

³⁰ For instance see von Notz, A. How to Abolish Democracy: Electoral System, Party Regulation and Opposition Rights in Hungary and Poland. *Verfassungsblog*, 10 December, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.17176/20190116-210647-0>; Goat, E.; Banuta, Z. Fresh Evidence of Hungary Vote-rigging Raises Concerns of Fraud in European Elections. *OpenDemocracy*, 17 May, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/breaking-fresh-evidence-hungary-vote-rigging-raises-concerns-fraud-european-elections/> [accessed 02/03/2025]; Magyar, B.; Madlovics, B. Hungary 2022: Election Manipulation and the Regime's Attempts at Electoral Fraud. *CEU Democracy Institute*, 30 March, 2022. Retrieved from <https://democracyinstitute.ceu.edu/sites/default/files/article/attachment/2022-03/Hungary%202022%20Manipulated%20Elections.pdf> [accessed 02/03/2025].

³¹ See Bugarič, B.; Ginsburg, T. The Assault on Postcommunist Courts. *Journal of Democracy*, 2016, Vol. 27, No. 3, p. 72–74, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0047>; Bánkuti, M.; Halmai, G.; Scheppele, K.L. Hungary's Illiberal Turn: Disabling the Constitution. *Journal of Democracy*, 2012, Vol. 23, No. 3, p. 138–146, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2012.0054>.

³² Cf. Smulovitz, C.; Peruzzotti, E. Societal Accountability in Latin America. *Journal of Democracy*, 2000, Vol. 11, No. 4, p. 147–158, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2000.0087>.

Successful examples of civil society functioning as a democratic firewall would include the women's marches in Poland which contributed to the replacement of the Morawiecki government in 2023, the mobilization of voters by civil society that unseated the Mečiar government in Slovakia in 1998, the protests in Slovakia against the Fico government after the murder of Ján Kuciak and Martina Kušnírová which led to its resignation in 2018, and the serial protests by the Million Moments for Democracy movement which undermined support for Babiš in Czechia in 2018–2019.

Successful protests of this sort are very rare. There have been vast numbers of protests against the actions of the Orbán government in Hungary, yet it remains firmly in power. Another impressive but unsuccessful effort was mounted by the One of Five Million Movement in Serbia which protested violence against opposition politicians by the Vučić administration. It sustained a campaign of protests from 30 November 2018 to 16 March 2020, when it was suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The political polarization and uptick in contentious politics that accompanies civil society mobilization aimed at stemming backsliding is a very dangerous time for SMIs. Illiberal governments will seek to control historical narratives and thus SMIs will come under increased pressure and scrutiny. Employees in SMIs could be compelled to embrace the government line or lose their jobs. Such demands may conflict with their professional standards. In such circumstances civil society can try to defend institutions beset by challenges from the government. We have seen that upon taking power illiberal governments have indeed moved to exert their influence over and through state MSIs. Fidesz in power has moved to institutionalize its version of the historical narrative. It changed curricula to paint the Horthy regime in positive terms and removed many authors from the curriculum, including Imre Kertész—the only Hungarian Nobel literature prize winner, and added the aforementioned writers Tormay, Wass and, and Nyíró.

In Poland a report commissioned by Piotr Gliński, the PiS Minister of Culture, the newly created Museum of the WWII in Gdańsk was attacked for presenting the war from a perspective that was too international while not focusing enough attention on the suffering of Poland. In a move calculated to take control of the museum, Gliński tried to combine the Museum with the Westerplatte Museum and Memorial and remove its founding director Paweł Machcewicz.³³ The Museum contested these decisions in a publicity campaign including open letters from historians and other scholars and in court. Eventually, the Ministry won in the Supreme Administrative Court stacked with PiS appointees.³⁴

Machcewicz was removed in 2017 and replaced by a historian connected with the PiS government, Karol Nawrocki (he was a candidate in the Polish presidential elections and is currently serving as the seventh president of Poland). Under Nawrocki, some exhibitions were redone and a strange film done in the style of a video game presented the suffering of Poland in a very cartoonish fashion.³⁵ The board of directors was replaced by a group of historians aligned with PiS, including Sławomir Cenckiewicz and Marek Jan Chodakiewicz.

Gliński also worked to remove the founding director of POLIN, the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, Dariusz Stola. He chose not to reappoint him despite the support of the Museum's board and its supporting organizations. In response, a protest campaign was organized by his supporters, including several international open letters protesting Gliński's failure to reappoint Stola. Despite these efforts he was eventually replaced by his able Deputy Director, Zygmunt Stępiński. POLIN thus avoided the kind of hostile takeover that the Museum of the WWII experienced.

³³ See Fontana, E. Meanings of the "Museum Boom" in Contemporary Poland and Elsewhere. *Museum Anthropology*, 2020, Vol. 43, No. 1, p. 53, <https://doi.org/10.1111/muan.12217>.

³⁴ For the given context, see Machcewicz, P. *The War That Never Ends: The Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk* / Translated by A. Połapska Adamek (in cooperation with B. Dewalt and D. Monaghan). Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2019, p. 154–172, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110659092>. See also Fontana, E. Meanings of the "Museum Boom" in Contemporary Poland and Elsewhere, p. 53–54.

³⁵ See Stola, D.; Cywiński, P.; Machcewicz, P.; Ziębińska-Witek, A.; Snyder, T. Historians in the Museum. *The American Historical Review*, 2022, Vol. 127, No. 4, p. 1884, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/rhac461>.

Under PiS, Polish–Jewish relations became a sore point. Poland passed a Holocaust Law which made it a crime to attribute blame for the Holocaust to the Polish state or people. The motivation for the law came from a common mistake that many foreigners make in characterizing concentration camps as “Polish.” The Nazis made the decision to locate their extermination camps in the formerly territories of the Polish state, the so-called General Government. Unlike other occupied nations the Poles also did not face the dilemma of state-level collaboration with the Nazis. Because of Nazi hostility towards Poland, the highest level of Polish authority was at the municipality. Yet there were Poles who did aid the Nazis at the local level or who sold out Jews or fellow citizens who hid them. The question is not whether Poles are justified in feeling wronged by their wrongful association with the camps, but the political uses to which the law could be put.

This became an issue when the law was used to attack Polish academics who did research into local Polish collaboration with the occupation. For instance, the book *Night without End: The Fate of Jews in German-Occupied Poland* (original *Dalej jest noc. Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski*), edited by Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski,³⁶ described an episode where a local village chief (Pol *sołtys*) handed over Jews to the Nazis. The blame attributed was misdirected due to a case of mistaken identity of two people in the narrative sharing the same name.³⁷ The book was roundly attacked by IPN historians who impugned its sources as unreliable.³⁸

They were sued by the niece of the *sołtys*. The suit was funded by a PiS-linked NGO, the Polish League against Defamation. The founder was Maciej Swirski, who PiS later appointed to chair the National Television and Radio Council. In the first instance the judge decided the two historians needed to apologize for the misinformation but did not levy a fine (as this would have a chilling effect on academic freedom). This was countered by an international campaign to defend academic freedom led by POLIN, with the support of Yad Vashem and the Simon Wiesenthal Center. The original judgment was overturned in an appeals court.³⁹ This case shows how both SMIs and CSOs can be weaponized in memory struggles and become protagonists in the struggles which have ramifications for academic freedom and freedom of expression.

After ejecting Central European University from Budapest, the Orbán regime continued to curtail the autonomy of SMIs. In 2019, the autonomy of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences was abolished when Parliament granted control of its budget to the new Ministry of Technology and Innovation. Many of its units were abolished, assigned to universities, or integrated into a new Eötvös Loránd Research Network (hereinafter, ELKH) under the control of the ministry. These measures sparked outrage, demonstrations, and open letters from the scientific community but without effect.⁴⁰

Fidesz has moved to control academic life by transferring control of public universities to private foundations controlled by Fidesz luminaries. In 2020 when they took over the University of Theater and Film

³⁶ *Dalej jest noc. Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski*. Vol. 2 / Eds. J. Grabowski, B. Engelking. Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2018. Translation into English: *Night without End: The Fate of Jews in German-Occupied Poland* / Eds. J. Grabowski, B. Engelking. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2s0jdz3>.

³⁷ See more A Ruling Against Survivors—Aleksandra Gliszczynska-Grabias about the Trial of Two Polish Holocaust Scholars. Interview. *Cultures of History Forum*, 8 March, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.cultures-of-history.uni-jena.de/politics/gliszczynska-grabias-about-the-trial-of-two-polish-holocaust-scholars> [accessed 02/03/2025].

³⁸ See, for example Domański, T. Korekta Obrazu? Refleksje źródłoznawcze wokół książki “Dalej jest noc. Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski.” *Polish-Jewish Studies*, 2019, Vol. 1, p. 3–72. Retrieved from <https://przystanekhistoria.pl/pa2/biblioteka-cyfrowa/publikacje/43750,Korekta-obrazu-Refleksje-zrodloznawcze-wokol-ksiazki-Dalej-jest-noc-Losy-Zydow-w.html> [accessed 02/03/2025].

³⁹ For more details, see *A Ruling Against Survivors—Aleksandra Gliszczynska-Grabias about the Trial of Two Polish Holocaust Scholars. Interview*.

⁴⁰ See Devi, S. Hungarian Government Taking Over Science Academy. *The Lancet*, 2019, Vol. 394, No. 10194, p. 201; Abbott, A. Hungary’s Scientists Outraged by Government Budget Grab. *Nature*, 2019, Vol. 566, p. 306–307, <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-019-00586-z>; Szűcs, Z. G. The Battle of the Academy: The War on Academic Freedom in Hungary Enters Its Next Phase. *Heinrich Böll Stiftung—Prague*, 12 March, 2019. Retrieved from <https://cz.boell.org/en/2019/03/12/battle-academy-war-academic-freedom-hungary-enters-its-next-phase> [accessed 02/03/2025].

Arts in this fashion, it led to petitions, protests, a sit-in, and a human chain around the building. Once again, the intervention by civil society in defense of academic freedom was ineffective in blocking the change.⁴¹

In addition to bringing existing academic institutions under heel, the Orbán regime has also created new institutions aligned with ideological and public memory preference. One such initiative that has met strong resistance from civil society groups has been a plan to open a branch of Fudan University from Shanghai in Budapest. The regime has blown hot and cold on this initiative, especially when confronting electoral challenges.⁴² Another high profile academic innovation has been the creation of the Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC) to provide additional training to a new generation of conservative activists, civil servants, and politicians, as well as a home for global figures on the right to do research in an international think tank.

The discussion here highlights the problems that civil society encounters in protecting SMIs against attempts by the state to transform them in line with their view of public memory. The one example here, the one successful defense took place in the Polish court system (B. Engelking and J. Grabowski) on appeal. Contentious politics, petitions, open letters, etc. seem to have little effect in blunting the determined exercise of state power.

Conclusions

Modes of civil society and the relationship of the state to its memory institutions are both strongly linked to the nature of the incumbent regime. We live in a moment where demagoguery masquerading as the voice of the people imperils democracy by provoking polarization of political views. Citizens of individual countries now often look at each other with hostility or even enmity.

Such a world threatens the professional integrity of those who staff SMIs. Political pressure imperils their ability to steward the artifacts of the national past on professional and meritocratic criteria. Curators of art museums use aesthetic criteria to assemble their collections and shows. Good art is not associated with any particular position on the political spectrum. Both the right and left are capable of producing political kitsch and trying to pass it off as art.

Archivists and librarians try to preserve the records of the past, make them available to researchers, and organize them in ways that make them more accessible. This is an ethos of service and openness. Universities and research institutions are there for the pursuit of knowledge, not for the promulgation of narratives that privilege one political faction over the other. They are there to teach students to think clearly and equip them to access information that allows them to make their own judgments. Everyone has the right to an education irrespective of their political orientation. Politicizing libraries, archives, and universities promotes ignorance, not knowledge.

The safest environment for SMIs is a tolerant and pluralistic culture where they can serve their purposes for all without prejudice. In these times, SMIs face the threat of becoming the targets of memory warriors who seek political gain from attacking aspects of their work. This can be carried out by actors in civil society or the forces that are politically in control of the state.

Civil society organizations can sometimes try to defend the autonomy of state memory institutions, but the successful examples of that are few and far between. In a region like Central Europe in which SMIs were subject to political control for decades, movement back in this direction would be a tragedy.

⁴¹ See Frenyó, A. Free Country, Free University—Students at Hungary's University of Theatre and Film Arts Protest Against Restricted Academic Freedom. *Heinrich Böll Stiftung – Prague*, 14 September, 2020. Retrieved from <https://cz.boell.org/en/2020/09/14/free-country-free-university-students-hungarys-university-theatre-and-film-arts-protest> [accessed 02/03/2025]; Gall, L. Hungary Continues Attacks on Academic Freedom. *Human Rights Watch*, September 3, 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/03/hungary-continues-attacks-academic-freedom> [accessed 02/03/2025].

⁴² See more Révész, Á. The Pandora's Box of Fudan Hungary. *Daedalus*, 2024, Vol. 153, No. 2, p. 207–216, https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_02084.

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