

## Civilizáció (Civilisation): coalition-building to fight back against government attacks on civil society

Civilisation was established as a joint campaign of Hungarian CSOs in early 2017. Their mission is to strengthen the image, constituency and support of civil society and civic action; to increase levels of solidarity; to share knowledge and skills to strengthen the civil society sector; and to take action against shrinking civil space and increase the opportunities of democratic participation and the diversity of civil society.

### What launched the coalition?

Since 2010, under the rule of the Fidesz party, Hungary has been subject to a severe backsliding in democracy and the rule of law. The government had dismantled the institutions of checks and balances, curbed media independence, and weakened social policies. CSOs were among the few remaining independent voices, and so from 2013-14 they became the government's next target.

The first high-profile attacks came in 2014, focusing on the EEA/Norway Grants Programme (an important resource for CSOs in some EU member states). The motive for this attack became clear when a list of 13 CSOs was published by the Prime Minister's Office; these organisations were considered 'problematic', and included the major national human rights, anti-corruption, gender and LGBTQI+ organisations. Media smear campaigns were initiated by the authorities to harass CSO staff, and groups were labelled as belonging to the 'Soros network' named after philanthropist George Soros, a target of intense negative propaganda and fake news. Investigations and tax inspections were sprung on the groups in question, and when the migration crisis hit Hungary in the summer of 2015 and thousands of asylum seekers arrived in Budapest, those CSOs providing assistance were labelled as 'foreign agents'.

**Existing weaknesses:** government attacks revealed the existing weaknesses in Hungarian civil society – namely, their income structures were dominated by the State, particularly via EU Structural Fund grants; this meant there was little need to innovate, research alternatives, or build support amongst the public, a fact demonstrated by the weak public response to the harassment of CSOs. Also, there had been little previous collaboration within civil society, and the attacks highlighted the need for cooperation and joint self-defence.

In 2017, the government announced their plans to regulate the foreign funding of civil society, with the 'Act on the Transparency of Organisations Supported from Abroad'. This proposed legislation would require CSOs receiving more than 7.2 million HUF from abroad (approx. \$24,000) each year

to register at the Court as a 'foreign funded organisation'. Failure to do so would result in fines, and eventual elimination of the organisation.

CSOs directly attacked in 2014 had begun to collaborate around their self-defence; this had dissipated when the initial attacks had faded, but in 2017, organisations were more aware of the context and of what was needed. 30+ large organisations, representing issues ranging from human rights to environmental justice and including groups with international counterparts such as Greenpeace and Amnesty International, started to meet regularly and strategise collectively. The 'Civilisation' coalition first came out publicly in March 2017 with a joint statement condemning the planned legislation:

*"HUNGARIAN SOCIETY NEEDS THE WORK OF CSOs. WE DO DIVERSE AND IRREPLACEABLE WORK FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD AND DEMOCRACY... WE STAND UP FOR OURSELVES AND FOR ONE ANOTHER".* The

declaration was signed by around 330 CSOs from all over Hungary.



### Who are the members?

The inner circle of the coalition is made up of approximately 30 national CSOs; they are a cross-sector mix of human rights, gender, environment, community and watch-dog organisations. There is also a broader network which engages via mailing lists and campaigns. Different levels of membership include observing members, those who participate only in specific activities, signatories of the coalition's joint declarations, participants at regional meetings, and newsletter subscribers.

### How does it work?

- There is a part-time coordinator, who supports the work of the coalition.
- Members meet regularly in person, and are connected via online mailing lists. Any member can propose agenda items or areas of focus.
- While the coalition is not a registered entity, there are formalized guidelines around how decisions are made (a voting system), and membership criteria.
- Smaller working groups facilitate practical operations. These are formed either organically, when a member has something helpful to offer to the wider network, or more formally, when a specific need is identified during a meeting and volunteers are sought to action it.

**Resistance to legislation** - the coalition fought the legislative proposals by:

- Organising a **mass demonstration** in Budapest
- Holding a silent protest during the session of Parliament when the draft was discussed, and a 'civil picnic' in front of Parliament before the law was passed

- **Mobilising supporters** with a letter-writing campaign targeting MPs
- Organising a joint petition of artists and writers
- And seeking **international solidarity** – for example Civil Society Europe gathered expressions of support from more than 500 European CSOs.

**Longer-term strategies** – the foreign-funding law was passed in the summer of 2017, at which point Civilisation pursued longer-term initiatives:

- **Boycotting the legislation** – 12 of the larger national organisations affected by the new legislation publicly boycotted it, with no direct legal consequence (so far). Meanwhile, many smaller, or more ‘innocent’ CSOs such as animal shelters, the World Wide Fund for Nature, the Red Cross etc. did register, which turned the Act into something of a laughing stock – rather than capture the kind of groups it had wished to target, it instead resulted in unwanted registrations by harmless groups.
- **Submitting joint complaints** to the Constitutional Court and the European Court of Human Rights; at the same time the European Commission launched a Rights infringement process, too which is now at the European Court of Justice; these legal proceedings are still pending
- **Rural outreach and engagement** – although the legislation did not trigger direct legal consequences for those boycotting it, it did have an overall stigmatizing and chilling effect on wider civil society, particularly outside of the capital. Rural CSOs have been fairly isolated; their main funders are state institutions or local government and so

#### **STOP SOROS**

Philanthropist George Soros and his Open Society Foundation have long been targeted by propaganda in Hungary, and many CSOs are labelled as part of the ‘**Soros network**’, a term designed to undermine their legitimacy. This propaganda went further when in early 2018 a legal package was announced, apparently intended to curb illegal immigration, named the ‘Stop Soros’ package. The government used fake news and distortion to campaign for this legislation, creating fear of immigrants and driving up hate and xenophobia in the run up to the April 2018 elections. Fidesz won at the elections with a two-thirds majority. The law was passed in June 2018, criminalising support to immigrants, and also introducing a special tax on the incomes of organisations ‘supporting migration’. However, it has yet to be implemented in practice, because the definitions included in the legislation are so weak and vague.

survival and dependence have been key issues for them. They are therefore wary of being connected with the so-called ‘**Soros network**’, and have fallen victim to the message that they should distance themselves from anything ‘political’, instead limiting themselves to more traditional charitable work. In response, the coalition started to organise various engagement opportunities for national CSOs to link with local organisations and create partnerships on issues of concern to local people. This network-building strategy has been a key focus for

Civilisation, as a way to achieve their aim to promote the cause of civil society and improve its overall image amongst the public.

### **LAYERS OF JOINT WORK**

These streams of work are supported by various mechanisms at the coalition level, including:

- The creation and sharing of resources and guidelines – for example those members with legal expertise have created guidelines on compliance for all members.
- Solidarity; those members with international/regional partners were quick to mobilise their external partners and peers in the face of the initial attacks. Also, members are ready to stand up for one another should it be needed.
- Outreach and communications – the coalition has released joint statements and pushed back on media smear campaigns. It is continuing with its rural outreach work and puts emphasis on positive communication and image building.

### **Outcomes**

- Members are now better prepared for threats; capacity has been built via shared resources, and links have formed between sectors and groups that were not previously connected, as this is the first truly cross-sector coalition in Hungarian civil society.
- Although the international and regional solidarity has not stopped restrictive legislation passing into law, it has helped Hungarian civil society feel seen, and not forgotten, which has been incredibly important.
- They are better organised; during quiet spells, the coalition is able to 'plan for peace times', developing longer-term strategies such as a positive image campaign, but also to prepare for adverse developments.

### **Challenges**

**'Standby'** – Civilisation was established in response to a crisis, and therefore their coalition has been built upon resistance. They work best together when there is an external threat or something to respond to. Without a common, clear goal to motivate their joint work, there is a risk that the interest and engagement of members will decrease. The government has gone relatively quiet during 2019, and so the coalition has been 'on standby'. They cannot maintain that mode infinitely, and so a common focus or theme is needed that brings the members together and inspires joint action.

## Lessons Learned

**How to cooperate** – this has been the first real cross-sector coalition in Hungary, and learning to cooperate and to work together took time. Members had to work hard to recognise and acknowledge different styles and types of CSOs, and different attitudes, approaches, appetites and agendas. It took some time to harmonise this, and to recognise and appreciate the diversity of the network. The lessons learned during earlier (failed) coalition-building efforts contributed to this – they taught more experienced members to exercise patience. Mutually agreed internal decision-making rules, based on the principles of ‘one member – one vote’ and ‘everyone contributes according to their capacities’ were also important, particularly for smaller, weaker members to feel safe and comfortable in the coalition.

Sarah Pugh and Deborah Doane

October 2019