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Remaking civil society under authoritarian capitalism: The case of the Orbán regime's Hungarian Academy of Arts

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Abstract

Authoritarian regimes are known for their attacks on civic organizations; however, this article demonstrates how such rules also set up and operate new forms of civil society. Drawing on a year-long ethnographic fieldwork at the cultural flagship institution of the Orbán-regime, the Hungarian Academy of Arts (HAA), this research engages with civic organizations often labeled as ‘uncivil,’ ‘dark,’ or ‘illiberal.’ Instead of applying the normative notion of civil society, it joins a century-long body of literature that, following Gramsci, stresses the integral nature of political and civil society. The article contributes to this research trajectory by spotlighting a new hegemonic regime’s dynamic remaking of civil society.

The article conceptualizes the process of remaking civil society and reveals four facets beyond top-down command (1) the making of clientelist social relations that affect both the privileged and the rank-and-file actors, (2) the managed articulation of dissent toward the regime that pacifies discontent (3) the relative autonomy of regime-allied civic organizations and (4) the orchestration of pre-existing bottom-up initiatives. By coining the concept of *recivilization*, this article contributes to understanding how emerging regimes remake civil society and mobilize voluntary social practices to maintain their rule. Through this understanding, this article highlights that authoritarianism is more than top-down ruling and suggests the novel notion of *recivilization* as a concept to capture the pro-systemic role of civil society.

Keywords: cultural politics and policy, civil society, authoritarian capitalism, state formation, Magyar Művészeti Akadémia (Hungarian Academy of Arts), Orbán regime

1 Introduction

In August 2020, in the Hungarian village of Kisgyőr, dozens of folk artists from all regions of the country were carving out the Christmas Nativity Scene of the Nation for the Hungarian Parliament. Working voluntarily, they were transforming heavy logs into cows, oxen, and sheep with the help of tractors, chainsaws, and axes. This work was taking place

in a summer camp subsidized by the Magyar Művészeti Akadémia (Hungarian Academy of Arts, hereafter HAA) and organized by the Head of its Folk Arts Section, who also serves as the village's mayor. As I realized between 2019 and 2021, during my more than a one-year-long participant observation at the HAA, its folk artist members were deeply unsatisfied when they saw the previous nativity scene prepared for the Parliament, which they characterized as too generic and Austrian-like. As the head of the camp summarized in one of their meetings: 'if our small village can have a lovely Hungarian Nativity Scene, there must be such a Nativity Scene at the House of Parliament, [because] it is certain that the nativity scene in Kisgyőr is more beautiful than that of the previous one exhibited in front of the Parliament.'¹ The woodcarvers marked the national character of the Nativity Scene not only by dressing the figures in Hungarian folk costumes and building the stable following vernacular architecture. They also carved out a sleigh to contain folk art objects made by dozens of folk-art associations of Hungary and the ethnic Hungarian minorities of the neighboring countries. The makers asked for the help of the constituency's Fidesz MP to find a place for their installation near the Parliament during the Christmas season. However, they did not ask for compensation for their year-long labor. As they proudly recalled among themselves, their volunteering shocked the bureaucrats of the regime that they otherwise endorsed.

While many people think there is no civil society in Orbán's Hungary, this article sheds light on the flourishing of regime-integrated civic organizations. To offer an alternative of the normative descriptions on the rise of the 'uncivil, dark and illiberal' and on the fall of 'genuine' civil society, the article coins the term recivilization to examine how civil society is remade in contemporary Hungary. This concept—established and expanded in the next section—joins a long history of scholarly tradition going beyond the normative approach of civil society and stressing the integral nature of state and civil society.

The case of the Christmas Nativity Scene of the Nation provides an excellent entry point for such an inquiry. The project of the Nativity Scene of the Nation was fostered by the HAA, a cultural flagship institution of the Orbán-regime, although most of the woodcarvers were not its members. The regime has ruled in Hungary since 2010 and enshrined the HAA into the constitution in 2011. Since then, the HAA, comprising ca. 300 predominantly elderly artists, owns a lavish real estate portfolio and has operated from a large annual budget (ca. 35 million EUR as of 2023),² spent grants, scholarships, and on the academicians' annuity equivalent to three times the minimum wage (ca. 1200 EUR as of 2023) among others.

Recivilization—the restructuring of civil society and its relationship with the state—is not specific to the HAA or the Orbán-regime's post-2010 remaking of civil society in Hungary. Instead, it is an integral part of any hegemonic shift, and the Academy's case is an illustrative instance of this process. The HAA offers an authoritative example to exam-

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the author.

² Unless otherwise noted, all the conversions are by the author according to the exchange rate year and minimum wage of 2023.

ine the process of recivilization, for at least three reasons. First, because it operates in the Orbán-regime that is often described as the frontline of ‘new authoritarianism.’ Within this, the Academy is commonly accused of being the regime’s creature to repress the freedom of the arts and artistic civil society. Second, the HAA has had its civic past: for two decades (from 1992 to 2011) it operated under the same name but as a precarious NGO predominantly based on voluntary labor (Nagy, 2023). Third, because the HAA has a paradoxical autonomy. It is formally self-governing and independent of the state apparatus, but its income is entirely derived from the governmental budget.

Authoritarian regimes are often accused of capturing the state and demolishing civil society (Magyar, 2016; Kovács & Trencsényi, 2020; Lindstaedt, 2021), and commentators often refer to the HAA as a paradigmatic case of this process (Artistic Freedom Initiative, 2022). It would be hard to classify the project of the Nativity Scene as an imperative case of the attack on civil society. Still, it can offer an entry point to examine the creative destruction of *recivilization* by asking how the state remakes civil society and how civic initiatives contribute to the cohesion of the regime.

This paper demonstrates through the case of the Orbán-regime of Hungary that authoritarian regimes are not merely destroying civil society but also remaking it to underpin and stabilize their rule. The instance of the semi-autonomous HAA, filled with countless voluntary ambitions (such as creating the Nativity Scene), offers a chance to show that authoritarian regimes’ civil society is more than a puppet of the governmental ambitions.

By conceptualizing the remaking of civil society and its relationship with the state as recivilization, this article brings three contributions to the literature. The first is that civil society does not disappear in authoritarian regimes but is recivilized. As a sphere of mediation, it contributes to the regimes’ deepening by knotting together the rulers and the ruled. The second emphasizes that bottom-up initiatives make new institutions meaningful and alive. For this reason, the co-optation and orchestration of pre-existing civic forms is a central element of recivilization. The third is methodological, underscoring that instead of scrutinizing the distinction between state and civil society, we should focus on their ceaseless interaction.

In the following, I first highlight the deficiency of the normative usage of civil society and locate the notion of recivilization among other concepts of civilization. Second, I introduce the Gramscian idea of civil society as part of the integral state as an angle that allows us to approach non-liberal organizations not as deviations but as parts of power struggles. Third, I also locate the HAA in the hegemonic process of the Orbán-regime of Hungary, specifically in its cultural politics and policy. Fourth, I demonstrate how ethnographic methods enabled this research and make its limitations transparent. After such theoretical and methodological preparations, I direct the reader toward the four facets of *recivilization*, (1) the establishment of clientelist funding structures penetrating all strata of cultural production (2) the pacifying management and articulation of dissent toward the central government (3) relative-autonomy of regime-bound civic organizations providing space for the (4) orchestration of bottom-up initiatives. As a result of these facets, we can go beyond the reductive juxtaposition of the captured state and critical civic society and shed light on Hungary’s state-led recivilization of society.

2 Civil society, state, and culture in and out of the Orbán-regime

2.1 Against the normative use of civil society³

This article deploys a notion of civil society that stresses its unity with the state and goes against its widespread normative usage. Although the non-normative analysis of civil society has almost a century-long tradition, dating back to the writings of Antonio Gramsci in the 1920s, such an approach should be reiterated. Its reinforcement is crucial since the prevailing scholarly and public understanding of civil society approaches it as autonomous from the state and market and as the carrier of liberal norms. Such an approach would exclude the HAA and its mediation between the regime and society from the research scope.

Normative uses often equate civil society with values such as independence, democracy, and courage and approach it as an autonomous sphere of liberal democracies limiting state power. However, these applications rarely reflect civil society's material constraints and historicity, such as the fact that 'the very existence of civil society depended on support from the state' (Kocka, 2011, p. 100). A historical-materialist approach would show that civil society 'is a concept from the "core" which claims universality, despite its Western provenance' (Kocka, 2011, p. 103). In East-Central Europe, this universalizing, normative meaning emerged with the post-socialist transition and entailed 'small intellectual circles' projection of 'the "ideal" of Western-type democracy on society' (Gagyí & Ivancheva, 2019, pp. 63–64). A normative notion would overlook non-Western histories of civil society, where its emergence 'went hand in hand with a quest for national identity' (Kocka, 2011, p. 106) and where authoritarian regimes often penetrated social relations through voluntary associations (Kerepeszki, 2016; Taylor, 2021).

The challenge of the Western model of civil society, accompanied by the deconstruction of its association with liberal values, has a tradition in several disciplines, such as anthropology (Hann & Dunn, 1996), social history (Kocka, 2004; 2011), and political science (Kopecky & Mudde, 2003). Despite this fertile literature, dominant academic and public discourses describe civic organizations of authoritarian orders as mere executors of the dominant political-economic power bloc's will and label them as 'the dark side of civil society' and 'illiberal civil society organizations' (Ekiert, 2019). Even the literature that recognizes and inquires about the existence of these regime-allied civic organizations often uses derogative terms to define them, such as Molnár's labelling them as part of an 'uncivil' society in contrast with the 'genuine' civil society (Molnár, 2016; 2020).

³ The most renowned example of unlearning the normative notion of civilization is Elias's notion of the civilizing process (Goudsblom & Mennell, 1998). Like this term, recivilizing is also historical and processual but has a substantially different focus. While Elias' civilization process on the changes of manners and habits through long-historical shifts, my focus is on the remaking of civil society. We both center on different scales of social integration and bring evidence from separate time and space constellations (Elias' from medieval and early modern Western Europe, mine from contemporary Eastern Europe). As a result, the two concepts co-exist rather than interfere with each other.

Instead of normative stances, this article joins Mikuš' (2018) distinction between 'liberal civil society' and 'wider civil society' (the former as a section of the latter) and shifts the focus on the 'regime-aligned civil society.'

Just as its normative approach perceived civil society 'as a process of civilizing' (Kocka, 2011, p. 98), this article also endorsed the processual approach, but without optimistic overtones. Recivilizing is a process, but not a unilinear and developmentalist one. Instead, it is an integral part of power relations, lined with ruptures and countermovement. By opposing labels such as 'uncivil,' this paper hypothesizes that the non-normatively understood civil society is more than a proxy of the dominant class. It has a relative autonomy which is not equal to the flourishing of liberal civil society. Instead, this semi-autonomous status can stabilize authoritarian regimes, just as liberal democracies. This stabilization operates by maintaining a densely woven interface between state and society that will be defined as part of the Gramscian integral state.

2.2 Integral state: The alternative of the state–civil society distinction

Civil society is as inseparable from the state as the voluntary woodwork of the Nativity Scene, and the HAA's financial and administrative support for the project are bound together. To lay the foundation for understanding the civil society of authoritarian regimes, we need a conceptual framework for the relation between state and civil society. The concept of the integral state introduced below offers a frame that enables us to surpass the state-civil society binary and capture how civil society is part of power struggles (Gagyi et al., 2020).

By building on the previous section's insight on civil society's material dependencies, this paper mobilizes Gramsci's concept of civil society to capture this entangled relation. Gramsci conceptualized this state-civil society relation with the integral state that consists not only of the central government but also the confluence of 'political society + civil society' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 208). According to the Italian thinker, civil society is a state-related social sphere where consent is manufactured and social reproduction takes place.

A Gramscian analysis of state and civil society embraces but also goes beyond the relational approach to the state (Thelen et al., 2017) and the analysis of the polyphonic interaction of state and civil society actors in an authoritarian context (Gerő et al., 2023). This article joins these analyses but deploys an apparatus to transcend the state and civil society dichotomy. The analytical tool of the integral state stresses that the 'State should not be only understood as the apparatus of government but also the "private" apparatus of "hegemony" or civil society' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 261; Jessop, 1990). Still, political and civil society are not analogous: they have a particular division of labor within the integral state. The former uses predominantly coercive means, while the latter principally deploys consensual ones.

We can focus on how this integration operates by considering the integration of state and civil society not as a distortion produced by authoritarian regimes but as a general characteristic of the capitalist state. This approach—originating from Hegel (Lewis, 2004), receiving a critical angle from Marx (1970), and developed by Gramsci—can assist us in looking 'beyond the monolithic notion of the State' (Crehan, 2022, p. 511) and debunk

the simplification of the HAA as the genuine handmaiden of the political class. The notion of the integral state will be also fundamental since it would be challenging to categorize the HAA as an ideal type of civil or state entity.

Gramsci did not assume an unproblematic, unidirectional relationship between the state and civil society. Instead of approaching the latter as the proxy of the former, he perceived them as a 'knot of tangled power relations' (Crehan, 2002, p. 103). Following Gramsci, I approach the integral state as 'the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 244). This quotation highlights the heterogeneities and potential conflicts within the integral state and helps locate cultural production in it as a toolkit to manufacture consent.

The notion of the integral state also reveals civil society's profound role in stabilizing political-economic power relations. As Gramsci argues, 'the superstructures of civil society are like the trench-systems of modern warfare' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 235) in which the narrowly defined state 'was only an outer ditch, behind which there stood a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks' (Gramsci, 1971, p. 238). Such an approach highlights why civil society is a central element of any hegemonic process and shows how voluntary activities are integrated into hegemonic projects. The concept of integral state also offers a powerful critique of theories of state capture and mafia state (Magyar, 2016). It demonstrates that the state is not purely a political-economic entity that can be conquered by political means in a top-down manner. A hegemonic process is instead 'not only, or primarily coercion "from above" but includes a certain degree of "consent" from "below"' (Streinzer & Tosic, 2022, p. 388). A Gramscian perspective can underscore how hegemonic processes of authoritarian states rely on pre-existing, voluntary forms of civic life and how they orchestrate them into their rule with a combination of consent and hammers. The escape from the juxtaposition of state and civil society offers space to analyze how different factions of civil society are embedded into state projects and offers an angle to inquire about civil society's mediating role in hegemonic processes. By integrating these takeaways, recivilization will be revealing not only regarding civil society. It will also shed light on the state-civil society nexus and the broader process of state-formation.

2.3 Culture and state formation in the Orbán regime

In the summer of 2021, the prime minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán delivered a mourning speech at the funeral of the HAA's honorary president, Marcell Jankovics, who made his name as an animated film director and a vital figure in the right-wing cultural circles. He addressed the mourners by reflecting on the deceased's role in their hegemonic project:

When our time came, I was puzzled for many years. I waited for him to swing his sword. Widely, strongly, deeply. Cut them in half, or as his animation heroes, shred them. [...] As Prime Minister, I gave him iron, smelter, nitrate, lead, and blacksmiths. But no and no. I did not hear the cracking of bones, the rupture of tendons, or the noise of falling bodies, nor saw heads falling into a basket [...]. It took me years to understand that I was waiting in vain. [...] His mission was different from my own. His mission was to show us why we were fighting and [...] what we need to protect. (Orbán, 2021)

These lines can open a threefold path: conceptualizing the post-2010 cultural politics and policy of Hungary, demonstrating HAA's position in it, and recapping culture's role in state formation.

Regarding cultural production, Orbán's lines quoted above accurately capture that culture is not an external but an integral part of the hegemonic struggle. First, the general cultural politics and policy of the Orbán-regime have been recently examined by several scholars (Kristóf, 2017; Barna et al., 2018; Bonet & Zamorano, 2020; Nagy & Szarvas, 2021). This article joins the thread in the literature that emphasizes how the regime's cultural politics should be studied as an integral part of its comprehensive restructuring of the internal and external dependencies from financial policy (Karas, 2022), to housing (Gagyi et al., 2021), from labor-relations (Meszmann & Fedjuk, 2020) to its integration into global value chains (Szabó & Jelinek, 2023). Altogether this shift can be described as a rise of state capitalism in which authoritarian measures serve capital accumulation and national cultural apparatuses of both elite and popular culture—such as the HAA or the subsidy of national pop music—are prioritized. This process occurs because these cultural forms are pillars, supporting the 'the state's role as promoter, supervisor and owner of capital' (Alami & Dixon, 2021).

Regarding the HAA's position in this process, we have to debunk Orbán's lines that exclusively frame the job of the regime's allied intellectuals as producers of artworks and ideas. This approach would obscure that allied intellectuals are not just outlining the goals of the power struggles, but they are fighting for them on a daily basis. It would also hide that they play a vital role in the clientelist allocation of material resources. In the regime's professional culture, the HAA is a central but not the only or an all-dominating institution. Still, it has four characteristics distinguishing it from other institutions: There are many other cultural institutions in the regime that employ cadres, allocate grants or even pay annuities, no other does all of these on a comparable scale and with such consistency. The HAA is one of the few cultural flagship institutions the regime did not radically overhaul over the last decade. Since the Academy's members cover all the branches of elite culture, the HAA can penetrate more than a single sub-field. Lastly, because of its formal self-governance, the HAA has abundant committees and sections where members can meet, debate, and express their grievances.

Regarding culture's role in state formation, Orbán's lines on the division of labor between artists and politicians echo Gramsci's distinction between the coercive state apparatuses and consent-making civil society. This division—of which the HAA-led recivilization of the Hungarian cultural civil society is an obvious case—is more than a Hungarian specificity. Recivilized cultural production underpins the long-term reproduction of other authoritarian regimes (Mikuš, 2018), and broader capitalist structures also accommodate civil society as a sphere that contributes to the reproduction of human lives, communities, and hegemonic order.

The concept of recivilization can be especially productive regarding the field of cultural production. Without expanding their history, it is essential to stress the entangled nature of the ideas of culture and civilization (see Williams, 1976). The notion of recivilization can analytically unfold the underlying intention of any cultural politics: the civilization of its subjects. In this sense, the contemporary conservative or liberal processes of civilization and recivilization are not innocent. They are just as power relations saturated as the colonial civilizing processes of the 19th century.

3 Methodology

This ethnographic study methodologically tackles the lack of academic knowledge on the operation of contemporary authoritarian state apparatuses. Instead of reproducing the traditional division of anthropology (studying the vulnerable) and sociology and political economy (examining elites), this project turns the toolkit of ethnography toward the dominant state apparatus. It aims to fill the gap between anthropologies focusing on street-level bureaucracies and local states (Fassin, 2015; Kovai, 2017), ethnographies of nationalism and the far-right (Feischmidt & Pulay, 2017; Pasieka, 2022), and the rarely ethnographic scholarship on the political-economy authoritarian states (Yurchenko, 2017; Éber et al., 2018).

To implement this objective, the analysis, conducted as part of a PhD project, has a threefold research design. Its first and most central element was a one-and-a-half-year-long ethnography during which time the author was employed as an intern at the HAA's central secretariat and publishing house. The participant observation was conducted by playing with open cards: all the affected actors at the Academy were aware of the ethnographer's background and objective. It resulted in hundreds of fieldnotes, documenting the Academy's informal and bureaucratic operations, public and internal events. Being present as an intern limited the range of events the author could attend but had the advantage that the actors often considered the researcher's presence incidental; therefore, it did not change the agenda and their attitudes. The second applied research method was the interviewing, conducted with key figures, less-known powerbrokers and administrators of the institution. Compared to the participant observation's bottom-up perspective, this resulted in expert interviewing situations and offered the chance to ask direct questions. However, it had the drawback that some actors—having stakes in the internal politics of the Academy—were less willing to speak sincerely and expansively.⁴ The third deployed methodology was archival research and policy analysis, essential sources to map the HAA's internal struggles and the policy aspects of recivilization. Through this element, the author processed two thousand previously never-researched documents of the Academy's NGO past, its publications, and the minutes of its post-2011 general assemblies.

In interpreting the empirical materials, this study methodologically mobilizes a variety of anthropological traditions: political anthropology for its passion for understanding how cross-cutting ties among social actors stabilize political regimes (Thelen et al., 2018, p. 6), institutional ethnography for its interest in capturing power relations within a single organization (Burawoy, 1979), the current of anthropology at home for its sensitivity toward conducting fieldwork in a well-known place (Messerschmidt, 1981) and most importantly, global ethnography and the extended case method for their urge to place local social relations into a global historical context (Gille & Riain, 2002; Burawoy, 2009). These traditions can ally to interpret the HAA as an institution that is more than cultural but political and to reflect on the author's local embeddedness by also revealing the global aspects of recivilization.

⁴ I anonymized all my interlocutors to protect them unless they were elected leaders during the research period.

4 The first facet of recivilization: The HAA's making of a clientelist institution and the reintegration of cultural producers

The Hungarian Academy of Arts is the supreme organization of 30,000 Hungarian artists. (György Fekete, the late President of the HAA, cf. HAA, 2012, p. 42)

As this line highlights, the HAA aims to be the Academy of all Hungarian artists, but it does not admit more than three hundred of them at a time. To control and coopt the 99 per cent, the HAA has a meritocratic ideology of uniting the most outstanding artists, but this alone would not be enough. To ally the 1 per cent and the 99 per cent materially, the HAA also installed clientelist funding structures. It is the most known facet of the recivilizing process, and its critics often reduce it entirely to this. In contrast with its everyday use, in this article, clientelism is not a derogatory but an analytical category. It is not a trademark of traditional societies or belated modernization since clientelism (or patron–client relations) is also present in contemporary, complex societies (Wolf, 2001). Following the concept's extensive literature, this article underlines that clientelism is a form of social integration, and its key features are reciprocity, hierarchy, and repetitive character (Semenova, 2018).

The following section considers the HAA's clientelist operation as only one, albeit important, part of its attempt to evolve into the supreme organization of all Hungarian artists. It examines how the HAA networks and subsidizes renowned and rank-and-file artists just as artists' associations to create a clientelist structure of cultural producers, which is more than a centrally controlled instrument of the regime. It also shows that this clientelism is not a pre-written masterplan but the product of an institutional arena in which members' and bureaucrats' distinct and often disharmonious intentions clash and materialize.

Two core factors shaped the clientelist facet of recivilization in post-socialist Hungary: the disintegration of the artists' unions of the socialist times and the precarization of cultural production. In the state-socialist regime, artists' unions integrated all the professional cultural producers by providing them welfare benefits (such as a pension, holiday vouchers, and cheap raw materials) and a limited public sphere for socialization and advocacy. With their disassembly, going hand in hand with the collapse of the culturalist state of socialism, cultural producers' organizational integration and the welfare allowance decreased and gave way to a precarization of labor conditions (Nagy & Szarvas, 2021). Precarious conditions and the lack of powerful organizations made the HAA's recivilizing process easier.

The HAA's material resources are not only tools to craft the financial forms of clientelism. These also provide solid material conditions for its members and employees to organize the reintegration and recivilization of cultural producers into the regime's hegemonic project. As one of them formulated it in an informal public interview: 'I was just discussing with fellow academicians that hell knows, who if not us, have the duty to care for the nation when we go to a small village, to communities where talent should be nurtured' (Kiss, 2023). Below, two complementary aspects of the clientelist recivilization will be shown: the reintegration of rank-and-file and the recognized cultural producers.

4.1 Reintegrating the rank-and-file artists

The ambition of making an institution that coopts all the artists of the country is based on financial transfers but also requires a permanent connection with the masses of cultural producers. Therefore—besides its transfers toward the thin elite of cultural producers, analyzed in the next section—the HAA has an ambition to restructure the entire production of elite culture, which they estimate to comprise about 30,000 people.

This idea was prominently featured at one of the HAA's first general assemblies as a constitutionally enshrined organization, when one of its members asked:

Which organizations [...] should be part of the HAA or be in its area of interest, both because they need the Academy's help and belong to it? There are many kinds of arts organizations [...] in Hungary [...] established in the socialist period, creating many values, so it is not necessarily inevitable that they all go to waste because of government decisions and the economic situation. (HAA, 2012, p. 37)

The affluent HAA rose after the global economic crisis of 2008 in a highly precarious art scene. As a result, after its first year of operation, the president could report that approximately forty art associations' leaders visited him, many to gain financial support (HAA, 2012b, pp. 8–9). In 2023, the HAA redistributes ca. 500,000 EUR directly among artistic civic organizations and double that amount on open calls. The neediness of the scene is made clear by the fact that in 2022, ca. six hundred organizations applied for the open call. Over two hundred got it, but none received more than ca. 2,500 EUR, which shows the all-embracing nature of the Academy. Besides these schemes, the HAA allocates many specific subsidies for rank-and-file cultural producers. Therefore, the total amount is even higher. Besides these grants for organizations, for 2022, the Academy initiated 2000 bank transfers monthly to individual cultural producers, as its general secretary proudly emphasized in a research interview. As he underscored, these did not exist before the HAA's enshrinement in the constitution of Hungary (Kucsera, 2022). The bulk of this number consists of modest artists' pensions (ca. EUR 315–80 per cent of the minimum wage), paid to more than 1000 people.

The clientelist nature of the HAA goes beyond the financial transfers, keeping art associations and elderly artists alive. While the number of academicians is limited, the HAA integrates rank-and-file artists through its non-academician membership (NAM). Besides extending the Academy's outreach and pacifying these cultural producers by giving them some insight and influence into its affairs, NAM also serves as a pool of future members. As the general secretary of the Academy claimed in a research interview: 'I always say that we should, as far as possible, choose among those who have chosen us, i.e., those who have applied for NAM' (Kucsera, 2022).

Clientelism toward the rank-and-file operates by endowing the civil society of the art scene, contributing to the livelihood of elderly artists, and giving some voice and recognition to them. This clientelist reintegration is much more than demolishing cultural producers' civil society. Numerous rank-and-file cultural producers also profit from this relation. Thus, it can be conceptualized as a double-edged protection (Tilly, 1985). In this, the regime forges both the threatening conditions and the protection against them in a way that mixes clientelism with consensual elements.

4.2 Reintegrating the recognized artists

After its rapid expansion around 2011, the HAA became the target of numerous demonstrations and boycotts. These protests involved cultural producers allied with the regime of cultural production and early-career ones disenchanted regarding their career prospects (Nagy & Szarvas, 2021). To recivilize the art scene in this context, the HAA also had to focus on depoliticizing critical voices. This was even more important since concerns that the Academy was nothing more than a vehicle of the regime mushroomed even within it. As a result of the external attacks and internal tensions, after 2011, several recognized figures left the HAA. One of the author's interlocutors recalled the most embarrassing memory of this period as a prizewinner of the Academy described himself as 'a cock on the dungheap of politicized art' in their speech.

To co-opt the elite of cultural producers, the HAA deployed multiple clientelist techniques. Its most self-evident form is the academicians' robust annuity. It contributed not only to the enrichment of the regime's true believers but also made HAA-membership attractive. As an interviewee summarized: 'When we started to get a monthly allowance, new people, scavengers showed up to join. In many cases, they had very vulnerable social circumstances' (Anonymous HAA member, 2021). In 2014, the HAA also initiated the Artist of the Nation (*nemzet művésze*) award as the highest state order for artists. It also came with more financial benefits than the pre-existing ones: the 70 awardees receive a lavish, ca. 1700 EUR (more than four times the minimum wage) annuity every month. This sumptuous annuity made the award attractive to artists who otherwise were highly critical of the HAA or had withdrawn their membership earlier, therefore, it is an effective instrument of coopting the elite. As the Artist of the Nation award tackles the senior figures of the artistic elites, the HAA also established a platform for coopting emerging artists into its clientelist recivilization. Its Scholarship Scheme, providing a three-year-long grant for 100 early-career artists each year, is financially just as outstanding as the Award.

As a result, we can see a twofold clientelism in the HAA's recivilizing project. On the one hand, it aims to penetrate and re-organize the masses of cultural producers, and on the other hand, it appeals to the emerging and established elites of culture. However, clientelism is more profound than merely buying out precarious cultural producers. It also interacts with three other aspects of recivilization.

4.3 The second facet of recivilization: The HAA as a mediator of hegemony-constructive-criticism

Mediation between the state and people is a core function of civil society. This section examines the dynamics of the HAA's remaking—recivilization—or this mediating role. Civic institutions of authoritarian regimes are commonly perceived as the top-down mediators of governmental will. Their bottom-up mediation of grassroots discontent toward the state apparatus is a more concealed but just as important aspect of the recivilization. To capture the role of conflict management in civil society's remaking, this section first reviews the HAA actors' statements about their mediating function. Then, it examines the shift in the Academy's conflict management from battleground to informalization by comparing two of its internal debates a decade apart.

4.4 The HAA as a proud mediator: Its decision makers on their mediation

The bureaucratic apparatus of the HAA is proud of its active mediation between the state and cultural producers. As its Secretary General expressed in a radio broadcast: ‘The HAA is [...] an intermediary body, mediating back and forth between the civil society and the government. It integrates [...] the opinions and ideas collected by the Academy into the governmental will and [...] transmits [...] that [...] outwards’ (Kucsera, 2021). This mediating function is not just an aspiration of the Academy’s leadership to validate its material benefits but also pervades its operation. Still, those concerned about the state of civil society under authoritarianism rarely consider this aspect. It could stay in the shadows because the mediation between citizens and the state is also a core element of the normative, liberal notion of civil society, from which institutions of authoritarian regimes are seemingly far.

The meditation of criticism is not equal to anti-regime stances. As the Academy’s chief officers formulated during our interview: ‘Politics always looks at the HAA as its most understanding critic’ (Anonymous HAA Officer, 2019). This constructive criticism is more than just a phenomenon tolerated by the state apparatus. Instead, it is a productive feature of the regime that shows how the HAA has a mediating and correcting function. Therefore, recivilized conflict management is not only about concealing criticism from the public but also about stabilizing the regime by giving room for its loyal cultural producers to criticize some of its aspects. Institutions such as the HAA have a bidirectional mediating function in this process. Besides mediating governmental ambitions, they also mediate grievances toward the ruling political bloc to reinforce it.

It would be a mistake to describe the members of the HAA as the unambiguous executors of governmental will, even if the opposition media and artistic factions describe them in this manner. While most sympathize with the Orbán-regime, their alliance with the regime should be constantly reproduced. The HAA also provides platforms where its members can express their discontent. Besides giving space for dissent, the HAA occasionally mediated these grievances toward the government. The following comparison focuses on two events of this *hegemony-constructive criticism* reinforcing alliances between cultural producers and the regime.

4.5 The early mediation of the HAA: Public battlefields

The initial assemblies of the HAA—after its enshrinement in the constitution—were battlefields. These events were frequently interrupted by demonstrators protesting the state-led rise of the Academy. Still, the open-to-the-public assemblies were also the arenas where members mediated their demands to the government. In this section, I analyze these events of 2011–2012 by relying on their official minutes to show the early phase of the Academy’s mediation taking place in the public sphere.

The ambition of mediating between cultural producers and the government penetrated the Academy’s early general assemblies. Several key figures of the HAA stressed their purpose and vocation to mediate toward a regime that—according to them—made their voices finally heard. The dance choreographer, Ferenc Novák, asked for a ‘militant

academy that draws the attention of the cultural administration to certain issues' (HAA, 2012, pp. 25–26). Along his lines, the art historian Katalin Keserü stated that 'It is an essential task of the Academy to sooner or later prevent the wrong decisions and actions that may be taken by the cultural, educational, and other parts of the government' (HAA, 2012, p. 36) by emphasizing the role of intellectuals as the moral standard of the society. The architect, István Dévényi, outlined a more realistic mission statement. He stressed that the Academy might cooperate with state power instead of controlling. He stated that 'artists have a strong demand to impact policymakers and have mutual influence. We know how difficult the country's situation is, and it is not an easy task. However, there is a great need for the Academy to shape Hungary's future together with politicians' (HAA, 2012, pp. 26–27). The film director, István Dárday, most realistically embraced the Academy's subordination to political-economic interests. He said: 'We have to find the dialogue with which the HAA does not act as an obstacle' (HAA, 2012, pp. 39–40).

All the participants were concerned about how the Academy could best support the emerging regime and what forms of critique could contribute to its desired rise. They all agreed that their role in the process is about internalizing criticism. At this early stage, the HAA mediated the dissent and grievance of its members about some large-scale issues, such as the showcase cultural development of the Museum Quarter, the education system, and the social impact of government austerity politics (HAA, 2012). Even if members formulated harsh criticism in the open-to-the-public general assemblies, the HAA transmitted these behind the walls.

4.6 The late mediation of the HAA: institutionalized informality

In contrast with the battlefield-like general assemblies of 2011–2012, these events were emptied by 2019–2021, the time of the research's ethnographic fieldwork. This transformation resulted from careful policies to reduce the publicity of internal conflicts. As a chief officer of the HAA summarized in a research interview: 'If the institutional structure works well, debate in the general assembly is very rare' (Anonymous HAA Officer, 2019). Senior decision-makers of the HAA also endorsed this approach publicly. 'If any question arises among the heads of the [cultural] institutions, we should settle them by dialogue, not by press statements' (Vági, 2022). These lines of a press interview encapsulate the Academy's conflict management strategies.

Over the decade between 2011 and 2021, the HAA gradually institutionalized and informalized criticisms. Around 2011, academicians aired their dissent in general assemblies, and even in the press; a decade later, it became channeled into its closed-to-the-public section meetings and interpersonal relations. This emptying of general assemblies is a deliberate change to conceal criticism from the public. However, this process did not terminate the mediation of criticism. As a result, the HAA continued to serve as a platform for its members to articulate concerns with government politics and policies. During this period, criticism of the regime appeared at the HAA's public events. The mediation of dissent was still present but occurred behind the scenes. Moreover, in contrast with the early times when critiques in the general assemblies tackled critical government politics, around 2020, these revolved around minor, apolitical issues.

The novel regime of conflict management will be unfolded through an event the author attended during the participant observation. The event was the closed-to-the-public monthly meeting of a section of the HAA—uniting academicians of the same artistic discipline. The meeting was loud, and the Section's members were angry because the National Library aimed to merge the special collection of their discipline with another one. An academician raised the issue in the meeting and found understanding among their peers, who agreed that this merger devalued their discipline. The merger of the two special collections carried the risk of the academicians' open politicization. A few weeks earlier, the liberal press published the case in a politicized framework as evidence of the incompetence and barbarism of the new, government-appointed head of the National Library. However, within the HAA, the case did not have time to get politicized. By the end of the session, the Academy's General Secretary—texting during the entire meeting—announced that they had already taken measures in this case. He did not even publicly announce his action; he just whispered it to the member who had raised the issue.

This event shows three aspects of the dissent's management. Firstly, it takes place informally. Without knowing the messages' content and addressees, it is clear that the action did not occur through the HAA's bureaucratic structures. This informality is crucial in managing the hegemonic process, even in an institution established by the regime. Informality and the concealed character of decision-making are entangled. The conflict management of the hegemonic process does not occur in the public sphere but within the informal ties of the bureaucratic structures. Discontent is pacified and privatized since it is articulated in the institutional structure and through informal ties within the institution.

Overall, bottom-up mediation is a central element of recivilization. Although the HAA's key actors proclaim the feature of mediation, external opinion leaders barely recognize it. As recivilization is a dynamic process, the mediation of hegemony-constructive-criticism developed rapidly during the first ten years of the HAA as a state body. The early public and political mediation of dissent evolved into a technocratic, institutionalized, and informal mediation. The mediation is technocratic because it only addresses the regime's partial, technical aspects. The mediation is institutionalized but concealed because the HAA provides a platform for the artists involved in its clientelist structures to express their grievances in an organized but not public framework. Still, the mediation is informal because the articulation of dissent toward governmental actors happens informally. As a result, the HAA not only restructures the civil society of cultural production but also serves as a civic organization that mediates the discontent of the chosen ones.

5 The third facet of recivilization: Right-wing civil society's paradoxical autonomy

It is puzzling to argue that authoritarian regimes' allied civil society can have a relative autonomy. This section will demonstrate this pattern and argue that this model also has a stabilizing function. For this purpose, the following examines the HAA's reaction to the largest cultural scandal of the early 2020s in Hungary. In 2020, the Orbán regime enforced a rapid, politically motivated takeover of the University of Theatre and Film Arts (SZFE).

Its objective was to redesign the aesthetic and political profile of the programs. The case was in the headlines of the local and international press for months. While students and their allies occupied the University and organized sit-ins and large protests, the HAA remained silent. This section utilizes the SZFE case to trace back the HAA aims to establish its autonomy from the regime. It also sheds light on how this paradoxically enhances the recivilizing process.

The Academy's silence was unexpected for several reasons. The takeover of the SZFE—previously run by people who were not associated with the regime—was nothing but a new frontier in the hegemonic struggles that the HAA was already fighting. Key figures of the SZFE's new, government-imposed leadership were also HAA members. The chairman of the SZFE's new board of trustees, Attila Vidnyánszky, has been an HAA member for more than 15 years, while another board member and future rector, Zoltán Rátóti also served as the head of the HAA's Section of Theater and Film. While they were fighting a day-to-day struggle with the full support of the government and its media, the HAA remained silent.

The HAA as an institution remained silent in the struggles around the SZFE, but its rank-and-file members militantly agitated against the protesting students. However, the leaders of the Academy were unhappy with the University's capture. They were not criticizing the University's new ideological, political, and aesthetic regime but were deeply concerned about the takeover method. The leadership was provoked by the fact that the HAA was neither asked nor involved in the so-called reform of the University. This oversight frustrated leaders of the HAA because of their self-image as the leading force in the Hungarian cultural field. Their self-image relied on the law stating that 'the opinion of the HAA shall be sought during the preparation of legislation, governmental programs or measures affecting Hungarian artistic life' (HAA Law, 2011). Due to their omission, one of the HAA's leaders said in an informal conversation, caught during participant observation: 'Since the HAA was not asked, I will now try to keep it far from the conflict.' To strengthen this unaligned, outsider position, he even rejected the request of the University's new board—40 per cent of which consisted of HAA members—to hold a meeting at the HAA headquarters.

The HAA leaders also distanced themselves from the takeover because they considered it unprofessional and inefficient. Their critique was technocratic: it did not touch the objectives of the takeover, just blamed the SZFE's new leaders for not applying the mediated and silent toolkit of recivilizing that the HAA developed through the years. The HAA's discontent with the techniques used and their distancing from the conflict were interrelated. These stem from the SZFE's new board's neglect of the HAA and its know-how on the proper way of fighting cultural wars quietly.

In the internal debates about the case of the SZFE, the HAA's dissent management strategies started to become autonomous. The Academy's demonstration of its outstanding know-how dominated over engaging in the new frontier of the hegemonic struggle. In this case, a recivilizing technique no longer served the de-escalation of the current wave of discontent. Instead, it fostered the stabilization of the Academy's autonomy, even by staying neutral in the actual frontier of the culture war. As a result, this case has also highlighted that a certain degree of autonomy is an integral part of the process of recivilization. However, this limited autonomy is far from anti-systemic political actions.

6 The fourth facet of recivilization: Orchestrating right-wing cultural production in a recivilized society

It is common to think about authoritarian regimes' new institutions as the vanguards of a new order. But the culture of the Orbán-regime did not have to be invented. Just as Poulantzas (1978, p. 31) states, 'the ideological state apparatuses do not create the dominant ideology [...] they rather elaborate and systematize it'; the HAA does not mastermind a new ideology. Instead, the Academy could build on a burgeoning realm of right-wing cultural associations ranging from folk art associations to circles of painters and writers. If we go beyond the normative notion of civil society, we can recognize these 'civic organizations beyond the "Open Society" battle' (Gagyi et al., 2020, p. 1). Still, institutions like the HAA have a pioneering role in orchestrating and upscaling the preexisting initiatives.

By returning to the case of the Nativity Scene of the Nation: an academician initiated it, most of the people involved were not even HAA members, and the Academy took up the cause. Its infrastructure also precedes the HAA and builds on pre-existing circles of folk artists since the folk-art camp where the kings, shepherds, and animals were carved runs from the early 1990s. Furthermore, the woodcarving HAA-member mayor of Kisgyőr had coordinated a similar Nativity Scene project eight years earlier; only then it had been installed in his village of 1,500 people. By 2022, he could scale up the project to place the next version in front of the Hungarian Parliament. This also shows a synergy between the individual ambition of the mayor to expand his project and of the Academy to display representative artworks. In this sense the HAA served as a vehicle of an individual initiative, but at the same time such projects vitalize the Academy. Not only did the project's idea and the infrastructure go beyond the HAA, but also its financial aspects. In 2022, the Academy merely subsidized it with ca. EUR 2,300 EUR. As a result, the project could not have been realized without the village's resources, the participants' voluntary labor, not to mention the sixty-four Hungarian folk-art associations that contributed to its creation.

The role of the HAA in this project is twofold, and it demonstrates the thesis of orchestration instead of creation. Its Section of Folk Art provides an institutional framework authorized to oversee large-scale national artistic projects through which actors can legitimize their endeavors. Besides this, the Academy's formal and informal political embeddedness helps to find political support for the project. But not even political support of the project was channeled by the Academy since its initiator, the woodcarving mayor of Kisgyőr, is a close political ally of the constituency MP, who is also an influential state secretary of the regime.

The Nativity Scene of the Nation is far from the only case in which the HAA relies on voluntary labor. Four years earlier, in 2018, the HAA was launching its first, large-scale folk art saloon exhibition, but selected the curatorial team with a great delay, only 3–4 months before the opening of the show. In this constellation—as one of them recalled in a quasi-ethnographic recollection (Fülemile, 2019)—the curators had no alternative but to rely on the pre-existing networks of folk art in their selection of the 3,500 exhibited pieces.

The project could not have been successful without a network, based on enthusiastic volunteering that is common in Federation of Folk Art Associations and in the folk craft movement more broadly [...] Without its effective contribution [...] the collection of the pieces would

have been impossible. Its regional chapters collected the material from the Hungarian and some cross-border areas in seven centers. [...] There the curatorial team examined, juried and selected them. (Fülemile, 2019, pp. 617–621)

This quotation demonstrates that although the folk-art saloon drew record visitor numbers, the HAA could not have realized it without mobilizing an extensive, pre-existing civic network. Still, this was a mutually profitable cooperation. The HAA benefited from the social capital of folk-art associations that made it able to realize the saloon exhibition. At the same time, the exhibiting folk artists, among whom a good proportion are from the circles of the Federation of Folk Art Associations, could display their works in a more prominent space than ever before.

The examples of the wood-carved nativity scene and the bottom-up rescued folk art saloon are just two of the countless cases in which the HAA orchestrates and enhances pre-existing forms of civil society. With the orchestrating facet, the regime gains voluntary resources and deepens its rule, while its committed civil society enjoys relative autonomy. This autonomy allows them to come up with and realize their ideas in the reshaped institutional arena.

7 Conclusions. ‘Recivilizing’: A tool to understand the dynamics of state–civil society nexus

This study challenged the notion that civil society in authoritarian regimes is destroyed by bringing ethnographic evidence from Orbán’s Hungary, commonly described as a frontier of authoritarianism. By doing so, it joined an extensive scholarly tradition stressing the integral nature of state and civil society under hegemonic regimes. The article contributed to this body of literature by coining the term *recivilization* to stress that the integrity of state and civil society is not static and to capture the dynamic remaking of their relations under a new hegemonic regime.

Recivilization is more than the weakening and destruction of previously dominant forms of civil society and state-civil society relations. As it was accentuated, this process is a creative destruction. Recivilization is defined as a toolkit through which regimes remake civil society to underpin their rule. Such a term can be central in capturing how consent is manufactured in the rising authoritarian regimes. The analysis of this recivilization mobilized three theoretical cornerstones. The deconstruction of the normative notion of civil society that was allowed to engage with an organization otherwise labeled as ‘uncivil.’ The concept of the integral state highlighted that recivilization is part of state formation. Lastly, the conceptualization of the regime’s hegemony underscored cultural politics and production’s role in this process.

By relying on these theoretical pillars, the article distinguished four fundamental facets of recivilization: (1) the rise of clientelist subsidy structures that integrate both the elite and the rank-and-file of cultural producers into the emerging hegemonic process, (2) the conflict management that instead of repressing, channels criticism into the regime in a constructive manner (3) the limited autonomy of the regime-allied civic organizations that is not an error, but a feature of the rule contributing to its deepening and (4) the orchestra-

tion of pre-existing forms of right-wing civic society that conveys bottom-up voluntary volition into the regime. By approaching the civil society of authoritarian regimes through such facets, the article contributed to its extensive literature by stressing that authoritarian regimes do not rule merely by capturing the state but orchestrate pre-existing civic ambitions and initiatives that vitalize the regimes' institutions. As a result, by coining the notion of recivilization, the article not only brought further evidence about the intertwined nature of state and civil society but also demonstrated the dynamics of its rapid remaking.

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