

# Shrinking space, expanding agency: Introducing the thematic issue on the paradoxes of non-state actor agency in contemporary Central and Eastern Europe

PÉTER MARTON<sup>1</sup> \* 

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**ABSTRACT:** Beyond introducing the contents of *Society & Economy's* thematic issue on non-state actors in contemporary Central and Eastern Europe, this article briefly sketches an outline of discussions about non-state actor (NSA) agency and provides a working definition thereof to be used in the issue. Subsequently, it highlights – and posits a rudimentary explanation for – two paradoxes that are of relevance beyond the geographical region in focus: the paradox of the non-linear agency-amplifying impact of state repression and the paradox of substitution. Both have implications for the assessment of state agency, NSA agency, and how the two are dynamically shaped by state-to-NSA and broader state-society relations.

**KEYWORDS:** agency, non-state actors, repression, state agency, substitution

**JEL CODES:** D74; L30; L31; L33

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1 Institute of Global Studies, Corvinus University of Budapest, Budapest, Hungary

\* Corresponding author: peter.marton@uni-corvinus.hu

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# 1. Introduction

As discussed in Marton (2024), the significance of non-state actors (NSAs) is often dismissed entirely in the field of International Relations. To such an extent, in fact, that the former's "discovery" and the very invention of the umbrella analytical category of "non-state actors" resulted from revelatory experiences among scholars of International Relations that contradicted established views regarding the (ir)relevance of these actors. The acknowledgement of NSAs has stemmed, on the one hand, from a recognition of their at least occasionally meaningful and even impactful agency; on the other hand, it has also reflected the frustration of analysts facing the challenge of how to conclusively attribute to state actors – based on hard-to-collect evidence – nominally non-state proxy agents' actions. In other words, NSAs have been recognised as "significant Others" of International Relations both for the occasionally impactful presence and the occasionally likewise consequential absence of their agency.

This conclusion does not yet support a truly fruitful discussion of this agency; it reduces the issue to simply considering whether such agency is present or absent. For the sake of more nuanced analysis, Marton (2024: 20-22) therefore proposes focusing on NSAs as organisations within whose frameworks a collective of natural and/or legal persons coalesces, with an interest in exercising agency specific to a given domain of activity. Regardless of that domain, meanwhile, the potential to exercise collective political agency also resides in organisations. Thus, a definition of NSA agency in politics must include two – often entirely distinct and at times merging – components: NSAs are *highly probable sites of domain-specific agency* and *plausible sites of political agency*. The former element concerns, for instance, a company's decisions and operations to ensure economic profitability, or a church organisation's efforts at proselytisation. Domain-specific activities often take on political significance independently of their original aims, depending on the context in which they take place. Political agency, meanwhile, may be exemplified by organisations that take an overt, intentionally political stance beyond the scope of their activity, e.g., in solidarity with a group of people or in condemnation of various policies or practices. More dramatic instances of political agency could include, *inter alia*, boycotts, active participation in protests, or the enablement of – or direct involvement in – combat and other forms of violent struggle, etc.

Two basic objections need to be dealt with to clear the path to research on NSA agency in the sense described above. One of these concerns state-to-NSA relations. Even those who recognise NSAs' capacity for meaningful agency will often look at it as a derivative of state interests and actions. States either enable or tolerate NSA agency; otherwise, it would not be possible, they say. Beyond some highly consequential and oft-cited examples that may be raised here in

counterpoint, such as al-Qa'ida's attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, one may also note that state agency is likewise often enabled, helped, impeded, or incapacitated by NSA behaviour. Moreover, in democratic contexts, party organisations – as NSAs themselves – compete to “pilot” the state, while interest groups exert an effect in all kinds of political contexts, trying to pull the “steering wheel” of government in one direction or another. Even if we put aside the issue of the origins of the articulation of the state interests that drive state actions, we need to realise that states are rarely able to achieve the outcomes they seek exclusively as a function of their own actions (Reynolds 1979: 94), and it is not only other state actors that are relevant obstacles or influencers in this respect.

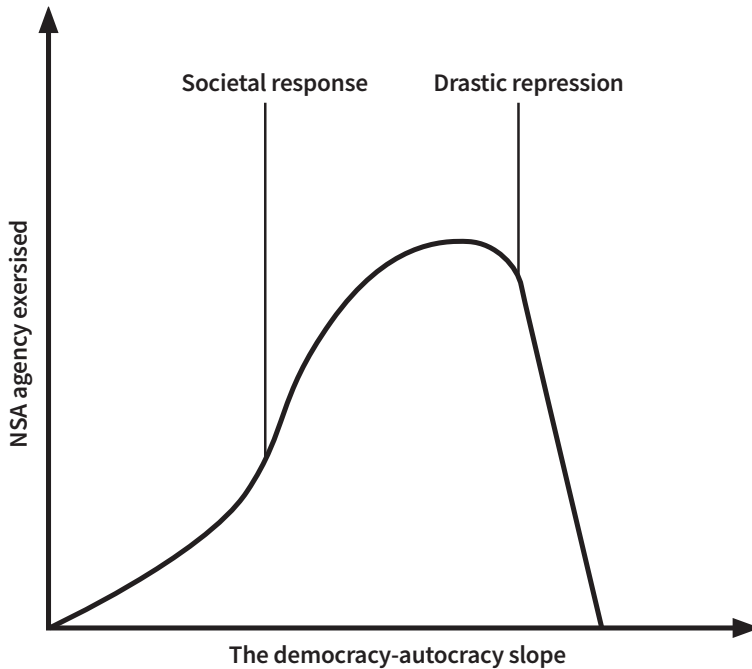
The other objection that needs to be tackled involves the deployment of overly restrictive conceptions of agency. For example, a widely cited definition by Hewson (2010) considers agency as marked by purposive, rational and powerful action. This introduces standards that are rather difficult to consistently meet for most actors – not only for NSAs. In a nutshell, “rational” is very difficult to operationalise, even if one thinks of it as bounded rationality. Consequently, so is “purposive”, as being purposive also depends on the unforeseen moves of other parties in the strategic interactions that shape outcomes in politics. The term “powerful”, meanwhile, is ambiguous and can be interpreted both in relation to an organisation's resources and the consequences of what it does, with a less-than-straightforward relationship between resources and impact.

And why should one disregard vaguely or uncertainly purposive, ill-considered action with limited impact? Analytically, the understanding of that limited impact may make a marginally significant contribution to the assessment of a situation or a process. Normatively, calling actors with limited impact irrelevant may place one alongside the most cynical actors in politics. The proposition here is, thus, to detach the understanding of agency – defined as the independently initiated implementation of intentional actions by organisations – from criteria tied to resources; an observer's often poor judgement of another party's rationality; and the partly incidental consequences of any action, be those short-term or long-term, or primary or second-order.

## 2. Two paradoxes

From the above-outlined conception of agency – as the independently initiated implementation of intentional actions by organisations that are either domain-specific and *possibly* give rise to politically significant consequences, or constitute *wilfully* enacted political action – two key paradoxes may be identified that are also manifest in the context of the majority of the articles in this thematic issue.

The first of these may be referred to as the paradox of the non-linear agency-amplifying impact of state repression. This implies a simple and fairly straightforward idea. As we move from a fully democratic setting toward more authoritarian or even outright autocratic arrangements – down the democracy-autocracy slope – state repression begets counteraction, leading to protest and solidaristic action. In other words, although its fundamental aim is to contain or suppress non-state agency, state repression may produce more NSA agency. The latter may then play a role in reversing the slide down the democracy-autocracy slope, or it may be choked off in the end, once repression reaches critical levels. This dynamic gives rise to the paradox of increased NSA agency even as the space for independent social initiative supposedly tightens or shrinks. This can be portrayed as a simple function, with the curve of NSA agency rising until reaching an inflexion point, after which it decreases – see *Figure 1* for reference.



**Figure 1. The rise and possible fall of NSA agency under increasing repression**

Source: author.

The other paradox to discuss is that of substitution. Klein and Lee (2019: 68-70) conceptualise the latter, situated within the web of relationships among the realms of civil society, state, and the economy, as consisting of parties from one realm appropriating some function of the other, partly or wholly. In

times of crisis, the less accountable the government is, the more inadequate the state-institutional response may be. NSAs may step up to compensate, freeing up state resources for other purposes. This may give rise to a vicious circle, further feeding into the paradox of increasing NSA agency amid a shift toward governance with limited accountability – with the politically significant consequence of relieving state structures of the pressure they would otherwise face for performing sub-optimally.

Both of these paradoxes have been seen operating in recent times in various Central and Eastern European contexts, and they can be observed to have shaped the processes discussed in several articles in this thematic issue.

### 3. Introducing the thematic issue

As Emirbayer and Mische (1998: 973) wonderfully formulated long ago, “changing conceptions of agentic possibility in relation to structural contexts profoundly influence how actors in different periods and places see their worlds as more or less responsive to human imagination, purpose, and effort”. It was not only in Central and Eastern Europe that, due to various processes, a sense of limited “agentic possibilities” arose. In places, this came to dominate public thinking – faced with, *inter alia*, the rise of populist governance, post-truth politics, repressive measures against civil society, and the influence of major corporations on public policies. Nevertheless, the dark mood of the day that prevailed when the idea for this thematic issue was born, back in 2025, reflected an overlooking of at least three issues of interest to the study of NSAs and their agency. One of these is the paradoxical possibility of an increase in NSA agency exercised in response to downward shifts on the democracy-autocracy slope, as already highlighted. Second, the role played by some NSAs themselves can and often does work to advance said shift downward. Such NSAs may include major economic actors such as tech firms, near-state entrepreneurs or oligarchs, or even (un)civil-society actors mobilising in favour of illiberal or autocratic leadership. The NSAs concerned may promote a shift away from democracy and themselves counteract efforts to defend civic rights and democratic institutions through a mixture of domain-specific and political agency.

Regarding the first count, the relationship between repression and civic action, the study by Ricz and Éltető of Hungarian civil society organisations advocating against battery-factory investments may be of most direct relevance. Also of interest with regard to NSAs’ seeking to contain or reshape state agency is Gulenko’s discussion of Telegram’s cyber-libertarian sense of mission in relation to several different governments, and Le Pavic and Gezerdava’s research on Abkhaz civil society organisations in the *de facto* state of Abkhazia.

Very interesting concerning the second point – NSAs facilitating the shift away from liberal democracy – is the case study of the Hungarian Reformed Church by Szűcs, as an example of a church organisation with privileged ties to a government representing a nominally conservative/traditionalist strand of populism under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. A special case is that of the European Jewish Congress, specifically under Moshe Kantor’s leadership, discussed in the article by Bornio and Zawada – with the added twist of the possible involvement of foreign political interference behind proxy-like behaviour by the organisation, suiting the needs of an autocratic actor.

As to the third point, the paradox of substitution, al-Wattar highlights this explicitly in a study of Greek and Turkish NGOs’ response to the post-2015 refugee crisis, pointing out how “gaps” that are “fixed” by NGOs may perpetuate the very reasons for the existence of the said gaps in state performance in the first place. A far more special case of substitution, with no negative feedback loop of the kind conceptualised above, is observed in Einertson’s research on the Joint Baltic American National Committee and its persistent, morally authoritative promotion of framings and narratives beneficial to the security interests of Baltic and other East-Central European countries. This complements, rather than substitutes, the Baltic states’ own efforts to influence public discourse in the United States. The conclusions from this case align closely with key points in the literature on agency regarding the importance of the temporal dimension, or – in simpler, clearer terms – the persistence of action required for it to be impactful (Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 967). They also serve to illustrate the subtle operation of “conversational agency” – drawing on non-tangible power resources such as the ability to make well-timed, adequately formulated, and authoritative statements in the context of policy discourses that play out in the long term (Gibson 2000).

An article that looks beyond the above-sketched framework is Szálkai’s examination of the impact of war on Ukrainian environmental NGOs, with regard to the transformation of their agency in a fundamentally changed context – one seemingly ill-suited to successful advocacy by them, yet one which has even led to an expansion of their role in specific areas.

## **4. Conclusion: A final word from the thematic issue editor’s vantage point**

Being the editor of a thematic issue is an emotionally complex experience. In many ways, seeing the interest in the subject of one’s research, along with direct evidence of being able to inspire such interest oneself, is something that most scholars may aspire to achieve. It is nonetheless something that evokes in one

a sense of responsibility as soon as actual collaboration begins. Have I done my supposedly foundational work correctly? Did I raise legitimate or truly well-articulated questions? Am I not leading the authors who decided to jump on my humble scholarly bandwagon down a blind alley, having fooled them into joining the ride? These are some of the doubts that one may develop.

At the risk of being seen as offering a flattering review of my own accomplishments, I wish instead to flatter the authors of the thematic issue by saying that their articles seem to me to have developed something really meaningful in the context of their own research of some of the ideas that kept me busy lately, including that of the two strands of NSA agency (political agency and domain-specific agency); the mutual infiltration among NSAs, states, and even international organisations; and inter-organisational ecosystems. My gratitude knows no bounds for this, even as I look forward with interest to comments and criticisms from a wider audience, namely the readership of this thematic issue.

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