

The non-state actor contestation of battery factory investments in Hungary: the activism of GÖD-ÉRT and MIAKÖ

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ABSTRACT: The article analyses non-state actor (NSA) agency at the intersection of autocratisation and new industrial policies. We focus on Hungary, an EU Member State that aims to become a leading global player in the electric vehicle sector, particularly in EV battery production. Besides the already functioning South Korean plants, numerous Chinese firms have been attracted to the country by extremely generous state support to build giga-factories. However, battery-related plants face opposition from the local population. Under the Hungarian autocratic regime, the space for NSA agency is increasingly shrinking, yet our focus is narrowed to analysing non-governmental organisations. We ask whether organised civil society can exercise political or domain-specific agency in an autocratising regime. Bottom-up initiatives against the battery factories mushroomed in all the affected Hungarian localities, which increasingly cooperated with each other, and even set up an umbrella organisation at the national level. Some important achievements are documented. To illustrate the causes of the limited non-state actor activism and nevertheless account for how impactful changes have occurred, the article analyses the experiences of two local associations: GÖD-ÉRT (the For Göd Association) and MIAKÖ (the Mothers of Mikepércs

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for the Environment Association). At the time of study, both have been forced to operate in an increasingly repressive setting.

KEYWORDS: Hungary, industrial policy, battery factories, non-state activism, autocracy, illiberal regime

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1. Introduction

The spread of autocratic tendencies and the rise of strong, illiberal states have increasingly shaped both the agency and the impact of non-state actors (NSAs). These changes alter NSAs' complex relationships to state actors (and to other non-state actors) within their inter-organisational ecosystems. In line with this special issue, we aim to explore the current-day agency, impact, and influence of non-state actors in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region, exemplified by an analysis of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil activism opposing the state-sponsored development of a new battery sector in Hungary. Our research question is whether organised civil society can exercise meaningful agency in an electoral autocracy.

Hungary is an emblematic example of an autocratic regime within the European Union. The term 'autocracy' is used in line with János Kornai's (2016) conceptualisation, as a third politico-governmental form between the ideal types of democracy and dictatorship.³ In this vein, autocratisation refers to the systematic destruction of democracy, its most visible features being the dismantling of the rule of law, attacks on private property, an obsession with centralisation and media censorship, followed by the undermining of free and fair elections and *attacks on civil society* (Kornai 2015: 3-6; V-Dem 2025). The term "hybrid regime" is also often used to describe these changes, yet we are convinced that the concepts of autocracy and autocratisation are better at depicting currently ongoing political processes (Croissant and Tomini 2024), with special relevance to the Hungarian context (Csanádi et al. 2022). The use of the term 'autocracy' can also be supported by the 2022 statement of the European Parliament, which also declared that Hungary had become a "hybrid regime of electoral autocracy" (EP, 2022). At the same time, we often refer to the Hungarian regime as being *illib-*

³ Accordingly, autocracy can be defined by the following primary characteristics: "1. The government cannot be removed through a peaceful and civilized procedure; 2. Institutions that could jointly guarantee the conditions of removing the government are either formal or weak; 3. Legal parliamentary opposition exists; multiple parties run for elections; 4. No terror [...], but various means of coercion are occasionally used against political adversaries [...]" (Kornai 2016: 565).

eral, as (in-)famously defined by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán (2014) himself in a speech in Tusnádfürdő (Baile Tusnad, Romania).

NGOs and civil activism have been under constant attack during the post-2010 illiberal era, leading to a “shrinking space” for civil society organisations and civil activism in Hungary (Boda 2024; Buzogány et al. 2022). In 2014, on spurious grounds, the police raided the offices of two foundations (Ökotárs and Demnet), which were responsible for the distribution of Norwegian Grants⁴ in Hungary for civic purposes (Átlátszó 2014) – this marked the first milestone in the crackdown by the illiberal regime on the civil sphere. Several restrictive laws and mandatory registration for foreign-funded NGOs followed, yet in the first half of 2025, a newer phase of repression started. In February 2025, PM Viktor Orbán explicitly promised to clean up those “fake civil-society organisations [that] serve foreign interests and organise political campaigns before our eyes” (Orbán 2025a). In March 2025, he referred to civic activists and NGOs, journalists, judges, and (opposition) political activists as (unwanted) “bugs” that are funded from abroad and must be eliminated (Orbán 2025b).

The so-called Sovereignty Protection Office was established in 2023 with the goal of protecting “the country’s economic, cultural, communication and political identity and independence” (Hungary Matters 2024). This office fits with a series of measures by the illiberal government aimed at attacking civil society. Over 2024-2025, it has prepared reports on several NGOs and their foreign financing.

In May 2025, a new proposed law (Bill T/1192 on the Transparency of Public Life) was issued, aiming to silence and eradicate NGOs (and other actors, such as the media or even for-profit firms) that receive foreign funding, including EU grants. Any CSO was potentially a target if it was deemed to “threaten the sovereignty of the country by using foreign funding to influence public life” (Hungarian Helsinki Committee 2025). The similarities of the proposed law to the Russian law of 2012 on Foreign Agents are clearly visible. Voting on the bill was first postponed to autumn 2025 due to large-scale demonstrations and heavy criticism. However, eventually it was not put to a vote in Parliament before the 2026 elections – only threatening remarks were made.

In this article, we focus on recent civil struggles against the harm caused by electric vehicle (EV) battery factories in Hungary. Hungary, a small Central European country, has not only become a forerunner in building an autocratic regime within the European Union under PM Orbán. It also aimed to become

4 Similar to other post-socialist countries, the Hungarian political economy of NGOs is characterised by limited domestic philanthropy and societal sources of funding, resulting in a substantial need for and reliance on external funding sources. Thus, the Norwegian Civic Fund for open society projects in Hungary has played a crucial role in filling this financing gap.

a global player in electric vehicle battery manufacturing. Besides the already functioning South Korean plants, several Chinese firms have been attracted to the country by extremely generous state support to build giga-factories, even as battery-related plants faced strong opposition from the local population. According to a survey at the end of 2024, 69% of the Hungarian population, and even 49% of pro-government voters, opposed the construction of battery factories, being mostly concerned about the environmental consequences (Bíró-Nagy et al. 2024). Concerns about the building of battery factories became an increasingly prominent topic in public discourse in 2023-2024, even exceeding concerns about the increase in Russian influence and other issues.

Numerous bottom-up initiatives emerged in all affected localities, first in a not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY) style. Later, with the announcement of further battery-related investments, however, these local NGOs started to cooperate and institutionalise on a regional and national scale. An umbrella organisation (AKÁRTEIS) was set up, and even some transnational linkages were established. Nevertheless, these local initiatives did not yet effectively channel the population's general discontent and opposition into real engagement and large-scale civil activism. Their outreach and achievements remained limited, with some success stories mainly in smaller villages at early stages of investment planning and decision-making. However, some partial accomplishments were achieved (even in regulatory and governance terms).

In this context, we apply case study analysis to explore two salient cases to illustrate the difficulties and potentials of non-state activism in an autocratic setting. The topic may be said to be understudied, and the related literature immature. With regard to generalisability, the main theoretical considerations may be valid only for other cases sharing some similarities. Formal generalisations that would enable large sample research designs are not possible within this framework. This is generally considered one of the downsides resulting from the case study approach (Flyvbjerg 2001; 2006). As we especially aim to identify the causes of limited non-state actor agency and the failure to scale up local activism in Hungary, we focus on two highly salient cases, as we think that a refined understanding of these crucial cases might offer important insights.

We explore the experiences of two local associations, GÖD-ÉRT (the For Göd Association) and MIAKÖ (the Mothers of Mikepércs for the Environment Association), and examine their achievements and struggles in an increasingly illiberal and repressive setting. Both groups are active and relatively strong. GÖD-ÉRT was founded in 2020; it is the "oldest" and most experienced association in the battery-related social movement. MIAKÖ is a relatively young association, founded in 2023 in response to the Chinese (CATL) investment into building a battery giga-factory. MIAKÖ could already build on the experiences of GÖD-ÉRT and evolved and developed rapidly; its activities today go beyond the issue of CATL's investment.

Both NGOs are among the main pillars of the umbrella organisation and social movement that was set up in October 2023 to oppose battery plants in Hungary.

For our case studies, we apply a review of literature, along with media monitoring, field research, and semi-structured interviews with members of the two associations, NGOs, and professionals (see Annex, Table A1). We also triangulate our data to validate our findings. Our main analytical focus – in line with this special issue – is on the forms of agency that were exercised – political versus domain-specific (Marton 2024: 21-23) – as well as on potential impacts, depending not only on available resources (funding), but also determined by the capability and willingness to exercise agency. We apply a multiscalar approach as we scrutinise local-level initiatives, yet embed these into national networks and dynamics, while also taking into consideration their transnational linkages and embeddedness.

Our results indicate that there have been certain partial accomplishments, and thus civil activism is neither impossible nor futile – even in autocratic settings. While the construction of factories has not been stopped, how these factories ultimately operate and how rules and regulations are enforced and monitored can be influenced by the persistent, meticulous, exhausting, and expensive actions of local actors. Civil activism has resulted in an increase in the awareness of the downsides of battery production across the general population and led to the thematisation of the main (environmental and social) concerns. Although these local associations are increasingly discredited, suppressed, and incapacitated both in the local and national arena, notable cases demonstrate their creativity and innovation, mostly through the utilisation of social media, institutional collaboration, and international assistance.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows: the second section highlights the main theoretical debates related to the agency of the NGO sector in autocratic regimes, and outlines the theoretical framework. The third section focuses on societal activism against battery factories in Hungary, and presents two case study analyses, followed by a discussion. The final section concludes.

2. Theoretical background

Scholars who analyse non-state actors in international relations and international political economy literature agree that NSAs are not only highly probable sites of domain-specific agency, but can also be plausible sites of political agency (Marton, 2024). Consequently, the NSA–state nexus must be considered as a complex, multifaceted relationship, with two-way interactions. It requires in-depth research to better understand NSAs’ agency and potential impacts, as

well as to reveal their ecological relationships within inter-organisational ecosystems in current-day contexts (Marton 2024: 33-34). In line with this research direction, in this article, we narrow down the focus to analyse the agency and potential impact of the NGO sector in autocratic regimes.

Amidst the ongoing third wave of autocratisation (Lührman and Lindberg 2019; Croissant and Tomini 2024), the agency of civil society in resisting and pushing back against autocratic tendencies has been put into the limelight again, focusing this time mostly on identifying the conditions and strategic mechanisms that can effectively drive (or hinder) civic activities against autocratic overreach (Tomini et al. 2023, V-Dem 2023). However, the relationship between autocracy and civil society is multifaceted and complex. While autocracies tend to suppress or control civil society, civil society can also be a source of resistance and a catalyst for change. The nature of this relationship is dynamic. Autocracies use strategies of both exclusion and selective integration (cooperation with, co-optation, and instrumentalisation) of civil society to strengthen or legitimise autocratic rule (Sombatpoonsiri 2024). At the same time, civil actors and NGOs respond to these autocratic pressures and restrictions by applying equally diverse strategies, mostly depending on size and adaptive capacities, issue sensitivity, and institutional embeddedness (Li and Farid 2023).

Two key debates stand out in the related literature that affect civil society's agency and potential impact in autocratic regimes. First, the notion of "shrinking space" entails the various tools and channels via which autocratic governments can restrict or disable civil society activities. Legal and administrative constraints can limit the operation of NGOs by limiting access to funding or to public roles (such as advocacy). States can also opt for violent strategies to repress NGOs and civil activism, mostly in cases when the (autocratic) state attributes a political role (agency) to the given organisations (Chaudhry 2022). The increasing spread and significance of new information-communication technologies and social media have led to moving some of these struggles into the virtual world, leading to a shrinking digital space for civil society, while also opening up new possibilities and avenues for bottom-up social mobilisation (Feldstein 2021).

The second debate relates to the (political) role of civil society. While originally it was assumed that NGOs have pivotal agency in processes of democratic transition and consolidation, as well as acting against autocratic overreach, more recently discussions have shifted to highlight the "dark sides" of civil society, referring to the autocratic regimes' co-optation of CSOs or the emergence of antidemocratic social activism (Foley and Edwards 1996; Kopecky and Mudde 2003; Lorch 2017; Geró et al. 2023). Thus, in short, civil society actors can deter, maintain, or even support the process of autocratisation (Davis and Zhang 2023; Sombatpoonsiri 2024); therefore, their role and impact, i.e., agency, have to be analysed on a case-by-case basis.

To enrich these discussions, in this article, we propose a more nuanced view of the *agency* of NGOs in autocratic regimes in line with the distinction by Marton (2024: 21-23) of *domain-specific* agency and *political* agency. The former refers to the organised collective will to act together in specific domains of action to promote or defend common interests or values (examples range from human-rights activism to humanitarian aid). The latter, in contrast, implies that the actors have the capacity and capability to make explicit and politically relevant choices and act effectively and independently regarding those choices.

For the in-depth analysis of the agency of NGOs in an autocratic setting, we adopt the perspective of political opportunity structures (Kitschelt 1986). This approach, in line with the above-mentioned notion of the “shrinking space”, assumes that civil activism and social mobilisation depend on the opportunities that are offered by the given political system to participate in decision-making (see also Buzogány et al. 2022; Gerő et al. 2023; and Boda 2024). In short, the political opportunity structure (PoS) refers to those characteristics of a political system that influence the potential for civil actors or social movements to mobilise and achieve their collective goals. In closed political systems, like autocracies, opportunities for participating in decision-making, or in governance in more general terms, are limited by both formal and informal factors, and these are not pre-defined or constant, but shall be considered as dynamically changing. The length of autocratic rule also matters, as, similarly to populist leaders, the longer autocratic rulers hold power, the stronger their control over civil society organisations tends to be (Ivanov 2025).

In this article, we focus on the domain-specific or political *agency* of NGOs. Therefore, we find Rochon and Mazmanian’s (1993) operationalisation of political opportunities especially helpful. Along with Boda (2024), we consider that three main arenas can be differentiated where NSAs can play an impactful role and influence the policy-making process, yet, as we illustrate later, in an autocratic setting, only one of these may be relevant. First and foremost, per Boda, NSAs can aim to change policies in their domain-specific areas directly, by advocacy or lobbying. Yet in autocracies, these channels are often blocked and not viable. Second, being included in the policy process can offer the opportunity for NSAs to exert influence on particular policies (even if formal participation might not automatically translate into effective impact). Institutionalised channels within the framework of social dialogues, in principle, are an important arena for NSAs to represent collective interests. However, in autocratic regimes, such opportunities might be nonexistent. A third arena offers opportunities, nonetheless, even if the first two are unavailable or ineffective: that is, aiming at changing social values via awareness-raising campaigns and trying to influence policy-making via social mobilisation. This can be effective even in an autocratic setting. Boda (2024: 668) highlights that while the first two channels are determined by legal

and institutional rules, as well as political practices, for the third arena, organisational (and financial) resources are of crucial importance, as these determine whether social mobilisation and campaigning can be successful.

Scholars usually look at the possibilities available to social movements shaped by the state or other external circumstances. Yet, in line with Bloom (2014), we also aim to demonstrate that the same logic regarding the possibilities and limits of those possibilities might work with respect to the state (at least in hybrid political regimes with some degree of policy responsiveness). Thus, we consider the nexus between the state and civil society as giving rise to reciprocal dynamics, whereby the opportunities and choices available to both might be shaped by the other actor (along with external circumstances).

As Meyer (2004) highlights, the context in which social movements emerge influences their development and potential impact. This “context-dependency” underlines our methodological choice (see also Flyvbjerg 2001) and calls for in-depth case study analysis to reveal the real dynamics between the state and civil actors in an autocratic setting.

3. Non-state activism against battery factories in Hungary

In international relations and international political economy studies, the analysis of NSA activities in the post-socialist region in general and in Hungary in particular lags behind that in other fields. Our focus on the Hungarian case can be justified by the seemingly *paradoxical evolution* of its civil society sector. While civil activism, especially in the environmental sector, played an important role in the fledgling democratisation process of the country, and representatives of civil associations were included in consultation and decision-making activities in the post-1990 period, the current situation could not be more different and defies what the initial expectations may have been.

Environmental civil society actors used to be considered among the strongest of the civil society subsectors in Hungary. The Danube Movement emerged in opposition to plans to build the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros dam, mobilising based on emotional, traditional, and anti-systemic values. Following the system change in 1989, a more and more open political opportunity structure emerged, and later, EU membership further expanded opportunities for green NGOs. At the same time, the green movement was not united and not free from political interference either. Between 2005 and 2009, Védegylet, the most politicised green NGO, was even active in micropolitics (e.g. by successfully proposing a president of the republic, and advocating for the post of an Ombudsman for Future Generations). These developments were instrumental to the founding of the first green

party in Hungary, called LMP (Lehet Más a Politika; Politics Can Be Different), which even gained seats in the national parliament in 2010. However, this success resulted less from the political potential of green politics in Hungary and more from lucky momentum at a time when many voters had become disillusioned with the until-then governing Socialists.

In the post-2010 period, with the building of an autocratic state, the gradual but systematic dismantling of the civil sector started, with the disintegration of its institutions and disabling of consultative and participatory mechanisms in legislation and decision-making. Under the highly centralised Orbán regime, many local NGOs suffered attacks and lost their former financial sources, leading to a shrinking civil space (Boda 2024; Buzogány et al. 2022). These changes are also visible in the CIVICUS rankings (2025), where Hungary is in the third-worst category (namely, “obstructed”),⁵ ranking 46th out of 198 countries worldwide, competing with Serbia and Ukraine for the lowest position in Europe. Similar tendencies are shown by the V-Dem indicators (2025), where related indicators, such as CSO consultation, CSO repression, and harassment of journalists, all show the sharp deterioration since 2010.

In this context, we focus on the recent and controversial developments in Hungary’s electric vehicle (EV) battery sector. The state generously supports the construction of a new electric vehicle battery manufacturing cluster despite significant opposition from the local population. Concerns about the construction of battery factories became an increasingly prominent topic in public discourse in 2023-2026, and numerous civic groups and associations emerged in the affected localities to oppose these investments and defend the interests of local communities and the environment.

Following years of seemingly fruitless local and regional struggle, in February 2026, an investigative newspaper article revealed (Weiler 2026) that the central government had been monitoring Samsung SDI’s practices through its secret service and even discussed this issue at a government meeting in the spring of 2023. Serious irregularities were uncovered, and the temporary closure of the factory was considered, but this was ultimately rejected. The government feared that it would deter incoming Chinese investment in the battery industry. This revelation caused a huge public outcry in early 2026. New evidence came to light, including new witnesses testifying one after the other. Battery manufacturing became a major topic of public debate in the run-up to the parliamentary elections in April 2026, with a strongly negative tone.

5 Civicus uses five categories running from open to narrow, obstructed, repressed and closed civic space. Obstructed in this regard means that “*Civic space is heavily contested by power holders, who impose a combination of legal and practical constraints on the full enjoyment of fundamental rights*” (Civicus 2025).

3.1 Case studies

To illustrate the difficulties and potentials of non-state activism in an autocratic setting, we apply a comparative case study approach to analyse the experiences of two civil associations: GÖD-ÉRT and MIAKÖ. The two cases were chosen based on their outstanding activity and central position in the Hungarian battery struggle (as also shown by their participation in the umbrella organisation set up against battery plants in Hungary at the national level). GÖD-ÉRT, founded in 2020, is the “oldest” and most experienced association in the battery-related social movement in Hungary. MIAKÖ, in contrast, was founded only in 2023 in response to the announcement of the development of the CATL gigafactory. As a much younger association, MIAKÖ could rely on and capitalise on the experiences of other civil associations, leading to a relatively quick learning phase and rapid development and extension of its activities, which by now go beyond the CATL issue. We examine the achievements and struggles of these two associations in the increasingly repressive setting in Hungary. Their experiences offer important insights and improve our understanding of NSA agency in the contemporary context of ongoing autocratisation.

We apply the same structure for the two case studies, grouping the tools of the NGOs’ agency. After a general introduction that presents the short history of the organisations, we explore their activities related to: 1. legal procedures; 2. demonstrations; 3. expert events and forums; 4. monitoring and measuring; and 5. social media activity, information and other creative ideas. The observed period closes in February 2026.

3.1.1. The GÖD-ÉRT (For Göd) Association – the oldest and most active NGO in the battery struggle

The first battery factory to operate in Hungary was Samsung SDI in Göd, located to the north of Budapest, on the left bank of the Danube. It started production in 2017, and its eight years of operation since then provide substantial evidence to effectively demonstrate the established practices and mechanisms within the Hungarian battery sector. Several irregularities related to its operation sparked local activism even from the very early stages.

Originating from a Facebook group of active citizens, the GÖD-ÉRT Association was founded in March 2020 by ten founding members. Since then, the number of members has increased significantly, with some changes and fluctuations, while five founding members have moved away from Göd. The main objective of the founders of the association was advocacy, being more efficient

in the form of an association, as they could become involved as clients in certain legal procedures and also make public data requests.

On 17 April 2020, the government decreed the creation of special economic zones (SEZ). The first SEZ became the Samsung SDI battery factory in Göd and the surrounding area, one-fifth of the town's territory. This measure involved taking revenge on Göd because the Fidesz party mayor (in office since 2006) lost the 2019 municipal elections, and an opposition mayor was elected. As an SEZ, both the local business tax of the factory and the control of the territory were transferred from the municipality of Göd to Pest County. One third of the city's budget was lost, and the municipality, as well as the residents of Göd, also lost the opportunity to take part in decision-making related to the industrial park and to access to any related information, insights and monitoring possibilities (Polyák 2026).

GÖD-ÉRT created a protest petition and held a general meeting in July 2020, at which numerous interested citizens participated. Following the event, an additional 24 persons joined the association. Among them was a respected, well-known environmentalist and one of the founders of the Danube Circle in 1986 (György Droppa). In 2025, the association had 65 members, with middle-aged women being overrepresented in the membership. Since the opposition city administration in 2020 cooperated on certain issues and supported the activities of the Göd-ÉRT Association, some people still consider it an opposition-based “liberal” organisation (Szalai 2025).

In February 2023, the opposition mayor of Göd resigned, and a Fidesz-backed mayor was elected. He met GÖD-ÉRT only once and has not cooperated with the association since. In the 2024 municipal elections, two activists from Göd-ÉRT were elected to the Göd municipal council as civic representatives. They have been broadcasting from the public meetings since their election and regularly ask the mayor about the problems related to the factory.

In September 2024, the Sovereignty Protection Office (SPO) initiated an action against GÖD-ÉRT. As part of an individual investigation, the SPO requested detailed information on the NGO's “professional” and “non-professional” activities, including networking and database-building, press releases, actions and awareness-raising campaigns. Bank account extracts concerning the association's financial activities were also requested, going back to 2020. The SPO also requested detailed information related to the use of a grant awarded by the European Commission's Our Common Values Programme (Bodnár and Bodoky 2024).

Legal possibilities

To help Göd residents suffering from noise, GÖD-ÉRT prepared and published a complaint form with a list of the relevant authorities and responsible parties. More than a thousand complaints against the noise caused by Samsung

SDI have been submitted using this form. The battery company was ordered to prepare a noise-reduction plan within a one-and-a-half-year timeframe. Samsung failed to meet this long deadline, and as the noise-reduction plan was not implemented, the company was fined EUR 540. The laboratory commissioned by the company itself made measurements and claimed that it could not detect excessive noise. Noise-related complaints continued, nonetheless, and Samsung was repeatedly given new deadlines to meet the prescribed levels. In early 2024, the company began to build a short “noise-protection” wall in a public area, much shorter than the height of the factory. As our interviewee told us, it is not clear who financed and built the glass wall around a playground in an area that belongs to the local municipality. She further added, *“By now, the glass wall has cracked in several places. But it seems that Samsung’s tax money is not enough to repair this; only warning signs have been posted to indicate that [these sections] are dangerous.”*

GÖD-ÉRT has continuously and very actively submitted requests for public information, as well as questions, and comments through every possible forum. These were mostly rejected or ignored, but the association has become increasingly well-known in the city and throughout the country.

GÖD-ÉRT filed a lawsuit on the basis of an expert opinion stating that the noise impact assessments concerning the factory and its road network are incomplete. For the first trial, the association received financial support from the residents of Göd. However, the lawsuit, which cost millions, was lost in 2024. According to the court’s ruling, there was no problem to speak of. GÖD-ÉRT finally managed to have a noise-protection zone established around the Samsung factory, covering 39 streets and almost 500 properties. However, even after the official decision was issued on this, the Pest County Government Office refused to initiate environmental proceedings.

There have been no examples of the factory receiving a harsher sanction than a fine. GÖD-ÉRT is very active in collecting information and requesting official data related to the operation of the factory, such as the amount and types of fines it has received.

The second lawsuit by GÖD-ÉRT was filed in December 2023. The association raised several points of concern regarding the single environmental permit issued by the County Government Office to Samsung SDI. GÖD-ÉRT claims that the decision is in breach of Directive 2010/75/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council on industrial emissions, as it fails to take into account the fact that the authorised installation is in breach of the noise emission standards. The Single Environmental Permit does not contain any provision or specification concerning the waste treatment processes on the site, and contains an incorrect assessment of the impacts on groundwater. Many of the questions received from the public have gone unanswered and were not

taken into account in the review process, which violates the provisions of the Aarhus Convention. In this lawsuit, the association requested immediate legal protection, which was ordered by the Budapest District Court in May 2024, and the Court suspended the factory's activities; however, this ruling has not been enforced. The first hearing on the Single Environmental Use Permit was delayed for more than a year, during which it was revealed that the Pest County Government Office had failed to submit a number of documents that should have been required (Bodnár, 2025a). In addition to the continuous delays, the activists' situation is complicated by the difficulty of finding experts to assist them in the lengthy proceedings. The County Government Office has also summoned Samsung SDI as a defendant in the process. *“Imagine a small civil society organisation standing against a government agency together with Samsung as the defendant. Samsung writes a counterstatement claiming that the civil society organisation is making false allegations because it is a political organisation attacking the factory due to political motivations. Obviously, this is not something the Koreans would find out for themselves, but rather something they were instructed to say,”* – described the situation of our interviewee from GÖD-ÉRT. In an important step, on 7 October, 2025, the Budapest Court revoked all operating permits for Samsung SDI; the factory should now initiate a new licensing procedure to continue operating. However, the factory's operations were not stopped, and on 3 February 2026, the Supreme Court invalidated the decision of the Budapest Court (Jogászvilág, 2026), making Samsung's permit valid again. *“The whole process will start from scratch again because the Supreme Court rejected it on the grounds that Samsung made too many changes to its application [for permission to operate] during the court proceedings, and the government agency allowed it to do so”,* – said the representative of GÖD-ÉRT.

Demonstrations

The first demonstration organised by GÖD-ÉRT took place in October 2020, titled “Göd is not a playground”. The event took place at a playground situated some 100 metres from the battery factory. The main speakers were a well-known environmentalist, a lawyer and other civil representatives.

On 16 April 2023, after preparing for the event for months, GÖD-ÉRT organised another demonstration with the key message: “No more factories!” There were around 500 participants, but the majority of Göd citizens remained absent. The demonstrators walked through the streets of the suburb, held speeches on the playground situated in the shadow of Samsung SDI, and handed their petition to the company's PR director. Several invitees, including an MP, a minister, the President of the Assembly of the Pest County Municipality, and the Director of the Pest County Government Office, did not turn up.

On 26 October 2023, the setting up of an umbrella organisation, AKÁRTEIS⁶ (Association for Justice for Battery Depleted Settlements), was announced at a joint demonstration during the third “Battery Day” conference of the Hungarian Battery Association. Since then, the number of AKÁRTEIS member organisations has steadily increased. It remains an informal association that collects together NGOs from settlements hosting battery factories.

In May 2024, GÖD-ÉRT and Greenpeace organised a joint demonstration in front of the Samsung SDI factory with short speeches protesting how the Court’s decision on the temporary suspension of the environmental permit had been ignored. After the demonstration officially ended, opposition party activists blocked several entrances to the factory (Jelinek 2024).

Another joint demonstration with Greenpeace and AKÁRTEIS took place on 15 February 2026, as the lack of effective regulatory oversight is a common problem across the country, and they believe that the authorities often protect the interests of polluting companies rather than the population. The protesters demonstrated for legal certainty, greater transparency, and public involvement (Economx 2026).

Forums, events

In the autumn of 2021, the Association organised a public forum in a theatre hall, which was full of participants. The representatives of the environmental authority, the regional MP, and Samsung representatives had all been invited but declined to participate.

The fora organised by the association and other NGOs are essential tools and channels of information and communication. The press is usually present at the events organised by the association.

As a first step towards transnational activism, on 22 November 2024, GÖD-ÉRT co-organised an international conference titled “Opportunities and threats of the battery strategy of the European Union and Hungary”. Under the Civil EU Presidency, Hungarian and foreign experts and NGOs discussed the negative consequences of battery production, the detrimental impact on the environment and the European Union’s directives on the battery industry. Recommendations for policymakers were also issued (Civil Presidency 2024).

Monitoring, measuring

As early as 2021, GÖD-ÉRT started to involve experts to conduct noise measurements. These all confirmed that the noise limit was being violated within a

⁶ The acronym in Hungarian means “even you”.

one-km radius of the battery factory. Financed by grants, GÖD-ÉRT also had water from residential wells tested in May 2022, and an accredited laboratory analysis of the water samples detected the presence of the hazardous solvent NMP (n-methyl-2-pyrrolidone). However, despite turning to the government office with these results, no investigations were conducted. The authority claimed that GÖD-ÉRT had not proved that the NMP came from the Samsung factory. On 21 February 2024, Greenpeace was informed by GÖD-ÉRT that a pipe near the Samsung SDI Hungary battery factory in Göd had burst and was leaking wastewater into the environment. Tests confirmed significant amounts of NMP in the wastewater samples (Bodnár 2024).

Regarding air pollution, in the national environmental database, a large, unprecedented irregular NMP emission from Samsung SDI was registered for 2021, yet this became public only in 2024. GÖD-ÉRT informed the media and the public, while the (pro-government) mayor of the city filed a police complaint against “an unknown offender” and, at the same time, also against the media portal for spreading the information. No investigation took place.

At the beginning of 2025, it turned out from Google Earth photos taken over the span of several years that the roof of the Samsung factory had become blackened due to dust emissions (Weiler 2025). In that part of the building, nickel, cobalt, and manganese are used. In August 2025, GÖD-ÉRT requested the emissions data of Samsung SDI from the County Government Office. It turned out that there was a huge discrepancy between the 2023 emissions data thus provided and the emissions data published on the national environmental database interface. “*We must protest spectacularly, this is absurd*, – said our interviewee.

In February 2025, a member of the NGO repeatedly asked officially for the 2023 emissions data for Samsung SDI from the Pest County Government Office. The data were provided. Later, when the updated National Environmental Information System database was published in August 2025, it turned out that the database entries indicated significantly smaller amounts regarding the emissions from the battery factory in Göd than the data that had previously been sent. Neither the Government Office nor the Ministry of Energy (responsible for the National System) clarified the situation (Bodnár 2025b).

Information, social media

The GÖD-ÉRT association has acquired a lot of information related to the irregular functioning and pollution caused by the local battery factory. Since 2020, when they started their activism, the public has become more aware of the irregular functioning of the plant and the dangers of battery production. The resistance movements in other municipalities affected by the battery industry were thus able to rely on the information and documents obtained by GÖD-ÉRT, and

the association's materials and experiences enabled them to learn and prepare for the fight with the companies and the authorities.

The GÖD-ÉRT Association has played a key role in raising awareness about issues related to the battery industry at the national level. Its members have often been featured in radio and television interviews, podcasts and documentaries on the impact of battery production. They share information on their website and in their own Facebook group. They also keep a list of the cca. 60 fines they are aware of that have been imposed on Samsung SDI by the authorities. In addition, since 2023, they have published an online leaflet (Göd-ÉRTetők; Göd-Understandably), in which they write about issues concerning Samsung and other issues and events related to the life of the city. One of the founding members of GÖD-ÉRT is a journalist from "Átlátszó" (Transparency), an investigative journal which maintains a free-of-charge portal for disseminating news related to Samsung SDI's activities. GÖD-ÉRT also receives enquiries from the foreign press and foreign NGOs (including from the East German city of Gera, where locals hindered a South Korean battery recycler plant from investing). *"The articles of Átlátszó containing the official decisions, and evidence concerning the misconduct of this recycler in Hungary were a major factor in the German protests"*, said the journalist in question. The recent scandal that erupted in February 2026 reached the international press, and foreign journalists contacted GÖD-ÉRT, so transnational activism exists and is expanding continuously.

GÖD-ÉRT is one of the founding members and main drivers of the cooperation with AKÁRTEIS. They actively post news on social media, produce informative videos and animations and aim to actively contribute to awareness raising. They hold online coordination meetings every three weeks with member NGOs on current issues in the battery sector.

As illustrated above, GÖD-ÉRT is the oldest and most active NGO in the Hungarian battery struggle, and its experiences and accumulated knowledge have helped other, younger organisations to follow suit. The next section turns to such a more recent example.

3.1.2. MIAKÖ – a young and rapidly developing association

In August 2022, CATL – Contemporary Amperex Technology Co Ltd – officially announced it would invest 7.34 billion EUR in Hungary to build a 100 GWh battery plant in Debrecen in three phases. This city, located in Eastern Hungary, hosts BMW's new factory and several other plants in the automotive and battery industries. The government decided to develop an industrial cluster in the vicinity of a previously mostly agricultural city. The decision to locate the factory in Debrecen would also strengthen CATL's partnerships with Mercedes-Benz,

located in a city not too far away, and potentially other new EV makers in Hungary. Not only are CATL's clients centred in Hungary, but its principal suppliers have also moved here. In 2020, Semcorp, CATL's primary supplier of separators, selected Debrecen as the location for its first overseas plant (Wu 2024).

CATL is surrounded by fields on the outskirts of Debrecen, near the village of Mikepércs. The first phase of the planned giga-factory spans more than 220 hectares and represents the largest-ever foreign investment in the country. Neither the local population nor the mayor of Mikepércs was aware of the plans before the announcement, although the government and the Hungarian Investment Agency had long been preparing the investment. The Minister of Agriculture even requalified the given territory from an ecological corridor to a normal land area in May 2022, removing one possible obstacle to the permission. According to a public opinion survey in early 2023, only 19% of Debrecen residents supported the construction of the CATL battery factory, while 64% rejected the project and supported a referendum to stop it. Meanwhile, 50% believed that the detrimental health and environmental effects of the battery factory outweighed the economic benefits (Flachner 2023).

The civil cooperation started on 30 November 2022 in Mikepércs village, where a public hearing took place on the construction of the CATL factory nearby. The Mothers of Mikepércs for the Environment Association (MIAKÖ) was officially founded on 14 March 2023 to protest against the giant Chinese battery factory. Since then, the community has become very active, writing open letters to the municipality and the factory; submitting several referendum questions; meeting with a CATL representative; and organising and participating in anti-battery demonstrations. They participate in events related to the battery issue regardless of which party or organisation is hosting them. Even after the construction of the factories, they remain active, vigilant, and responsive to any issues that arise. The members now include not only mothers and fathers from Mikepércs but also numerous members from Debrecen.

On 11 February 2025, the Sovereignty Protection Office targeted MIAKÖ too in its report on the “Soros-network” in Debrecen. The report enumerates the NGO's activities and summarises details of its grant from the European Union (SPO 2025).

Legal possibilities

The mass opposition to the battery factories in Debrecen started at the public hearings at the beginning of 2023 (9 and 20 January). People strongly voiced their questions and objections to the project. Participants came from Debrecen and its surrounding area, as well as from Göd and other places. The events attracted substantial media interest, and the public could follow the angry comments and

shouting. In April 2023, to avoid further such events, the government issued a decree making online public hearings possible (Aradi 2023). Since then, public hearings regarding battery plants have been conducted without citizens' physical presence, using questions submitted in advance. MIAKÖ has participated in all hearings and sent detailed comments and questions to the authorities.

Apart from the submission of referendum questions (all were rejected), they regularly make requests for data of public interest and collect signatures. Private persons supporting and belonging to MIAKÖ filed two lawsuits against the County Government Office concerning CATL's permits. The local Court of First Instance included CATL as a defendant in the lawsuit. CATL's lawyers received all documents and were present at all the hearings. *"The big corporation and the authorities are on one side, facing off against the population. I think that says everything. So, whom can you trust here?"* – asked the representative of MIAKÖ. In the case of the safety report, the Curia, on 29 November 2023, annulled the disaster management licence issued to CATL on the grounds that the authority had violated the rules (Mázsár 2023). CATL submitted a new safety report, and a new permitting process was launched. The permit was granted on 17 March 2024 (Polgár Tóth 2024). In the case of the environmental permit, the legal process is intentionally slow, and running into its third year (as of 2025). Rare trials still discuss the right of the citizens to recourse to the law. The opinions of two independent experts appointed by the court were questioned after it emerged that they were not favourable to the authority. In October 2025, the Debrecen Court of Justice once again suspended the lawsuit concerning the unified environmental permit for the CATL battery factory because the Chinese company had submitted a request to the government office to amend the permit for the third time.

Demonstrations

MIAKÖ organised the first demonstration on 28 January 2023. Two hundred people marched from Mikepércs to Kossuth Square in Debrecen (a distance of 10 km), where the crowd swelled to around 1,000. The next demonstration was organised by the aforementioned green party (LMP) on 10 February 2023, and the president of MIAKÖ also delivered a speech there. Similarly, on 4 March, another small opposition party, Momentum, organised a demonstration in Debrecen, where 300 people participated, among them MIAKÖ members. On 15 March 2023, they organised a demonstration in Mikepércs and announced the legal formation of the association. On 5 May 2024, the president of MIAKÖ held a speech at the main opposition party rally in Debrecen.

On 1 February 2025, MIAKÖ organised a demonstration in front of CATL in Debrecen's southern economic zone. The event was preceded by protest

marches from Debrecen and Mikepércs. Several organisations joined the initiative, including parties and NGOs.

Forums, events

On 31 March 2023, MIAKÖ organised an expert forum in Mikepércs, inviting a chemistry professor, an economist-researcher, and an energy and water expert to participate. The mayor of the village participated in the event too (Mikepércsi Anyák 2023). Later, other expert fora were also organised, inviting experts to participate as presenters on each occasion. A chemical expert spoke about the hazardous materials used in battery production, and a lawyer discussed real estate prices and the possibility of locals selling their houses.

MIAKÖ regularly holds conversational events called “Talking evenings with MIAKÖ” in a café in Debrecen, and organises “Zebra Wednesdays” at pedestrian crossings in Debrecen, where members hold up blackboards and signs with messages against battery factories. On 22 July 2025, the president of MIAKÖ and the leader of the main opposition party held a live-streamed discussion on battery-related issues. The event was called “Battery Picnic” (Debreciner, 2025a).

MIAKÖ participates in country-level green conferences and events, as well as in civil events in other cities. They have also attended several demonstrations in Budapest as a sign of solidarity with teachers and health workers. MIAKÖ was invited to the sessions of the Parliament’s Sustainable Development Committee in February 2023 and April 2024. In these sessions, several NGOs and experts participated – no representatives of government parties were present.

Monitoring, measuring

MIAKÖ runs an ‘ANYÁDMÉR’ (literally meaning “your mother’s measures”) air pollution monitoring programme. The government abolished the National Meteorological Service as of 1 January 2024, which had been providing air pollution data. The Municipality of Debrecen, together with the University of Debrecen, set up a committee and installed devices at 16 locations in the city to continuously monitor environmental elements (water, air, soil, etc.). The system is called the “Green Sentinel”, and it is widely promoted by the city leaders. MIAKÖ does not trust this system due to the lack of cooperation of the Municipality, and because if a pollution event (incident) occurs, the polluter is untraceable. “*The sandpit is ready for the ostriches to poke their heads into*”, our interviewee stated. MIAKÖ intends to address governmental and local deficiencies by establishing an air quality monitoring network, where measurements are taken and documented daily. The aim is to make data and trends transparent on a continuous basis. The first measuring device was installed in

the autumn of 2023 in the Southern industrial park and later at several other locations (a total of 14). “*We hope that the monitoring network will be a bridge between citizens, scientists and policymakers. We build measuring communities from volunteers who undertake to have devices in their gardens or houses*”, – said a member of MIAKÖ (Debreciner 2025b). The monitoring network was financed by citizen donations and the EU’s CERV project.

Information, social media

MIAKÖ has an informative homepage and actively posts on Facebook, too. At the beginning, they printed stickers with “Stop Akku!” (“Stop Batteries!”) signs. “*It was good to see the stickers on the houses and doors, but a while later these vanished, because the rumour spread that such people would be subjected to tax [audits]*” – said the representative of the association. MIAKÖ creates informative videos, collects information from various sources, and contacts lawyers and experts.

The NGO is actively watching the activities of other battery plants in the area (Semcorp, EVE Power, EcoPro) and is a member of AKÁRTEIS, collaborating with GÖD-ÉRT and other organisations as well. The international press has shown great interest and conducted several interviews with the mothers who are involved, as well as with other members. MIAKÖ representatives also often participate in podcasts and interviews. Although MIAKÖ was founded because of CATL, the association is already functioning as a watchdog for the entire local battery sector.

4. Findings

The two analysed NGOs were established in 2020 and 2023, respectively, under an already restricted and relatively closed political opportunity structure. Thus, even from the outset of their activities, both were prepared for legal, formal and informal struggles and fights to represent and defend the interests of their local constituencies. Nevertheless, in recent years, they have experienced a further narrowing of space for civil activism through formal and informal channels and have reacted to these developments in diverse ways (see *Table 1*).

Both organisations were set up and launched their activities based on a few dedicated citizens who were able and willing to spend time, energy and their own resources to protect the interests of local society and the environment. At the same time, relatively quickly, both managed to attract a substantial number of members, organise themselves, and set up legal entities. Within a few years of active operation, both were able to exert influence well beyond the boundaries of their own localities.

While the repository of formal legal possibilities has been shrinking, members of both organisations were tireless in exploiting them, filing numerous lawsuits and complaints, requesting public information, and initiating petitions and referenda (the government declined or annulled all of these). Beyond investing tremendous (often their own private) resources (in terms of time, energy and expertise) into these issues, over time these organisations accumulated substantial expertise (legal and otherwise, including tacit knowledge) that is not only beneficial to them – the impacts go well beyond, via partnering and the exchange of experiences with other (domestic or international) organisations, as well as by way of raising awareness of the wider public and engaging advocacy (thus sowing the seeds of further potential political agency). The setting up of an umbrella organisation that creates a platform for all battery-affected communities represents well the dynamically evolving exchanges and learning process, as well as the scaling up of activities and the resulting expanded outreach.

The impacts of both organisations also filter into the public domain through monitoring and measurement activities. Thus, they can be considered “gap-fillers”, as by moving beyond their traditional roles, they become primary providers of public services, replacing in this respect the government and public authorities that are reluctantly building up the needed measuring and monitoring infrastructure (and, when doing so, often manipulate the measurements).

Finally, both organisations rely to a great extent on new information and communication technologies, especially social media. This has not only enabled rapid and effective organisation and communication among members from the outset, but digital solutions have also facilitated their outreach (especially to younger generations). Both are very active on their websites and Facebook sites in sharing information, mobilising people, and raising awareness, including by using “shorts” (short videos) with the help of artificial intelligence tools.

Table 1. The dynamics of government strategies and NGOs’ actions and reactions

| Closing of the Political Opportunity Space | Government Response/ Strategies | Responses of NGOs |
|--|--|---|
| formal, conventional legal tactics | restrictive laws | exploiting remaining legal possibilities |
| | action by ‘Sovereignty Protection Office’ | trying to keep a low profile and complying with obligations – when needed |
| | cutting access to funds | investing private resources (time, energy and expertise – volunteering, community service), diversifying resources and crowdfunding |
| informal, discretionary tactics | fabricated official inspections and excessive police raids | learning process, accumulating (legal and domain-specific) expertise |
| | intimidation and discrediting campaigns | awareness-raising campaigns |
| | | partnering with other domestic and international NGOs (becoming stronger together) |

Source: authors.

5. Conclusion

The policy of the Hungarian government towards those NGOs whose activities are critical of the government’s (the prime minister’s) aims reveals the autocratic character of the Orbán regime. There are similarities with such phenomena in Russia (see Bogdanova et al. 2018; Marton – Thomasen 2024), particularly as regards the labelling of these non-state actors as foreign agents with the intention of restricting their activities as well as intimidating them.

The development of a large EV battery sector has been a “flagship project” of the Hungarian government’s new industrial policy. Those NGOs that question its implementation, ask for more transparency and participation in related decisions, or protest against the irregular functioning of already operating factories, are considered enemies of the regime.

The NGOs that fight against issues caused by the battery sector rely on very dedicated citizens who not only consider health and environmental protection valuable but are also eager to dedicate time and energy to fighting for them. They try to build local communities, engage intensively in learning from each other, and promote networking. They share their experiences with awareness-raising, local mobilisation and fundraising, and sometimes even cooperate with international partners.

We have illustrated NGO activity with two cases associated with the anti-battery-factory movement: an “older” association in Central Hungary and a newer

civil group in the Eastern part of the country. Having analysed the same segments of their activity, we can detect some similarities.

- Both groups are challenged by the traditionally low level of solidarity of Hungarians when demonstrations are organised. It is very difficult to mobilise people, even if they agree with the aims of the NGOs.
- The NGOs try to use the available legal possibilities, but are stymied by autocratic and illiberal legal tricks.
- It is very difficult to find authentic experts who will criticise government plans or at least try to objectively enumerate problems, as they fear retaliation from the autocratic regime.
- Both NGOs have developed and accumulated a substantial amount of independent expertise and knowledge concerning issues associated with battery production that could be channelled into effective policy and decision-making, yet in the centralised and captured institutional setting of the Hungarian illiberal regime, these channels barely exist.
- Monitoring that substitutes or complements the rare official measurements requires considerable financial resources, which are often beyond the capacities of these organisations (although cooperating with larger and more established actors, such as Greenpeace, can help to overcome these difficulties). Nevertheless, the authorities usually reject the results of independent measurements, deeming them unaccredited.
- The most successful area of these non-state actors' activity is the spreading of information and raising of awareness on the local (and even the national) level, mostly through online communication channels.

These commonalities reinforce our hypothesis that in an autocratic setting, NGOs can be most effective at changing social values via awareness-raising and social mobilisation. The analysed cases reveal, however, that the two NGOs not only managed to thematise the battery issue but, in some cases, also pushed authorities and ministries to apply and enforce somewhat stricter regulations and to provide monitoring services. In this regard, we conclude that their agency is clearly domain-specific and not explicitly political, although opposition parties often take up this issue and support local initiatives in the hope of future votes, while the government depicts these initiatives as politically motivated. This can potentially lead to the emergence of political agency in the mid- to longer term. The scandal related to the government's hushing up of Samsung SDI's practices that endangered employees and the environment broke out one and a half months before the national election in the spring of 2026, becoming a key issue in public discourse and driving widespread criticism of the Orbán government.

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Annexe

Table A1. Interviews

| Interview | Description | Length (min) | Mode |
|-----------|--|--------------|----------|
| 1 | leader of a local civil organisation | 80 | online |
| 2 | member of a local civil association | 60 | personal |
| 3 | member of a local civil association | 40 | phone |
| 4 | member of a local civil association | | online |
| 5 | environmental expert | 30 | phone |
| 6 | board member of a civil organisation protecting big lakes in the country | 30 | personal |
| 7 | a local town council member | 30 | personal |
| 8 | attorney at law specialising in environmental law. | 40 | personal |
| 9 | WWF Hungary policy officer | 30 | personal |
| 10 | founder of a civil nature-protective foundation | 30 | personal |