



THE INSTITUTIONAL ROLE OF MIGRANT NGO'S IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS BASED ON EU AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION REPORTS

Ahmet Küçük

Introduction

■ The post-Cold War transformation of Central and Eastern Europe fundamentally reconfigured the relationship between states, civil society, and minority communities (Howard, 2003; Ekiert & Kubik, 2010). As post-socialist polities integrated into European political and legal architectures, the institutionalization of minority rights emerged as a central axis of democratic consolidation and social cohesion (Kelley, 2004; Checkel, 2005). Within this reconfiguration, civil society organizations, particularly migrant non-governmental organizations (NGOs), assumed roles that reached well beyond conventional advocacy, operating as institutional intermediaries between minority populations and state structures (Börzel & Buzogány, 2010).

Migrant NGOs contribute to minority rights governance through multiple and overlapping channels: policy consultation, direct service provision, cultural representation, and engagement with international funding mechanisms (Schrover & Vermeulen, 2005; Ambrosini & Van der Leun, 2015). These activities carry particular weight in Central and Eastern Europe, where state institutions frequently confront capacity deficits and where civil society development has proceeded unevenly across and within national borders (Howard, 2003; Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004).

Despite the growing salience of these organizations in regional governance, systematic comparative analyses of what they actually do, and under what conditions they manage to do it, remain scarce, particularly those grounded in documentary



evidence rather than country-specific fieldwork. This article addresses that gap. It examines how migrant NGOs contribute to the institutionalization of minority rights across selected CEE countries by employing a document-based methodology, analysing policy papers, monitoring reports, and institutional publications produced by the European Union and major international organizations. This approach enables a comparative perspective on how migrant NGOs are formally recognized, supported, or constrained within different governance configurations.

The central argument advanced here is that migrant civil society organizations in Central and Eastern Europe function as institutional actors mediating between international norms and domestic practices. By translating minority protection frameworks into concrete programmes and participatory mechanisms, these organizations play a constitutive part in embedding rights-based approaches within national governance architectures.

At the same time, their effectiveness is conditioned by legal environments, funding ecologies, and the broader configuration of state–civil society relations. The article proceeds to elaborate the theoretical framework guiding the analysis, followed by a review of the relevant literature, a discussion of the methodological strategy, the presentation of empirical findings from three country cases, and a concluding assessment of implications for policy and scholarship.

Theoretical background

Civil Society, Migrant NGOs, and the Institutionalization of Minority Rights

Understanding the institutional role of migrant NGOs in post-socialist settings requires an analytical framework that integrates insights from democratic theory, the sociology of power, institutionalist scholarship, and migration studies. No single theoretical tradition captures the complexity of what these organizations do and how structural conditions shape their capacity to act. Figure 1 schematizes the theoretical architecture guiding this study.

A normative entry point is provided by deliberative democratic theory. Civil society organizations are frequently understood as arenas in which marginalized groups articulate interests and translate them into claims directed at the state. Habermas's (1996) account of the public sphere foregrounds how communicative processes within civil society generate legitimacy and shape political decision-making. Read through this lens, migrant NGOs operate as mediating structures enabling minority communities to participate in public discourse and policy processes from which they would otherwise remain excluded. This mediating function acquires salience in post-socialist societies, where participatory institutions developed unevenly and where trust in formal political channels has remained fragile.



Yet civil society cannot be grasped in purely normative terms. Sociological perspectives insist that civil society organizations operate within structured fields marked by unequal distributions of resources and power. Bourdieu's (1991) field theory conceptualizes social life as a configuration of relatively autonomous arenas in which actors compete for social, cultural, and symbolic capital. Applied to migrant NGOs, this perspective foregrounds differential organizational capacity, uneven access to funding, and disparities in state recognition. Organizations embedded in transnational networks or sustained by international donors may acquire disproportionate leverage in domestic policy arenas. The trajectory of minority rights institutionalization, on this account, is shaped by positional advantage, not merely by the normative force of rights claims.

Institutionalist approaches further illuminate the mechanisms through which minority rights become embedded in formal governance arrangements. New institutionalism underscores the interaction between formal rules, informal norms, and organizational practices in producing political outcomes. Institutions evolve through processes of adaptation, learning, and norm diffusion—not through legal change alone (North, 1990). Migrant NGOs contribute to this evolution by functioning as carriers of international norms, particularly those promoted by European institutions. Through participation in consultative bodies, implementation of integration programs, and monitoring of discrimination, these organizations translate abstract rights frameworks into concrete institutional practices, a process that is neither automatic nor free of contestation.

A fifth analytical pillar emerges from recent scholarship on democratic erosion in post-socialist Europe. Ekiert and Dasanaïke (2024) conceptualize “dictatorial capture” as a process whereby democratic institutions are internally hollowed out while maintaining formal procedural continuity. Unlike classical authoritarian seizures, dictatorial capture proceeds through the gradual expansion of executive control, the instrumentalization of legal frameworks, and the strategic co-optation or neutralization of civil society.

This concept illuminates the Hungarian case with particular clarity. What migrant NGOs confront in Hungary is not overt repression in any classical sense but rather a systematic legal reconfiguration that repositions them as adversaries of the state while preserving, indeed, instrumentalizing, the institutional architecture of EU membership. The analytical purchase of “dictatorial capture” for the present study lies in its capacity to explain why European-level enforcement mechanisms have proven insufficient: the formal procedural shell of democratic governance remains intact, rendering violations legible only through sustained monitoring of the kind that civil society organizations perform. The concept thus establishes a direct theoretical bridge to the empirical findings on Hungary presented below, where the Defence of National Sovereignty Law and the criminalization of migration assistance exemplify precisely the mechanisms Ekiert and Dasanaïke identify.

Migration scholarship adds a further dimension by foregrounding the transnational character of migrant organizations. Rather than operating within the confines



of a single nation-state, migrant NGOs typically maintain cross-border connections, facilitating the circulation of resources, ideas, and political repertoires. The concept of transnational social spaces (Faist, 2000) captures how migrants simultaneously engage with multiple political and social contexts. In the European setting, this transnational dimension intersects with multi-level governance structures in which authority is distributed across local, national, and supranational scales. Minority rights policies are shaped not only by national governments but also by EU institutions and regional organizations, opening spaces for civil society intervention at multiple governance levels (Marks & Hooghe, 2004).

Contemporary scholarship has further refined the understanding of NGO-state relations through the interrelated concepts of “NGOization” and the “shadow state,” and it is worth dwelling on these at some length, since they speak directly to the paradox at the heart of migrant civil society in post-socialist contexts. NGOization denotes the progressive professionalization and institutionalization of civil society organizations, a trajectory in which organizations acquire technical capacity to manage donor funding, satisfy reporting requirements, and implement complex programmes, yet risk severing the connective tissue linking them to grassroots constituencies (Lang, 2012). The process is not ideologically neutral: professionalized NGOs tend to adopt the logics of their funders, orienting themselves toward quantifiable outputs and project cycles rather than the slower, messier work of political mobilization and community self-organization. In Central and Eastern Europe, where civil society development was disproportionately shaped by Western donor agendas in the 1990s, the residue of this dynamic continues to structure organizational cultures and strategic orientations (Jacobsson & Saxonberg, 2016; Petrova & Tarrow, 2007).

In migration governance specifically, NGOization intersects with what Ambrosini (2021) theorizes as “street-level humanitarianism”, the operation of civil society actors in the interstices of restrictive legal frameworks, delivering services and protections that states are unwilling or unable to provide. This concept captures something that formal legal categories miss: governments throughout the CEE region that are rhetorically hostile to migration nonetheless depend on NGOs to perform essential sovereign functions, border-zone medical care, asylum casework, social service provision, language training for newcomers, creating a profoundly contradictory institutional arrangement. Civil society absorbs the operational burden of migration management without possessing the sovereign authority to grant permanent rights, secure long-term funding, or shape the policy frameworks within which it operates. The resulting configuration has been characterized as a “shadow state” (Wolch, 1990), wherein NGOs compensate for deliberate state withdrawal or chronic institutional incapacity while remaining exposed to political precarity and shifts in governmental posture. What makes this dynamic especially consequential in the CEE context is its entanglement with broader trajectories of civil society development in the post-Cold War period. As Anheier (2017) has argued, the arc of civil society’s role since 1989 has



moved from initial euphoria through institutionalization toward a present moment marked by contraction, co-optation, and strategic adaptation. The initial boom in NGO formation across the region, heavily subsidized by international donors and framed within democratization narratives, gave way to more ambivalent configurations in which organizations must navigate between donor expectations, state regulation, and the demands of the communities they claim to represent. For migrant NGOs, this tension is acute: they must simultaneously satisfy the bureaucratic requirements of EU funding instruments, maintain credibility with migrant communities whose needs are immediate and concrete, and withstand political environments that may treat their very existence as a provocation.

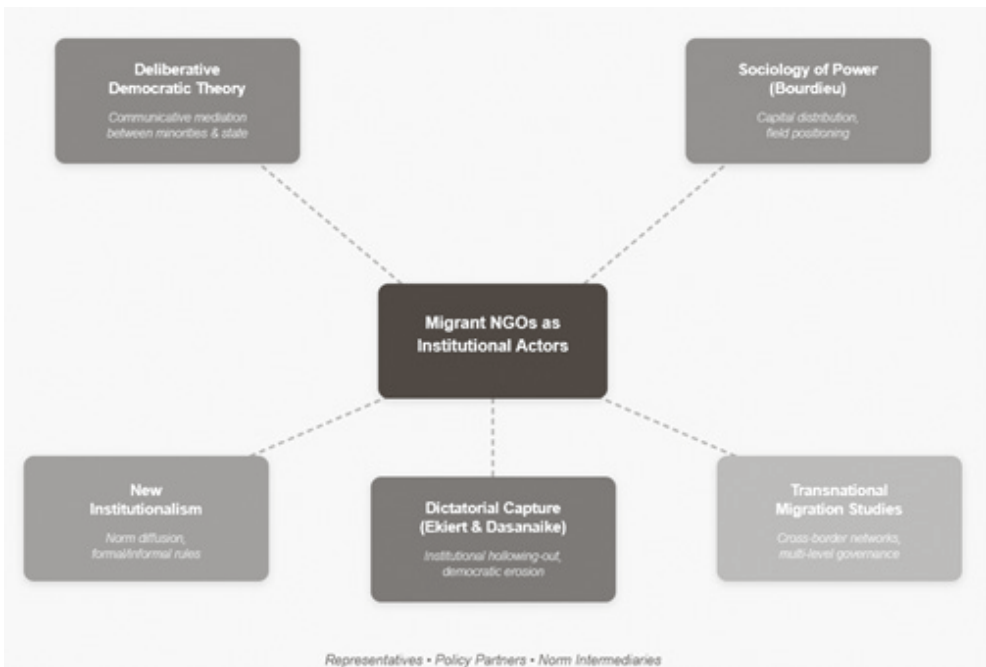


Figure 1. Theoretical framework: Five analytical pillars converging on migrant NGOs as institutional actors. Note: Created by the author.

The Central and Eastern European region presents a particularly complex environment for the operation of migrant NGOs. Post-socialist legacies, evolving legal frameworks, and heterogeneous models of state–civil society relations have generated divergent patterns of institutional engagement. In some contexts, governments actively incorporate civil society organizations into policy processes; in others, the role of NGOs remains circumscribed or openly contested. These variations underscore the necessity of examining migrant NGOs not merely as advocacy groups but as institutional actors whose influence depends on the broader governance arrangements within which they are embedded.



A further refinement is necessary at this stage, one that bears directly on the analytical utility of the category “migrant NGO” itself. The term, as deployed in policy documents and much of the scholarly literature, obscures significant organizational heterogeneity. At least three distinct organizational types operate under this umbrella, each governed by a different institutional logic. First, humanitarian service-delivery organizations provide direct assistance, shelter, food, medical care, and legal aid, and are typically embedded in donor-funded programme cycles, oriented toward measurable outputs, and evaluated by throughput metrics. Their relationship with the state is often quasi-contractual: they implement functions that public institutions cannot or will not perform. Second, rights-based advocacy organizations operate at a greater distance from service provision, concentrating instead on legal challenge, policy monitoring, anti-discrimination campaigns, and engagement with European and international accountability mechanisms. These organizations tend to be the primary targets of governmental restriction in contexts of democratic backsliding, precisely because their work renders state failures visible. Third, grassroots migrant-led initiatives, associations formed by and for migrant communities, serve functions of cultural preservation, mutual aid, and collective identity formation that neither service-delivery nor advocacy organizations fully address. Their institutional profile is often more precarious: less professionalized, less visible to international donors, and more dependent on volunteer labour and community resources (Schrover & Vermeulen, 2005). The empirical sections that follow attend to how these different organizational types are differently positioned and differently constrained across the three country cases, even where the documentary sources consulted do not always maintain such distinctions with analytical rigour.

By integrating deliberative democratic theory, sociological analyses of power, institutionalist perspectives, and transnational migration scholarship, this study conceptualizes migrant NGOs as pivotal agents in the institutionalization of minority rights. They function simultaneously as representatives of minority communities, partners in policy implementation, and intermediaries linking international normative standards with domestic practice. This hybrid theoretical architecture enables a more textured account of how civil society contributes to the consolidation of minority rights regimes in Central and Eastern Europe.

Literature review

Civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations have become central actors in contemporary governance, particularly in policy domains touching on migration, integration, and minority rights. In democratic theory, civil society is conventionally understood as an intermediary sphere linking citizens to state institutions. Classical contributions emphasize its capacity to foster participation, accountability, and generalized social trust (Putnam et al., 1993), while deliberative



approaches foreground its function in shaping public discourse and influencing policy formation (Habermas, 1996). These perspectives position civil society as a constitutive element of democratic consolidation and rights protection.

More recent scholarship, however, has drawn attention to the ambivalent position of non-governmental organizations within governance structures. Rather than acting solely as independent advocates, many have become enmeshed in service-delivery networks shaped by state funding and supranational policy architectures.

This professionalization may enhance organizational capacity while simultaneously constraining autonomy and attenuating grassroots mobilization (Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004). In migration governance specifically, NGOs frequently operate as implementing partners in integration programmes, humanitarian assistance, and legal support, thereby occupying a hybrid institutional position between advocacy and administration (Ambrosini & Van der Leun, 2015).

The role of migrant-oriented NGOs acquires particular significance in the institutionalization of minority rights. These organizations mediate between migrant communities and public authorities, facilitating access to social services, legal protections, and avenues of political participation. Existing research demonstrates that migrant civil society organizations contribute both to practical integration outcomes and to the articulation of collective claims in the public sphere (Schrover & Vermeulen, 2005). At the European level, they participate in transnational advocacy networks promoting norms related to anti-discrimination and human rights (Koopmans, 2013).

In Central and Eastern Europe, the development of civil society has followed trajectories markedly shaped by post-socialist legacies. The collapse of state socialism and subsequent democratic transitions produced institutional environments characterized by rapid organizational proliferation, heavy external donor influence, and fluctuating state-civil society relations. Scholars have argued that civil society in the region frequently operates within constrained political contexts defined by limited institutional trust, weak organizational consolidation, and periodic governmental hostility (Ekiert & Kubik, 2010). These conditions bear directly on the capacity of NGOs to influence policy and sustain minority rights advocacy.

Post-socialist legacies also condition migration governance across the region. Compared to Western Europe, many Central and Eastern European countries have relatively recent histories as immigrant-receiving societies, resulting in evolving institutional frameworks and contested public debates on diversity. NGOs have frequently stepped into gaps in state capacity by providing services to migrants and refugees, particularly during periods of heightened inflows. Their activities, however, are shaped by national political discourses and regulatory environments that may either facilitate or constrain civil society action (Börzel & Buzogány, 2010).

Regional research further indicates that civil society organizations working on migration issues operate under increasingly politicized conditions. Studies of migration management at the European Union's southeastern borders underscore the importance of cooperation between NGOs, international organizations, and



public authorities, while also identifying tensions arising from divergent priorities and resource dependencies (Polgár, 2023). The dynamics at play are perhaps most starkly visible at the EU's external borders. Pries & Savcı (2023), examining refugee-related organizations operating within the framework of the EU-Turkey agreement, demonstrate how these bodies occupy an inherently contradictory institutional position: simultaneously delivering humanitarian assistance and functioning as *de facto* instruments of EU border externalization. Their findings suggest that the institutional role of migrant-oriented NGOs cannot be understood apart from the geopolitical architectures within which they are embedded, a conclusion that resonates strongly with the CEE cases examined in this study, where EU accession conditionality and post-accession monitoring have similarly shaped the opportunity structures available to civil society.

Analyses of humanitarian responses to refugee movements emphasize the capacity of civil society actors to mobilize resources rapidly and advocate for vulnerable populations, even in contexts where institutional support remains limited (Polgár, Péntes, & Radics, 2025). These findings point to the capacity of NGOs to function as institutional entrepreneurs, shaping policy implementation on the ground.

At the same time, civil society autonomy in parts of the region has come under increasing pressure from state regulation and political intervention. Research documents the strategies through which governments seek to influence the nonprofit sector, including funding controls, legal restrictions, and public narratives questioning organizational legitimacy. Such dynamics risk transforming civil society into a compliant sector while preserving the outward appearance of institutional pluralism (Nagy, Béres-Áfra, & Szalóki, 2025). For migrant NGOs engaged in minority rights advocacy, these constraints may substantially curtail independent action.

Beyond institutional considerations, sociological approaches underscore the role of NGOs in identity construction and community formation. Migrant organizations provide spaces in which collective identities are negotiated and political claims articulated, contributing to the symbolic dimension of minority rights institutionalization. This function is particularly salient in Central and Eastern Europe, where national identity narratives and historical memory continue to shape public attitudes toward migration and diversity (Kozachuk, 2018).

Despite growing scholarly attention, comparative analyses that integrate migration governance, civil society development, and minority rights institutionalization across the region remain limited. This limitation reflects, in part, a genuine lacuna in the field: the scholarly literature on migrant NGOs in Central and Eastern Europe is markedly thinner than its Western European counterpart, a disparity rooted in the region's more recent history as a destination for immigration and in the relatively late emergence of migration-focused civil society infrastructure. What literature does exist has tended to concentrate on single-country cases or specific policy episodes; the 2015 refugee crisis, for instance, generated a wave of case-study publications, rather than pursuing the kind of sustained comparative analysis that would reveal broader



regional patterns and institutional logics. More recent contributions, however, have begun to address this gap. Vermeersch (2006) examined the political strategies of Roma organizations in post-accession Central Europe, while Brunarska et al. (2016) analysed migrant civil society in Poland under conditions of rising anti-immigration sentiment. The present study builds on these efforts by examining migrant NGOs through the lens of institutional roles as framed in supranational policy documents, seeking to contribute to a more systematic understanding of how civil society mediates minority rights across the region.

Methodology

Document Analysis of EU and International Institutional Reports

This study employs qualitative document analysis as its primary research method to examine the institutional role of migrant NGOs in Central and Eastern Europe. Document analysis is well-suited to research contexts in which policy processes, institutional frameworks, and governance mechanisms are constituted through formal reports, legal texts, and organizational publications rather than through directly observable interactions (Bowen, 2009). Given that the influence of migrant NGOs on minority rights is substantially mediated through policy discourse, funding architectures, and international monitoring mechanisms, institutional documents constitute a valid and analytically productive data source.

Rationale for Document-Based Research

The reliance on documentary sources reflects both methodological and substantive considerations. As a method, document analysis permits the systematic examination of policy narratives, institutional priorities, and governance strategies across countries without requiring fieldwork, which in this region may be constrained by access limitations, political sensitivities, or both. Substantively, the European Union and international organizations do not merely describe civil society conditions in Central and Eastern Europe; they actively constitute them. Their reports structure policy agendas, set normative expectations, and channel funding toward particular organizational forms (Checkel, 2005). Civil society development in post-socialist contexts has been profoundly shaped by this external influence, transmitted through conditionality mechanisms and processes of norm diffusion (Howard, 2003). Institutional reports thus provide insight into both the opportunities available to migrant NGOs and the constraints that circumscribe their operation.

Data Selection and Sources

The empirical material comprises policy reports, monitoring documents, and analytical publications produced between 2015 and 2024 by major European and international institutions engaged in civil society governance and minority rights. Selection criteria included direct relevance to civil society, migration, minority rights, or NGO development; coverage of Central and Eastern European countries; institutional credibility and methodological transparency; and accessibility for comparative analysis. On these grounds, the study draws on European Commission reports on rule of law and integration policies, Council of Europe monitoring mechanisms, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) assessments, United Nations human rights and migration reports, and evaluations produced by international NGOs such as Freedom House and Amnesty International. These sources are widely recognized as authoritative references in comparative political and sociological research on European governance (Kelley, 2004).

Table 2 provides an itemized overview of the principal documentary sources subjected to systematic analysis. While additional contextual materials were consulted during the research process, the documents listed below constitute the core analytical corpus from which thematic codes were derived.

Table 1. Core Documentary Corpus Analyzed (2015-2024)

Source Institution	Document Type	Coverage	Period
European Commission	Rule of Law Reports (country chapters: Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria)	Judicial independence, civic space, media freedom, anti-corruption	2020-2024
European Commission	Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion	Integration policy frameworks, NGO partnership models	2020-2024
Council Of Europe	Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for National Minorities: Country Opinions	Minority rights implementation, consultative mechanisms, and language rights	2015-2024
Council Of Europe, Commissioner For Human Rights	Country visit reports and third-party interventions	Freedom of association, asylum access, and civil society constraints	2018-2024
Osce/Odihr	Annual Reports and Election Observation Missions	Democratic governance, minority participation, rule of law	2018-2024
Unhcr	Operational updates, protection monitoring reports	Refugee and asylum-seeker access, border practices, and temporary protection	2015-2024



Source Institution	Document Type	Coverage	Period
Freedom House	Nations in Transit; Freedom in the World (country reports)	Democratic governance scores, civil liberties, and civil society environment	2015-2024
Civicus	CIVICUS Monitor ratings and analytical reports	Civic space classifications, restrictions on association and assembly	2018-2024
Civil Liberties Union For Europe	Annual Rule of Law Reports	Civic space contraction, government–civil society relations	2020-2025
Amnesty International	Annual Reports (country entries)	Human rights conditions, migration, asylum, and freedom of association	2015-2024
Human Rights Watch	World Reports (country chapters)	Human rights documentation, migration governance, legal developments	2015-2025

Note: Compiled by the author. Documents were selected based on institutional credibility, direct relevance to civil society and migration governance, and coverage of at least one of the three country cases.

Analytical Strategy

The documents were subjected to qualitative content analysis, with attention focused on how migrant NGOs are positioned within institutional discourse and policy frameworks. Qualitative content analysis enables the systematic interpretation of textual data through the identification of recurring themes, categories, and patterns (Schreier, 2012). The analysis proceeded in three stages, illustrated in Figure 2. First, an open coding process identified references to the functions attributed to migrant NGOs, including service provision, advocacy, representation, and participation in policymaking. Second, axial coding grouped these functions into broader analytical categories reflecting distinct institutional roles: policy implementation partners, advocacy intermediaries, community representatives, and symbolic actors within international monitoring frameworks. Third, a comparative reading across country cases assessed variations in how institutional environments shape NGO roles, with particular attention to the divergence between contexts characterized by democratic consolidation and those marked by democratic backsliding.

To render the analytical procedure more transparent, two illustrative coding sequences are provided here. In the first instance, the European Commission’s Rule of Law Report (2024) on Hungary contains passages describing the Sovereignty Protection Office’s investigative powers over civil society organizations. During open coding, this passage was assigned the code administrative surveillance of NGOs. In axial coding, this code was grouped under the broader category of state mechanisms constraining civil society autonomy, which in turn informed the analytical theme of adversarial



repositioning identified in the Hungary case. In a second example, the Council of Europe's Advisory Committee opinions on Romania reference the participation of Roma organizations in consultative bodies on minority language education. Open coding assigned the code minority consultation mechanisms; axial coding placed this within the category of NGOs as policy implementation partners, contributing to the theme of institutional fragility and uneven partnership. These examples are indicative rather than exhaustive, but they illustrate the iterative movement between textual evidence and analytical abstraction that structured the analysis throughout.

Validity, Limitations, and Ethical Considerations

Document-based research carries inherent limitations that deserve candid acknowledgement. Most pressing is what might be termed a "front-stage" bias: institutional documents are, by their nature, curated artefacts. EU progress reports, Council of Europe monitoring assessments, and NGO evaluations are produced for specific audiences and within specific institutional logics; they foreground certain phenomena, compliance gaps, legislative developments, and program outputs, while inevitably occluding others, notably the informal strategies, internal tensions, and everyday negotiations that characterize organizational life on the ground. The risk, in other words, is that a documentary analysis may reproduce the institutional gaze rather than penetrate it. This study mitigates the bias through two strategies. First, triangulation across multiple institutional sources, EU bodies, the Council of Europe, OSCE, UNHCR, and independent monitoring organizations such as Freedom House and CIVICUS, ensures that no single institutional perspective dominates the analysis. Where these sources converge, confidence in the underlying pattern increases; where they diverge, the divergence itself becomes analytically productive. Second, and following Fairclough (2013), the study treats documents not merely as descriptive accounts but as discursive constructions that reflect underlying power relations, governance priorities, and strategic framings. Reading documents in this manner, attending to what is emphasized, what is minimized, and what is absent, partially compensates for the limitations inherent in the absence of ethnographic or interview-based data.

A further limitation concerns uneven reporting across countries: some states receive more extensive international monitoring than others, which may affect comparative depth. Hungary, for instance, attracts disproportionate attention due to the severity and visibility of its democratic backsliding, while Bulgaria's institutional difficulties receive less granular coverage. This study addresses the asymmetry by focusing on analytical patterns rather than attempting exhaustive country-by-country evaluation, and by acknowledging where documentary evidence thins. All materials analysed are publicly available, ensuring transparency and replicability, and the research adheres to established standards of scholarly integrity through accurate representation of sources and avoidance of selective interpretation.



Findings

Democratic Backsliding, Civic Space, and Migration Governance in Central and Eastern Europe

This section examines the institutional environment for migrant NGOs in Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria through the lens of democratic backsliding and civic space contraction. Drawing on EU monitoring reports, international organization assessments, and civil liberties documentation, the analysis traces how broader governance trajectories condition the operational context for migrant organizations. The three countries, while sharing post-socialist legacies and EU membership, exhibit distinct patterns of state–civil society relations that shape the institutional role and strategic orientation of migrant NGOs in substantively different ways.

Hungary: The Systematic Erosion of Civic Space

Among the three cases examined, Hungary presents the most advanced trajectory of democratic backsliding, with consequences that have fundamentally restructured the operating environment for migrant NGOs. The Hungarian case is analytically significant not merely for the severity of its restrictions but because it instantiates what Ekiert and Dasanaïke (2024) theorize as “dictatorial capture”, the internal hollowing-out of democratic institutions while their formal procedural architecture remains nominally intact. Since 2010, the successive Christian Democratic coalitions led by Viktor Orbán have progressively consolidated control over state institutions while simultaneously constraining civil society autonomy through an interlocking set of legislative, administrative, and discursive mechanisms.

Legal and Institutional Architecture

The Hungarian case is defined by the systematic deployment of emergency powers to circumscribe civic space. Following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the government maintained a “state of danger” decree permitting rule by executive order and enabling the override of parliamentary legislation. This emergency framework coexists with a separate “state of crisis due to mass migration” decree, continuously in force since 2015, producing a condition of permanent exceptionalism that normalizes restrictions on both migration governance and civil society operation (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

The Defence of National Sovereignty Law, enacted in February 2024, marked a qualitative intensification of constraints on organized civil society. This legislation established the Sovereignty Protection Office (SPO), an entity endowed with broad powers to access government and intelligence data and to investigate individuals or



organizations deemed threats to national sovereignty. The parliamentary leader of the governing Fidesz party explicitly identified the law's targets as "foreign-funded journalists, pseudo-NGOs and dollar-funded politicians." By mid-2024, Transparency International Hungary and the independent investigative outlet Atlatzso had become subjects of SPO proceedings. Both the European Commission, which referred the matter to the Court of Justice of the European Union, and the Council of Europe's Venice Commission, which called for repeal of the legislation, registered the extent to which Hungarian law now diverges from European norms regarding civil society autonomy (Civil Liberties Union for Europe, 2025).

Criminalization of Migration-Related Assistance

For migrant NGOs in particular, the most consequential development has been the progressive criminalization of activities supporting asylum seekers and refugees. The 2018 "Stop Soros" legislative package, together with subsequent amendments, rendered assistance to irregular migrants and asylum seekers a criminal offence. In September 2024, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights submitted a third-party intervention before the European Court of Human Rights in the case brought by the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, contending that this criminalization violates European Convention provisions on freedom of association and assembly (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

The practical effects of this legislative architecture extend beyond formal legal sanctions. Organizations working with migrants confront not only prosecution risks but also sustained stigmatization in pro-government media and recurrent administrative harassment. This environment has fundamentally altered the institutional role of migrant NGOs in Hungary: rather than functioning as policy partners or service providers within established governance structures, they have been repositioned as adversaries of the state.

Migration Governance and the Structure of Exclusion

Hungarian migration governance exhibits systematic exclusionary characteristics that further marginalize NGO participation. Access to asylum procedures has been rendered effectively inaccessible since 2020 legislation prevented most asylum seekers from lodging protection claims within Hungarian territory, a finding corroborated by UNHCR (2024) operational assessments, the Hungarian Helsinki Committee's annual reports, and the European Commission's rule of law reporting cycle (European Commission, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2025; UNHCR, 2024).

At the southern border with Serbia, authorities continue to carry out unlawful pushbacks, in some instances accompanied by documented violence. While the reported incidence of such operations declined significantly between 2023 and 2024, this reduction reflects changes in Serbian migration management rather than any substantive Hungarian policy reform.



The differential treatment of Ukrainian refugees reveals the ethnically stratified logic of Hungarian migration governance. Between February 2022 and September 2024, over 5.4 million border crossings from Ukraine to Hungary were recorded according to UNHCR displacement tracking data, with 46,149 individuals registering for temporary protection by July 2024 (Eurostat, 2024; UNHCR, 2024). An August 2024 government decree, however, terminated shelter support for Ukrainian refugees from regions not deemed war-affected by Hungarian authorities. The approximately 3,000 individuals affected by this measure were predominantly Roma from Transcarpathia, many of them children (Human Rights Watch, 2025). This differential treatment illuminates how ethnic hierarchies structure access to protection and reveals the intersection of migration policy with pre-existing patterns of racialized exclusion.

Judicial Consequences and the Limits of European Enforcement

The European Court of Human Rights and the Court of Justice of the European Union have repeatedly found Hungary in violation of asylum and human rights obligations. In June 2024, the CJEU imposed a €200 million fine for what it characterized as an “unprecedented and exceptionally serious breach of EU law” concerning asylum restrictions, accompanied by an additional €1 million daily penalty for non-compliance (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Earlier in 2024, the ECtHR ruled that Hungary’s detention practices, including the arbitrary detention of a Syrian woman fleeing armed conflict and forced marriage, as well as the deprivation of food to asylum seekers, including a child of five years, in transit zones.

These judicial findings produce a deeply paradoxical institutional situation. Migrant NGOs operate within a legal environment repeatedly declared unlawful by European courts, yet domestic implementation of these judgments remains absent. Organizations thus function not as partners in the implementation of settled legal norms but as monitors of ongoing violations and litigants seeking enforcement of European standards against a resistant national government.

Assessment of Civic Space

The cumulative weight of these developments positions Hungary as what the Civil Liberties Union for Europe (2025) classifies a “dismantler” state, where governments “intentionally undermine the rule of law in nearly all aspects.” The CIVICUS Monitor (2024) categorizes Hungary’s civic space as “obstructed,” reflecting entrenched and systematic barriers to organizational operation. Migrant NGOs, in this context, are not merely constrained; their very institutional function has been redefined by a governance regime that treats independent civil society as a threat to sovereign authority.



Romania: Institutional Fragility and the Politics of Discontent

Romania presents a more ambiguous case than Hungary, characterized by institutional fragility rather than systematic dismantlement, and complicated by the rise of far-right mobilization that has reshaped the political terrain for migrant NGOs. The 2024 electoral cycle exposed the volatility of Romania's democratic consolidation and the entanglement of migration and minority issues with deeper currents of political discontent.

Political Context and Far-Right Mobilization

Romania's rapid economic growth since EU accession in 2007 has been accompanied by widening inequality, pronounced regional disparities, and institutional neglect, conditions that collectively fuel political dissatisfaction. In the 2024 presidential election, far-right candidate Călin Georgescu came close to victory, propelled by nationalist rhetoric, diaspora mobilization, and a highly effective social media campaign (University of Vienna, 2024). The structural conditions behind this outcome run deeper than any single candidacy. According to World Bank estimates, nearly 20 per cent of Romania's labour force, more than two million individuals, has emigrated over the past fifteen years, constituting one of the most severe cases of human capital depletion recorded globally (Politico, 2024).

The political salience of migration in Romania operates along different axes than in Hungary. As a major country of emigration rather than immigration, Romanian political discourse on migration centres on diaspora rights, demographic decline, and the perceived hemorrhaging of national human capital. Between 1990 and 2023, Romania's population declined by more than four million due to emigration and persistently low birth rates (Politico, 2024). This demographic reality conditions how immigration and asylum, relatively marginal policy areas in domestic terms, are framed in public and political discourse.

Rule of Law and Institutional Capacity

Romania's classification among the five "dismantler" countries by the Civil Liberties Union for Europe (2025) reflects concerns regarding judicial independence, corruption, and media freedom. The 2024 electoral cycle exposed how social media platforms could enable a previously marginal ultranationalist figure to surge to electoral prominence, while legislation intended to secure public service media independence had languished without parliamentary action since 2021. Eurobarometer data indicate that fewer than 30 per cent of Romanians express trust in their government, while 69 per cent place confidence in the military, a disparity that reveals the weakness of civilian democratic institutions (Politico, 2024).

For migrant NGOs, this institutional environment generates contradictory dynamics. Weak state capacity in areas such as migrant integration, anti-discrimination enforcement, and social service provision creates demand for NGO involvement. Yet the same



institutional fragility undermines stable partnership frameworks, leaving organizations dependent on project-based funding cycles and exposed to political volatility.

Socioeconomic Context and Operating Conditions

Romania's deep socioeconomic inequalities shape the terrain on which migrant and minority advocacy takes place. One-third of the population was at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2023, with median household income standing at only one-third of the EU average. Regional disparities are extreme: Bucharest's GDP per capita now exceeds that of Paris or Stockholm, yet Romania also contains some of the EU's poorest regions (Politico, 2024).

These conditions affect migrant NGOs in two interconnected ways. First, they generate competition for scarce resources and policy attention, with migration and minority issues frequently marginalized relative to more visible social and economic concerns. Second, migrant NGOs in Romania often operate at the intersection of multiple and compounding forms of disadvantage—Roma migrants from Ukraine or Moldova, for instance, confront overlapping discrimination based on ethnicity, migration status, and socioeconomic position.

Assessment of Civic Space

The CIVICUS Monitor (2024) categorizes Romania's civic space as "narrowed," indicating that while civil society organizations can generally operate, they face periodic harassment, funding insecurity, and political pressure. Unlike Hungary's programme of systematic institutional dismantlement, the constraints on Romanian civic space are more diffuse, emerging from institutional fragility, corruption, and the reverberations of emigration and inequality rather than from centralized authoritarian control. For migrant NGOs, this means navigating an environment in which formal freedoms nominally persist, but substantive operating conditions remain precarious and contingent.

Bulgaria: Institutional Paralysis and Polarized Governance

Bulgaria exemplifies a third pattern of democratic erosion: backsliding through institutional paralysis rather than coordinated assault. Since 2021, the country has held seven parliamentary elections—six of them early—reflecting a depth of political instability and party system fragmentation that conditions the operating environment for migrant NGOs in ways distinct from either the Hungarian or Romanian cases (Spirova, 2025).

Electoral Instability and Party System Fragmentation

The 2024 electoral calendar exemplified Bulgaria's political volatility. European Parliament elections in June coincided with the sixth early parliamentary election since 2021, producing a turnout of only 33.8 per cent, a figure indicative of deep



public disengagement. Seven parties entered the National Assembly, with GERB-SDS retaining a plurality at 24.7 per cent, followed by the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) at 17.1 per cent and the reformist coalition We Continue the Change-Democratic Bulgaria (PP-DB) at 14.3 per cent, a sharp decline from its previous electoral position. The nationalist and pro-Russian party Vazrazhdane (Revival) consolidated its parliamentary presence at 13.8 per cent, amplifying anti-migrant and anti-minority discourse within the legislative arena (Spirova, 2025).

This fragmentation carries direct operational consequences for migrant civil society organizations. Policy continuity becomes something close to impossible when governments collapse, and elections recur at this pace. Legislative initiatives affecting migration or associational life may be introduced, debated, and then abandoned when parliaments dissolve. The resulting institutional uncertainty renders long-term strategic planning exceedingly difficult for organizations that depend on stable relationships with public authorities.

Rule of Law and Governance Deficits

The Civil Liberties Union for Europe (2025) identifies Bulgaria among its five “dismantler” countries, citing the instrumentalization of anti-corruption investigations for partisan purposes. Investigations were launched against prominent political opponents while long-standing patterns of corruption, such as construction waste dumping in the Sofia municipality, continued without consequence. The continued political influence of DPS leader Delyan Peevski, despite being sanctioned under the US Magnitsky Act for corruption, illustrates the weakness of rule-of-law mechanisms and the entanglement of organized economic interests with formal political institutions (Spirova, 2025).

For migrant NGOs, this governance context entails operating in an environment where legal frameworks may be enforced selectively, where political connections determine access and resources, and where anti-corruption rhetoric can serve as a vehicle for the targeting of civil society actors rather than for genuine institutional accountability.

Migration and Minority Politics

Migration and minority rights remain deeply polarizing in Bulgarian politics. The political year was defined by contentious debates over LGBTQ+ rights, migration, and domestic violence, reflecting broader cultural and ideological cleavages. Euroscepticism grew, fuelled by pro-Russian sympathies among several parties (Spirova, 2025). At the same time, Bulgaria achieved notable progress in its European integration trajectory during 2024, joining the Schengen Area for air and sea travel and advancing toward Eurozone accession. This paradoxical combination, domestic instability and ideological polarization alongside continued institutional integration at the European level, characterizes Bulgarian governance and shapes the opportunity structure for migrant NGOs.



Assessment of Civic Space

Bulgaria's civic space, like Romania's, is categorized as "narrowed" by the CIVICUS Monitor (2024). Organizations working on migration, minority rights, and anti-discrimination confront not only political polarization but also the operational difficulties inherent in an environment of recurrent institutional instability. The presence of a significant ethnic Turkish minority, politically represented through the DPS, lends minority rights issues a degree of political salience absent in some neighbouring countries. This salience, however, does not translate straightforwardly into stronger institutional protections; rather, minority issues become enmeshed in broader political conflicts, with the DPS's dual function as minority representative and political actor subject to continuous contestation (Spirova, 2025).

Comparative Assessment

The examination of Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria reveals three distinct patterns of democratic backsliding and civic space contraction, each carrying different implications for the institutional role of migrant NGOs.

Table 2. Civic Space and Governance Indicators Across Three CEE Countries

Indicator	Hungary	Romania	Bulgaria
CIVICUS Classification	Obstructed	Narrowed	Narrowed
Rule of Law Status	Significant regression	Dismantler	Dismantler
NGO Operating Environment	Hostile / Confrontational	Precarious / Uneven	Uncertain / Polarized
Primary Constraint	Systematic legal dismantling	Institutional fragility + far-right mobilization	Political instability + polarized governance
EU Legal Actions	Multiple CJEU fines	Limited	Limited
Migration Policy	Active exclusion + pushbacks	Emigration-focused	Polarized; Schengen membership

Note: Classifications and indicators are compiled by the author based on reports from CIVICUS (2024), the Civil Liberties Union for Europe (2025), Human Rights Watch (2025), and Spirova (2025).

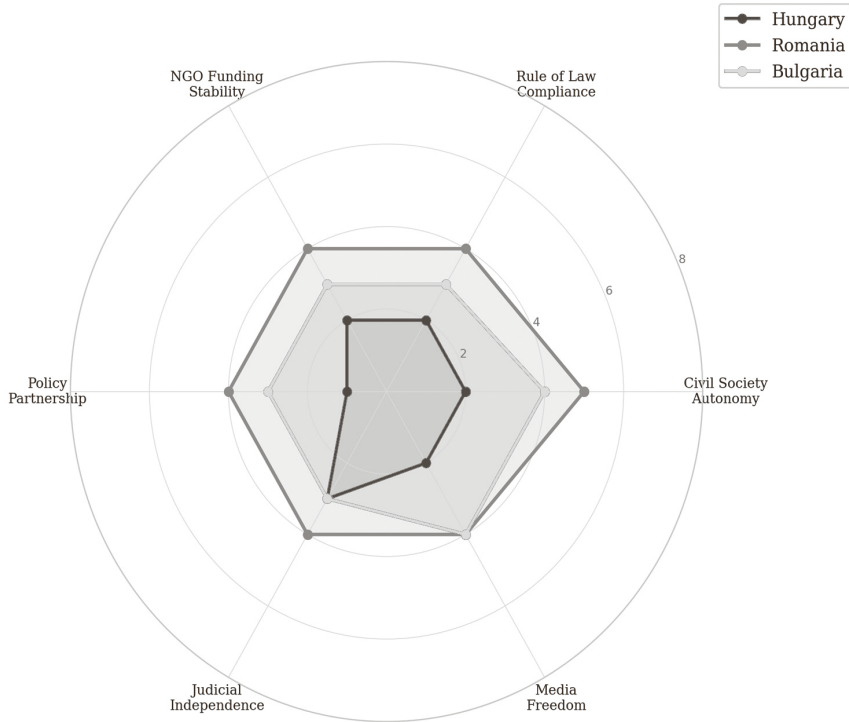


Figure 2. Comparative civic space profile: governance dimensions across Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria (indicative assessment based on institutional reports).

Note: This indicative assessment is based on data and classifications from CIVICUS (2024), the Civil Liberties Union for Europe (2025), and Human Rights Watch (2025)

Divergent Patterns of State–Civil Society Relations

Hungary exemplifies the most far-reaching restriction of civic space, characterized by intentional state action to constrain NGO autonomy through legislation, administrative harassment, and sustained discursive delegitimation. Migrant NGOs in Hungary operate within a fundamentally adversarial relationship with state institutions, functioning primarily as litigants before European courts and monitors of ongoing violations rather than as policy partners or providers of public services.

Romania exhibits institutional fragility rather than systematic dismantlement. Migrant NGOs navigate a terrain in which formal freedoms coexist with weak state capacity, endemic corruption, and growing far-right mobilization. Their institutional role is precarious and uneven: opportunities for partnership exist but remain contingent on project funding cycles and vulnerable to political shifts. The deep socioeconomic inequalities and emigration dynamics that fuel political discontent also shape how migration and minority issues are framed and addressed in the policy arena.



Bulgaria combines political instability with polarized governance, generating pervasive uncertainty for migrant NGOs. Repeated elections and governmental collapses preclude policy continuity and undermine the possibility of stable institutional partnerships. European integration provides certain frameworks and resources, but domestic implementation of European standards remains contested. The entanglement of corruption with formal political institutions means that NGOs advocating for transparency or minority rights may face selective enforcement or political targeting.

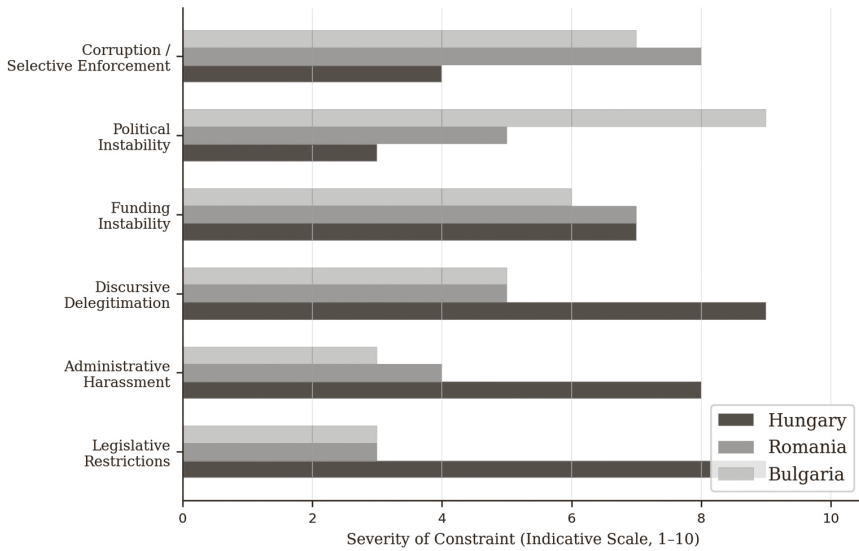


Figure 3. Constraint mechanisms affecting migrant NGOs: comparative severity across three CEE countries (indicative assessment derived from institutional documentation).

Note: The analysis and severity assessments are derived from institutional documentation and reports by the European Union, the Council of Europe, and international NGOs (2015–2024) as cited in this study.

Cross-Cutting Dynamics

Several cross-cutting dynamics emerge from this comparative analysis, schematized in Figure 4. First, European integration no longer functions as a consistent democratizing force. While EU membership provides legal frameworks and funding, the Hungarian case demonstrates that member states can systematically violate European norms while facing only limited effective sanctions. The CJEU's €200 million fine against Hungary, though unprecedented in scale, had not been paid at the time of writing, illustrating the enforcement deficit that characterizes EU governance in this domain (Human Rights Watch, 2025).



Second, emigration shapes domestic political dynamics in ways that bear directly on migrant NGOs. Central and Eastern Europe has lost approximately 9 per cent of its population to Western Europe since 2004, with emigrants tending to hold more liberal values than non-migrants (Auer & Schaub, 2024). This selective out-migration may reinforce illiberal political tendencies in sending countries, producing environments less hospitable to migrant and minority advocacy.

Third, the conflation of migration with national security provides justification for civic space restrictions across all three cases. Hungary's permanent "state of crisis due to mass migration" exemplifies this securitization logic, but analogous dynamics are evident in Bulgarian and Romanian political discourse, particularly among nationalist parties (Spirova, 2025; University of Vienna, 2024).

Fourth, ethnic hierarchies structure migration governance in ways that formal legal categories do not capture. The differential treatment of Ukrainian refugees in Hungary, where Roma from Transcarpathia lost shelter support while ethnically Hungarian Ukrainians received more favourable treatment, reveals how migration policies intersect with and reproduce existing patterns of ethnic stratification (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Migrant NGOs must navigate not only formal legal frameworks but also these informal hierarchies that shape access to rights and resources in practice.

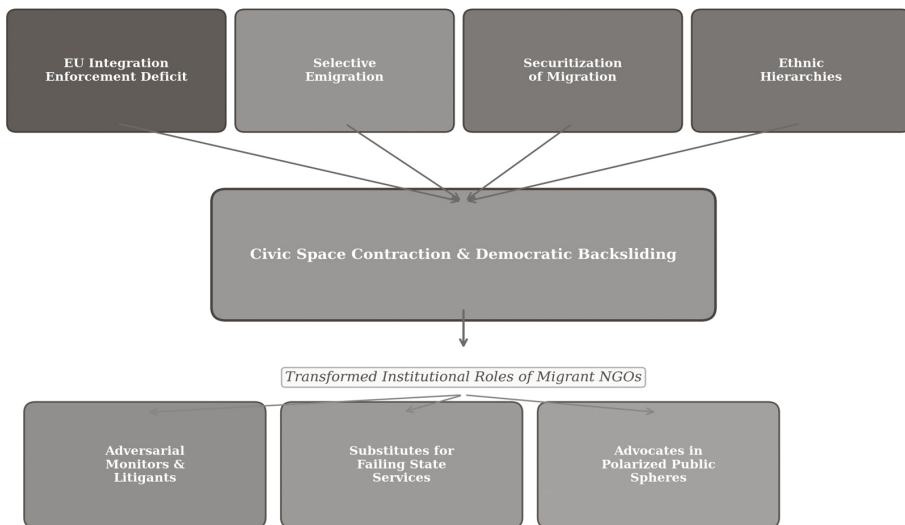


Figure 4. Cross-cutting dynamics: from macro-level drivers through civic space contraction to the transformation of migrant NGO institutional roles.

Note: Created by the author based on a synthesis of the literature review and the institutional reports analyzed in this study



Conclusion

The institutional position of migrant non-governmental organizations in Central and Eastern Europe cannot be adequately understood in isolation from the broader governance context in which these bodies are embedded. Democratic erosion, the contraction of associational freedoms, and the progressive politicization of migration fundamentally condition what organizations can do, how they relate to public institutions, and what strategies they are compelled to adopt.

The Hungarian case demonstrates that systematic state action can transform migrant NGOs from institutional partners into adversarial monitors and litigants. Romania illustrates how institutional fragility, combined with far-right mobilization, generates precarious operating environments where opportunities for engagement coexist uneasily with threats to organizational autonomy. Bulgaria reveals that political instability and polarized governance produce uncertainty that undermines stable partnerships and policy continuity. Across all three cases, migrant NGOs continue to function, providing services, advocating rights, and monitoring violations, but the institutional terms on which they operate have been substantially transformed.

Rather than functioning as embedded intermediaries between minority communities and state institutions, the role envisaged by European governance frameworks, migrant NGOs increasingly operate as substitutes for failing or absent state services, as litigants seeking enforcement of European norms against resistant governments, and as advocates in increasingly polarized public spheres. This transformation carries significant implications for the institutionalization of minority rights. When migrant NGOs cannot operate as stable partners in policy implementation, when their autonomy is constrained by legislative and administrative pressure, and when migration itself becomes securitized, the translation of international norms into domestic practices becomes fragmented and contested.

The institutionalization of minority rights requires not only legal frameworks but also robust civil society organizations capable of mediating between international standards and local realities. In contexts of democratic backsliding, this mediating function becomes simultaneously more necessary and more difficult to sustain. The findings of this study point to the need for European institutions to move beyond monitoring and reporting toward more effective mechanisms for protecting civic space and supporting civil society autonomy in member states where democratic governance is under strain.

Future research should extend the comparative scope of this analysis to additional CEE countries, Poland, the Czech Republic, and the Baltic states, which present particularly instructive cases given their divergent configurations of minority politics and civil society regulation, and incorporate primary data from migrant NGO practitioners themselves, whose lived experience of institutional constraints and opportunities remains insufficiently represented in the scholarly literature.

The integration of documentary analysis with ethnographic and interview-based approaches would yield a richer account of the processes through which migrant organizations navigate the shifting terrain of minority rights governance in post-socialist Europe.

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