PARTECIPAZIONE e CONFLITTO
The Open Journal of Sociopolitical Studies
ISSN: 1972-7623 (print)
ISSN: 2035-6609 (online)
Coordinamento SIBA - University of Salento

PArtecipazione e COnflitto
https://ese-journals.unisalento.it/index.php/paco/
ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)
ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)
PACO, Issue 19(2) 2026: 519-538
DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v19i2p519-538

Published 15 July, 2026

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Inside the Micro-politics of Repression. Institutional Control and Political Neutralization of Non-Profit Organizations in a French City

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ABSTRACT: This article shows how understanding repressive phenomena in liberal democracies requires conceptualizing them within the framework of a deeper and more diffuse dynamic of institutional control and political neutralization of civil society organizations through funding and partnerships. To do so, we examine, through a research conducted in Lille, a municipality in northern France, what we propose to call a micro-politics of repression. We focus more specifically on the micro-political processes of control and repression in this city through two case studies that show how partnership relationships can, depending on events and conflicts linked to the asymmetrical nature of these relationships, tip the balance towards certain forms of more or less overt reprimand and repression. In conclusion, we open the discussion on the importance of a joint understanding of the phenomena of institutional control, political neutralization, and repression with a broader reflection on the restriction of civic space in Western democracies.

KEYWORDS: civil society organizations , funding , institutionalization , repression , third sector

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1. Introduction

The study of the repression of collective action has historically focused on its most coercive forms: police violence, incarceration, and criminalization (Della Porta, Filleule, 2004; Earl, 2013; Bloom 2020). These forms of physical and judicial coercion against social movements have in fact intensified in recent years in Western democracies, particularly in France (Codaccioni, 2019; Jobard, Filleule, 2021), as have the forms of repression that have affected the Yellow Vests movement (Della Sudda, Rungoat, 2022) and anti-racist movements (Talpin, 2022; Beaman, Fradette, 2022). In recent years, however, research has emerged focusing on "soft," "indirect," "covert," or "low-key" forms of repression which, while not resorting to violence or coercion, nevertheless lead to demobilization by increasing the costs of engagement: cyberbullying and disqualification of activists, difficulties in accessing meeting spaces, fines and bans on demonstrations, or—of particular interest to us here—funding cuts (Earl 2003; Marx-Ferree 2004; Garcia 2014; Talpin 2016; Jämte and Ellefsen, 2020).

However, this broader approach to political repression raises certain questions. While proposing to define repression as "state or private action means to prevent, control, or constrain noninstitutional, collective action (e.g., protest), including its initiation," Jennifer Earl asks: "What distinguishes political repression from other forms of control, such as general social control or crime control? Moreover, when is something actually repressive, versus just resistant to change—e.g., what is the difference between people who drag their feet against change versus those who actively suppress actors pushing for change?" (Earl, 2011: 263). While we can assume that all the various forms of institutional control of collective action do not constitute political repression, we may wonder, conversely, to what extent these forms of institutional control feed into or are articulated with repressive practices, whether "overt" or "covert." This question could be addressed through the relationship between repression and political opportunity structures, even if such a paradigm often leads to focus on macro processes, rather than on the meso and micro logics through which repressive practices unfold as part of the more or less ordinary forms of governance of civic action.

This article adopts such a perspective by examining what we propose to call a *micro-politics of repression* through a research conducted in Lille, a municipality in northern France, between 2021 and 2024. In doing so, based on immersion in this territory and long-term observation of the relationships between institutions and non-profit organizations[1], we study the continuities between the institutional practices of control and repression distinguished by Earl, and the social and political conditions that cause the same institution to oscillate between the one and the other in its relations with civic actors. Using qualitative data from a field study focusing on both the perspectives of voluntary organizations and institutions, this article shows that the practices of repression recorded, which most often take "covert" forms but sometimes also "overt" forms (Earl, 2003), are part of a more general system of institutional control of organizations, notably taking the form of multiple practices of admonition, on which their effectiveness ultimately depends. The article places particular emphasis on the central role played by funding and the partnership mechanisms and discourse surrounding it in mechanisms of control. In the case of organizations funded by public authorities and involved in the implementation of public policies, sanctions against their political positions should be analyzed as stemming from both formal procedures and the more informal interactions that underpin the partnership between these organizations and institutions. Under the guise of formal control over the way non-profits use public funding,

[1] In this article we use alternatively the term "non-profit organizations", "civil society organizations" and "voluntary organizations", or even "civic actors" to denote what is defined in France as "associations", and in particular those founded under the 1901 law regime. Those are formal organizations - they are required by law to have a board and an annual general assembly -, and therefore relatively durable. France counted about 1.4 million registered associations in 2023, about 380.000 receiving public funding and 144.000 having at least one staff member.

informality becomes a resource for institutions in their day-to-day relations and, in most cases, outside the public eye to sanction certain political orientations that are alternative, if not opposed, to their own.

By connecting the ordinary modes of governance of non-profits with repressive practices, this article invites a dialogue between literatures that have had little interactions so far, namely those relating to repression on the one hand, and those concerning both the non-profit sector and the conditions of its autonomy on the other (see, mostly concerning the Global South: Glasius et al. 2020; Chaundry, 2023), particularly with regard to public or philanthropic funders, or patronage and renewed forms of clientelism at the local level (Jenkins, Eckert, 1986; Marwell, 2007; Lefèvre and Berthiaume, 2017). Earl includes efforts to "prevent" protests in her definition of repression, as well as attention to "channelling" practices understood as "indirect protest control using a reward and consequence structure that shapes, rather than directly controls, protest (e.g., non-profit tax policy)" (Earl 2003; 2011). She thus echoes other work on such practices which aim, or at least have the effect, of anticipating repression, defusing critical potential so as to avoid having to resort to repression, at least openly (Bartley, 2007; Boykoff, 2007). However, it seems to us that such a *pre-repressive stage* is central to other literature, particularly works that question the ways in which public or philanthropic funding influences the willingness of civil society organizations, and not only social movement organizations, to engage in political advocacy activities or even to take on counter-power positions (Mosley, 2012; Pekkanen et al., 2014; Corrigall-Brown, 2016). And while it may sometimes seem that right-wing political forces are more likely to cut funding to civil society organizations for overtly political reasons, the study of a city, Lille, historically governed by the Socialist Party, which is a priori less inclined to repress progressive positions (Delfini and Talpin, 2025), allows to highlight the systemic or at least routine dimension of practices that tend to transcend partisan divisions.

We begin with a contextualized literature review of research on the institutional framing of civic action and repression through public funding, particularly in North America and France. We then describe the theoretical approach and methodology used to grasp the links between institutional control, political neutralization, and repression, as well as the specific characteristics of the territory studied for this purpose, namely the city of Lille. Next, we focus more specifically on the micro-political processes of control and repression in this city through two case studies that show how partnership relationships can, depending on events and conflicts linked to the asymmetrical nature of these relationships, tip the balance towards certain forms of more or less overt reprimand and repression.

2. From institutional control to repression: governing civil society

Under what conditions can critical or contentious civic action take place in a state recognized as democratic? To what extent can such action, whether carried out by "associative," "non-profit," or "civil society" organizations, be deployed autonomously, if not critically, vis-à-vis the state and, more generally, the public and private powers that finance these organizations? Works tackling these questions have developed separately from those on the repression of social movements, even though they suggest, in our view, decisive factors for understanding the institutional practices and processes that constrain the political capacities of the voluntary sector and fuel repressive phenomena in Western democracies.

2.1 How governments and foundations channel non-profits through funding

Many studies have been conducted on the way funding shapes critical civic action. Research about the United States often focus on the role of foundations due to their centrality in the funding of civil society actors, offering precious results concerning the processes of control and channelling through funding (INCITE !, 2017;

Corrigall-Brown, 2016). For instance, sociologist Tom Bartley (2007) has shown how foundations can moderate and channel environmental mobilization practices: by selectively supporting certain actors rather than others, thereby promoting less radical organizations; by encouraging the professionalization of associations and thus the concentration of their members on fundraising and career objectives; by contributing to the formation or institutionalization of a new organizational field in which associations are frequently diverted from their more political objectives. But despite a "popular mythology" that suggests the American non-profit sector would be mostly dependent on philanthropy, Lester Salamon among others has pointed out that it only accounted for a minor part of the U.S. sector's revenues, far below the fees and charges paid by clients or customers and, of particular interest here, government funding, representing 38% in 2007 (Salamon, 2012: 10).

This centrality of government funding has sure been addressed by research, taking into account historical periods of growth (War on Poverty) and retreat (Reagan era), followed by changes in the methods of allocating funding, and therefore in the forms of partnership, through the establishment of a "contracting regime" (Smith and Lipsky, 1994) that sometimes lead to different forms of marketization (Salamon, 1993). To be funded, voluntary organizations must professionalize by complying with institutional requirements, the consequences being a loss of autonomy and a weakening of their capacity and, for many, their willingness to act as a counterbalance to power (Wolch, 1990; Eikenberry and Kluver, 2004). Studies investigate the effects of public funding on the activities of non-profit organizations. They focus in particular on the fear of sanctions, especially taking the form of withdrawal of funding, in the event of protest or simple criticism, and on the bureaucratization processes induced by the proliferation of responses to contracting mechanisms (Chaves et al., 2003; Pekkanen et al., 2014).

However, these studies show counterintuitively that the best-funded non-profit organizations are those that most often engage in lobbying or advocacy practices. In short, public funding does not suppress the political activities of voluntary organizations. But this finding is largely tempered by certain studies, particularly those based on qualitative data and therefore a more sophisticated definition of forms of advocacy, such as the study conducted by Jennifer Mosley (2012) on the field of non-profit services for the homeless in Chicago. She also shows that public funding does not eliminate political activity and advocacy practices among non-profit organizations, but rather tends to reinforce them. But government funding tends to shape and redirect the political activities of organizations towards defending organizational interests and securing funding. These activities ultimately push them to avoid clashing with elected officials and decision-makers and thus developing critical positions. To paraphrase a common expression, they would bark but not bite the hand that feeds them.

This invites to question the funding relationship between government and civil society organizations from the perspective of clientelism: public support not only creates dependency but also submission to the political powers that be. Nicole Marwell (2004), for example, describes how, in the case of Brooklyn, clientelist practices have been reshaped since the 1980s with the privatization of the welfare state and the increasing subcontracting of social services to community organizations. Whereas clientelist relationships within the New York Democratic political machine were previously dyadic—between elected officials and voters, through potential brokers—this system has been reconfigured, with organizations providing a more direct link to voters through the services they provide and being funded in return by the state, even if this funding is not justified in this way. In doing so, Marwell shows how non-governmental organizations have become political actors, acting in favour of the reproduction of local political hegemonies. Similarly, Michael McQuarrie (2015) showed, in the case of Cleveland, how the municipal government had reshaped the associative ecology by contributing, notably through funding, to the structuring of cooperative organizations with local elected officials and to the marginalization of protest organizations.

Nevertheless, are instrumentalization or political neutralization the hegemonic forms of partnership in America? The case of Quebec, in Canada, proves that they aren't. The literature focuses in particular on autonomous community associations that have developed an original form of partnership that some refer to as "conflictual cooperation" (Lamoureux, 1994; Hamel, Maheu, Vaillancourt, 2000; Bourque et al., 2007). For instance, Deena White (2012) shows that, while Ontario, another Canadian province, has moved from 1980s to 2010s to such a "coercive instrumentalisation" pointed out in the United States, a coalition of Quebec's community organizations resisted the government's moves in this direction and obtained the establishment of core organizational funding framework that recognizes their autonomy and advocacy work.

2.2 In France, civil society organizations from institutional control and depoliticization...

In France, research has also addressed the question of changing relations between the state and voluntary organizations through the contractualization of public funding. It has become the norm, leading to the increasing instrumentalization of the voluntary sector by the state: as American scholar Jennifer Wolch (1990) talked about a "shadow state", French sociologist Matthieu Hély described the non-profit sector as a "quasi public sector" (Hély 2009). Many studies have thus emphasized how the French voluntary sector has been structured by public authorities, both in terms of its funding arrangements and the standards and practices surrounding them, wrapped up in a rhetoric of "partnership" that (often poorly) conceals a profound asymmetry in relations. Mathilde Pette's (2014) work on immigration agencies shows, for instance, how the relationship with public authorities can shape the work of activist groups, encouraging them to become more formalized, routine-based, judicialized, and individualized. In this case, establishing partnerships with public authorities prevents them from carrying out protest actions, with non-profits playing a "filtering role" for the benefit of the administration and "playing the State's game" (Pette, 2014).

In these partnership arrangements, funding also plays a key role, although research has long lacked data to prove it. Public authorities are the first source of revenues in France. According to data from the *Paysage associatif français* survey[2], while the total revenues of the non-profit sector has grown from € 59 in 2005 to € 113 billion in 2020, the share of public funding tended to decrease from over half the total revenues in 2005 to 44% in 2017 – the year 2020 is special because of the Covid-19 pandemic that can explain that the total revenues of the sector stagnated while the share of public funding increased again, certainly being a consequence of different kinds of exceptional supports. But if public funding has generally tended to increase by 58% in the last 15 years, this increase being financed by the various public bodies (State, *Régions*, *Départements*, Cities, Welfare agencies), this evolution has been coupled with a major transformation in financing methods: while the part of grants declined from 34% in 2005 to 20% in 2020, public procurement, i.e., contract payments for service provisions conditional on results, have grown from 17% to 29%. In other words, public authorities are increasingly relying on non-profits while confining them to a service provider role, at the expense of their autonomy, as acknowledged in a recent administrative report: "Most of this funding is intended to implement public policies: the use of voluntary organizations is therefore more often a means of managing a public service than a form of support for the organizations themselves"[3].

These new funding arrangements are underpinned by the development of a genuine grants management system that reinforces the asymmetry between funders and funded organizations, and thus the latter's ability

[2] See : Tchernonog and Prouteau, 2007 ; 2013 ; 2019, and Prouteau and Tchernonog, 2023.

[3] Inspection générale des Finances-Inspection générale de l'éduction, du sport et de la recherche, « Revue de dépenses publiques en direction des associations », May 2005 : https://www.vie-publique.fr/rapport/299782-revue-des-depenses-publiques-en-direction-des-associations, our translation.

to develop autonomous and critical action. Based on his investigation of the accounts of two voluntary organizations in Lille, where the survey of this article was also conducted, Thomas Chevallier (2022a) shows in particular that, rather than a downward trend in funding, there is a high degree of variability in the financial resources provided, contributing to the precariousness of their activities and increasing their dependence on public funders. Furthermore, calls for projects, as well as the more or less informal practices of support from administrative agents to respond to them, allow for various forms of discreet interference by institutions, especially municipalities, in the affairs of organizations. In another article, Chevallier (2022b) shows how these mechanisms contribute, particularly in the context of the Politique de la ville, a set of national urban policies targeting working-class neighborhoods in France, to socialize community leaders to a grammar of partnership in which they are encouraged to adjust to institutional expectations and not to politicize the problems of the residents they serve, and even less so the actions they organize. In this context, clientelist practices have been reshaped: they are more discreet, and calls from non-profits to support specific candidates have become rare (Talpin, Bonnevalle, 2023), which does not mean civil society has become more autonomous.

2.3 … to various forms of repression through an authoritarian shift

In this context, French civil society organizations are far from having equal opportunities and resources. In addition to the fact that increasingly cumbersome procedures tend to favor organizations with the largest budgets, which accumulate the organizational skills and resources needed to meet institutional requirements, it also appears that filtering is increasingly taking place when it comes to values and positions. While this phenomenon remains to be objectively assessed—which this article seeks to contribute to—it seems that governments at various administrative levels tend to favor not only the groups most aligned with their positions, but also, and above all, those that refrain from taking any kind of critical stance in the public arena.

Especially, for the past decade, civil society organizations have been increasingly criminalized in France. The year 2015 marked a turning point in relations between the state and the voluntary sector. The terrorist attacks that struck the country that year, targeting the Charlie Hebdo newspaper in January and then the Bataclan concert hall in November 2015, have had rapid consequences for all civil society organizations. The vote for a state of emergency after the November attacks proved decisive. From the outset, this resulted in a restriction of civil liberties, with the banning of environmental protests planned on the sidelines of COP21 in Paris in December and the house arrest of activists. The tools used during the state of emergency immediately extended beyond groups suspected of terrorism, restricting freedom of assembly and demonstration. As Vanessa Codaccioni points out: “The entire repression of activism is affected by the strengthening of the fight against terrorism, with two clearly identifiable effects: the weakening of reactive punitive measures in favor of increasingly preventive repression and the mobilization of anti-terrorism measures against activists” (Codaccioni, 2019: 12).

Consequently, security-related legislation has proliferated at an unprecedented rate, with multiple infringements on civil liberties and individual rights, against a backdrop of increasingly systematic and violent repression of social movements, notably the Yellow Vests movement in 2019. Increasingly, the state has made voluntary organizations and NGOs, particularly those located in working-class neighborhoods, prime targets of its strategy to combat “Islamist separatism” and “radicalization” (Delfini and Talpin 2025). This approach was enshrined in law with the passing on August 24, 2021, of the law “Reinforcing respect for the principles of the Republic,” also known as the “separatism” law. It aims to respond to community withdrawal and the development of radical Islamism by strengthening respect for republican principles and amending laws on religion. For civil society organizations, this law translates into two significant measures: (1) the creation of a “republican commitment contract” (*contrat d’engagement républicain*), which must now be signed by all

organizations seeking accreditation or public funding – an example of which we will see in one of our case studies; (2) an extension of the grounds for administrative dissolution of organizations, that have multiplied in recent years.

Under the banner of security, the government is strengthening its arsenal of measures to repress the critical capacity of civil society organizations, whether through "overt" or "covert" practices, or even "preventive" or "channelling" measures, to use the terms proposed by Earl (2011). A quantitative survey focusing on non-profits relationships with public authorities – based on a representative sample of French associations, with more than 2,400 respondents – conducted in 2024, indicated that 9.6% of them declared having experienced sanctions (financial cuts, symbolic attacks, administrative or judicial sanctions, etc.) over the past years, due to critical positions or actions they organized (signing a petition, participating in a demonstration or event, taking a stand at a public event, such as DowJ, a case we investigate below). 27% of them also declared various forms of self-censorship, actions or positions they refrain from having to avoid sanctions[4]. More than ever, repression is part of a broader trend towards control of organizations by institutions, especially since Article 1 of the separatism law also specifies that beneficiaries of government contracts are subject to the same principle of religious and political "neutrality" as public service employees. In recent years, the term "neutrality" has been increasingly invoked by institutions to justify cuts in subsidies and other forms of repression of positions taken by civil society organizations. Echoing this term, we propose, in the rest of this paper, to use the notion of political neutralization as a pivotal phenomenon on a continuum ranging from institutional control to more or less open repression.

3. The political neutralization of civil society and the micro-politics of repression: theoretical framework

Given this contextualized literature review, and in order to foster dialogue between studies on the governing of voluntary organizations on the one hand, and work on the repression of collective action on the other, our research demonstrates the value of a comprehensive approach, based in particular on the key notions of political neutralization and the micro-politics of repression. In democratic contexts, the assumption is that the most overtly repressive sequences remain rare, giving the impression of a kind of consensus or at least respect for pluralism. What Chevallier (2020) calls a "partnership domination" is thus partly obscured by a "public transcript" (Scott, 1990) that portrays the relationship between civil society organizations and the government as interdependent and equitable, denying its profoundly asymmetrical nature. Political neutralization thus refers to the logic by which organizations, caught up in a whole set of funding and partnership mechanisms, and therefore by a whole set of incentives, constraints, and reprimands, are led to adapt their practices and even change their trajectories and representations of civic action to comply, or at least not upset institutional expectations. Some would call it "depoliticization", in the sense that they are encouraged to refrain from any form of "politicization", i.e. generalization and conflictual discourse and actions (Duchesne and Haegel, 2007; Eliasoph and Lichterman, 2010). However, we will prefer the idea of political neutralization to that of depoliticization which we believe does not reflect the fact that organizations, by giving up their critical capacity, often still take part in political orientations, the ones of government (Chua, 1991). Following Scott (1990) however, identifying political neutralization mechanisms neither means they are always successful nor that non-profits do not resist and invent tactics to avoid repression through the nurturing of some "hidden transcripts".

[4] See Rodrigues, Talpin, « Nos libertés associatives vont-elles si mal ? » Juris Asso, n°83, novembre 2025.

This is also why it is relevant to echo Foucault's approach of power by talking about a micro-politics of repression, which is well summarized by Gilles Deleuze:

> "Power is a power struggle, or rather, every power struggle is a power relationship. […] Power has no object or subject other than other powers, no other being than the relationship: it is an action on other actions, on possible actions, on future or present actions […]: to incite, induce, divert, make easy or difficult, expand or limit, make more or less probable... Such are the categories of power" (Deleuze, 1986: 77, our translation).

Following this approach, repression isn't (or not only) to be understood as an act through which the State seeks to exert its authority over civil society organizations, but has to be addressed within a finer analysis of the interactions and relationships through which various institutional actors (administrative or elected officials) and non-profit actors (staff or volunteers) seek to promote or defend their political orientations and principles of action to each other. This leads to study how, ultimately, the former manage to get the latter to act according to their expectations, and how the latter manage to resist. Facing certain acts of resistance or demonstrations of autonomy, institutional actors can assume repression, through disqualification, funding cuts, criminalization, or even dissolution, signifying that non-profit actors are deviating from expected behavior, or even stepping outside the scope of "good partners". As part of the phenomenon of political neutralization, as we will see below through two case-studies, the micro-politics of repression begins, unfolds, and takes hold at this pre-repressive stage of institutional control, of incorporating voluntary organizations into the state apparatus (Wolch, 1990), which "prevents" criticism or politicization of action (Earl, 2011) by making it less likely or more costly (see also: Boykoff, 2007). Most of the time, they are encouraged to stay away from any form of criticism or political expression, particularly by anticipating the costs of such positions. But the micro-politics of repression also relies on a whole set of more or less discreet – and therefore difficult to report – practices, including formal and informal corrective measures, warnings and micro-sanctions, through which organizations, including those whose purpose is not openly militant, learn that they must not "bite the hand that feeds them" or, more generally, assume a position in the public sphere. Among these sanctions, the threat of cutting grants, expressed in different ways, is surely one of the most powerful means of political neutralization. Facing this threat, the resistance capabilities of organizations vary greatly depending on the profile and history of individuals and organizations.

4. Methodology

Conducted between 2021 and 2024, this research articulates quantitative and qualitative materials with a view to contributing to the development of a relational perspective, i.e. taking into account the relationships between institutional and non-profit actors and the balance of power between them. This mixed-methods protocol combines statistical analysis of administrative data on subsidies allocated by the city of Lille between 2010 and 2020 with interviews with administrative officials and municipal elected representatives in charge of allocating or monitoring subsidies (n=8), as well as interviews with non-profit leaders (n=10), which were complemented, when possible, by an analysis of their organizations' accounting records. Statistical analysis of the financial data – provided by the city hall as part of a research agreement and constructive dialogue with the deputy mayor in charge of civil society organizations and the management controller in charge of subsidies – first made it possible – after cleaning and enriching the data by linking it to social data on employing organizations – to describe the landscape of the subsidized partners of the municipality during the period. In doing so, we distinguished those that appear to be the "winners" of austerity through an increase, if not a securing, of their funding, from those whose funding is being called into question, or even suppressed.

This typology was then used to select the organizations to be interviewed in order to investigate, as far as possible, all the profiles and types of trajectories highlighted (see the following section), including cases of

organizations that had disappeared or lost financial support from the municipality. Non-profit leaders were asked about the terms of their partnership with the city hall, and more specifically about changes in their funding and the mechanisms used to allocate and control it, as well as the difficulties they encountered in this relationship. Their responses were then compared with the discourses of municipal actors interviewed, as well as with accounting data on their organizations' budgets collected both from their accounts published online on open portals and from certain accounting documents provided by the municipality or the organizations themselves.

Among the cases investigated through interviews or reported elsewhere, instances of overt repression are rare, while warnings, ranging from mild to severe, and, even more so, self-censorship appear to be more widespread. We chose to focus here on situations where the relationship between associations and institutions has shifted, moving from partnership to conflict. It should be pointed out, however, that among this group of non-profits different trajectories can be distinguished. The reduction or even disappearance of institutional support is not necessarily the result of a repressive mechanism, even hidden. In any case, one of the goals of this article is to investigate in detail what underlies the end of a partnership and the emergence of a conflictual, even repressive, dynamic between former partners. To this end, we have selected two diverse cases that constitute rare instances of such open conflict between the institution and non-profits. In other cases, the end of financial support may have taken place silently, even though it may have been underpinned by real political disagreements (and not just an austerity logic). In this respect, our survey focuses on exceptional cases: when conflict becomes overt, and even for one of them public. While these cases are rare and exceptional, we shall see that they reveal the ordinary power relations that underpin links between organizations and institutions. When the norm (in this case, partnership) is no longer respected, notably through the expression of critical or political positions, what was taken for granted so far and did not need to be stated – the neutrality and docility of non-profits – comes to light (Boltanski, Thévenot, 2006).

In order to study as closely as possible the logic of what we propose to call the micro-politics of repression, this article focuses on two cases: DowJ, a cultural organization, and Hous4all, a civil society organization fighting for the housing of low income people[5]. Through their trajectories, these cases allow analyzing the logic by which, through the encounter between institutional impulses for political instrumentalization and neutralization and non-profits' impulses for autonomy and resistance, reprimands intervene and, at certain moments, give way to more or less subtle forms of repression, which non-profits face in different ways depending on their positions and resources. While it may be tempting, at least in the case of Hous4all, which is experiencing one of the most overt and rare forms of repression identified by the research, to speak of a limit case, this should not obscure the fact that certain dynamics of control that they reveal tend to be, ultimately, more widespread, if not commonplace. Surveys of other organizations in our sample, especially with more "docile" positions, still sometimes reveal episodes of varying degrees of conflict and admonitions.

5. Context: a municipality seeking to rationalize partnerships mechanisms in times of austerity

The city of Lille is a particularly interesting case for examining the methods of institutional control of voluntary organizations through funding. Indeed, Lille and its surrounding area have historically been a place where the Socialist Party has experienced a strong hegemony since the late 19th century. This dynamic first emerged through the labor movement, then through the control of city hall and the development of a progressive, paternalistic policy known as "municipal socialism". From the outset, but more strongly after World War II,

[5] For the sake of confidentiality of those concerned, the real names of organizations and individuals have been changed.

socialist hegemony was also based on a network of clientelist relationships with private actors, including both for-profit and non-profit organizations. The party's clientelism toward these organizations then developed more broadly through the distribution of grants. The 1970s saw the emergence of new forms of community activism, focusing on housing, the environment, unemployment, or immigrant rights, with which the local authorities governed by the Socialists entered into partnerships and even created more informal relationships of trust and reciprocity, sometimes relying on alliances with the Green Party.

Since the 1980s, Lille has been at the epicentre of an all-out policy to boost its attractiveness, supported not only by a policy of tertiarization of the local economy, but also by major cultural events and the idea that these events would promote the development of the poorest neighborhoods (Collectif Degeyter, 2018). In this context, and with the introduction of New Public Management principles, new generations of socialist elected officials tend to seek to streamline partnerships with voluntary organizations in order to move away from the clientelism associated with the "old world," particularly through the widespread use of calls for projects since the 2000s. French local authorities have been confronted at the beginning of the 2010 decade to a severe fiscal austerity – an indirect effect of the 2008 global economic crisis – that had direct effect for subsidized non-profit actors.

In a ground-breaking study based on budget data from various public institutions in the Lille metropolitan area, Laurent Fraisse (2021) shows how subsidies fell between 2013 and 2016 in the following proportions by level of government: €2.58 million less from the central government, a decrease of 5%; €19.3 million less from the *Conseil régional Hauts-de-France*, a decrease of 18%; €5.5 million less from the *Conseil départemental du Nord*, a decrease of 13%; €340,000 less from the *Métropole européenne de Lille*, representing a 1% decrease; and €1.4 million less from the city of Lille, representing a 5% decrease. Our own statistical analysis of the accounting data of the city between 2010 and 2020 confirms this trend. Once inflation is taken into account, the total budget allocated to non-profit organizations has fallen by 10%, from €24.7 million to €22.3 million, representing a decrease of more than €2 million. This decline in subsidies has been coupled with a concentration of the number of organizations receiving funding decreasing from 797 in 2010 to 702 in 2020.

Some statistical elements help picturing the landscape of these organizations and its evolution. Overall, these are relatively young, with around one-third of them having been created between 2010 and 2020, one-third between 2000 and 2009, and one-third before 2000. The main sectors of activity represented are culture (28.3% of organizations), humanitarian, health, and social services (22.8%), followed by education, training, integration (12.6%) and sports (12.3%). Just over half (877 out of 1,748) are or have been employers during the period. Among these 877 employing entities, where the number of employees could be obtained, one-third have one or two employees, one-third have three to nine employees, and the remaining third have 10 employees or more. Employing organizations receive 86% of the subsidies granted by the city hall, which indicates that it has largely favored funding professionalized partners. The decline in total and average amounts has been felt more acutely by non-employing organizations, which lost an average of 42.3% of their funding between 2010 and 2020, while employing organizations lost only 7.4%. Conversely, the more employees an organization has and the longer it has been in existence, the more likely it is to receive funding throughout the period. Funding patterns go hand in hand with the amounts transferred: half of the employing organizations that received funding once or twice received an annual average of at least €5,600, while half of those that received funding without interruption received an average of at least €23,900.

This evolution inevitably puts pressure on the local field of professionalized non-profit organizations. By making municipal subsidies more difficult to access, the reduction in funding and its concentration have the effect of raising the "barriers to entry" for newcomers (Bourdieu, 2005). They also embody a resource for institutional actors to put pressure on actual partners, by imposing ever greater constraints and demands on them and putting them in competition with each other. The cases studied below ranged among regularly

subsidized partners when they experienced different episodes of injunctions, warnings and repressions through cuts. Behind trajectories of apparent stability of partnership, these cases like the ones of other non-profits investigated, confirmed by the interviews with municipal actors, show that maintaining the funding is becoming a more and more difficult challenge, if not a struggle, the municipality being on the lookout for opportunities to gain budgetary leverage. If previous studies conducted in the same city have shown how contractualization of subsidies, complexification of procedures, and a budgetary crisis rhetoric combine to make the non-profits increasingly anxious about losing funding and more and more likely to accept institutional expectations (Chevallier 2022a; 2022b), the question here is how are these processes impacting their readiness to take a stand in the public sphere.

The hypothesis we explore here is that any political stance tends to break the partnership "public transcript" and, in doing so, to provide an opportunity for the municipality to cut funding. Of course, criticism specifically targeted at the municipal government might be more directly linked to different sorts of repression, but the example of a city long governed by a leftist party, when it presents itself as favorable to pluralism and democracy, encourages us to enrich the clientelist hypothesis with a more comprehensive analysis of the transformation of civil society governing modes. To what extent are sanctions partly distinct from simple patronage-based reactions to deviations from the government line? What about the differences between the postures and attitudes of administrative agents and elected officials? Let us now see, through two specific cases, how this background of interactions and relations is nurturing logics of instrumentalization and political neutralization. It can sometimes, when non-profits resist them and try to follow their own principles and agenda, push certain institutional actors to reprimand or even repress them, the micropolitics of repression being also shaped by the reactions of non-profit leaders and participants, that are more or less inclined to resist or surrender.

6. Case 1: DowJ, an association dedicated to cultural action resisting institutional control and political neutralization

The story of DowJ is told by Nathalie, co-founder and former president, in an interview. In the second half of the 2000s, she was a student, as were her sister and one of her best friends, all three came in Lille from the same rural town. Involved in different social movements at the time and volunteering in cultural events, they came up with the idea of launching a street arts festival in the city. They were only in their twenties at the time: "It was quite naive, quite impulsive really." They approached the "Maison des associations" (*House for Non-profits*), a municipal facility dedicated to helping new and existing organizations, which granted them financial assistance to get started and put them in touch with the culture department, as well as with a non-profit dedicated to supporting project leaders in this field. In this context, they decided to launch their festival in a working-class neighborhood of the city, targeted as a "priority neighborhood" under the Politique de la ville, where no such cultural offering existed.

With a few friends, they set up the DowJ organization and immediately began applying for grants. Nathalie is aware that her and her colleagues' cultural background meant that they were not afraid to embark on this quest for grants and, in doing so, grapple with the technicalities of the procedures:

> "We were students, we knew how to write, so we immediately started submitting applications. It was a reflex we had right away. [...] We also learned how to draw up budgets, but we had, how should I put it, the intellectual background needed to put together a grant application. So we did it very quickly".

Initially, the three protagonists worked on a voluntary basis. Nathalie was a scholarship student and, despite having student jobs, she says she "had time". An enthusiasm, if not a passion, drove them to invest themselves wholeheartedly in the project:

> "And after all, the founding members of DowJ, we all still have a good work capacity. Because we learned that the files didn't write themselves, and then we set up European projects. We had to write them, 35-page documents. We spent sleepless nights writing applications. So yeah, there was a lot, a lot, a lot of work. I guess you can imagine that you don't just create an organization like that in a living room, which then becomes an organization employing five people, without a lot of work behind it".

For the very first edition of the festival, DowJ received €30,000 in grants from a dozen different sources, which Nathalie says were "linked to the fact that we were young": youth services, universities, Politique de la ville, etc. Nathalie's sister was then employed on a subsidized contract for administrative tasks, while Nathalie herself was employed on a subsidized contract in another voluntary organization while studying: "In terms of time, it was tough. Considering there was DowJ, and then work, because we had to eat". The two friends had to make do with precarious conditions, as subsidized jobs are capped at minimum wage and are often part-time.

Quickly, the organization supporting DowJ's development encouraged them to set up a European project based on youth exchanges by applying to European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), which led them to develop a new activity outside of the festival core program. DowJ adapted to requests and showed its willingness to work with institutions, earning its recognition, particularly at the city level. Nathalie's high school friend was then hired as the organization's coordinator. The organization quickly grew to four employees, initially relying on subsidized contracts. It also employed civic service workers[6]. In 2018, the organization had a budget of €400,000, a significant portion of which was used to pay for services, particularly artistic services during the festival. According to municipal data and the organization's accounting reports, municipal funding, provided by the cultural department and the Politique de la ville, reached already €19,000 in 2010 and fluctuated between €14,000 in 2013 and €44,000 in 2017. But funding also came from other institutions, notably the State, the Conseil régional (*Regional council*) or the Conseil départemental (*Departmental Council*), as well as from foundations, and was used both for "operating costs" and for "projects," i.e., often for activities other than organizing the festival, which was DowJ's core activity. However, at the end of the 2010s, while the organization was at its peak in terms of budget, it abruptly ceased its activities and went into liquidation.

To explain this, we need to look at how the organization's relationship with its community and political environment has evolved. Halfway through the period, a new elected representative from the socialist majority was appointed by the mayor to manage the neighborhood. He was in the midst of a rising political career and showed a desire to make his mark on local politics. In addition to the contemporary music and street arts festival organized by DowJ, the neighborhood also hosted a more popular culture annual event organized by the PopA organization. With a stated aim of streamlining funding, the elected official decided in 2015 to merge the two events, which put the DowJ organization in a difficult position:

> "They decided to keep [our festival], saying it was sexier than [the PopA festival]. But with the obligation for us to include the parade and other very popular events [organized by PopA], which weren't really part of the DNA of our project. And, conversely, our project was considered too cultural

[6] The civic service is a program created in 2010 for people under the age of 26, funded by the government, which allows non-profit organizations to receive funding to recruit young people for several months to contribute to the organization's activities for a salary of less than €600 per month, which is below the minimum wage, with the aim of promoting employability and a sense of commitment among young people.

> and out of touch by the people who were more involved in PopA. So it was complicated, both for the people at PopA and for the people at DowJ. It was a bit like a forced marriage".

This merger order created a lot of tension within DowJ, but employees and board members agreed that there was no way to resist:

> "Yes, we had to ask ourselves the question, but we couldn't do anything else. How can I put it? I don't know... There was no choice, if you like. The funding was conditional on us going ahead with [PopA]. It was either that or lay off people because we didn't have the money to put on the event. So at a certain point, it's not really a choice. It's a forced choice."

So what Nathalie calls "work culture clashes that could have been painful" in a context where "there was no financial security either, but there were still 18 billion files to process" led the organization's coordinator, Nathalie's high school friend and co-founder of DowJ, to burnout, so much so that he decided to quit his job.

As president, Nathalie, supported by the other members of the board, took action to manage day-to-day affairs and implement a new human resources organization: she describes a great deal of stress, and even a miscarriage during this period. This shows the personal and health implications of the relationships between voluntary organizations and institutions. Joint festivals with PopA were organized for two years, then DowJ's board decided, for what would turn out to be its last festival, to return to a separate formula, even if it meant entering into open conflict with the elected representative. In response to this resistance, the latter decided not only to withdraw the municipal subsidies for which he was responsible, but also to call on certain other funders, through political contacts, to do the same. In this case, we can talk about a disciplinary measure, a form of sanction in response to an act of refusal to submit to institutional will, although his decision didn't have to be openly declared since the granting of subsidies remains, at least in France, discretionary.

The consequences of these subsidy cuts were swift and severe. Facing a cash shortage, tensions within the team, and no one willing to take over as president, Nathalie decided one night to propose to the board that the organization be dissolved: "It was such a mess that no one wanted the presidency. And I was clearly exhausted too. And then I decided that at some point, a project that had no one to take it over was a project that was dying".

At first glance, this turbulent trajectory of the organization and its partnership with the city hall would not appear to be a case of political repression, but rather a failed attempt to put it under institutional control, leading to the abandonment of an organization's project. However, Nathalie's account of this power struggle between the elected official and the organization is punctuated by micro-sanctions imposed by the former against political positions endorsed by the latter, for example by organizing a critical debate on urban projects:

> "We organized a debate with a Marxist sociologist about urban renewal projects that involved demolishing houses. The residents were quite upset about this. So we organized a debate called 'The neighborhood is changing, and what about us?'. And in fact, he [the elected official] called us into his office and told us, 'If you do that again, I'll screw you over'. Well, almost..."

In our investigation, this type of informal reprimand in response to citizen participation in public debate, as recounted by Nathalie, who is still deeply affected nearly ten years later, is in fact relatively common, almost routine. It is important not to fuel potential criticism towards the funder and sponsoring institution: the partner organization must comply with the latter's expectations. This dynamic shows the extent to which the micro-politics of repression is part of a broader logic of institutional control and political neutralization. Moreover, it is not insignificant that this story came up during the interview after Nathalie mentioned the "electoral

interests" that, in her opinion, led the elected official to demand a rapprochement with PopA, whose members would give pledges of allegiance that DowJ leaders refused to make[7].

> "He told me several times, 'You're voting Green anyway,' etc. No, but that's not the point. He also asked us to... To support the candidacy of [another socialist representative] in the legislative elections. To which I said, 'Sorry, we're not a political organization, I will never sign anything'. I refused. And right after that, he cut off his subsidy...."

Nathalie even pointed out that before that, the elected representative had asked the DowJ's coordinator to join the Socialist Party. Here, it was the refusal to support the elected official and his party in the elections, and therefore to enter into a clientelist partnership, that was punished. According to Nathalie, the sanction took the direct form of cutting off funding, fueling the hypothesis of a reprimand following a refusal to engage in clientelism, but it seems that these episodes were part of a broader continuum of injunctions, constraints, and reprimands through which the elected official sought to discipline and adjust the organization to his expectations and interests, to the point of driving its leaders to burnout and liquidation.

Nathalie also emphasizes that an internal reshuffle within the socialist majority governing the city changed the situation. Not only this new elected official was appointed in the neighborhood, but he also rose through the ranks of the political hierarchy and, in doing so, surpassed the elected official in charge of cultural affairs, that supported DowJ so far. The project of the new elected official in the neighborhood to merge the DowJ's festival with PopA's event sparked a conflict within the municipality, between the culture department and the local council:

> "They were arguing amongst themselves. [The elected representative for culture saying]: 'There's no way I'm going to fund a barbecue and candy floss'. On the other hand, the other [retorted]: 'Yes, but you're promoting bourgeois bohemian culture, and that doesn't work'. Anyway, we were kind of caught in the middle..."

Behind this conflict, we can see that the institution isn't a monolith acting in unison, but a complex organization within which some actors might take sides for an organization and defend its projects and principles, while others will seek to challenge them. Instrumentalization and political neutralization therefore take on different nuances depending on the perspective and interests of the institutional actors involved.

7. Case 2: Hous4all, a housing rights organization that seeks to remain activist

Hous4all is a non-profit that advocates for the right to housing. Created in the wake of the urban struggles of the 1970s, it embraces a stance of conflictual cooperation by participating in the implementation of local housing policies while challenging institutions on issues that hinder access to housing rights for the most disadvantaged residents, both through participation to public policy and demonstrations. To do so, its main mode of action is to provide free support to families in resolving their problems, which include access to social housing, eviction procedures, unsanitary conditions, rental disputes, debts, etc. It is mainly for this activity that the organization has, since its inception, received funding primarily from public authorities, enabling it, during the investigation period, to employ three staff members and, through them, to assist approximately 500 families per year. For this organization, as well as others of the same tradition based in other neighborhoods of Lille, the transformation of partnership relations towards institutional control and political neutralization in a context

[7] Shaudry (2023) showed how the association of non-profits with a partisan camp, especially in a context of increased electoral competition (as has been the case in Lille in recent years, particularly between left-wing forces), increases the likelihood of repression, which seems to be confirmed here.

of budgetary constraints has manifested itself through several more or less repressive episodes, to which it has nevertheless managed to oppose significant resistance.

Between 2010 and 2019, the share of public funding in total annual funding fell from 100% to 76%. Although this relative decrease is partly due to the support, which became recurrent from 2011 onwards, of a foundation dedicated to the fight against poor housing, it also comes with a decrease in absolute terms, as public funding fell from €147,000 in 2010 to €93,000 in 2019. This decrease is due in particular to the cessation of funding from the *Conseil régional*[8] after the electoral shift to the right in 2015, as well as to the reduction in funding from the *Conseil départemental*[9] by more than €20,000 during the same period, again in the context of an electoral shift to the right. In 2022, funding from the *Conseil départemental* was finally completely withdrawn, putting the organization in even greater financial difficulty. In this context, the city's support is particularly important, as it takes the form of a stable subsidy of €30,000 per year, as well as the provision of premises free of charge. However, the stability of this support has been undermined over the period, particularly when the city, faced with cuts in state funding, has sought to make budget savings.

In 2016, for example, a letter was sent to the organization, as well as to three other allied housing rights organizations based in other neighborhoods of Lille, by four municipal elected officials from the socialist majority. The letter began by announcing the awarding of the usual subsidy under the housing department's call for projects. However, it then announced that, given "significant budget constraints," the city hall would soon be forced to reconsider this grant, or "even more so" to reconsider the free provision of premises, particularly "in order to ensure fairness with regard to other organizations supported by city hall." All the more so given that, according to activity reports, the "local roots" of Hous4all and the three other organizations were becoming less and less evident, "which could raise questions about the relevance" of the existence of organizations in the various neighborhoods. The letter concludes: "We invite you to consider the possibility of pooling resources with other organizations."[10]

During this period, this growing uncertainty surrounding municipal support was accompanied by tighter administrative and institutional control over the organization through the funding it received. In an interview, Samuel, the director at the time, described the struggle that ensued when the municipality ordered the organization to provide a certain amount of non-anonymized information about the people it supported. This request first appeared in the 2016 version of the housing department's call for projects, which Hous4all had to go through in order to obtain its recurring funding. Like the other organizations concerned, its managers had not been notified by the administrative officials in charge of funding, with whom they had been in contact for several years, considering them as "partners".

Initially surprised, staff and volunteers all decided to refuse such a procedure, which went against the ethical and militant principles that they had followed since the inception of Hous4all, including respect for anonymity and the protection of personal data. The organization responded that it would provide some information, but that it would be non-nominative unless families gave their consent. This did not please the municipality, which decided to punish the organization by reducing its 2017 subsidy by €10,000. Samuel summarizes what happened in informal exchanges, not in writing: "We were told: 'You should have sent us a list of names...'. But we didn't give in, so we lost." Samuel also talked about an "ego battle," explaining that the organization

[8] Regional Council, a local public body representing the first territorial level after the national State.

[9] Departmental Council, another local public body, representing a territorial level below the regional council.

[10] As we have seen in the case of DowJ, this is not an empty threat, as mergers and amalgamations of organizations initiated by institutions have multiplied in recent years.

was able to "stand up" to the city thanks to its own reserve funds at the time, which amounted to €80,000, allowing it "a certain amount of freedom."

In the following years, with the help of data protection legislation[11], the organization managed to impose its position by means of a form given to families, who were invited, in an informal manner, to refuse to provide their personal data when filling out the form. In any case, the €30,000 granted was reinstated, and Hous4all won this battle, but the partnership seemed to have been somewhat tarnished. Once again, this was not an act of political repression, or if so, only very indirectly, insofar as it would be a sanction against the implementation of a politicized principle of anonymity in the work for which the organization was subsidized. On the other hand, it was indeed the institutional control of a militant organization that was tightening.

In early 2024, an employee of the organization went to the scene of the eviction of 30 Roma people (including children, elderly people, and sick people) from a camp in a suburb of Lille. There, she met a family she had been helping with administrative procedures for several months. In a report written by the organization and sent to the *Métropole européenne de Lille*, a supra-municipal body gathering 95 cities of the metropolitan area, we learn that the non-profit's employee first introduced herself to the bailiff in charge of the eviction, questioned the institution officials present at the scene, spoke with the vice-president of the institution on the phone, and spoke with the evicted residents. Several residents expressed their anger at the prospect of being put out on the street, but, supervised by a large police force, the eviction ended peacefully.

"It won't happen like that, expect consequences": on the phone the day after the eviction, the housing director of the Métropole Européenne de Lille was angry. She addressed the president of Hous4all and informed him that the eviction had been marred by "verbal abuse bordering on physical violence," a version that the detailed report of the intervention written by the organization contradicted in every respect. After several weeks of follow-up calls from the organization, fearing for its funding, a meeting was organized at the offices of the Métropole Européenne de Lille. The institution announced that it was withdrawing the organization's entire annual subsidy (€38,000), even though it had already been approved. To justify this cancellation, it invoked Article 5 of the "Republican Commitment Contract", focusing on "provocation to hatred and violence." In question: two sentences that the organization's employee was alleged to have said to the city officials, which she formally denies: "Aren't you ashamed of yourselves?" and "How can you look at yourselves in the mirror after carrying out this eviction?" Hous4all would learn later that the sanction had been voted on at the same time, in the same building, a few floors below, in the institution's office. During this meeting, the vice-president in charge of housing denounced "activists with blind faith." More interestingly, Martine Aubry, then still the socialist mayor of Lille, regretted that "voluntary organizations [were] playing politics instead of doing the work for which they are paid with public money." Finally, Damien Castelain, president [without party affiliation] of the institution, hammered home the point: "I intend to uphold the sanction, and I am not sure I will lift it. [...] The decision to subsidize this organization again would be a serious political mistake."

Nine months after the events, in November 2024, the decision was first communicated by letter to the organization, without providing any further explanation of the institution's position. Confident in its good faith and despite the risks that this act of resistance would have on future funding, Hous4all decided to challenge the decision in court. Understanding why the partnership turned into repression requires a detailed examination of how it evolved over time. In this case, the control mechanisms associated with funding did not lead to the political neutralization of the organization and a change in its repertoire of action, as is usually the case, due to the persistent militant ethos of its leaders and the support from philanthropic foundations, so that a disagreement with the institution was able to turn into open conflict, which led to financial sanctions. Such

[11] The General Data Protection Regulation comes into force in 2018.

cases are rare because, very often, political neutralization creates barriers that lead either to the alignment of civil society actors or to their eviction and even, as we saw in the case of DowJ, to their disappearance.

8. Conclusion and discussion: repression as a dimension of the restriction of civic space in liberal democracies

Through these two cases, our goal was to show how understanding repressive phenomena in liberal democracies requires conceptualizing them within the framework of a deeper and more diffuse dynamic of institutional control and political neutralization of civil society organizations through funding and partnerships. In our corpus, sequences of repression, even "soft" ones, remain exceptional—although they have clearly been on the rise in recent years. We argue that such repressive practices are in fact only the tip of the iceberg, concealing a whole micro-politics of partnership relations made up of institutional injunctions and prescriptions, but also of conformations, adjustments, and resistance on the part of organizations. Money and formalized mechanisms impose constraints, while the informality of relationships allows institutions to make control, political neutralization, and, when organizations resist, reprimands, less visible and even more painless, both for those involved in the organizations and for the general public. The case of relatively open and assumed repression and punishment, as recently experienced by Hous4all, is certainly an extreme case, but it reveals implicitly the ordinary relations between civil society organizations and public authorities. The latter exercise prescriptive power through their financial power, which constitutes a permanent "sword of Damocles" hanging over the heads of the former. If it rarely falls, it is because the relationship of dependence is so institutionalized that these mechanisms have, over time, produced a political neutralization of civil society through widespread self-censorship – what is most of the time called channelling (Jenkins and Eckert, 1986). Sanctions and reprimands have direct but also indirect consequences, they become anticipated to the point of being internalized by voluntary organization leaders, fuelling a logic of shutting down political opportunities, or the "evaporation of politics" as described by Eliasoph (1998).

Our investigation highlights the links between control, political neutralization, and repression. It is when the first two do not work, when non-profits do not comply with institutional injunctions—refusing to merge its festival with another organization's event such as DowJ, or to provide a list of names of people receiving support, as in the case of Hous4all—and when they criticize certain actions or decisions endorsed by public authorities—denouncing the eviction of Roma people, as in the case of Hous4all, or questioning the legitimacy of an urban renewal project, as in the case of DowJ—that sanctions occur. While institutional control, political neutralization, and repression may be viewed as part of a continuum, this mechanism may better be understood as a pyramid, with repression often representing only the final stage of a conflictual process, generally aborted or defused as a result of the alignment, compromises, and renunciations of civic actors, which may even lead to the end of the partnership before the clash occurs. Such a theoretical proposal, developed in the case of a relatively progressive territory, could, in the future, be tested in other territorial and national contexts.

Moreover, if the repression of civic action, particularly in its "soft" or informal forms, but not exclusively so, has been on the rise in France in recent years, this may be due to the reduced tolerance of criticism by public authorities whose legitimacy—particularly its electoral component—has been weakened in a context of rising abstention, with any dissent being seen as a further weakness for the ruling power. While the literature emphasizes that repression is sensitive to electoral competition (Chaundry, 2022), and in particular to the strength of opposition parties, we believe that a broader understanding of the political context is necessary. Even in the relatively uncompetitive context of the city of Lille at the time of the investigation, these forms of repression appear more prominent than in the past, reflecting the erosion of the socialist government's social

base. While in France, as in many countries in the global North, the social roots of political parties have weakened considerably in the past decades, this can be seen as a factor shaping relations with civil society.

But our article also suggests that this acceleration in forms of repression of critical civic action must be seen as part of a more global phenomenon of shrinking civic space, observed in many other countries, particularly in Europe[12]. In academic literature, however, this theme remains in its infancy, most often being considered only in the context of authoritarian regimes or countries in the Global South, even though it refers to a dynamic that is running rampant in Western democratic regimes (Anheier and Toepler, 2019; see, however, Hummel and Strachwitz, 2023). In a context characterized by the widespread rise of the far right in elections, culminating in Donald Trump's re-election as President of the United States in 2024, but also by the proliferation of military conflicts, the micro-politics of repression highlighted in this article is one of the fronts on which the decline of civil liberties and democracy is taking place. With the attacks on media and the multiple challenges to the independence of the judiciary, the restriction of civic space is undeniably linked to the weakening of citizens' ability to organize collectively and individually to make dissenting voices heard by those in power.

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[12] See for exemple the CIVICUS Monitor : https://monitor.civicus.org/ ; or the European Civic Forum's Civic Space Report : https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Civic-Space-Report-2025.pdf .

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