

## Caring Communities in Urban Hungary: A Civil Society Perspective

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### Abstract

This article examines the development and impact of caring communities in a Hungarian town, situating the analysis within debates about the neoliberal restructuring of care and the authoritarian neoliberal state of Hungary. Drawing on Joan Tronto’s ethics of care and various conceptualizations of caring communities as spaces of critical reflection and civic engagement, we investigate how civil society organizations act as facilitators and organizers of the local care landscape. Our empirical focus is a mid-sized urban center in southern Hungary, where demographic aging, shrinking welfare capacities, and a diverse social environment shape potential stakeholder cooperation. Based on qualitative research methods, including participatory fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups, we analyze how local civil society organizations negotiate their roles in relation to municipal actors and other stakeholders, and the political impact they achieve on local governance through their work. The findings highlight both the potential and the limits of community-based initiatives: A shift can be observed at the municipal level, where concepts such as conscious aging and empowerment are increasingly recognized. However, civil society organizations are not able to fully prevent the reproduction of existing inequalities, and the participation of older adults remains limited.

### Keywords

care for older people; caring communities; civil society organizations; Hungary

## 1. Introduction

In the context of neoliberalism, care provision is increasingly subjected to market forces—a trend that has been widely discussed in the scholarly literature, including in relation to European welfare states. Within this framework, communities have been conceptualized as a potential “fourth pillar” of the care diamond (Razavi, 2007), offering an alternative to the ongoing processes of marketization and re-familialization of care. While caring communities have gained institutional recognition in countries such as Austria and Germany, critical scholarship has questioned the extent to which these initiatives genuinely challenge neoliberal restructuring, asking whether they are instead being co-opted into the same paradigms they seek to resist.

Although caring practices in urban life have become a growing area of study (Breinbauer et al., 2024; Kainradl et al., 2024; Wegleitner & Schuchter, 2018), the development, limitations, and potential of caring communities remain underexplored in Central and Eastern Europe. Given that the concept of caring communities inherently involves an examination of the interplay between civil society organizations, care regimes, and the state, it is crucial to consider how these initiatives unfold across differing political and institutional contexts. In particular, their emergence and function in authoritarian neoliberal states, such as Hungary, where welfare provision has undergone rapid transformation and is increasingly shaped by centralized, top-down decision-making (Szikra & Öktem, 2023), warrant closer examination. In this article, we examine the extent to which local state and civil society organizations possess the capacity to counterbalance these trends and implement a more democratic culture of care.

This article investigates how civil society organizations, as community initiators and organizers, are navigating a context in which the central state is systematically withdrawing from the provision of care for older people, democratic participation is in decline, and civil society operates under increasing constraints. The analysis employs the conceptual framework of caring communities (Wegleitner & Schuchter, 2018; Wegleitner et al., 2026) to explore local power dynamics and stakeholder relationships, with special attention to civil society organizations. We draw on Joan Tronto’s conceptualization of care, including feminist care ethics (Tronto, 1993), and the understanding of caring communities by Wegleitner and Schuchter (2018) and Haubner (2020), who frame caring communities as loci of critical reflection on social relations, care needs, and civic engagement.

Our empirical focus is the town of Pécs, a mid-sized urban center in Baranya County, Hungary. The article examines the local care infrastructure, focusing on the development of stakeholder cooperation, and explores the impacts of community-oriented initiatives on local relations, collaborations, and social change. It is important to note that the research and data analysis were carried out before the 2026 elections, which marked the end of the Orbán regime. This research is conceived as a case study; therefore, its findings are not generalizable. However, they do highlight broader patterns in the operation of civil society organizations within a wider authoritarian context. The research asks (a) what challenges civil society initiatives face when attempting to promote a local democratic culture of care and (b) what impact they can achieve. The article will reflect on local political and economic constraints, with particular focus on the relationship with the municipality and other civil organizations. In doing so, we engage with broader questions about the local culture of care and the democratic potential of community-led initiatives.

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## 2. How Can Care be a Democratic Common?

### 2.1. *Democratic Values in Care Ethics and the Commons*

In his most famous work, Hardin (1968) addresses the threat to societies posed by the depletion of shared resources, such as nature, water, or air, driven by human self-interest. Besides being physical, material entities, the commons are also understood as sets of social relations and social practices (Nightingale, 2019; Ticktin, 2024), which necessarily require a community (Caffentzis & Federici, 2014). This community is not based on identities, but on practices of care, collective contribution, and the reproduction of the commons in an egalitarian way. The commons can be interpreted as a type of governance, grounded in principles of participation, cooperation, and inclusiveness (Murillo et al., 2025). Organizing the commons involves more than managing shared resources; the process shapes and produces the community itself. One of the forms of organizing the commons is self-governance, requiring the individual engagement of citizens, through which they can learn acts of political engagement (Murillo et al., 2025). Governing the commons involves ethical and political commitments to inclusivity, cooperation, and polycentric decision-making, among others. At the same time, commoning is not just a political practice in which mutuality, participation, and empowerment take place, but one where asymmetrical relations and the pitfalls of government mechanisms may also arise (Nightingale, 2019; Zentai, 2025).

Feminist scholars argue that care is both a practice and a value, is relational, and human lives—at least for a few years—are necessarily dependent on the care they receive (Glenn, 2000; Held, 2006; Tronto, 2013). The ethics of care acknowledges emotions and emphasizes the moral obligation of fulfilling the needs of individuals for whom we have responsibility (Held, 2006). According to Held (2006, p. 15), care ethics recognizes caring relations, trust, and cooperation as moral phenomena that require moral evaluation:

An ethic of care focuses on attentiveness, trust, responsiveness to need, narrative nuance, and cultivating caring relations...an ethic of care sees the interests of carers and cared-for as importantly intertwined rather than as simply competing. Whereas justice protects equality and freedom, care fosters social bonds and cooperation.

Thus, care and justice cannot be separated; justice is a necessary component of caring relationships.

While the ethics of care perceives that addressing intersectionality is key, including privileges and power relations in the fulfillment of care needs (Tronto, 2013), as well as the undervalued skills and competences of racialized carers (Raghuram, 2019), the theoretical limitation of the concept has been criticized. Hankivsky claims that care ethics often relies on homogenizing categories without attention to within-group differences, risking the reproduction of essentialist assumptions (Hankivsky, 2014). Her critique also concerns the conceptualization of power: Inequalities theorized by care researchers tend to treat systems of oppression as hierarchical rather than interlocking. Feminist care ethics entails the recognition and articulation of care needs and political sensitivity in particular. Social inclusion can be achieved through solidarity and various forms of social participation; thus, care is inevitably a political process (Bauder, 2016).

## 2.2. The Caring Community as an Instrument for Making Democracy?

In feminist critical literature, care and democratic values are interconnected. In a synthesizing piece, Glenn (2000) sees caregiving as a public social responsibility. Tronto (2013) argues that in caring democracies, family members do not collapse under care responsibilities, and the exploitation of paid care workers does not occur, nor does a pay gap or unequal care provision. In democratic societies, caring is based on participation and inclusiveness. “Democratic citizens are all engaged in provid[ing] and need care together; this *caring with* is a political concern and one that needs to be resolved through politics” (Tronto, 2013, p. 140). These ideas are strongly present in the discussion of caring communities. Caring communities are dynamic relations and places of critical reflection about care needs, involving multiple actors, where new relationships may emerge based on trust and engagement (Wegleitner & Schuchter, 2018; Wegleitner et al., 2020). Our analysis relies on this interpretation, treating the concept as a broad, relational understanding of care performed in physical space.

Drawing on Pateman (2012), participatory democracy refers to a form of citizen participation that involves deliberation, inclusion, and empowerment within society. Within this framework, democracy is not just a system where debates take place, but one in which citizens actively shape their institutions and environment; thus, democracy extends to everyday life. The concept of participatory democracy captures the idea of “making democracy” by emphasizing how democratic capacities, actors, and institutions are continuously produced through practice. The literature of caring communities also raises this point by linking democratic participation to active citizenship, in which individuals engage in and contribute to local society through mutual support and attentiveness (Kainradl et al., 2024; Wegleitner et al., 2026). Co-creation and collaborative learning enhance participants’ sense of agency, thereby fostering a more democratic society.

Spatiality inevitably has a significant role in the participation, social relations, and everyday life of citizens (Purcell, 2003; Roxberg et al., 2020). Based on the concept of the “right to the city” (Harvey, 2003; Lefebvre, 1996), urban spaces are understood as critical arenas for resisting neoliberal restructuring, where citizens can demand inclusivity and shared control and reclaim urban spaces for democratic use. This perspective aligns with the concept of caring communities, which understand care as *doing* community in the places and spaces where acts of care occur. Urban spaces (Kainradl et al., 2024), neighborhoods (Sointu & Häikiö, 2024), care facilities (Gábrriel & Katona, 2025), and community gardens (Rosol, 2012), among many other locations, are key sites for doing community reflectively. Caring neighborhood projects are initiatives that connect locals and foster social cohesion (De Donder et al., 2024). A caring neighborhood leads to an environment in which participants’ happiness increases (De Donder et al., 2024) and reinforces the sense of informal mutual support (D’Eer et al., 2024).

In connection with the fact that the concept of the caring community is rooted in state-led programs in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland (Haubner, 2020; Wegleitner et al., 2020), critiques arose early after its introduction to the academic literature. While the state constructs and legitimizes a system of informal and gendered labor under the banner of community and voluntarism, promoting involvement in care for older people has become an exploitative political strategy. Haubner (2020) uses the concept of “indirect exploitation” to refer to the appropriation of unpaid and underpaid care labor to check the rising costs of reproduction and, indirectly, maximize profit. This exploitation allows the state to maintain the care system without committing significant resources to formal care provision. When the state outsources professional work to volunteers, it not only deepens welfare state retrenchment but also instrumentalizes communities

by idealizing them (van Dyk, 2018). Thus, this form of labor is inherently associated with the production of precarious conditions.

In authoritarian neoliberal states like Hungary, civil society initiatives, including caring communities, are particularly exposed to the challenge of cooptation. While civil society is often seen as a counterbalance to the state, civic organizations in authoritarian regimes may legitimize the system and reinforce state authority (Lewis, 2013). This can be seen when NGOs reduce pressure on the government to deliver higher-quality social services, or when the existence of the former creates the illusion of pluralism and alternatives, even if real policy initiatives are missing from the government agenda. Cox (2020) examines key developments in social welfare provision in East Central Europe, including Hungary, and the rise of nonprofit organizations as providers of welfare services since the early 1990s. The author finds that, despite the variety among the analyzed countries, civil society organizations' role in service provision has generally limited their ability to either pursue their own aims or preserve their autonomy, partly due to financial difficulties. In our research, we examine how far the initiatives we study have succeeded in building community and shaping attitudes, thereby contributing to a more democratic society.

### 3. The Local Care Regime

At the time of the research, in Hungary, care for older people was not a priority, unlike childcare, which was strongly supported by intense pronatalist social policies (Fodor, 2022). The Orbán regime considered families and children the main solution to demographic decline, while the needs of older adults were neither publicly discussed nor dealt with. The Hungarian care regime that targets older adults relies heavily on underpaid informal workers providing home-based care (Katona & Gábrriel, 2026), while the state did not develop care provision through benefits or services, as reflected in the numbers. In 2025, the basic care allowance provided to relatives who were continuously caring for a chronically ill or severely disabled person was 125 EUR gross per month, while the increased care allowance was 188 EUR gross per month, paid to supporting family members caring for individuals with severe disabilities or significantly increased care needs (Hungarian Parliament, 2024).

The *National Strategy for Older People*, published in 2009, set the goals of promoting the active lifestyle and social participation of older people and shaping the image of older citizens, among others (Hungarian Parliament, 2009). The document also contains the idea of conscious aging; however, there are no critical reflections on the neoliberal interpretation of the concept, which emphasizes productivity and market-oriented solutions (Stončikaitė, 2024). Overall, the document lacks a critical evaluation of active aging and related neoliberal terms. No newer version has been released since 2009, indicating that the Orbán governments did not pursue a strategic vision for older people in the following 17 years (until its defeat in spring 2026). In the document *Strategy for Long-Term Care 2030* (EMMI, 2021), the concept of social policy is replaced by that of care policy. Meleg (2025) finds the core ideas of this care policy problematic because they reduce care to the individual, family, and community spheres by diminishing the role of the state and emphasizing the ideological influence of Christianity, thereby questioning the professional validity of social work. The ideas behind the care policy fit well with the authoritarian Hungarian government's narrative on care for the vulnerable. The principal critique of this care policy by Meleg (2025) is that it resembles and institutionalizes an ideology that foregrounds the *caritas* within

Christian social teaching—an approach that is paternalistic and stands in contrast to the core professional principle of empowerment in social work.

In Hungary, care provision is the responsibility of municipalities. The obligations concerning the social care provision of municipalities are written into the Social Act of 1993 (Hungarian Parliament, 1993), while policy concepts related to aging are often developed and implemented at the local level. Caring community initiatives are not institutionalized in Hungary, and community-based initiatives are not facilitated by the central state; however, local municipalities or civil society organizations may enhance the implementation of community-based ideas.

Located in southern Hungary, the population of Pécs has been steadily declining over recent decades (140,000 inhabitants in 2025), alongside an aging demographic profile, exacerbated by the outmigration of younger generations. However, Pécs is a unique town in several respects, particularly in its political landscape and civil activism. Politically, the town has followed a shifting trajectory since the political transition in 1989. Although the ruling Fidesz party governed Pécs for two periods (1994–1998 and 2009–2019), the municipality has been led by opposition-backed mayors for the rest of the time. At the time of the research, the municipality was led by an independent mayor supported by a coalition of opposition parties since 2019. Pécs is governed by a politically diverse municipal assembly in which neither side holds an absolute majority. Therefore, the political landscape is rather different from that of many mid-sized Hungarian towns. According to the Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 956 civil society organizations (402 foundations and 554 associations) were operating in the town in 2024, a high number relative to the population. Regarding aging, Pécs is one of the few Hungarian municipalities to have officially adopted a policy concept on aging (discussed in detail below), which reflects on welfare responsibilities and societal change.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. Research Methods

The research applied a qualitative methodology. In the first step, local policy documents were analyzed. We studied all the related legislative documents and policy proposals published by the municipality and civil actors associated with the living conditions and social provision for older citizens, with a particular focus on the Policy Concept on Aging Pécs (Pécs Megyei Jogú Város, 2022), Civil Concept 2022–2026 (Pécs Megyei Jogú Város Önkormányzata, 2021), and the Local Equal Opportunities Program (Pécs Megyei Jogú Város Önkormányzata, 2023). The empirical research involved participatory fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups. Organizations were selected with the help of local partners, while we also drew on our prior knowledge of the civil society landscape of Pécs. To build and strengthen relationships within the selected communities, we attended various community events, such as open lectures for older adults, joy dance sessions, thematic gatherings, and workshops. Besides gaining insight into social activities, the fieldwork helped to build trust with the community organizers and members. Furthermore, it also provided a pool of interviewees from which we selected the focus group participants. Three focus groups were conducted with various stakeholders, including experts, founders of local civil associations, community developers, older adults, municipal employees, heads of social institutions, healthcare professionals, volunteers, and academics working on aging or social policy ( $N = 15$ ). The first focus group took place in March ( $n = 4$ ), the second in May ( $n = 4$ ), and the third in December, 2025 ( $n = 7$ ). We conducted

12 individual semi-structured interviews with community organizers, heads of civil associations, heads of social institutions, municipal employees, academic researchers, and members of local communities between 2023 and 2025.

The research project relied on participation and applied engaged research methods to establish and sustain dialogue with the study participants (Morrison & Sacchetto, 2018). The approach indicates that researchers' commitment was continuous, despite challenges that may have arisen in interactions. In our research design, engagement involved returning findings to the communities and facilitating discussions about our research results. For the data analysis, we used the iterative research method (Fairfield & Charman, 2019). This methodological approach involves theorizing, data collection, and data analysis being negotiated repeatedly rather than in a fixed linear sequence. It relies on a dialogue with the data, in which emerging evidence leads to revisiting assumptions and updated theoretical ideas guide further inquiry. Iterative qualitative research helps generate explanations while mitigating the risk of bias in the analysis. The analysis primarily focuses on the work of civil society organizations, while referring to the macro-level policy context where relevant.

One of the authors, Bettina Török, had a dual role in this research. While she was a PhD student at the time of the empirical data collection, she was also a member of the Council on Aging and a co-founder of a civil association based in Pécs. This positionality provided experiential knowledge of the overall dynamics of the town's civil society, including decision-making processes, internal practices, alliances, and fault lines. At the same time, it required critical reflection on potential biases, such as over-identification with participants or partial interpretation of the interviews. To navigate this insider-outsider dynamic, the co-authors engaged in constant dialogue and collaborative data interpretation.

#### **4.2. Selected Civic Initiatives**

For the sociological fieldwork, we selected a few organizations identified as caring communities. These organizations see older people as a heterogeneous group of capable citizens with highly different needs and abilities. According to them, these special needs do not depend on the age cohort to which individuals belong, and reflexivity regarding ongoing societal changes should be incorporated into both community life and social policies. Author Dóra Gábrriel attended the events of four civil society organizations, which slightly vary in their goals, areas, and approaches, while they all address the experiences of aging citizens. The first was a series of open lectures for older adults that takes place every other week at the University of Pécs. The idea was developed by a researcher and university lecturer specializing in later-life education, successful aging, and lifelong learning. Besides attending the lectures, members also organize themselves and make friends after the event. The second organization is a foundation that seeks to create a local conscious aging ecosystem and to build a conscious aging network connected to related European movements. They have launched several initiatives, such as developing a board game on intergenerational cooperation and a workshop on aging, and they frequently organize community meetings in the city center. The third is a civil society organization located in a community building close to the town's main pedestrian street that provides space for events, meetings, and educational courses for older people. The building is maintained by the municipality and is frequently visited by different groups and clubs. The fourth is an association that brings together patients with Parkinson's Disease to promote their rehabilitation and represent their general and specific interests. They organize social events, excursions, and joy dances in public spaces of the town to raise awareness of their disease.

### 4.3. Ethical Considerations

After providing information on the goal of the study, all interviewees signed a consent form outlining their rights and procedures for data management. Interviewees were aware that they had the right to withdraw their consent at any time and to terminate the interview; furthermore, they could refuse to answer questions asked by the interviewer. Participants granted permission to use excerpts from the interviews after sensitive data had been anonymized.

## 5. Municipal–Civil Society Organization Relations in the Local Care Landscape

Cooperation in the field related to aging is characterized by the dominance of informal networks and is mainly determined by personal relationships. Professional and civil initiatives often start with professionals seeking partners within their own circle of acquaintances. This allows a flexible and rapid response, but increases the dependence on individuals and does not guarantee long-term sustainability. As a co-founder of a foundation explained:

Through personal relationships, a person sets off with their own struggles....You start, you do it, and you look for collaborators across sectors or across professions, drawing on your own network of connections. I think this is strengthening in its own way and gaining momentum, and after a while, it [the initiative] will become strong enough. In my view, this will be the solution...people will start to realize they want to join, they will see the strength behind it, and over time, they will come to believe in it.

Institutional frameworks for cooperation are rare. Typically, parallel initiatives are intertwined at the individual level. Formal cooperation between organizations is much more difficult to achieve because such collaborations are not always considered genuine, as they are not based on consciously developed, long-term professional structures. However, informal cooperation is seen as the basis for strong networks that can attract more participants who will engage with the activities of these organizations.

The informal networking of various civil initiatives was interpreted as an “ecosystem” of aging in Pécs by one of our informants. In her view, it involves diverse and heterogeneous imaginaries about care, with the involvement of various stakeholders with different skills, capacities, and agendas. However, the network is loose, largely ad hoc, and unstructured. Based on the interviews, a picture emerges of a local “ecosystem” characterized by both strong civic activism and a lack of institutional support. Although some professional networking has started in recent years, the municipality is more of a passive supporter than an active coordinator. However, one of the civil society organizations acts as an important meeting point where smaller organizations can collaborate. “We started to form networks like this, and that’s a really great thing, but the municipality would rather let it happen than actually support it,” claimed one of the community organizers. They continued:

The local government isn’t lifting a finger. The local government is just happy we exist, period....They’ve never supported us. Now we’d like a clubhouse. It’s a bit like daycare, though obviously it isn’t. So, a place where you can sit down, make coffee or tea, order newspapers, things like that. We don’t have a space, nothing.

Participants underlined that despite the lack of stable support of the local municipality, civil society organizations and the civil service providers are key drivers of local initiatives on aging, as well as retirees' organizations, health and social care institutions, faith-based providers, and informal communities (e.g., hiking groups and joy dance networks). Many institutions and communities related to aging operate entirely outside formal structures.

Volunteering is one of the most important resources of local initiatives related to aging and community work. A significant number of the programs, especially the civic and community-based activities, rely almost entirely on volunteers. This model provides flexibility but also leads to serious issues with sustainability:

[For more impact, we] would need many more people and much more time. We would have to promote this [initiative] and attract people, but we do not really have the [capacity] to do so. Everyone is a volunteer; we work for free, so there are basically just the two of us doing this. (Community organizer)

In many civil society organizations, all actors, including community organizers, trainers, and course leaders, work without remuneration. In these cases, volunteering is not complementary but a fundamental part of the work. Besides this, local government initiatives often require voluntary contributions from civil society organizations. In many cases, expert work is also expected to be provided free of charge, which puts an unsustainable strain on human resources in the long term. These findings strongly confirm Cox's (2020) analysis of civil society organizations in East Central Europe, which shows that while these actors are increasingly incorporated into welfare provision, they are simultaneously constrained by ongoing austerity measures. Additionally, this can be understood as an example of labor exploitation in caring communities, which Haubner (2020) critiques.

## 6. Political Impact: Democratic Potential of Cooperation and Local Tensions

The Policy Concept on Aging Pécs was published in 2022 with the intention of assessing and reflecting on the emerging needs of older adults living in the city. The document states that the common interest of the municipality and civil society organizations is to ensure long-term, effective cooperation to address new challenges and shape attitudes. The document highlights the importance of self-care and consciousness in the aging process, while pointing out that the deterioration of economic and social conditions in Hungary has significantly reduced municipalities' room for maneuver. This is an interesting point made by the authors (who are not named in the policy concept), which suggests that the municipality not only recognizes the increasing care gap but is also willing to take responsibility and open to alternative solutions to handle local care needs. The role of civil society organizations and the involvement of volunteers in care provision are also mentioned, as are new ideas to be implemented, such as a community center for older adults and the development of more community spaces.

The Policy Concept on Aging has been a major catalyst for deepening relations between the actors. The preparation of the document started in 2021, was coordinated by a civil society organization at the request of the municipality, and the professional content was compiled by professionals working in the field. The principle of involvement was wide-ranging: Not only representatives of the institutional system, but also civil society organizations, community developers, and concerned citizens were approached. This broader horizon provided an opportunity to bring together different perspectives and extend cooperation in a

democratic way. The process was therefore linked to a participatory paradigm shift, in which the involvement of local actors and collective thinking was expected.

However, conflicts between the actors were also present, stemming from several sources: attitudinal and generational differences, gender-related tensions, professional rivalry, and resource imbalances. Attitudinal differences are one of the major obstacles to successful dialogue. A few older male professionals espoused rather conservative ideas and were critical of the sharply different, integrative perspectives on aging held by the majority of the civil actors who joined the Council in the 2020s. In contrast, the younger, mostly female civil actors criticized the dominance of older male delegates in the Council on Aging and similar forums for their short-term mindset and status anxiety, which, in their view, makes it difficult to adopt professional standards or innovations, undermines joint work, and hinders progress:

The biggest problem with the Council on Aging is that only the very old people are sitting there, who can only think in the very short term—I could even say, in a very narrow way: It's all about pensions, about what benefits they get...Whereas the kind of thinking we immersed ourselves in—what long-term measures would be worth implementing, starting from raising awareness, through active aging, to intergenerational relations...so, we considered many aspects—is very far from their way of thinking. (Head of social institution)

Thus, these tensions reflect a conflict between attitudes and goals, but are actually rooted in gender and generational differences.

One of the most critical obstacles to the development of care and services for older people in Pécs is the lack of stable and sufficient resources. The implementation of the Local Equal Opportunities Program, the Civil Concept, and other action plans for older people largely depend on grant funding. The Local Equal Opportunities Program 2023–2027 is a strategic document without which the municipality cannot participate in Hungarian and EU-funded tenders. Its goal is to establish professional partnerships through cooperation between the state, municipality, church, and civil society organizations. Civil Concept 2022–2026 is a strategic document that analyzes the role and opportunities of the town's civil sector. It highlights that non-profit organizations in Pécs are key players in carrying out community and social tasks and are strategically important partners for the local government in providing local public services. Plans are often put into effect only once organizations have won specific tenders, which puts implementation on a highly uncertain footing. Although TOP Plus funds can provide an opportunity to launch new projects, success is not guaranteed, and implementation can be delayed. The lack of resources often leaves plans and ideas unrealized, causing frustration among professionals and mistrust in the community. The reliance on the grant system makes long-term strategic planning virtually impossible, as all development is dependent on securing grants.

The authors of the Policy Concept on Aging noted that having delegates in the Council on Aging is an important political impact of their work, and that the concept of conscious aging has already been incorporated into municipal discourse. As one of the authors said: “At the policy level, we shape the space and the way of thinking through municipal documents. So, it's really exciting that we say ‘conscious aging,’ and more and more people understand what it means—even at the municipality.” Actors interpreted the acknowledgment of their persistent work at the municipal level as a sign of devotion to further projects. In their approach to “conscious aging” they also foreground community development and the crucial role of

social relationships, including co-housing initiatives. Therefore, they do not engage with the neoliberal implications of this concept, as they interpret conscious aging not as a call for individual responsibility and self-care, but rather as a collective project aimed at building supportive social environments and communities—both locally and at the city level, supported by the state—that care for older people and address aging as a long-term, socially embedded process.

## 7. Perceived Shift in Local Relations

### 7.1. Central Concepts and Goals

The interviews and focus groups suggested attention to two related topics: shaping attitudes in local society and the necessity of building communities. Civil society organizations in Pécs strongly rely on these elements when discussing their desired and actual impacts. Shaping attitudes includes raising awareness, fostering solidarity at the societal level, and transferring knowledge across generations:

Aging is not only an issue for older adults. We would like young people to start dealing with it as well, and until now it hasn't really been typical to have programs designed for that—[those] not only involving young people, but thinking about the whole issue [aging] together, because this should be a social responsibility. (Founder of a foundation)

The fact that conscious aging is an issue incorporated in the Policy Concept on Aging is perceived as one of the main impacts of civil society organizations:

The small-scale ecosystem-building we started here in Pécs nearly three years ago is now showing visible results, as the mindset itself has been incorporated into the much-talked-about policy concept. In this regard, we can achieve small things within our own remit—like running a club every month, organizing events, and finding and supporting every innovative initiative and idea related to older people that aligns with the conscious aging approach. (Co-founder of a foundation)

Community building includes network formation, enhancing members' social participation, and encouraging individuals to contribute their own skills to the community. One example of this is a sewing workshop initiated by a woman who regularly participates in the foundation's events. The group serves as a safe space for women of all ages who can talk about their daily challenges while enjoying time together.

Stakeholders also raised questions about what community means and how it can be achieved. There is consensus among the interlocutors that social relationships are particularly important for older people to avoid loneliness, and social participation can contribute to greater well-being. As one of the community organizers put it: "One of the keys to successful aging is not being alone. Loneliness kills." A cofounder of a foundation argued as follows:

It's very important to me that we actually get people to start speaking honestly with one another, to learn the culture of how to argue and debate respectfully—because then, later, we can really find solutions to social problems. If we can talk to one another while paying attention to the other person, we will understand their point of view.

The community aims to make an impact on local society by activating and regularly challenging its members collectively to achieve social change. In this case, *caring with* (Tronto, 2013) is inherently political, embedded in a democratic learning process (Wegleitner et al., 2026) where community encounters not only strengthen social relations but also lead to higher levels of social participation through democratic co-creation.

### **7.2. Limits of Participation**

The question of who can actually participate in and become members of these communities was addressed in various ways by the stakeholders. The participation of older adults is strongly shaped by intersectional factors, among which educational background is particularly significant. People with lower levels of education (less than a secondary-school leaving certificate) do not dare enter the university building to attend open seminars. This implies that the location and the environment of events affect the willingness to participate. The digital divide is also an influential factor, preventing certain individuals from participating. According to community initiators, people who lack knowledge of online communication (e.g., email, Facebook) drop out. Additionally, Roma people and older adults with lower social status hardly ever take part in the community events of the abovementioned groups. However, they may join the Retirees' Association's events, where the entry threshold is very low and the group is less exclusive. The current research also found a gender imbalance in favor of women among the participants. Male participants were either brought by their wives or seeking new partners, while some men were "afraid to come," according to community organizers.

The interviewees did not explicitly address the political divide among participants. In several civil society organizations and communities, this absence can be interpreted as reflecting a shared understanding of political views within the specific group. However, in one local community, the group leader stated that discussing politics is explicitly prohibited at community events, which, in her view, creates a relaxed atmosphere.

Overall, the civil society organizations we investigated primarily focus on *active* older people, and do not reflect much on their (lack of) efforts to involve people with greater care needs in their programs. An Austrian case study mentions health constraints, language barriers, and earlier experiences of exclusion as possible drivers of high dropout rates (Wegleitner et al., 2026). In our case, patterns of non-participation can also be understood in relation to structural inequalities. Limited cross-class interaction and social solidarity might reduce individuals' confidence in participating in mixed social settings. These dynamics are further reinforced in contexts where civil society is marginalized, leading to selective participation rather than broad inclusion (Geró et al., 2023). Ultimately, such exclusions reflect the broader effects of an authoritarian–neoliberal regime that constrains civic spaces and reproduces social hierarchies.

### **7.3. Intergenerational Approach in Desired and Implemented Ideas**

While representatives of civil society organizations had many goals, such as introducing intergenerational cohousing, establishing a care facility, and creating an intergenerational learning platform supported by civil actors, some of these ideas seem to remain long-term plans. A notable exception is the planned intergenerational cohousing initiative, which is already the subject of pilot research and incorporated into the Local Equal Opportunities Program. The initiators are aware that it would solve the housing problems of only a limited number of people living in the town; however, they believe it could be an innovation not only

in Pécs but also serve as a good example for other municipalities. That is why they are sharing the idea with other stakeholders:

We went to the [group name] meeting to talk about this and to see, to monitor, how they react. We also discussed it at a gerontology conference so that this housing program would become a topic at the national level as well. (Founder of a foundation)

The question remains: How much is the municipality willing to help launch the idea?

Despite the challenges, various ideas have already been realized, such as the transfer of knowledge about conscious aging among older citizens and the dissemination of knowledge through social media implemented by a foundation. Further, a university course has been opened up to older adults by a community organizer, where older citizens are able to participate and engage in conversation with students on aging and related issues: “They attend my class....It’s been hugely successful; they love it. My retirees sit in one row, my undergraduates in another, and they communicate—the classes are so good, I love them, and they appreciate them very much.” Another product of activist efforts is a team game that shapes attitudes and raises awareness about older people. It intertwines individual life stories with broader historical transformations. While it aims to educate, it also fosters a sense of community, and participants are invited to Foundation events to continue engaging with the topic. These initiatives have an impact not only on older generations but also on younger ones by creating the space to exchange ideas and draw on the knowledge associated with diverse life experiences.

## 8. Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, we raised the question of the democratic potential of caring communities navigating in a mid-sized Hungarian town in an authoritarian state where care for older people is neglected and severely underfinanced. We observed the economic constraints under which civil society actors operate; studied the tensions and forms of cooperation within the local care landscape; and identified the impacts of community-based civic initiatives on local governance through a critical lens, highlighting the limitations of these initiatives. One of the contributions of this study lies in its illustration of how dynamics already discussed in the literature (Haubner, 2020; Rosol, 2012) also manifest within the Central and Eastern European context, where austerity measures and dependency on state funding further limit the autonomous and critical potential of civil society actors (Cox, 2020). The article examines a case in which local care culture is undergoing transformation and in which a caring democracy, as described by Tronto (2013), is emerging as a relatively new approach, shaped by ongoing struggles and conflicts within the local care landscape.

In a caring democracy, care-related tasks are not exclusively assigned to institutions, but citizens feel responsible for each other and engage in providing care in a conscious way (Tronto, 2013). Drawing on Tronto’s concept of caring democracy, care is necessarily a political act. In the case study, representatives of civil society organizations articulated an approach to aging and care that reflected many elements of Tronto’s framework. Although they framed their aims and activities in terms of “conscious aging,” their work did not align with neoliberal ideas of individualized self-care; rather, it emphasized community building, the active social participation of older adults, and a long-term, intergenerational perspective on aging. Even though

community initiators did not consider themselves political actors, they tended to reject involvement in party politics, including the public articulation of views and reflections on the authoritarian government and its politics, to remain neutral. Nevertheless, they engaged in highly active political work at the local level through their involvement in elaborating the city-level Policy Concept on Aging and by joining the Council for Older People, while continuing to implement tasks that would otherwise fall to the state.

The shrinking room for maneuver of civil society organizations in Hungary, which is otherwise largely discussed in the literature on authoritarian regimes (Gerő et al., 2023), was only addressed by stakeholders in our research concerning the lack of resources, which manifested at several levels: the withdrawal of resources from small NGOs by the state, the dependence on grants due to the absence of state funding, and the absence of a financial basis for long-term, sustainable institutional operation. While civil actors complained about the municipality's lack of support, they emphasized that they remain independent entities because of the lack of such formal engagement.

Additionally, their participation in the development of the policy document, and their active engagement in the Council—even though the Council's mandate is limited to commenting on policies, rather than approving or vetoing them—can be interpreted as forms of participatory democracy in the sense described by Pateman (2012), who argues that local governance fosters democratic capacity through civic learning processes.

According to Nightingale (2019, p. 21), commoning is a performative action, where the focus is on the making: “Commoning is a set of practices and performances that foster new relations and subjectivities, but these relations are always contingent, ambivalent outcomes of the exercise of power.” While the commons may contribute to an egalitarian society, they entail the risk of co-optation and the creation of social divisions (Caffentzis & Federici, 2014). The struggle of community-based initiatives with other civil society organizations that were not open to their ideas shows that shifting perceptions of care and working towards a new culture of care in a socio-political environment where these ideas are new involves a difficult journey.

Due to its democratic, non-hierarchical nature, the commons are often referred to as a struggle against exclusion (Nightingale, 2019). The danger of the commons can be identified in exclusionary practices within communities, while intersectionality and diverse individual experiences of power relations are also present (Nightingale, 2019). Our analysis indicated that, beyond the uneven chances for stakeholders, there were also fault lines in participants' access to particular communities. We observed that newly emerged civil society organizations mainly target active older adults, raising questions about equal opportunities and accessibility for a large group of people living in the town. Additionally, although the caring community initiatives sought to promote the active participation of all older people and to be inclusive, the interviews revealed that several groups remained excluded, including people from lower social classes, individuals with lower levels of education, ethnic minorities, and men.

While avoiding normative claims, it can be observed that the current development of local civil society appears to outweigh the constraints posed by the limited room to maneuver. Overall, Pécs is a town that demonstrates a deliberate commitment to fostering a more caring local society on a policy level. At the same time, community-based civic initiatives operate in a rather fragile environment and do not fully reach all potential groups of older adults. A limitation of the current research is that it did not include retired individuals who are not engaged in local community activities. As a result, their perspectives are absent from

the analysis. Incorporating this group's views would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the local culture of care.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### Data Availability

Due to the nature of the research, data sharing is not applicable to this article.

### LLMs Disclosure

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