

Civil society in Slovakia

The concept of civil society was introduced in Slovakia after 1989, when opportunities opened up for grassroots independent organising and formation of autonomous organisations and initiatives. The first important step in the early 1990s was the adoption of *the Law on Association of Citizens*¹, which regulates the establishment of associations and trade unions. These, together with other state-defined types of organisations, such as foundations², non-investment funds³, churches and religious societies⁴, form an essential part of civil society. Other important components are informal and unregistered organisations and initiatives and individual active citizens. The development of active citizenship and civil society has also benefited from the adoption of *the Law on Volunteering*⁵ in 2011.

Civil society is usually defined as “a third sector existing alongside the state and the market. Civil society is also often referred to as the civic sector, the non-governmental sector or the non-profit sector. This implies that civil society is created by a variety of free activities that are independent of public authority (state, public sector, general government, political power) and whose purpose is not to make profit (market, business sector), but to pursue

¹ *Zákon o združovaní občanov*, <https://www.slov-lex.sk/pravne-predpisy/SK/ZZ/1990/83/> (accessed 03.02.2023).

² *Zákon o nadáciách*, <https://www.slov-lex.sk/pravne-predpisy/SK/ZZ/2002/34/> (accessed 03.02.2023).

³ *Zákon o neinvestičných fondoch*, <https://www.slov-lex.sk/pravne-predpisy/SK/ZZ/1997/147/> (accessed 03.02.2023).

⁴ *Zákon o slobode náboženskej viery a postavení cirkví a náboženských spoločností*, <https://www.slov-lex.sk/pravne-predpisy/SK/ZZ/1991/308/> (accessed 03.02.2023).

⁵ *Zákon o dobrovoľníctve*, <https://www.slov-lex.sk/pravne-predpisy/SK/ZZ/2011/406/> (accessed 03.02.2023).

an interest, whether it is a higher, public, general interest or a partial, group or individual one”⁶.

Also hybrid forms that cross the boundaries between civil society and the market are seen as part of civil society. These include social enterprises, corporate social responsibility schemes, philanthropic activities and corporate foundations.

At the same time, a strong civil society is considered one of the fundamental pillars of liberal democracy. A democratic state should therefore support the development of civil society, see it as a partner and create conditions for the sustainability of its initiatives and organisations. These ideas led in 2011 to the creation of a public infrastructure and the adoption of strategic documents and action plans to facilitate the development of civil society.

State support

In 2011, the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for the Development of Civil Society (OP DCS) was established to “contribute to better understanding of the need for and importance of civil society by stakeholders from the public sector, the business sector, the political sphere and the media, as well as the general public, so that they feel part of civil society, and interact with it more intensively. The Plenipotentiary is intended to encourage these agents to facilitate the development of mechanisms of civic participation through partnerships”⁷.

In particular, the Office should aim to achieve the following three objectives:

⁶ The definition from the website of the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for the Development of Civil Society: https://www.minv.sk/?ros_rozvoj-os (accessed 03.02.2023).

⁷ The website of the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for the Development of Civil Society: https://www.minv.sk/?ros_my (accessed 03.02.2023).

- to make public administration more open to citizens
- to support active participation of the public in governance
- to stabilise the status of NGOs as active public institutions, improve their legislative anchorage and the conditions for their functioning.

In the following year, the Council for Non-Governmental Non-Profit Organisations was established, which is an advisory and consultative body of the Government. The Council can submit proposals to the Government on measures that help the development of civil society, it monitors the implementation of action plans for the development of civil society, comments on draft of legislative bills relating to the development of civil society, and submits proposals for filling the post of Plenipotentiary for the development of civil society. Members of the Council include representatives of ministries, municipalities and regions and representatives of selected NGOs⁸.

The OP DCS coordinates two main agendas: the Open Government Partnership (OGP) and civil society development. Slovakia joined the OGP in 2011 and since then the OP DCS has been regularly preparing and evaluating the implementation of the OGP's biennial action plans. The main objective of the OGP is to strengthen “transparency, participation and accountability of the government to its citizens”⁹. In 2012, the first comprehensive *Strategy for the Development of Civil Society in Slovakia* until

⁸ *The Statute of the Council of the Government of the Slovak Republic for Non-Governmental Non-profit Organisations*, https://www.minv.sk/swift_data/source/rozvoj_obcianskej_spolocnosti/rada_vlady_pre_mno/zakladne_dokumenty/Statut%20RV%20MNO_doplneny%20s%20do datkami%201,%202,%203%20a%204%20konsolidovane%20znenie%2019.10..pdf (accessed 03.02.2023).

⁹ The website of the OP DCS: https://www.minv.sk/?ros_ogp (accessed 03.02.2023).

2020¹⁰ was also developed, followed by the *Strategy for the Years 2022-2030*¹¹ approved in 2022. Both Strategies identified weaknesses of civil society in Slovakia and proposed steps to improve the situation.

Weaknesses and lack of institutional support

Both Strategies identified the underfunding of some components of civil society as one of the most important problems that have not been addressed in the long run. These are mainly watchdog organisations, analytical NGOs or public interest advocacy organisations. The project-style of funding of organisations or the approach of donors are also sources of problems. Only very few project calls, for example, provide funding for the actual capacity development of NGOs, which makes systematic and long-term work on developing a specific agenda or activities almost impossible. The lack of financial support and the absence of a support infrastructure is also evident during crises, leading to results in the cessation of activities of some initiatives and organisations. Most recently, this problem was strongly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Another problematic point is the lack of cooperation between the public administration and the civil sector. Cooperation often remains only formal. Several mechanisms and instruments have been developed to promote civic participation and active citizenship, yet the results of various participatory processes are not incorporated into public policies. Similarly, the public

¹⁰ *Koncepcia rozvoja občianskej spoločnosti na Slovensku do roku 2020*, https://www.minv.sk/swift_data/source/rozvoj_obcianskej_spolocnosti/rozvoj_obcianskej_spolocnosti/koncepcia_rozvoja_os/Koncepcia-rozvoja-OS_2020.pdf (accessed 03.02.2023).

¹¹ *Koncepcia rozvoja občianskej spoločnosti na Slovensku na roky 2022-2030*, https://www.minv.sk/swift_data/source/rozvoj_obcianskej_spolocnosti/rozvoj_obcianskej_spolocnosti/2022/kros_2022_2030/KROS%202022-2030.pdf (accessed 03.02.2023).

administration is resistant to the introduction of social innovations, which are being piloted by civil society organisations.

The 2020 Strategy states that “the trends in the Roma participation in the solution of problems of the Roma minority have not been favourable” and that “the Roma voice is almost absent in the conceptual influencing of the solution of the Roma issue”. Although the Strategy reproduces racist language¹², it at least mentions that the lack of participation is an issue – unlike the 2030 Strategy. The new strategy does not include the word Roma at all, despite the fact that overall the position of this minority in society has not improved. However, the OP DCS does address the topic of the inclusion of “vulnerable groups”, which also includes the Roma¹³.

The lack of concrete information and data on civil society organisations and initiatives also poses a problem for the implementation and adaptation of policies to support civil society development. The authors of the 2020 *Analysis of the socio-economic contribution of the non-profit sector and the state and trends of civil society development*¹⁴ have partly tried to address this shortcoming. The analysis concludes that in order to better understand the structure and trends in civil society, it would be advisable to conduct regular and in-depth research at intervals of approximately 5 years. Without these, it is also difficult to determine the actual size of the sector, as, for example, the numbers of formalised NGOs listed in state registers include

¹² The term “Roma issue” stigmatizes the whole Roma population, due to the fact that the problems that the Roma in Slovakia face stem from systemic discrimination, racism and social exclusion, not from their ethnicity.

¹³ The website of the OP DCS: https://www.minv.sk/?ros_participacia_otvorene_temy_zapajanie_zranitelne_skupiny (accessed 03.02.2023).

¹⁴ Ministerstvo vnútra SR / Úrad splnomocnenca vlády SR pre rozvoj občianskej spoločnosti, *Analýza socioekonomického prínosu neziskového sektora a stavu a trendov rozvoja občianskej spoločnosti*, Bratislava 2020, 1134 pp., https://www.minv.sk/swift_data/source/rozvoj_obcianskej_spolocnosti/vyskum_neziskoveho_sektora_a_obcianskej_spolocnosti/2020/ANALYZA_NP%20VYSKUM_17.12.2020_FINAL.pdf (accessed 03.02.2023).

a large number of organisations that are in liquidation or have not been active for a long time. For informal initiatives and activities, we have even less data.

Civil society and democracy

As already mentioned, civil society is identified in public debate as one of the pillars of democracy. But its commonly used definitions do not explicitly refer to democratic values. This raises the question of how far organisations and initiatives that are founded by or represent anti-democratic forces can be considered part of civil society. This is the case, for example, with neo-Nazis. This concerns, for instance, the well-known organization *Slovenská pospolitosť* (The Slovak Fellowship) – a civic association registered by the Ministry of the Interior in 1995. The attempt to dissolve the organisation in 2008 was unsuccessful, so it can be still the Registry of Civil Society Organisations¹⁵. The paramilitary organisation *Slovenskí branci* (Slovak Conscripts) established the civil association *Naša vlasť je budúcnosť* (Our Homeland is the Future) in 2016 and also managed to register it with the Ministry¹⁶.

A similar situation is with ultra-conservative Christian organisations that may pose a threat to the secular character of the state. Their main agenda includes efforts to restrict reproductive rights and to reinforce discrimination against queer people. Many of them are linked to global or pan-European networks with which they coordinate to promote their agenda and from which they are able to raise funds. The xenophobic *Aliancia za rodinu* (Alliance for the Family) is a civic association. In 2014, it initiated a petition for a so-called

¹⁵ *Slovenská pospolitosť* in the CSOs Registry: <https://ives.minv.sk/rmno/detail?id=Qwa%2fBSRWul6B5VOFz68vmexgW0XhM7bfSj9q39%2fHKO5RLN3zkGiDkteyrAtpZu2P> (accessed 03.02.2023).

¹⁶ *Naša vlasť je budúcnosť* in the CSOs Registry: <https://ives.minv.sk/rmno/detail?id=Z%2bTq8X8NSaWbDUfbYHf8iPnXmwhqawP61IP%2fKwQvuUYi7xzoYIibVebaBvwJc9Aj> (accessed 03.02.2023).

Referendum on Family Protection¹⁷. The referendum was strongly backed and promoted by the Conference of Bishops of Slovakia¹⁸. The Referendum questions were as follows:

1. Do you agree that the term marriage shall exclusively denote only the union between one man and one woman and shall not be used to denote any other cohabitation of persons?
2. Do you agree that same-sex couples or groups should not be allowed to adopt children and raise them?
3. Do you agree that schools should not be able to require children to participate in classes on sexual behaviour or euthanasia if their parents or the children themselves disagree with the content of the classes?

In the end, the Referendum was unsuccessful, but it induced a lot of social hatred and animosity. *Fórum života* (The Forum of Life) a union of 54 anti-choice organisations, is also a civic association. Its representative is a member of the Government Council for NGOs. Together with other similar organisations, these associations were also involved in the successful campaign that in Slovakia thwarted the ratification of the *Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence* (the so-called *Istanbul Convention*)¹⁹. Representatives of ultra-conservative organisations that seek to restrict the human rights of women and queer people have also been members of the Committee for Gender Equality at the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, although their

¹⁷ About the Referendum at the webpage of *Aliancia za rodinu*: <https://www.alianciazarodinu.sk/referendum-za-rodinu-2015/> (accessed 03.02.2023).

¹⁸ Vyhlásenie Konferencie biskupov Slovenska k referendu o ochrane rodiny, <https://www.tkkbs.sk/view.php?cislocianku=20150208001> (accessed 03.02.2023).

¹⁹ 333 organisations from 9 countries petitions the Council of Europe to remove gender ideology from the Istanbul Convention, <https://forumzivota.sk/2018/04/04/333-organizacii-z-9-krajini-ziada-radu-europy-aby-odstranila-rodovu-ideologiu-z-istanbulskeho-dohovoru/> (accessed 03.02.2023).

membership in the Committee was a violation of its statute, and their participation had an impact on its work and effectiveness. The Committee on Gender Equality is part of the Government Council for Human Rights, National Minorities and Gender Equality.

However, it is not our aim to continue listing similar organisations. The aim is to draw attention to the fact that civil society activities do not necessarily contribute to the development and strengthening of liberal democracy. On the contrary, they can be a threat to it. This raises the question of how the institutions of a democratic state that support the development of civil society should approach these threats. The current Strategies do not address this issue at all.

Activities that damage democracy and the name of civil society include whitewashing, greenwashing and astroturfing. Henbury Development, a development company co-owned by the financial group J&T, acquired property on the Danube riverfront from the City of Bratislava in 2005 without public discussion, without a tender and below its real market price²⁰. This property housed the Park of Culture and Leisure (PKO) – a unique cultural space with a capacity of 4,000 people, which hosted hundreds of events a year and generated income for the city. Bratislava has no other similar space. Yet the city council donated it to the developer for 1 euro²¹. The effort to save the PKO mobilised considerable resistance. More than 12,000 people supported the petition for its preservation²². Despite this, the efforts of people to save the building failed. J&T privatised the waterfront and even tried to block off a key urban cycle route that runs by the new development.

²⁰ BAO – List primátorovi 19.2.2015, <https://pko.estranky.sk/clanky/tlacove-spravy-a-stano-viska/bao---list-primator-ovi-19.2.2015.html> (accessed 03.02.2023).

²¹ Miliónový vianočný darček za 1 €, <https://pko.estranky.sk/clanky/tlacove-spravy-a-stano-viska/ts-bao-milionovy-vianocny-darcek-za-1----.html> (accessed 03.02.2023).

²² The current number of petition signatures, <https://pko.estranky.sk/clanky/peticia-za-zachranu-pko/aktualny-pocet-podpisov-k-peticii.html> (accessed 03.02.2023).

In 2006, the financial group set up its own foundation, which supposedly promotes values such as fairness and respect²³. In 2009, *Bratislavský okrásľovací spolok* (the Bratislava Beautification Association) was established to create the impression that J&T cared about improving the quality of life in the city and maintaining local traditions. The culmination of efforts to manipulate public opinion was the launch of a petition “For a new PKO”, which the developer passed off as a “citizens’ initiative”²⁴. In reality, however, it was legitimisation of the demolition of the PKO and the corruption associated with it. These activities pose a great danger, as they seek, by means of fake grassroots civic activity, to garner people’s support for private corporate interests that are contrary to the public interest.

Grassroots and key political struggles

Many times, civic action indeed contributes to protecting or developing and strengthening of democracy. Key political struggles in Slovakia, as in other European countries, currently include efforts to avert climate catastrophe and end the plundering of natural resources, to fight for the rights of queer people, to preserve reproductive rights, and to resist the rise of authoritarianism and fascism.

At the end of the 2000s, a movement for queer rights began to take shape in Slovakia, building on the publishing and educational activities of the first feminist organisation ASPEKT and the First Lesbian Association Museion, whose origins date back to the mid-1990s. Museion facilitated the formation

²³ The J&T Foundation, <https://www.nadaciajt.sk/nadacia-jt-k37.html> (accessed 03.02.2023).

²⁴ Bútorá M., Bútorová Z., Strečanský B., Ondrušek D., Mesežnikov G. (eds.), *Štúdia trendov vývoja občianskej spoločnosti na Slovensku*, Bratislava 2011, p. 7, https://www.minv.sk/swift_data/source/rozvoj_obcianskej_spolocnosti/na_stiahnutie/publikacie/Studia-trendov-vyvoja-OS.pdf (accessed 03.02.2023).

of the Queer Leaders Forum (QLF). A few years later it turned into a civic association. The QLF initiated the festival Rainbow Pride Bratislava, which was held for the first time in 2010²⁵. Today, the Rainbow Pride Bratislava is an independent civic association whose main goal is to organize the festival²⁶. The rights of queer and transgender people is also the main mission of the association Saplinq. The organisation provides support services to queer and transgender people and their families, and since 2013 has been organising a separate Pride Košice festival in the east of Slovakia²⁷. In 2022, queer people also started to organise on university grounds via the student association Light FiFUK established at the Faculty of Arts of the Comenius University in Bratislava²⁸.

Environmental activism is developing very dynamically. In recent years, many new organisations have started to join the "traditional" ones (Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, etc.) in their efforts for climate justice. In response to excessive logging in Slovak forests, which was also taking place in protected areas and national parks, the We Are the Forest initiative was established in 2017²⁹. In a short period of time, it managed to gain more than 70,000 supporters and push the government to adopt a reform of the national parks. A large number of initiatives and organisations have emerged to strengthen the climate protection movement. Their diversity has also broadened the scope activities: some of them have been focusing on advocacy and lobbying and co-founded the Climate Coalition³⁰ involved in the drafting of the *Slovak Climate Law*, some of them are mobilising the youth

²⁵ MUSEION – rešpektovaný svet inakosti alebo História MUSEION v skratke, <https://www.lesba.sk/museion/> (accessed 03.02.2023).

²⁶ Website of *Dúhový PRIDE Bratislava*: <https://duhovypride.sk/> (accessed 03.02.2023).

²⁷ Website of *PRIDE Košice*: <https://www.pridekosice.sk/> (accessed 03.02.2023).

²⁸ Light FiF UK: [1] <https://www.facebook.com/light.fifuk>, [2] <https://www.lightuk.sk/o-nas/> (accessed 03.02.2023).

²⁹ Website of the *My sme les* initiative: <https://www.mysmeles.sk> (accessed 03.02.2023).

³⁰ Website of the Climate Coalition: <https://klimatickakoalicia.sk> (accessed 03.02.2023).

and organising climate camps or direct actions (*Z lavíc do ulíc/From School Desks Benches to the Streets*, *Bod obratu/Turning Point*)³¹ to increase pressure on polluters.

For many years, marches have been held in Bratislava to celebrate the anniversary of the founding of the WWII clerofascist Slovak state in the year 1939. Since the 1990s, various organisations or activists have tried to block them and prevent them from spreading their ideology of hatred. The blockades gradually became a tradition that led to the creation of the initiative *Bratislava bez náckov* (Bratislava without Nazis)³². The initiative began to systematically draw attention to the activities of fascists, highlight their various crimes and to organise educational activities. In 2015, together with other groups, it began to organise the festival *Povstanie pokračuje* (The Uprising Continues)³³. The festival aims to revive the legacy of the antifascist Slovak National Uprising (1944), as a reaction to its hollowing out by political elites who formally espoused it, but in practice have no problem supporting xenophobic policies. The festival has been held annually since its establishment. The attendance counts thousands of people, and the organising team has grown into yet another anti-authoritarian initiative. In 2016, these initiatives organised the “Anti-Fascist Mobilization” in response to the election of the fascist *Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko* (People’s Party Our Slovakia) to the Slovak parliament³⁴. In 2018, a protest was held against

³¹ The City Action Camp on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/events/199310865532885> (accessed 03.02.2023).

³² Website of the *Bratislava bez náckov* initiative: <https://bratislavabeznackov.wordpress.com/about/> (accessed 03.02.2023).

³³ Website of the festival and *Povstanie pokračuje* initiative: <https://povstaniepokracuje.sk> (accessed 03.02.2023).

³⁴ In response to the election of the chairman of the fascist party People's Party Our Slovakia, Marian Kotleba, as the mayor of the Banská Bystrica Self-Governing Region, the initiative *Nie v našom meste* (Not in Our Town) was established in Banská Bystrica, which initially organized mainly resistance to the regional mayor, his policies and opinions. Nowadays, it primarily organises discussions and other events focusing on liberal democracy and human rights: <https://www.facebook.com/NIEvBB/events> (accessed 03.02.2023).

the inaction of the state prosecutor's office following the killing of Filipino Henry Acorda by a Slovak citizen. Between 2016 and 2022, the initiative also organized a series of anti-fascist mobilizations, marches, and other events in support of people fleeing the wars in the Middle East, or in support of queer people's struggle for recognition. Actions and events took place not only in Bratislava, but also in other Slovak cities (e.g. Liptovský Mikuláš, Trnava or Košice)³⁵. Thanks to these activities, anti-fascism is much more visible and alive in Slovakia today, and fascists have to reckon with the fact that they will always encounter resistance.

The *Povstanie pokračuje* initiative currently interlinks resistance to fascism and authoritarianism with the climate movement, seeks to network with queer initiatives and anti-militarist activism³⁶ and also supports the pro-choice reproductive rights movement. Over the last ten years, 25 legislative proposals to restrict access to abortion have appeared in the Slovak parliament. These efforts coincide with the dissemination of fascist and ultra-conservative propaganda about "gender ideology" or lies about the so-called *Istanbul Convention*. In particular, the feminist organisations ASPEKT³⁷ and *Možnosť voľby*³⁸ have long been dedicating their efforts to refuting this false propaganda. In 2018 other groups and activists joined them in response to the increased activity of non-democratic forces. The initiative *Nebudeme ticho* (We Will Not Be Silent) was formed³⁹. It began to mobilize the public even more intensively, organizing protest marches and

³⁵ *Povstanie pokračuje* page on Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/povstaniepokracuje/events> (accessed 03.02.2023).

³⁶ For instance with groups inspired by the world-wide movement Food Not Bombs which interlink anti-militarism with animals rights activism.

³⁷ Website of association *Aspekt*: <http://www.aspekt.sk> (accessed 03.02.2023).

³⁸ Information about the Istanbul Convention on the website of the organisation *Možnosť voľby*: <http://moznostvolby.sk/category/istanbulsky-dohovor/> (accessed 03.02.2023).

³⁹ Facebook page of the initiative *Nebudeme ticho*: <https://www.facebook.com/nebudemeticho/> (accessed 03.02.2023).

educational workshops. Many protests against restrictions of reproductive rights were attended by thousands of people, which in the Slovak context can be regarded as previously unprecedented participation.

Conclusion

The landscape of civil society in Slovakia is quite diverse. We do not have systematic data about its spectrum, and there is a lack of in-depth academic research and analysis as well. Therefore, we did not strive for its exhaustive description, and it would not even be possible given the limited scope of this paper. We tried to highlight two trends that influence the formation of civil society and democracy in Slovakia. On the one hand, there are people who are narrowing the space of freedom and democracy through their activities, and on the other hand, there are people who are opposing them and trying to widen the space for democracy and equality for all citizens of the country. In the efforts to further develop civil society as an area of democratic participation, it is necessary to ensure that support is given to the latter. Only then can civil society truly be a pillar of democracy.