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Civil society in Slovakia: current state and challenges

Abstract

This paper presents the state of civil society in Slovakia based on the analysis for the fourth comparative report of the European Union-Russia Civil Society Forum. Using standard research methods (desk research, structured interviews and focus group), the paper provides a brief civil society overview on history, statistics and funding. Further, it analyses legal and political conditions for civil society organisations facing the problems of the growth of far right populism. The interviews were conducted with the representatives of fifteen Slovak civil society organisations of various sizes (from local to national) and from various fields of activity (education, social services and inclusion, cultures, human rights, environment protection, social entrepreneurship, employment, social housing, healthcare). To verify results and findings from the interviews and formulate additional conclusions, a focus group with seven experts was organised. Using these methods, the paper identifies the biggest challenges and possible solutions underpinning the current situation of civil society in Slovakia.

Keywords: civil society, non-governmental organisations, civil society organisations, Slovakia

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Introduction

Recent literature has registered deep structural changes in relationships between civil society and states across Europe and further afield (Acheson & Visser, 2016). In general, there has been movement towards a more disordered welfare mix and greater penetration of market mechanisms into both the funding and management of civil society organisations (CSOs) (Bode & Brandsen, 2014). In many countries, a growing role for civil society in the direct provision of welfare services has been managed by means of procurement through competitive tendering and performance measurement. This has forced CSOs to become more business-like to survive and reinforced a division between those able to compete in the new welfare market and the majority of small CSOs reliant on volunteer labour. An indication of the rapid growth of a CSO service industry is the growth in employment. Salamon and Sokolowski (2018) found that employment growth in a sub-set of CSOs (which they term “nonprofit institutions”) outdistanced total employment growth between 2008 and 2013 in all but one of the 12 European countries they had data for.²

This trend has been accompanied by a tendency for some governments to devalue the contribution of civil society to democratic decision-making and narrow the routes to political influence by organized interests in civil society (Amnå, 2006; Acheson & Laforest, 2013; Milbourne & Cushman, 2015).

Civil society organisations create the so-called third sector of the economy. The latest definition of Salamon & Sokolowski (2016a, b) which builds on many years of research by Salamon & Anheir (e.g. 1997 and 1998) broadens the scope of traditionally used term “the third sector” as a set of organisational and individual activities that meet the following three underlying philosophical notions frequently evoked in Europe:

- Privatness — i.e., forms of individual or collective action that are outside the sphere and control of government;
- Public purpose — i.e., serving the broader community and not primarily to generate profit or otherwise create something of value primarily to the persons undertaking the activities or those persons’ family members; and
- Free choice — i.e., pursued without compulsion (Salamon & Sokolowski, 2016a).

More specifically, this conception includes organisations characterised by the five operational features:

- a. It is an organisation, that is, institutionalized to some extent, though not necessarily legally registered or constituted;
- b. It totally or significantly limits through some binding provision distributing any surplus generated from their activities to its directors, employees, investors, or others;
- c. It is self-governing, that is, it is institutionally separate from government, is able to control its own general policies and transactions and has the capacity to own assets, incur liabilities, or engage in transactions in its own right;

² This part of the introduction was written with help of Nicholas Acheson, editor of the 2019 Report.

- d. It is non-compulsory, that is, involving some meaningful degree of uncoerced free choice on the part of individuals working for, or participating in, its activities; and
- e. Private, i.e., not controlled by government Salamon & Sokolowski (2016b).

The paper is organised as follows: after introduction and methodology section, there is a brief overview of civil society in Slovakia, followed by legal and political framework. Analysis of interviews is presented, finished by conclusion, including remarks from the FG. The paper is part of the 2019 Report on the State of Civil Society in the EU and Russia, funded by EU-Russia Civil Society Forum.

Methodology

The goal of this paper is to map the current state of Slovak civil society including the most pressing challenges and possible solutions to these challenges.

In this paper, we follow the Civil Society Forum's definition of 'civil society', which builds on the above mentioned five operational features and includes registered and non-registered non-profit and non-governmental organisations, civic initiatives and social movements, except political parties, religious communities, educational and scientific institutions, trade unions, and employers' organisations. Civil society organisations (CSOs) that have religious roots can actively provide social services, charity, education, youth work etc. These organisations can be considered as CSOs showing their civic activism and activities go beyond the scope of spreading the religion and as such their experience was taken into account when conducting this study.

To fulfil the goal, several methods were employed:

1. Desk research to prepare an overview of the available CSOs statistics, define trends and essential challenges for the CSOs in Slovakia and analyse general legal and political framework in which CSOs are working including the most important recent changes, political decisions, public discussions, and civil society campaigns.
2. Structured interviews with representatives of selected CSOs (leaders or senior managers) to get narratives about trends and solutions for some challenges with a view to elaborate on their meanings and gain a bottom-up actors' perspective on the state of civil society. The selection of CSOs for interviews was given by the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum report, it must have fulfilled the following criteria:
 - Given the diverse character of civil society actors and the multiplicity of areas they work in, researchers should aim to ensure the representation of organisations considering the wide spectrum of organisations (Human rights and democracy/ international aid organisations, Environmental organisations, Social enterprise, Social movements, Social services incl. healthcare organisations, Youth and civic education organisations, History and culture associations, Sport and hobby clubs, Community development, CSOs resource centres, think-tanks).
 - Both national/regional/local as well as big/small organisations should be represented in the sample of the interviewees.

We conducted 15 interviews, coded and cited anonymously:

- Interview SK1: local/regional CSO, culture, human rights
 - Interview SK2: local/regional CSO, education (religion)
 - Interview SK3: national CSO, education, advocacy
 - Interview SK4: national CSO, employment
 - Interview SK5: local/regional CSO, environment
 - Interview SK6: national CSO, social services and inclusion
 - Interview SK7: local/regional initiative, human rights
 - Interview SK8: national CSO, social services and inclusion
 - Interview SK9: national CSO, social entrepreneurship
 - Interview SK10: national CSO, social services, social housing
 - Interview SK11: national CSO, education, inclusion
 - Interview SK12: local/regional CSO, education
 - Interview SK13: local/regional initiative, education, health
 - Interview SK14: local/regional CSO, environment
 - Interview SK15: local/regional CSO, sport
3. A focus group to verify conclusions of findings from the interviews and formulate strong and plausible additional conclusions. Our focus group (FG) consisted of:
- FGSK1: Founder of a CSO, national organisation, social services and inclusion
 - FGSK2: Academic, university teacher and researcher
 - FGSK3: Statutory representative of a CSO, local/regional organisation, human rights and advocacy
 - FGSK4: Activist, volunteer, founder of a CSO, local/regional organisation, culture
 - FGSK5: Academic, statutory representative of a CSO, local/regional organisation, volunteering
 - FGSK6: Founder of a CSO, statutory representative, national organisation, social services and inclusion
 - FGSK7: Founder of a CSO, local/regional organisation, education and youth work (religion)

Civil society in Slovakia

Different political regimes (e.g. monarchy in Austro-Hungarian Empire, communism in Czechoslovakia, building democracy in Slovakia) have affected the non-profit sector and its formation — different regimes caused discontinuity in civil society development, with a profound impact on the nature of civil society (Vaceková & Murray Svidroňová, 2016).

The most notable impact in this respect has been the influence of the communist regime, which lasted over 40 years and systematically destroyed the organically developed CSOs. However, the regime did not completely eradicate civil society, which survived deep underground (Strečanský, 2017).

November 1989, along with political and economic changes, brought an increase in civil activities and the entry of private institutions, including non-profit organisations, into

the economy. By 1993, nearly 6,000 non-profit organisations were registered and by 1996, there were already over 12,000 (Kuvíková & Svidroňová, 2010).

The period after the EU accession (2004) was accompanied by growth in the activities of CSOs and changes in their relationships with government and business. CSOs were struggling to define their relationship with the state: to fuel the necessary reforms, to provide constructive criticism, to find a place in provision of services and to achieve an improved framework for civil society.

Since 2010, there has been polarisation in the society. One of the major polarising themes, in which the CSO sector was also significantly involved, was the discourse on human rights, family values and LGBT rights. The government's efforts to prepare its strategy for human rights protection revealed growing differences between liberal (secular) and socially conservative (religiously inspired) segments/sections of the civil society. Additional major areas that fuelled the societal polarisation was migration and unaddressed corruption.

The last few years have brought visible growth in urban community organizing, neighbourhood initiatives and public space rehabilitation by civic initiatives (USAID, 2017). CSOs are behind many social innovations in the fields of urban development and housing, healthcare, social services, education and environment (Nemec et al., 2015). There was also a visible growth of cultural initiatives and community development.

Civil society in Slovakia reflects the ambivalence of Slovak society. On the one hand, it is a driving force and creative space for new initiatives in social innovation and pro-social action, and it stimulates dialogues on important issues in the public sphere. On the other hand, Slovak CSOs are relatively weak socio-economic actors in terms of economic output and employment. Most CSOs are small and volunteer-based, and they act on the local and community level. (Strečanský, 2017).

CSOs statistics

According to the Statistical Office (2019), there were 64,136 non-profit organisations in Slovakia in 2017. This number includes 43,544 associations³, 3,071 public benefit organisations⁴ (PBOs), 518 non-investment funds and 469 foundations which are considered the core of civil society (in the total number there are also church-established organisations, interest associations of legal entities etc. which are not object of this research). The following table shows only the four mentioned types (49,049 CSOs).

Full data on the breakdown of the CSO sector by field of activity is not available, but partial data can be obtained from the Statistical Office and the Ministry of Interior. This data

³ Associations as defined by Act no. 83/1990 Coll. on association of citizens are organisations freely established by at least 3 citizens in order to pursue the goals set in their statute either to the members only or to the general public (<http://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/99932/119583/F-255803203/SVK99932%20Eng.pdf>).

⁴ Public benefit organizations or non-profit organizations providing public benefit services are established with aim to provide publicly beneficial services enumerated in Act no. 213/1997 Coll. to all users under the same conditions (<https://www.legislationline.org/documents/action/popup/id/3854>).

Table 1. CSOs in numbers 2008–2018

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Civic associations	23651	25460	26991	28648	28205	31989	33894	36041	40386	43544	45938
Foundations	382	412	426	439	416	328	443	459	468	469	468
Non-investment funds	454	470	484	504	483	344	497	501	524	518	504
Public benefit organisations	1628	1869	2101	2302	2111	1827	2707	3193	3742	4518	4874
Total	26115	28211	30002	31893	31215	34488	37541	40194	45120	49049	51784

Source: own work, based on the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic.

is very often inconsistent, irregular or only for some types of CSOs. In January 2019, a new law came into force — the Act no. 346/2018 Coll. on the CSOs register, which will enable acquiring comprehensive information on CSOs including the field of activity or whether they are active or not (to distinguish so-called dormant organisations). The CSOs have a year to provide required information to the register; the data will be available in 2020 or later.

The largest share of the workforce is in typical CSO fields of activity. In education, there were 13,106 employees in 2017 and employment in social services almost doubled from 4013 in 2013 to 7,808 in 2017. There has also been an increasing tendency for work in the membership organisations (e.g. professional membership organisations, youth movement organisations, hobbies organisations etc.).

Another statistic for the workforce is available based on the legal form of CSO. Civic associations are the most common type of CSOs, but they mostly work with members and volunteers (the highest number of volunteers is in civic associations), so the PBOs are the legal form with highest number of employees (table 2).

Table 2. Number of employees (FTE), casual workers and volunteers in CSOs by legal form

Legal form	Type of workforce	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Civic associations	Avg. no of employees	3 414	7 674	7 473	9 415	10 728
	Casual workers	20 440	43 357	44 159	25 997	13 424
	Volunteers	311 648	224 933	254 673	255 942	197 991
Foundations	Avg. no of employees	132	132	143	221	143
	Casual workers	787	491	799	211	261
	Volunteers	1 510	3 313	1006	871	983
Non-investment funds	Avg. no of employees	22	17	2	0	23
	Casual workers	183	34	69	3	7
	Volunteers	2 419	1406	1 485	1 774	2 300
Public benefit organisations	Avg. no of employees	18 540	18 641	19 520	22 234	22 437
	Casual workers	14 313	11 746	13 714	16 131	12 246
	Volunteers	11 735	14 806	20 884	25 809	28 563

Source: The 2019 Report on the State of Civil Society in the EU and Russia.

CSOs funding

To map the funding of Slovak CSOs is even more challenging than to map their numbers. Partial data can be obtained from the Statistical Office and then one must search for various sources, e.g. data from National budget and its final account, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Interior and mostly previous research on this topic. Therefore, the paper tries to summarise the data available on public, private and foreign funding.

Public funding now accounts for a larger share of funding sources and is still rising. In 2013, public sources amounted to almost EUR 273 million (Svidroňová & Kuvíková, 2014). In 2016, only state subsidies and transfers to CSOs came to almost EUR 79 million (National final account, 2016). According to the Statistical Yearbook (2017), in 2016, the state provided EUR 953 million to the non-profit institutions but this includes church organisations and hospitals transformed to public benefit organisations so it cannot be specified how much went to CSOs as understood in this paper.

Private funding consists of grants, gifts and contributions. A number of Slovak foundations provide grants to CSOs mainly with funding from domestic sources, including tax assignments. Local community foundations provide grants funded through both locally raised funds and international donor resources. In 2017, CSOs received gifts and contributions in the amount of EUR 257 million, which included EUR 117 million from individuals (46%), EUR 79 million from companies (31%) and EUR 60 million from abroad (23%), i.e. slightly more than a fifth of private funding comes from abroad.

The indirect tax benefits for charitable giving or for contributions to CSOs were abolished when the tax assignment mechanism was introduced. This mechanism allows assigning a share of paid income tax in favour of registered CSOs. It has been used in Slovakia since 2002 for individuals and since 2004 for companies. It represents approximately 6–10% of the revenue of the CSOs (Molokáč & Hagara, 2015). The mechanism has undergone several changes, currently ranging from 1.5% to 3% of assignment, depending on compliance with the conditions set by the Income Tax Act (Svidroňová & Kuvíková, 2014). The option of assigning 3% by individuals who prove that they have worked for at least 40 hours of volunteering per year is still underutilised. In 2017, less than 3,000 individuals used this 3% option.

Table 3. Development of tax assignment in thousands of €

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Individuals	20944,00	21740,00	24231,00	27175,36	30173,00
Companies	25762,00	30465,65	32718,52	34455,69	33103,00
Total	46706,00	52205,00	56949,00	61631,00	63276,00

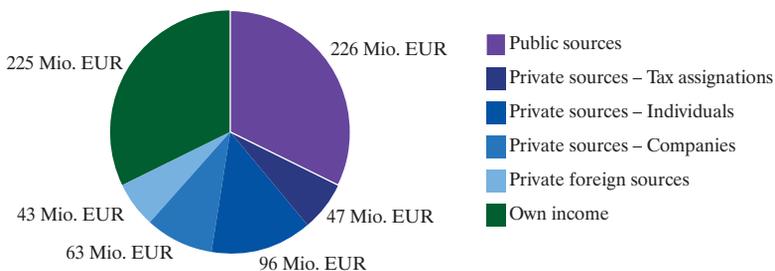
Source: own, based on data from the Institute for Financial Policy.

Foreign public funding is mostly project-based. In the past, the European Union (EU) funds were difficult to access for CSOs, but there was a significant increase in funding available to CSOs through the EU Structural Funds. Six calls for proposals were issued in May 2017 as part of the EU-funded Effective Public Administration programme. These were the first EU-funded calls for proposals in Slovakia in which CSOs were the only eligible applicants. Through these calls for proposals, CSOs were able to apply with projects focused on improving public policy, civic awareness and participation, the fight against corruption, and transparency in public administration (USAID, 2017). In total, EUR 26 million was allocated among 92 projects (www.reformuj.sk).

The Active Citizens Fund Slovakia, a grant programme financed through the European Economic Area/Norway Financial Mechanism and managed by a consortium of three foundations (Ekopolis, Open Society Foundation and Carpathian Foundation) launched the calls for proposals at the end of 2018, it is expected to allocate EUR 9 million in support of a civil society by 2021. This programme has been the only significant source of funding available to CSOs active in the areas of social inclusion, anti-xenophobia, and human rights as well as anti-corruption and good governance (Strečanský, 2017. Politicians, who do not like that these issues are tackled by CSOs, spread the rumours of “Sorosian funding”.

Although data is quite scarce, according to research, the situation with CSOs’ funding has not changed much and this structure has been quite stable through the years (Murray Svidroňová, 2019) and is similar as in 2013. In terms of structure, the funding sources of Slovak CSOs are almost equally divided between public, private and own income sources (approx. a third each). Foreign sources are 5% of total income of CSOs (figure 1), i.e. the Slovak civil society being funded by Soros is not based on facts.

Figure 1. Proportion of sources of Slovak CSOs in 2013⁵



Source: Strečanský, Bútora et al., 2016.

Despite the accessibility of resources, CSOs still remain underfunded (the amount of available resources is not enough to satisfy the demand in order to provide all the necessary services, especially in the field of social services).

⁵ More recent data is not available in this structure and does not allow for comparisons through the years.

Legal framework and political conditions

In Slovakia, as in other countries in the past decade, the extreme right is gaining power (see e.g. Mudde, 2010; Pytlas, 2013; Kluknavská & Smolík, 2016; Harris, 2019). It started in 2013 in a regional election, when in the Banská Bystrica region, the ultra-right party leader, Marian Kotleba, was elected as the region's governor. He stopped funding to several non-profit organisations in the region, mostly in the field of culture (independent arts who also portrait human rights) and he refused any EU funding for the region. In 2016, in a national election, his political party "Kotleba — Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko" (Kotleba — People's party Our Slovakia — Kotleba — LNSS,) made it into the parliament with 8.04% (14 MPs were elected, one MP left the party in November 2018). Among other issues, Kotleba as well as other populist and extreme right wing politicians have pushed a narrative to discredit the civil society activity and delegitimise the CSOs that are funded from foreign sources and that the CSOs funded from abroad should be considered "foreign agents".

This was strengthened in February 2018 after the murders of an investigative journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancée. The murders caused shock throughout the country, sparking mass protests and a political crisis. Many CSOs and informal initiatives of citizens were mobilised and protested on the streets (The Guardian, 2018). The crisis culminated on 15 March with the resignation of Prime Minister Fico and his entire cabinet. In November 2018, the members of the main organiser of these protests, initiative "Za slušné Slovensko" (For a decent Slovakia⁶) were investigated by the National Criminal Agency — the reason given was that they "organised a coup funded by G. Soros in order to destabilise the country" (The Slovak Spectator, 2018). The investigation was an attempt to intimidate the organizers of the protests by those persons in political establishment who tried to impede the changes. Investigation failed to identify any proofs of wrongdoings and ended up with nothing.

The trust between populist politicians and civil society has been low in the past and after these events, the tension has grown into an open conflict. As a consequence, the relationship between the leading political actors and civil society has become very formal, rather distant and reserved.

Civil society does not engage itself directly in party politics and competition for political power. However, the government often takes advantage of CSOs' expertise, e.g. the experts are asked to provide their services free of charge or for minimal fees.

On the other hand, several leaders from the civil society have entered politics both at the local (Marek Hattas, mayor of Nitra; Matúš Vallo, mayor of Bratislava) and national level (Viera Dubačová, MP). Most lately, in the president election in March 2019, Zuzana Čaputová became the first female president, coming from the movement caused by Kuciak death and representing civil society activism in environmental issues. Čaputová

⁶ The initiative is an informal network of active citizens in all regions in Slovakia who started acting after the murders. The murders have triggered not only anti-corruption movements, but also other issues have become part of the agenda (education, police, agriculture).

has been very active in the civil society and she combined it with political activism, she was vice-chairwoman of the political party Progressive Slovakia till the second round of elections, running the campaign with the support of majority of opposition parties.

The legal framework for civil society is stable and considered to be positive and slightly improving (USAID 2017). There are no specific regulations for employment of paid staff in CSOs, the same rules defined in the Labour Code apply to CSOs as well as to companies. Volunteering is mostly regulated by The Act 406/2011 on Volunteering. In 2018, several legislative reform proposals have been initiated, among others a proposal to reform the funding of CSOs from public sources, to reform the law on public collections and the law on volunteering. Also a concept on volunteering education was approved and it is to be implemented at all levels of education in Slovakia, i.e. pupils and students will learn about volunteering as a part of the curricula, not only theoretically but as a practical experience in several subjects and courses.

In 2018, the Act no. 112/2018 Coll. on the Social Economy and Social Enterprises (SEaSE Act) was adopted, which accommodated a term “social economy subject”. A social economy subject can be any *civic associations, foundations, non-investment funds, public benefit organisation*, trade company, cooperative or sole proprietor which:

- a) are not mostly or fully financed and managed by the state,
- b) perform activities pertaining to an area of the social economy (i.e., their main objective is to achieve positive social impact),
- c) that are not-for-profit or the profit is used for purposes of achieving positive social impact.

A social economy subject is considered a social enterprise only if:

- a) it performs economic activity systematically, independently, in its own name and on its own liability,
- b) its main objective is to achieve a measurable positive social impact,
- c) its achievement of positive social impact is done through goods or services, which it produces, supplies, provides or distributes,
- d) it creates a profit from its activities, uses more than 50% of the net profits for achievement of the main objective as referred to in point b),
- e) it involves various stakeholders (including employees and members) in the management of its economic activities.

The SEaSE Act further differentiates between a social enterprise (mentioned above) and a registered social enterprise, which is established on the basis of an application. The status of a registered social enterprise can be granted to social economy entities in the areas of work 1) integration social enterprise, 2) housing social enterprise and 3) other registered social enterprise, if it achieves a greater positive social impact than an entrepreneur who performs a similar activity for profit.

Results: challenges as seen by respondents

The main challenges identified in interviews can be divided into three categories of funding, organisational capacities and government attitudes towards civil society. This part is based on responses that describe the issues discussed the most accurately, i.e. from the extensive material gained by the interviews, the most repeated answers were examined carefully and those defining the challenges the best, were used.

Funding

Respondents again confirmed a traditional, old challenge of all CSOs, the funding. Most of them pointed out that the number of CSOs is growing, but the available funding has not. As SK3 puts it: “Financial sustainability is a permanent challenge for CSOs. Large and stable organisations are also addressing financial sustainability in the long term — especially in relation to covering administrative costs. Another financial challenge is the overall change in the environment. An important source of income is the tax assignment, which has been used by more and more companies to set up their own corporate foundations in recent years.”

Several more interviewees stated similarly, that there are only few financial schemes supporting wages, which hampers both the professionalization of these organisations and their sustainability, e.g. “most grants do not cover labour costs, so we use mostly voluntary work to carry out our activities”. (SK14)

Respondents identified two further problems with funding: non-transparent criteria and “misusing” the system. “The criteria for selecting projects are not entirely clear or sufficiently transparent. There is no feedback in case of refusal of the project proposal.” (SK4). “There are also CSOs that just write projects. They know how to get EU funds and other projects, but these have a minimal impact on civil society or on improving the situation. For example, they do 2–3 obligatory activities and then just print information leaflets, but this is not a sufficient tool to change something.” (SK5)

In the field of social services, there is a specific problem with funding: “fiscal decentralisation has not been done properly, with the result that important competencies were transferred from the state to local governments, but the conditions for funding and addressing fundamental and complex issues have not been solved. In this way, the state virtually exempts itself from all responsibility for not addressing the conditions for many groups of the population.” (SK8)

As new challenges in funding are seen in crowdfunding and especially company social responsibility (CSR), which companies are trying to do but they do not know how: “Despite companies having CSR, they do not know what to do with it — CSOs need to find ways to understand how the donor would like to support a particular idea. The donor needs to understand that it is not about quantity. Often it is necessary to explain the regional differences, e.g. to a donor from the west of Slovakia that in the east of Slovakia there is a different acute need and therefore it is necessary to change their

original idea.” (SK10). CSOs also need to learn how to raise funds and how to “sell” an idea or an innovation. There is also a new demand from donors who want to see how their donations were used (need to measure impact, to quantify the work of CSOs, to be able to provide arguments based on previous results).

Organisational capacities

Funding determines another well-known challenge of multitasking due to the limited possibilities to pay enough staff. Yet we show this issue as a separate challenge altogether with other issues concerning personal capacities: “Finding quality and qualified people is becoming increasingly complicated (especially because of the ability to pay them adequately). At the same time, we are not able to offer them the same benefits compared to the public and private sectors — we have the time to give them our guidance, but we cannot offer them stability (short-term contracts, work on a self-employed license).” (SK3)

This challenge is also connected with legislation, there are no exceptions for the CSOs in labour law, unless they are registered as social enterprises: “It is disadvantageous for the CSOs to conclude employment contracts because of high wage deductions which means if we want to save money, we prefer self-employed workers. In particular, this concerns young people, who are just finishing school, who have a problem with being self-employed, they want to have a classic employment contract — it gives them more security.” (SK1)

Lack of personal capacities is also connected with youth leaving Slovakia: “The biggest challenge is the combination of an outflow of smart people and a lack of funding. Actually, because of this, our organisational structure has changed as well, out of 5 employees there are now just 2. The rest are external co-workers or volunteers; we cannot provide them with stable work. If there is a project where you can create a job, we can hire someone for about a year, but it is not a stable background.” (SK5)

A new challenge within personal capacities stressed the need for the CSOs’ staff to professionalise: “The need for professionalisation of civil society is huge. There is a need for private resources, but the CSOs must speak the language of business which they do not know how to do due to the lack of professionalization. These tools are missing — communication and presentation skills, research, data, education of management, employees’ training.” (SK10).

Also, the interviewees mostly pointed out that they have other employment and the CSOs are a hobby or something they perceive as their personal mission — how they want to contribute to the society. Therefore, the lack of time to work for the CSO is eminent: “The lack of time capacity to address all the activities we would like to. That is why we have decided to focus only on the most important, which we believe has the greatest impact and is in line with our mission. This challenge is related to the fact that we are a small civic association with three volunteers.” (SK2). Several CSOs are also solving the issue where to focus their capacities and they search for programme areas that would fit their missions the best: “Another challenge is in the programme area. It

is problematic to look for strategic topics to devote our time to. For financial reasons (donors), we must constantly review the programmes already running and look for new innovative approaches in the old programmes, while opening up new programmes that reflect the changing needs of target groups (which is also related to a rapidly changing society in which we must respond to these changes adequately).” (SK3) Also, new programme areas are being looked for in order to work with new target groups: “We ask ourselves: how to involve relevant stakeholders in our projects? How to work with excluded communities, young people, especially the so-called. NEETs (not in education, employment or training).” (SK4).

Changing political climate and government attitudes

Other challenges seen by respondents are connected with the government attitude towards CSOs. It stems out from civil sector activities and how CSOs are perceived by the government and politicians: “In terms of the topics we are dealing with, we mainly face political attacks. At one time it was just an expression of the extremist political party Kotleba — LNSS, but the mainstream political parties (e.g. Smer and SNS — Slovak National Party) have also taken up this narrative and are already negatively commenting on civil society and CSOs.” (SK7)

“The situation in Slovakia it is still better than in neighbouring countries, e.g. Hungary and Poland, here, the CSOs are not so challenged, yet the pressure is strong on some types of organisations, mostly those dealing with human rights and LGBTI.” (SK1). In May 2019, the Minister of Culture stopped all ministry grants for the LGBTI organisations despite the positive recommendation of the commission for these projects⁷.

A new challenge for some types of organisations (such as think-tanks, advocacy organisations, analytic organisations, etc.) is, in particular, the intensifying pressure of some groups (conspiracy scene, politicians, right-wing populists, disinformation media such as *hlavnespravy.sk*) who are sharply defining themselves against CSOs and their actions.” (SK3) Some rival politicians even agreed that the civic movement For Decent Slovakia is only “a bunch of Soros kids” and it is not citizens’ initiative, but a politically organised movement by emerging political parties such as Progressive Slovakia and former president Kiska’s new “For People” party.

Another challenge is tied to a tendency in the government to only think in terms of projects and short term solutions: “There is a constant pressure on innovation and innovative solutions, while many types of activities simply need to be repeated and done in the same way over the long term. Also, there is little support for activities aimed at preventing the risks of social exclusion, e.g. in the field of social services.” (SK8).

⁷ <https://emerging-europe.com/news/rights-activists-demand-resignation-of-slovak-culture-minister/>.

Possible solutions for the Slovak civil society

The interviewed organisations offered various solutions/responses to the above-mentioned challenges. The most strongly resonating ones included the following areas:

Political environment — the current difficult political climate may be influenced by the national elections in 2020. There appears to be a growing number of people working in civil society going into politics at all levels.

Legal environment — while some laws have had a positive impact on CSOs others such as employment legislation may need to be changed to help with the recruitment and retention of staff.

Funding — there is a persistent lack of resources over the long term. Instead, short term project finance is predominant leading to uncertainty for CSOs. Several authors point out that diversification of funding takes too much time and effort and does not bring the financial stability so the CSOs should focus on concentration on one viable source instead (Von Schnurbein and Fritz, 2017; Vaceková, Valentinov and Nemeč, 2017). Yet, in the conditions of Slovakia, diversification and becoming more entrepreneurial seem to be the key as stated by several interviewees (need for self-financing, including conducting business activities which can generate funds to run the organisation). The SEaSE Act minimises the risks associated to this business-like evolution, e.g. redirecting the focus from main activity to business activity or loss of internal democracy. The Act defines that more than 50% of the net profit must be used for the main activity, and that the social enterprise must involve various stakeholders including the employees and members (even volunteers) in the management of its business activities.

There is a huge opportunity to develop cooperation with the private sector. Companies are aware of CSR, “but they do not know how to grasp the idea and they need a professional CSO partner to offer a meaningful solution” (SK10).

Image — the image of civil society in the eyes of the public has become distorted. CSOs must now be able to defend themselves in front of the media, politicians and the public.

Intersectoral cooperation — both local and regional governments appear more inclined to listen to CSOs than in the past — at least in the east of the country. There is considerable potential for partnerships between the public sector and the CSOs. “Over the past few years, the biggest opportunity for the CSOs has been in partnerships with other actors in both the public and business sectors. In the public sector CSOs often become partners for strategy and public policy-making, and are increasingly able to formulate and offer their activities as services that the public sector is willing to pay for” (FGSK7).

Due to the limited scope of this paper concrete solutions are not presented, but some solutions how the respondents cope with the challenges can be found in the 2019 Report on the State of Civil Society in the EU and Russia.

Conclusion

Based on the interviews and focus group results, several challenges and trends in the development of civil society in Slovakia were identified in the areas of political and legal environment, funding and organisational capacity of CSOs.

Several practitioners in the FG expected a rise in the number of social enterprises, they believe that social entrepreneurs might have a more significant impact on the society and hybrid models of businesses and CSOs will be deployed more often. This is in line with expectations from the new law on social economy adopted in 2018.

Some of the FG participants, however, expressed somewhat negative views on development in civil society, by pointing out to its uncivil elements: “On the other hand, there are also organisations that too belong to civil society, but the values they promote are not very democratic, quite the contrary. Perhaps we know what I am talking about and I do not need to name anyone...⁸ But no one can forbid them from forming an association if it is in line with the law and they are careful to be law-abiding, to be on the edge of the law.” (FGSK4)

To wrap up, the identified trends and challenges are in line with the current development of CSO sector in CEE, especially Hungary and Poland, where CSOs are facing huge wave of criticism. E.g. in Hungary, there is a governmental effort aimed at undermining the credibility of civil society (Szabó & Mikecz, 2015) or an attempt to stigmatise CSOs by forcing them to register as “civic organisations receiving foreign funds” if they receive more than EUR 24,000 per year from outside Hungary (including funding from EU sources not managed by a Hungarian institution). In Poland in 2017, the Parliament adopted the Act on the National Institute of Freedom which changes at the national level the process of distributing public funds for NGOs. The law fails to provide any guarantees for open and transparent process of distributing the funds (Szuleka, 2019). In Slovakia the situation is not so bad, yet it becomes critical and the CSOs are mobilising to prove their existence and maintain a good image, as well as cooperation with the government. Especially after Zuzana Čaputová, an activist, was elected president, this gives hope for better CSOs — government relationships.

Challenges with funding and organisational capacities have prevailed for several years. CSOs need to diversify their sources, including appeals on company social responsibility of both national and local companies. The need is to gain funding, which would allow also for education and training of employees and volunteers.

The issue of “uncivil” society (see Bernhard, 2020) remains a thread and needs further monitoring to answer the questions on future development of CSOs in Slovakia.

⁸ The participant referred to civic associations created or supported by far-right extremists.

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