

International Summary

Slovakia

The research conducted in Slovakia displays a rich and sometimes contradictory picture of how NGOs see themselves, how they see their contribution to the national governance up-to-now and how they see future role for themselves. The picture has some elements that are clear and some elements that are fuzzy and inconsistent and need further reflection and thinking around them.

The views mirrored in this report reflect the “engagement bias” of the sample that consists of very active NGO leaders. However, in most of interviews, respondents were trying to talk not only about their organizations, but about the NGO scene as such. This extends the relevance of this report to broader area than just of the sample.

There are two ways how the concept of NGO is perceived. Either through emphasis of civic and individual dimension which frames the NGO concept as a space where individuals may freely apply their ideas, skills, creativity, values or beliefs and complement the state and market, or through the institutional dimension, where the NGO concept is perceived as formalized structure, an instrument that renders legal subjectivity and ability to gather resources for active citizens to act in public space.

Besides the generally well-known key milestones of NGO evolution in Slovakia, that include the formation of the third sector infrastructure body – Gremium of the Third Sector, S.O.S. Third Sector Campaign against the illiberal foundation law during Meciar government, or get-out-the-vote campaign OK 98, an important milestone emerges the activity of foreign private foundations, mostly U.S. based that allowed for growth of internal capacities of NGOs without prescribing the activity or exerting excessive bureaucracy.

For the strategic contribution of NGOs on national governance, respondents consider major public mobilization campaigns that influenced the direction of the country’s overall political and international development, contribution to development of strategic legal framework friendly to citizen involvement in public affairs (for example the freedom of information act) and changes in social awareness such as gradual acceptance of international role of Slovakia or acceptance of voluntary engagement for public benefit.

There were number of instruments how NGOs were achieving their goals – ranging from direct protest actions to participation in decision-making

bodies or to expert work. All of these contributed to a better and deeper public discussion, that otherwise would not take place. However, there is a universal feeling of discontent with the way, how the state, and to a lesser extent, local government, approach the issue of public consultations. Respondents consider the practice of public consultations as useful and needed, and complain that the state is often passive or reluctant to meet its obligation in this area, as far strategic issues are concerned.

The relationship between the state and NGOs has been stigmatized by the domestic politics since nineties, until now. This stigmatization contributed to the fact, that even 10 years after the fall of communism the Slovak future in 1998 on the contrary to other V4 neighbors, was unclear and NGOs were involved in the struggle over the democratic rules and European (in a cultural and democratic ideal sense) orientation of Slovakia. The catching up syndrome in the state-NGO relationship is felt until now. For this reason there is a spectrum of different relationships ranging from ignorance, dependence, asymmetry and animosity to respect and equality.

Overall impression on the position of NGOs in the society is that NGOs are frustrated from the feeling of their insufficient integration in the society at-large and of their insufficient acceptance from the state. Another significant opinion says that NGOs were not able to persuade the public sector institutions that NGOs are good and effective instruments for improving the quality of life of citizens and as such the public sector and NGOs should do much better in their effective cooperation, than what happens now. Surprisingly, respondents active in social services provision shared this opinion as well, along with advocacy and watchdog NGOs.

NGOs see for themselves in future deepening and overlapping of three major roles, that they grew into and that do not exclude each other: 1) filling-up the white spots including pilot experimentation and social innovation, 2) watchdog and mirroring the power and giving voice to marginalized groups and 3) partner cooperation with public and private sector in improving the life of citizens. It is not clear whether the state sees these roles in such light as well and whether the state will not try to mould the NGOs into the service provision and public funding. So far there were some tendencies of this direction, but the coherent policy towards the civil society by the state has not yet been formulated or integrated into government policies.

Domestic politics will remain to be a factor in the relationship of state and NGOs. The tendencies in the population towards the populism, etatization, forced patriotism and revived xenophobia and nationalism remain as good reasons for not ignoring the domestic politics as a factor in this relationship in the future.

Another important barrier is insufficient domestic funding environment that is gradually dominated by the corporate sector, stagnating role of public funding and controversial role of structural funding. The missing consensus on the side of political and social elites also complicates to identify a place of NGOs in legal and institutional space of Slovakia. Especially in regard to global challenges that Slovakia faces (demographic trends, terrorism, migration). It is also not clear how will be the NGO sector defined in the law – as private sector or public sector. At the moment it is unclear and the tendency is to consider it a public sector and organize its legal and fiscal regime accordingly.

Internal barriers in NGOs include insufficient communication with public, competition among NGOs, low capacities in terms of volunteer time, staff time and resources that is accompanied with increased demands put on by the bureaucratic nature of using public funding including EU funds. NGOs face also the dilemma of increasing professionalism which contributes to increasing presence of managerial culture and disappearing of non-profit ethos.

NGOs need to clarify for themselves how they should respond to the gradual disappearance of the “American” trace of civic engagement in public space in the collective memory and how to prepare for the EU integration processes resulting in increased public funding in terms of services, strengthening of large NGOs, weakening of small NGOs and increase of bureaucracy.

In the light of the above, there is a need of more intensive communication of NGOs with politicians and with public as such about their work for the society, contributions and explanations of reasons why they engage themselves in the public space or provide services to citizens.

The dilemma remains how should NGOs position themselves towards receiving public funding in all three roles (innovation, watchdog and partnership) when at least in one of them (watchdog) public funds may decrease the independence in NGO judgement over government. But if public funding would not be relevant, what are the options?

Additional needs for next five years that would boost the activity of NGOs in the above-mentioned roles include:

- Establishment of stable foundation for research of NGOs and civil society with long-term outlook. Basic data about NGOs are missing for reasonable public policy making in this field.
- Establishment of accredited educational program for non-profit volunteers, staff, board members.
- NGOs need free, flexible and empowering funding. Existing funding environment stresses rigid frameworks and does not stimulate capacity building and strategic attitude-taking of NGOs. Modify existing public funding channels to respond to this need. Private philanthropy is not visible in this context, most of the corporate philanthropy focuses on pragmatic win (socially relevant cause) - win (media visibility, corporate image promotion) programs.
- Strengthening of global and civic education in the educational system, adding the European perspective in the education.
- Learn and experiment with new types of alliances, tactics, and strategies how to address the recent wave of growing nationalism, xenophobia and intolerance to minorities.
- To address global and pan-European issues in time when the attention of public is focused on domestic politics.

Many conclusions or findings are open-ended questions and dilemmas. NGOs and the state should be trying to find honest questions to them lead open conversation about issues with each other without political agenda and consult more frequently their attitudes and positions.