
Civil Society in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia
NGO Market, Prague, April 12, 2017

Panelists:

Bulcsú Hunyadi, Senior Analyst, Political Capital Institute, Hungary

Milan Andrejkovič, Office of Plenipotentiary of Slovak Government for the Development of Civil Society, Ministry of Interior, Slovakia

Marek Šedivý, President, Association of Public Benefit Organizations in the Czech Republic and Director of Ronald McDonald House Charities, Czech Republic

Moderator: *Roman Pacvoň*, Forum 2000 Foundation, Czech Republic

The debate began by the presentation by Bulcsú Hunyadi on the deteriorating situation of the non-profit sector in Hungary which has been radically worsening since 2010. The hostile political environment intensified its campaign against the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in 2013 when it symbolically and practically declared a war on them. The campaign is targeting watchdogs, human rights and transparency NGOs in particular. Moreover, the regime follows the example of Russia in many ways by strengthening its autocratic tendencies and silencing all critical voices. A survey done among the NGOs show that they are mostly concerned about financial resources, especially the state funding, and the legislation. The most pressing challenge is the attempt to secure unlimited powers for the state which directly threatens independent organizations and creates the conditions of an illiberal regime. Legal and political system of Hungary is being tailored to fit Fidesz's needs. There is an ideological and political bias towards NGOs according to which public benefit is being defined as beneficial to the state and the government. The state funding of NGOs is under government control which means they have to be in line with the government ideology and plans. Furthermore, we see the establishment of new NGOs directly and closely linked to the government whose objective is to support the current political system. There are public campaigns targeting NGOs, their funding is being cut and many organizations are branded as working against the government and promoting the interests of foreign organizations, not Hungary. Many NGOs have been receiving threats from the general public as well.

During the following discussion, Mr. Hunyadi confirmed that the campaign specifically targets NGOs with political activities, such as the ones working in civil rights promotion or helping refugees and integration of foreigners. He also admitted there is an increasing trend of private donations to NGOs, nevertheless, most organizations still depend on government support. The efforts against NGOs are currently focused on passing legislation prohibiting foreign funding of the organizations.

Milan Andrejkovič has an expansive background in the non-profit sector and is currently responsible for the development of the civil society in Slovakia by creating public policies in the governmental office. His lecture covered four main topics: the registration process of NGOs, financing, open government partnerships and research. Every day, some 10 to 20 new organizations are registered in Slovakia. The new proposed register which should be adopted by the parliament this year is similar to the commercial register and is designed to increase transparency about the people operating and managing the NGOs as well as other background information. The Slovak NGOs are funded by both private and public sources, direct and indirect. The new law strives to make them more independent and less reliant on governmental funding. The proposed bill was drafted after discussions between the government and NGOs in the framework of an open and transparent partnership. Another way to improve the civil society is aimed at research. This is the first year when the government started to collect comprehensive data about the civil sector, the main trends and issues. They will help develop a better understanding of the NGOs' needs which is useful both for the government and the organizations themselves.

Follow-up questions and answers provided more detailed information on NGO funding. Mr. Andrejkovič admitted there is a need for more transparency with open calls for government funding and for better definition of recognized private sources. These issues are being debated with the NGOs. He also conceded that the office he works for is not a government priority and consists of a small team of people. The reputation and trust it receives largely depends on the people working there.

Marek Šedivý focused on the perception of NGOs among the general public in the Czech Republic. He started by pointing at the stunted legislative process regarding the non-profit sector. According to Mr. Šedivý, the current government is too weak to change the trend and amend the respective laws. The main issue facing the NGOs is the public perception and media coverage. The public is becoming more distrustful and they are questioning the very purpose of NGOs. This image is worsened by the fact that some organizations are supported by political parties which they endorse in return. Moreover, some media are owned by politicians and provide only a very biased view on the issue. Another problematic aspect is the lack of transparency of many NGOs, the role of their governing bodies is often not clear, the annual reports do not provide comprehensive and meaningful information on the internal governance or the financial aspects (such as the operational costs). Mr. Šedivý proposed that all this information should be available online in order to increase transparency.

Answering questions from the audience, Mr. Šedivý confirmed that NGOs are not a priority for the government and the organizations themselves are not pushing for radical legislative changes. He thinks that less government interference is preferable. Nevertheless, he admitted the legislation is complicated when it comes to NGO funding because all 14 regions have separate rules and

regulations. He also voiced support for several self-evaluation projects mapping the NGO work and suggested that the Czech Republic might emulate the Slovak research models if they produce relevant data and other outcomes.

Recommendations

The discussion enabled representatives from Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic to present the situation of the civil society in their respective countries along with the main challenges and threats it faces. It was clear that such a platform could help develop the non-profit sector in the Visegrad countries by creating international networks for sharing of experiences, both positive and negative. These contacts can identify the best tools and methods to address common challenges or how to replicate good practices in different contexts. The platform can exist just as an informal network or it can be developed further, for example by organizing debates in the framework of the NGO Market in the coming years. The platform should include representatives from Poland as well as other stakeholders in order to provide a balanced and diverse overview of the issues at hand. The lively discussion and audience participation confirms that the topic is also attractive to the wider public.

The participants and the audience were particularly interested by the situation in Hungary. The dangerous trend of limiting basic democratic freedoms and actively disrupting the work and voices of government opponents requires our attention and support. Cooperation of NGOs from Visegrad countries has a potential of developing stronger international pressure on the Hungarian government and send a message of support to the civil society in Hungary.

Resources

Full presentations of all three speakers can be watched online at <https://slideslive.com/38900621/civil-society-in-czech-republic> (Marek Šedivý), <https://slideslive.com/38900620/civil-society-in-hungary> (Bulcsú Hunyadi) and <https://slideslive.com/38900622/civil-society-in-slovakia> (Milan Andrejkovič).

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