

## POLITICAL INFLUENCE OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS AND CIVIL SOCIETY

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This research paper was supported by the Cultural and Educational Grant Agency of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of Slovak Republic (KEGA) project - Dynamika premien verejnej správy v Slovenskej republike, project registration number 001UCM-4/2019.

**Abstract:** This paper discusses the political influence of NGOs and civil society on political development. Non-governmental organizations have no direct impact on government actions, but they have an opinion-forming function, by which they can influence citizens and voters. In this respect, it is important that NGOs act in the interest of citizens, which is a sensitive and difficult to prove topic in the case of foreign funding. Just as civil society needs to organize itself in NGOs for its development, these organizations need funding for their activities. The interest of government should be to ensure sufficient funding for this area, which will to some extent prevent the influence of foreign donors on the political situation in the given country. The article is addressing a current issue, as NGOs are an integral part of any democratic society. Their influence on the political situation was noticeable in Slovakia before the 1998 parliamentary elections, when they influenced the electoral behavior of citizens, thus influencing the overall result of the elections. Contemporary literary sources, opinions of Slovak experts, but also the theoretical definitions of NGOs and civil society were used to better understand the position of NGOs in the society.

**Keywords:** civil society, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), 1998 parliamentary elections, Slovak Republic, political change

### 1 Introduction to concept of civil society

In order to examine non-governmental organizations (NGOs), their activities or members, we must first define the very environment in which they are created. The non-governmental sector is supposed to have its role in every democratic country, as civil society is one of the manifestations of a healthy democracy. The definition of civil society is not uniform; every social scientist and author interested in the issue emphasizes different attributes, which is also a sign of dynamism in this area - in terms of main social themes of a particular period. In terms of political science, civil society is essentially the possibility for citizens to influence the execution of government power, thus improving their living conditions, which is most often achieved through membership in certain organizations. (Barrett, Zani, 2014) We can understand civic associations, non-profit organizations or political parties as an expression of civil society, but also social values, public opinion or democracy itself. In Central Europe we tend to define and divide civil society in a way corresponding to Karel Müller's concept for example, who applied a structural normative view in his book "Češi a občanská společnost" and recognizes two main theoretical approaches; economic and socio-cultural (Müller, 2002).

Müller does not analyze the economic approach in depth, referring to it as reductionism, which has significant limitations and handicaps. As part of this economic approach to civil society research, there are two contradictory currents - leftist and capitalist. The leftists refer to the Marxist-Hegelian ideas and define civil society as a necessary product of an imperfect system that later merges with the government, after the victory of proletariat (working class). Reductionism in this approach is a simplification of social conflicts to economic conflicts. The capitalist interpretation describes the libertarian model, a market operating with minimal government interference, in which the market and the state should not restrict each other. Civic organizations entering into this relationship are, according to this interpretation, an unnecessary element. In this case, civil society is reduced to a part of the state apparatus which it is to be integrated to make the functioning of the market more efficient.

According to Karel Müller, the socio-cultural approach is much more important for social sciences, as it does not focus on

society only in the sense of an economic entity. In this approach we recognize three ways of interpretation - generalists, maximalists and minimalists. Generalists define civil society broadly, on the level of a political system exhibiting certain characteristics. They emphasize legal political power, pluralism of opinions, public debate or free market (Jašková, 2019). Müller compares them to the group of Scottish moralists. Thus, from this point of view, civil society is a precondition for a functioning democracy.

The maximalistic interpretation of civil society describes it as a whole area outside the government, as all institutions that are not involved in execution of power. They include for example, the market economy, political parties, public opinion or various forms of social cooperation. According to maximalists, civil society is everything but the executive, the legislature, and the judiciary. Müller compares their interpretation to the concept of Jeffrey Alexander called „umbrella like concept“ (Müller, 2002).

Minimalists go even further and their interpretation removes both the market economy and other institutions that do not provide scope for mutual solidarity. Civil society is an expression of the universal values of the society and strengthens the emergence of unified identity. Thus, in a minimalist interpretation, civil society is the sum of values, traditions and norms, culture and morals which are universal for a particular society. Citizens are bound by a tight network of interpersonal relationships, solidarity and loyalty. It implies a developed and mature community, a rich civic life and an interest in the common good. (Amirkhanyan, Lambright, 2019; Okanazu, Madu, Igboke, 2019) This approach is based on the functioning of the non-governmental sphere in established and developed democracies, but is very difficult to achieve in practice.

### 2 Materials and methods

The main goal of our paper is to illustrate the power of NGOs to influence the governmental sphere, despite their position based in their name - non-governmental organizations. Partial goals of our paper are to analyze the situation before the 1998 Slovak parliamentary elections, as well as the foreign financial support of NGOs in this period. We used a combination of scientific methods to achieve our goals. During the processing of theoretical knowledge we used the method of scientific abstraction, by which we determined the basic context of the examined issue. The method of analysis has helped us to define the extent of elaboration of this topic in scientific literature. The acquired knowledge was then processed by the use of scientific synthesis, which led to our conclusive findings.

### 3 Non-government non-profit organizations

Thus, NGOs could not function without civil society and democracy, and organizing into NGOs is an expression of active citizenship. (Bee, Guerrina, 2017) These organizations are referred to as the „third sector“, they do not participate in the governing and have no political ambitions, they are founded by physical or legal persons and their field of activity is very broad. In the case of a sufficiently developed civil society, we will find non-governmental organizations covering all civic interests and needs. (Kidd, 2016; Cseh Papp, 2018) However, our article focuses on non-profit organizations dealing with the quality of democracy and human rights, so called „think-tanks“ of critical thinking or „watchdogs“ of democracy. These NGOs differ from other citizens' associations in some attributes: their activities are beneficial to the public, they have a formal structure, voluntary membership, they are self-governing, profit-making is not their goal and are, of course, independent of the government and political leaders (Pirošík, 2004). Of course, these organizations need funding to spread their message, and they can get necessary finances in several ways. For example, one way in these particular organizations is to offer analytical services, where NGO experts conduct analyzes, political, economic or

sociological surveys, consultancy services for media or political entities or publish professional publications.

The main sources of funding currently include:

- Tax assignments - a mechanism for transferring a certain percentage of personal and corporate income tax
- Voluntary donations and gifts, philanthropy, public collections
- Membership fees from registered NGO members, income from their own activities
- Finances from government or local government
- Funding from European Union grants
- Finances from foreign donors

(Ekonomika MNO, 2019)

NGOs have ten main functions, according to Martin Bútora in the publication „Čítanka pre neziskové organizácie“ (Bednárik, et. al., 1998):

1. Formulating and interpreting the ideas and demands of citizens - which takes place during their active participation. The non-governmental platform provides space for citizens and can further professionalize their opinions or complaints, for example in the form of lobbying.
2. Preservation and development of diversity, plurality. NGOs associating minorities or maintaining the folklore and cultural heritage have an irreplaceable role in the society.
3. Opinion-forming function. NGOs can support government policy, interpret it and explain it to the public, but also opponents creating a certain opposition platform. This function also played a role in Slovak politics and elections in 1998, which we will mention in the next chapter.
4. Acting in favor of social integration. Inclusive function, in terms of providing space for all groups and classes of citizens, minorities and marginalized groups.
5. NGO as an agent of political socialization. Through membership and participation, but also from a position of reader and listener to NGO's activities, citizens acquire political and democratic principles.
6. Control functions. NGOs may be in the aforementioned "watchdog" position of democracy, criticizing any undemocratic actions of the government. Along with the free media and opposition political parties, they act as warning mechanisms, or as so-called "whistleblowers".
7. Provision of services and public goods - especially those which are not covered by the State. These can be, for example, humanitarian and social services, education and awareness raising, but also legal counseling or environmental protection.
8. It is a terrain for social innovation and experimentation. As stated in aforementioned publication, D.H. Smith is the author of the idea, that new schemes of social interaction and assistance can run within the non-governmental sphere, because it is risky to integrate them nationwide without trying. In the case of good results, they can then be offered to the government and implemented more widely.
9. Conflict prevention and resolution - this area mainly concerns racial and ethnic conflicts, which are better received by the community in form of community activists than by government workers.
10. Reproduction of social wealth. Social wealth does not mean material goods, but theoretical concepts and strategies responding to current problems, practical experience and encouraging solidarity as well as the feeling of belonging.

#### 4 The history of Slovak NGOs

Before the year 1989, civic activities criticizing the government were illegal and persecuted in the political system of former Czecho-Slovakia Federation, but civil society in the form of opposition think-tanks functioned secretly, at the level of so-called dissent. These individuals and groups expressed their opinions and criticism through prohibited prints called *samizdat*,

maintained contact with Western countries, and spread news from the "outside" - democratic countries from around the world. (Občianske hnutie Verejnosť proti násiliu (VPN) vzniklo pred 25 rokmi., 2014) After the democratic transition and later independence of the Slovak Republic, conditions for civil society were much more favorable and NGOs as well as opposition think-tanks were able to operate freely. Their function, however, was limited by the lack of funding and attacks of former government, which distorted democracy in several ways.

The former government was criticized both by foreign and domestic experts, it was described as authoritarian, and in the second half of the 1990s the situation began to escalate. Government criticism has been a frequent reason to be pushed out of government and public service platforms, mostly into NGO structures. Criticism was directed at the privatization of strategic enterprises into unprofessional hands - presented as the creation of a domestic capital-forming class, minimum foreign investments, unemployment at the level of 14% as well as isolation from the European Union and its structures. Other countries also responded to our situation e.g. *démarches* from the European Union and the moniker "Black Hole of Europe" by US Secretary of State, Madeline Albright. Thus, during the Vladimír Mečiar's government, opposition, liberal politicians and experts gathered in the non-governmental sector, supporting their cooperation and the emergence of new society and democracy oriented think-tanks. Their creation was also supported and financed by foreign donors. The goal of these think-tanks was to return the Slovak Republic to the path of reforms and modernization, which was far from done only by transformation from the totalitarian regime. This agenda was also present in the programs of the opposition parties, and the subsequent government of Mikuláš Dzurinda put it into practice (Schneider, 2003). NGOs created between 1993 and 1998 which were focused on commenting and analyzing politics have mostly dealt with the same subject - criticizing Mečiarism, and warning about its consequences.

Their position in this period was complicated not only in terms of accusations and attacks by the government and political leaders, but also in terms of financing. At that time, the Slovak Republic was not a member state of the European Union - which was undesirable in Mečiar's regime, so NGOs could not ask for financial support from EU sources. Government grants for opposition think-tanks were also sporadic. The mechanism of tax assignments, by which citizens give part of the paid tax to selected NGOs, did not exist at the time, it was introduced by the subsequent government. At that time, philanthropy and financial donations from individuals and businesses were minimal, both as a result of the 14% unemployment rate and the resulting economic situation, as well as a result of the „novelty“ of democratic regime and its elements in our conditions (Fíla, Schwarczová, Mura, 2015). The NGOs had to turn to foreign donors sharing the same political opinions at the time. The largest donors were foreign foundations, such as the Ford Foundation, the German Marshall Fund of the US, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the Open Society Institute and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation (Marček, 2004). On the other hand, this gave the government another reason to accusations and conducting an anti-campaign against these think-tanks and their representatives.

#### 5 The 1998 parliamentary elections in Slovakia

The period between 1994 and 1998 can be characterized as a period of unconsolidated democracy. The regime that emerged in Slovakia after the early parliamentary elections in 1994, was atypical for the development of democracy in Central European countries. We can find the equivalent in the form of the rule of the Croatian President, Fraňo Tuđman, which can be characterized similarly authoritarian. For both types of governance, the term „hybrid regimes“ is used in the literature (Hloušek, Kopeček, 2003). In this context, S. Szomolányi (1999, p. 59) states that Slovakia was characterized by a high fragmentation degree of political entities with signs of polarization at the time, which resulted in a bipolar configuration

in the form of two antagonistic groups of political parties - which can not be defined as one-dimensional on the left-right scale of the political spectrum. (Horváth, 2017) They can be defined schematically, as an authoritarian versus liberal-democratic profiled groups, both in terms of understanding leadership policy and in the value orientations of their supporters.

As a result of the political struggle and the lack of a clear vision of the future of the country, self-governing principles in the area of political and social system were suppressed in favor of strong government administration (Horváth, Čibík, Švikruha, 2018; Čibík, Meluš, 2019). During this period, political leaders took only those measures that could be used to promote their own political interests in some way - those which were expected to assist them in the process of gaining or maintaining power.

In terms of the functioning of the political system in this period, it can be stated that not all the conditions required by the democratic process have been met (Horváth, Hrušovský, 2009). Although free and competitive elections were held, what happened after cannot be associated with a true nature of democratic and legal state. Deficiencies in the governance and institutional organization of the country also affected those areas that fell within the relatively accessible civic participation. (Buleca, Mura, 2014) This situation was expected to be changed by the 1998 parliamentary elections.

Thus, the situation just before these elections was tense. Former coalition led a confrontational and discriminatory campaign, public media were abused, criminalizing of political opponents was present, as well as exceeding the legal limit of funds to run the campaign. (Šurmánek, 1998). Shortly before the elections, a new electoral law was passed, which was not only unfair to political opponents, as it was clear tactical change of rules during the game, but moreover, the law carried some undemocratic and unconstitutional elements. MPs demanded to declare these parts as unconstitutional:

- 1) restrictions for the electoral campaign on public media, Slovak Television and Slovak Radio (§23 par. 1)
- 2) §17 par. 2, whose discriminatory character prevented political party candidates from standing on lists of other political parties or coalitions;
- 3) §16 par. 2, which transferred the obligation to create the electoral district commission from the mayor to the head of the district office. (Krištofik, 2001)

The new law introduced single electoral district, which by the way persisted until now, and it apparently helped Vladimír Mečiar and HZDS to win at that time. Nevertheless, the HZDS failed to form a government coalition, which was then created by different parties from opposition: the Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK), the Democratic Left Party (SDL), the Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK) and the Civic Understanding Party (SOP). This new government was led by Mikuláš Dzurinda, and it was pro-democratic and pro-western.

The 1998 elections had a remarkable voter turnout - 84.2% of voters had participated. For illustration – the first, founding elections of 1990 had a turnout of 95.4% of voters, 84.20% of voters attended the 1992 elections and turnout further dropped to 75.7% in 1994. After the 1998 elections, turnout dropped again and literally fell in the upcoming years. Since 2006, the parliamentary elections in Slovakia have not exceeded 60% level of voter turnout. This disparity in electoral turnout therefore raises the question: what led to such massive mobilization of voters in 1998? It was largely the activity of NGOs.

Table 1 – Voter turnout in Slovak parliamentary elections

Parliamentary elections (year)	Voter turnout in %
1990	95,4
1992	84,2

1994	75,7
1998	84,2
2002	70,1
2006	54,7
2010	58,8
2012	59,1
2016	59,8

Source: Voľby do Národnej rady Slovenskej republiky, 2020

The most important pre-election projects were the Civic Campaign 98 (OK98) and the Rock of the Elections 98 (Rock Volieb 98). OK98 was created as a platform associating NGOs with the aim of contributing to active involvement of citizens in the electoral process. The campaign aimed to mobilize and educate voters, as well as to monitor the electoral process. (Bútora, 2010) The OK98 was declared by 35 founding NGOs, which showed their distrust to the government at that time, and the number of member organizations almost tripled in a few months. Rock Volieb 98 had a similar goal - ensuring maximum participation of young people aged 18-25 in the upcoming parliamentary elections. Educating youth on how to be capable citizens is also important in current and modern democracies, as the 2016 presidential elections in the U.S.A. have shown that productive citizenship is not always a matter of course. (Rebell, 2018) In 1998 Slovakia, this was done through rock concerts, which included discussions about society, elections and their importance for the future of the country, and the life of every citizen (Kampaň Rock volieb má presvedčiť najmä prvovoličov, aby išli voliť., 1998). In addition to the media campaign and organizing concerts, discussions and spreading of educational materials were also done by the "traveling bus", which travelled through 22 cities across Slovakia with many stops in nearby towns and villages.

Confirmation of foreign funding of the anti-government campaign is also found in the statement of journalist Martin Šimečka, who confirmed the engagement of NGOs in the 1998 elections at the public event "Otvorene o extrémizme" in 2017 in town of Čadca, during the discussion: „Probably the financial support provided by Soros to NGOs campaigning against Mečiar... without foreign funding we might not have been able to do it. (Soros pomohol poraziť Mečiara - Šimečka, Smatana, Mečiar., 2018)

The power of NGOs to influence policy was shown in the 1998 elections. Organizations directly not involved in politics expressed their ability to change it through influencing the citizens. However, the legitimacy of such campaigns may raise questions and doubts, especially when funding comes from foreign sources. The 1998 political change is broadly perceived positively - former government was openly crossing the borders of democracy, but the situation may be different. Non-governmental organizations can hypothetically act with the support of foreign entities in order to destabilize the country, and transform the government for their own benefits.

## 6 Financing of NGOs after the 1998 elections

Thus, an important question awaiting the new government was to find a way of funding NGOs that would involve citizens in a way other than direct donation. After decades in totalitarian regime, donation and philanthropy was not widespread among Slovak citizens. Therefore, the mechanism of tax assignments has been introduced into the Slovak legislation, which provided citizens with the possibility to give part of their income tax to a selected NGO or other approved entity. The taxpayer assigns a part of the tax which he must pay - if he does not state any recipient, the full amount is paid to the government. This mechanism was launched in 2002 and has gained large popularity among citizens and NGOs since then. It has also

undergone many changes, and at the present time, assignments are also possible for legal entities (companies).

Under current legislation, a physical person may assign a 2% share of the paid tax. If he / she submits a confirmation of volunteering for at least 40 hours, he / she may assign up to 3%. This part of tax is transferable to one beneficiary, if the amount is at least 3 €. For legal entities the conditions are slightly different, they can assign 2% of their paid tax only if they have donated at least 0.5% of this paid tax to other entities during the current taxation period. In case they have not donated the corresponding amount, they can only assign 1% of the paid tax. However, they may distribute the amount among several beneficiaries, but only if the amount for each beneficiary is at least €8 (Act No. 595/2003 Coll.) Currently, there are 14 915 NGOs on the list of beneficiaries, which is approximately 12 times more than in 2002, when there were 1 250 beneficiaries listed. During the 2017 taxation period, 63.27 million € was transferred through this mechanism. (Asignácia dane., 2019). As we can see in the table below, the income of NGOs has an increasing nature and hence independence from foreign funding was secured also by this mechanism, to some extent.

Table 2 - Summary income of Slovak NGOs from tax assignment

Taxation period	Amount of assigned finances
2002	1.16 mil. €
2003	1.37 mil. €
2004	19.18 mil. €
2005	22.72 mil. €
2006	29.12 mil. €
2007	31.92 mil. €
2008	35.70 mil. €
2009	54.39 mil. €
2010	43.91 mil. €
2011	40.39 mil. €
2012	42.14 mil. €
2013	48.81 mil. €
2014	52.12 mil. €
2015	48.43 mil. €
2016	60.93 mil. €
2017	63.27 mil. €

Source: Asignácia dane, 2020.

## 7 Conclusion

While NGOs have no direct impact on political decision-making and the government, they have an impact on citizens as they are opinion-forming, integrating and socializing. The citizens, in a role of voters, have this influence through the election of their political representatives. The 1998 elections demonstrate the non-negligible impact of NGOs on citizens. In addition to high voter turnout, the change of political leaders and the switch of government policy from isolated to pro-European were also ensured. However, NGOs would not be able to finance such extensive pre-election activity without foreign help - financial donations from foundations and funds mostly from the US. The question of legitimacy is appropriate in such case, since it was, a foreign activity to bring significant political change in the country. In this respect, domestic NGO funding is more acceptable and should be a matter of course in every healthy democracy. However, donation and philanthropy were still under-used in Slovak society at the end of the 1990s, which was compensated by the introduction of tax assignment mechanism. Thanks to this mechanism as well as financial support from the European Union, financing of NGOs is much smaller problem than in the past.

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