



Weekly Briefing

Slovakia Society briefing:
Think-tanks and NGOs in Slovakia
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Think-tanks and NGOs in Slovakia

Similar to other Central and Eastern European countries, think-tanks and NGOs in Slovakia have sprung up after the transition to democracy in the late 80s and early 90s, seeking to aid the transformation of the country through influencing the policy-making and contributing to an informed public discussion. After the end of the turbulent era when NGOs formed a united front against the authoritarian tendencies of the Mečiar government, the environment for their functioning has gradually become more forthcoming and healthy. However, as a reaction to recent public demonstrations and political crisis, NGOs have become politically controversial again, with the former Prime Minister leading the calls for their stricter controls.

History and the current situation of think-tanks and NGOs in Slovakia

In Slovakia, and in the whole region of Central and Eastern Europe, think-tanks have started to appear after the downfall of the communist regimes in late 80s. The main role of the newly formed think-tanks was to assist in the troubled process of democratic transition and give input for the informed policy-making. Throughout the 1990s, the whole NGO sector was very much engaged in the political struggle against the then-PM Vladimír Mečiar, who exhibited strong authoritarian tendencies and during his rule Slovakia faced the threat of international isolation with doors to the EU and NATO slowly closing. Mečiar's government was openly hostile to NGOs and wanted to limit space for their functioning.

After the 1998 elections when Mečiar was ousted, the environment for NGOs has become gradually better. The NGOs have become a partner rather than an enemy of the government. In 2001, a governmental advisory body – The Governmental Council for Non-Governmental Organizations was established. In

2010, the government created a post of the plenipotentiary of the government for the development of civil society. Furthermore, with the accession to the EU NGOs have undergone the process of Europeanization and the access to European funds has increased the share of public funding. Many of the representatives of think-tanks have also moved into the field of politics. For example, the architect of Slovak economic reforms Ivan Mikloš originally headed a conservative economic think tank.

Currently, there are 6 main types of financing for NGOs in Slovakia: tax assignment mechanism at 2%; voluntary private donations and corporate philanthropy; public financing from foreign sources (Norway and Swiss funds); public financing from European structural funds; public financing from ministries' financing mechanisms; local government financing. Another source of financing are the profits stemming from an organization's work.

According to the latest rating "Global Go To Think-tank Index" published annually by the University of Pennsylvania, there is no Slovak think-tank among the best 150 think-tanks in the world. The highest ranked Slovak think-tank is the F.A. Hayek Foundation, which is ranked on the 122nd place among the non-US organizations listed. Other ranked Slovak think-tanks in various lists are the Slovak Foreign Policy Association (SFPA), Slovak Governance Institute (SGI), GLOBSEC Policy Institute, Institute of Asian Studies (IAS), Institute of Economic and Social Studies (INESS), Institute for Public Affairs (IVO) and Centre for European Affairs (CEA). Therefore, it can be argued that Slovak think-tanks are not major actors on a global scale. Nevertheless, some of them have built a significant reputation in the immediate region.

Most of the think-tanks in Slovakia have been dealing with social and economic issues. The other important group of think-tanks focus on the issues of governance, fight against corruption, foreign and security policy, ethnic relations etc. Think-tanks promoting liberal economic policy have traditionally enjoyed a dominant position in Slovakia and have also contributed to Slovak economic reforms. In general, Slovak think-tanks have promoted policies on the liberal part

of the spectrum throughout their existence. In terms of foreign policy think-tanks, basically all of them have been stalwart supporters of the trans-Atlantic orientation of the Slovak foreign policy. With the growth of concerns about Russia's information warfare in (Central) Europe since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Slovak foreign policy and security think-tanks have been engaged in various activities designed to counter Russian propaganda and, in a more wider sense, to instill self-identification with the Western geopolitical space as represented by EU and NATO among the population, especially the youth.

An interesting positive development in the past few years has been the proliferation of internal advisory bodies within the ministries, which could be classified as government think-tanks as studied by Sedlačko and Staroňová. The mission of the bodies is to provide scientific policy advice based on technical analysis and thus provide for an informed political debate. This process has been part of a general professionalization of the policy making process in Slovakia. All the ministries (except for the Ministry of Defense) and also the Government Office have by now established internal advisory bodies. One of the most notable ones is the analytical unit "Value for Money" that has been established under the Ministry of Finance. Its experts have, among other results, issued analytical work that has undermined the financial rationale of the Ministry of Transport's plans for the construction of highways. This has manifested the potential of analytical bodies to openly contend political decisions on the basis of expert knowledge and has thus contributed to the professionalization and transparency of the policy making process.

Recent issues

In the recent years, NGOs in Slovakia including but not limited to think-tanks have faced political pressure. The main point of contention has been the foreign funding of organizations and their alleged working "against Slovakia's interests". The right-extremist parliamentary party Kotleba – People's Party Our Slovakia put forward a legislative proposal to designate foreign-funded NGOs as foreign

agents. While accusations against NGOs have been a staple for extremist parties and authoritarian regimes, they have recently been also taken up by the “mainstream”.

In spring 2018, the anti-government demonstrations erupted in Slovakia, sparked by the murder of an investigative journalist who had, amongst other scandals, uncovered the ties of people from the Prime Minister Róbert Fico’s close circle to the Italian mafia. Fico was finally pressured to stand down from the position of Prime Minister, but has remained the head of the strongest party SMER. Fico has claimed that the demonstrations were actually premeditated and has even since repeatedly accused non-governmental organizations of plotting the overthrow of his government, funded by the money of the American philanthropist George Soros. Soros and his funding for various causes around the globe has long been a point of focus for extremists and conspiracy theorists. In neighboring Hungary, the conspiracy has been elevated to the official stance of the government. Yet in Slovakia it was the first time it has been voiced by the Prime Minister.

Fico has declared the intention to closely review the financing of Slovak NGOs and determine the origin of their funds. As a response to Fico’s vitriolic rhetoric against NGOs, 30 representatives from various organizations penned a common statement pinpointing the fact that only 6% of funds for NGOs comes from foreign sources. Moreover, most of these are funds from the EU, EEA and Norway grants. The representatives have also argued that Slovak NGOs are closely regulated by the Slovak laws and publish yearly reports that transparently disclose their financing.

Finally, the revision of the law governing NGOs that passed the parliament in October did not include provisions about their financing. The new law only provides for a creation of a single register listing NGOs with the stated goal of introducing order and transparency into the NGO sector. Before, there was no legal requirement to record data on statutory bodies and members of the statutory bodies of these organizations. The final version of the law was largely supported

by the NGO sector. Zuzana Wienk, director of the anti-corruption organization Alliance Fair-play has said that the new measures could actually make it easier for NGOs to get through necessary bureaucratic procedures. Still, there have been signals that the ruling party SMER wants to make further legislative action designed to tighten the space for NGO activities.

Conclusion

The situation of Slovak NGO and think-tank has undergone many changes since the democratic transformation almost 30 years ago. Today, they enjoy a generally favorable environment beneficial for their healthy functioning and further growth. Even the government has created institutional space for the semi-independent advisory bodies that contribute to the professionalization of policy debate and policy-making process. However, as demonstrated by the anti-NGO rhetoric of the former Prime Minister Fico, Slovakia is also not immune from attacks against the activities of these actors, as we have seen in the neighboring Hungary. If this rhetoric continues to get support from the highest political circles, the NGO and think-tank environment in Slovakia could see significant setbacks.