

DEFUNDING¹ OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS IN SLOVAKIA IN 2024-2025

or

How the fourth government of Robert Fico restricted access to resources for non-governmental organizations working in human rights, culture, the environment, and development aid in 2024-2025

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¹ Defunding: state-controlled deliberate reduction of funding for non-governmental non-profit organizations, achieved through a combination of various steps and measures aimed at reducing the access of all or some non-governmental non-profit organizations to public resources

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1. Introduction

1.1. Public Funding and the Non-Profit Sector

Public funding is a standard source of support for non-governmental, non-profit organizations. Globally it accounts for between 25% and 65% of non-profit sector revenues. In continental Western Europe, non-profit organizations are important partners of the state in the provision of public services. In countries with the welfare state tradition (e.g., Germany, France, Great Britain, Netherlands) as well as in Austria with its corporatist tradition, the share of government revenue in nonprofit organizations approaches 60%. (Salamon et al., 2017)

In Scandinavia, however, the social democratic version of the welfare state considers the non-profit sector to be more important for its expressive role than for service provision, though the sector is still significant in terms of employment. In general, public funding for non-profit organizations expresses the belief that the strengths of the public sector complement the weaknesses of the non-profit sector, and vice versa (Salamon and Sokolowski, 2017; Anheier and Toepler, 2019).

Most post-communist states' non-profit sectors have a share of public funding of their total revenues below 35%. They also have a lower employment rate in the nonprofit sector than most Western countries. These parameters indicate **a statist pattern in civil society development** (Salamon and Sokolowski, 2017). Data in the early 2000s indicated this pattern in Russia, Slovakia, but also Poland and

Spain. However, some post-communist countries, such as Hungary and the Czech Republic, have even then exceeded 50% public funding in non-profit sector, and the number of people employed in the nonprofit sector there was higher compared to countries with the statist pattern.

Over the past 15 years, the share of public funds in the nonprofit sector's revenues has risen in Slovakia — from 38% in 2013 (Strečanský, Murray Svidroňová, and Andrejkovič 2017) to nearly 50% in 2021 (Svidroňová and Jakuš Muthová, 2022). This would suggest a gradual development of partnership between the public and nonprofit sectors, and a partial retreat from the statist framework. Contrary to this trend, employment in the nonprofit sector in Slovakia is not growing significantly, suggesting that Slovakia is somewhere between the statist and the welfare partnership patterns of civil society development in the social origins of civil society typology (Salamon, *ibid.*).

According to various estimates, public funds flowing into Slovakia's non-governmental sector may amount to approximately EUR 400-500 million per year. A significant share of these funds flow to the nonprofit sector in a **decentralized manner through the tax designation mechanism.** (Török and Strečanský, 2023). In 2023, this amounted to EUR 100 million (Brozmanová Gregorová and Murray Svidroňová, 2024). The majority flows in a centralized manner as **subsidies, contributions, grants, or service contributions** (approximately €300 million on average from 2020 to 2024) (Sloboda *et al.*, 2023; Šimeková, 2025)². In 2019, the estimated amount of private resources for financing the nonprofit sector was around EUR 250 million. This figure may have increased since then, albeit not

significantly, and thus may represent 30-40 % of the sector's total revenues (Strečanský, 2020).

Regardless of the amounts of public funds flowing to the sector, the question of why a partnership of the public and nonprofit sectors is or could be a sound policy approach still needs to be answered. Current knowledge agrees that the rationale for investing public resources in nonprofit organizations is based on two premises:

1. *The interdependence of the public and nonprofit sectors in delivering public value to society:* Neither sector alone can maximize public value in many areas given its own sectoral limitations. A whole-of-society approach is therefore a key in many areas, including traditional ones such as social affairs, culture, and education, as well as areas where civil society has not traditionally been involved, such as defense, security, competitiveness, and innovation.
2. *Pluralism and diversity are essential values for social cohesion, good governance, accountability, and the quality of democracy.* Civil society embodies these values more than the state or the market (OECD, 2003, 2020, 2025a).

² A significant portion of public resources flowing into the nonprofit sector is tied to sports. State contributions to churches and religious societies are not included in this overview.

These two points offer an answer to the question why efforts to foster a partnership between the public sector and the nonprofit sector constitute a sound public policy. Therefore, despite short-term political turbulence and the apparent complexity of the relationship between the state and the non-profit sector in Slovakia, this relationship has, overall, followed the European trajectory over the past twenty years in terms of strengthening partnership and moving towards, if not a continental, then at least toward a **hybrid model** in which the state is an important partner of the non-profit sector and their relationship moves towards complementarity rather than contestation³ or substitution⁴.

3 Contestation either as a friendly competition, or adversarial conflict between the state and non-profit sector

4 Substitution either as a replacement of the state by the non-profit sector due to failing or incompetent public sector to deliver public value while facing a strong demand from the public, or a libertarian policy that reduces the public sector financially, leaving the most of the production of public value to private sector – profit and non-profit – but without public funding.

1.2. Defunding as a Subject of Research

This analysis examines the phenomenon of “**defunding**,” phenomenon i.e. the deliberate state-directed reduction of funding allocated to the non-profit sector which occurs through a combination of various steps and measures aimed at restricting the access to public resources for all or some non-governmental, nonprofit organizations.

From a macroeconomic perspective, the extent of defunding analyzed here is less significant and may not be reflected in administrative data or nonprofit sector statistics. However, its significance is fundamental when examined in greater detail within micro-environments reveals its fundamental significance. The importance of defunding is determined by its nature and focus rather than by a purely quantitative perspective.

Changes in financial flows of public resources are a natural and legitimate part of every government’s policy toolkit. What is exceptional about the defunding that took place in Slovakia in 2024 and 2025 is its scale and scope. On the other hand, and perhaps more alarming, is the way the state implemented and continues to implement defunding thereby undermining the principles of good governance, rationality, proportionality, justification, partnership, and decency.

The analysis focuses on four areas: human rights, culture, the environment, and development aid. The authors of the individual chapters are experts who have been active in their respective fields for many years and are well acquainted with the complexities of the relationship between the public sector and the non-governmental sector. They strive to view their fields objectively and factually,

describing what happened and how, as well as what consequences this has and may have.

In each thematic chapter, authors examine the extent of defunding and attempt to quantify it. They identify procedural and process-related aspects, such as how the defunding took place, what administrative procedures or combinations thereof were used to achieve the goals and, who the main actors were in these processes and decisions. They also focus on capturing the impacts of defunding, although many may manifest later and may not be immediately visible. In the analysis, they identify the consequences of defunding not only for the non-governmental organizations themselves but also for their broader environment and relationships with other socio-economic partners, as well as for the quality and scope of cooperation between the third sector and public administration in achieving public value in specific areas. They identify the responses of non-governmental organizations to the situation that has arisen and propose recommendations aimed at the internal operations of the third sector and at public administration, public policy, local governments, and the private sector.

Interpretations of the actual reasons why defunding occurred or is occurring are not the main focus of this study, although they are just as worthy of attention as the defunding itself and are partially mentioned in the text. The actual reasons are usually obscured by secondary and formal justifications and therefore would require a deeper analysis. The main, though not explicitly acknowledged reason for defunding, is the effort by certain politicians or politically appointed senior government officials to silence or suppress and eliminate, the critical voice of civil society in public policy from the public square and replace it with loyal partners or otherwise like-minded entities. This reason—the suppression of critical voices in the public sphere—is not usually stated openly by political leaders, but remains hidden in neutral statements about fiscal consolidation

or the necessity of creating new support mechanisms. However, it manifests itself in the public sphere even in emotionally charged remarks that make sweeping generalizations about the waste of public funds by non-governmental organizations.

To further highlight this Orwellian “doublespeak,” Robert Fico’s government stated in its Manifesto for 2023-2027 that it recognizes the need for ongoing cooperation with non-governmental partners, the government’s readiness to support the cultural sector, systematically improve the social standing of cultural workers in society and financially support non-governmental organizations in the humanitarian, environmental, and educational fields.

This analysis serves as a tool for exposing this “double speak.” In addition, it also exposes the tools used by Robert Fico’s fourth government in its efforts to politically control the public sphere and limit the plurality and voice of civil society in public discourse. The analysis serves as a record and testimony of the harsh, indecent, and inadequate methods and practices. Practices through which a single political establishment seeks to control public institutions and decision-making processes that should serve society and taxpayers impartially, without partisan affiliation and contribute to the common good and the public interest.

Editor’s note: Finally, terms such as “non-governmental,” “non-profit,” “third sector,” and “civil society” are used interchangeably to describe the organizational space between the family, the state, and the market in which active citizens engage and which is characterized by separation from the state, non-profit status and self-governance; it is governed by private law, fulfills a public benefit purpose, protects public interest and exhibits a certain degree of voluntarism.

2. Key Conclusions and Findings

2.1. Extent of Defunding

The total extent of defunding of non-governmental organizations from public funds for **2024 and 2025, based on analyses conducted in the areas of human rights, culture, the environment, and development aid, can be estimated at EUR 15–16 million.**

In the area of human rights (subsidy scheme of the Ministry of Justice of the Slovak Republic), there was no reduction in the total allocation for calls for proposals in 2024 and 2025. In 2024, however, the call was canceled and then re-announced, while **the process of evaluation applications was modified between the cancellation of the call and the announcement of the new one.** The cancellation of the 2024 resulted in a **direct shortfall in planned support amounting to 769,500 euros.** Although the call was later re-announced, the originally evaluated applications were not reassessed; organizations had to reapply, and the call had already been fundamentally changed in terms of application evaluation. At the same time, due to so-called ‘selective defunding’ – that is, the non-awarding of grants to organizations with high project quality – **funding was reduced by an additional 305,501 euros.** Since the amount of funds allocated for grants was adjusted for inflation in 2024 and 2025, **the total defunding in the human rights sector can be estimated at 1.1-1.2 million euros.**

In the area of culture, specifically the Arts Council, the amount of funds available for redistribution has, paradoxically, increased

from 20 million to 30 million euros. Nonetheless, for the year 2025, the amount of defunding for non-governmental organizations operating **in the field of culture can be estimated at 3.5 million euros** as a result of negative interventions (non-support, reduction of grants) by the Arts Council’s new composition of its board. These interventions occurred following recommendations from evaluation committees and concerned 513 projects under various calls for proposals during the period from January to June 2025 alone. Based on developments in the first half of 2025, it can be assumed that a similar trend continued in the second half of the year. However, it is not possible to quantify this at the time of this report’s preparation, as no information is available regarding the requested and supported amounts for allocations from July through December 2025.

The total amount of defunding of environmental NGOs **in 2024 and 2025 can be estimated at 5,823,000 euros** and consists of an 823,000 euro shortfall from the Green Education Fund (ZVF), whereas NGOs had previously drawn funds from this source in the amount of approximately 410,000 euros per year amounting from the ZVF at that time. The main source of the shortfall, amounting to **5 million euros** in this area, is the state’s refusal to co-finance environmental projects supported by LIFE program.

The total amount of defunding for NGOs in the **in the development aid and humanitarian cooperation sector for 2024 and 2025 can be estimated at 4.5–5.5 million euros** due to a reduction in the total budget allocated to SlovakAid calls for proposals, as well as the reallocation of a portion of resources toward business projects.

2.2. Defunding Processes

The methods by which defunding occurs can be categorized as follows:

- ⊗ **Administrative cuts to budgets allocated for calls and programs.** This approach was used in the areas of development cooperation, the environment, and human rights (for 2026). At the same time, however, there have been instances of augmented budgets, as evidenced by the Arts Council in 2025, though defunding took a different path there.
- ⊗ **Cancellation of planned and expected calls for proposals.** This approach was used primarily in the field of human rights (cancellation of the call for proposals at the Ministry of Justice in 2024). The cancellation of the call for proposals was unexpected, and it occurred the day before the scheduled proposal presentations.
- ⊗ **Selective decision-making.** This approach to defunding was used in the fields of human rights and culture where there was a significant reduction in the diversity of recipients through the redistribution of the same amount to a smaller number of recipients and, conversely, an increase in the amount of support to others.
- ⊗ Selective decision-making was facilitated by **changes in the composition of the bodies responsible for decision-making.** This is particularly evident in the areas of development cooperation, culture, and human

rights funding. This approach led to an increase in politicization and centralization of decision-making.

- ⊗ **Alterations to the established regulations** represent another way in which defunding has occurred. Whether through changes to applicant eligibility that excluded NGOs (e.g. by justification that schools are able to provide environmental education without the help of environmental NGOs). Or **changes in a ministerial decree defining the rules about provision of subsidies from the Ministry of Justice** (by amending the Decree No. 129/2024 Coll. of the Ministry of Justice of the Slovak Republic). These changes significantly altered the rules for deciding on the allocation of subsidies resulting in a restriction on the participation of representatives of civil society and strengthened the participation of the state administration in decision-making, reduced transparency and modified the procedural rules for evaluation in a way that degraded its quality by eliminating the two-round evaluation. A separate issue was the process of preparing and approving changes to the rules, which was, for example, in the case of Arts Council, non-transparent and without the participation of the professional community.
- ⊗ **Limits on co-financing.** This defunding mechanism was used in the environmental sector in connection with the LIFE program, which requires co-financing from public sources, partly because LIFE projects are by design implemented in collaboration with state institutions.

2.3. Consequences and Impacts

In many cases, the effects of defunding are evident in the areas that were targeted and where non-governmental non-profit organizations were active. These impacts include a decline in protection of human rights, reduced nature conservation, cancellation and reduction of many regular cultural events, and a decrease of the volume of services in the field of development and humanitarian aid.

The reduction in funding for non-governmental actors in these areas has a direct impact on the non-governmental organizations themselves, their capacity, and operations. A direct consequence is the need to lay off employees, the overburdening of remaining staff, and, in many cases, the need to restructure organizations due to changes in planning horizons and disruptions to the continuity of long-term programs in particular. In the case of development organizations, there is a noticeable decline in their competitiveness in the international arena. In the case of environmental organizations, the impacts are particularly noticeable among smaller organizations, as well as those that, due to the loss of co-financing, are losing funding from European sources.

From a broader perspective, defunding, combined with stigmatization and denunciation, also results in a so-called *chilling effect*. Some CSOs stop applying for public funding because they believe that their applications will either be rejected or, conversely, that receiving such funding will expose them to harassing audits and discrediting. Defunding also contributes to the delegitimization of CSOs and undermines their reputation as actors incapable of protecting human rights or caring for the environment without support from public funds.

This is reflected, for example, in the reluctance of employees of state institutions to communicate with CSOs.

The consequences of defunding extend beyond NGOs' organizational dimensions and are also evident in the broader institutional environment with which NGOs collaborate. For example, local governments that have benefited significantly from environmental NGOs' environmental education activities are affected. Also affected are recipients of development and humanitarian aid through restrictions on NGOs' operations directly in the field or on their cooperation with international partners. In the area of development cooperation and humanitarian aid, defunding results in the dismantling of functional infrastructure for partnership and cooperation between the state and civil society through the weakening of the capacities of the umbrella organization of development organizations (Ambrela) and by restricting access to public policy-making processes.

The public sector's financial balance is also impacted, as the suspension of state co-financing has meant that a significant portion of the funds that NGOs secured through international competition for nature conservation projects will not reach Slovakia. This includes flows to state institutions, local governments, or local companies, as they would otherwise have received these funds. At the same time, it limits the possibility of participating in new international cooperation projects in the future and the defunding thus directly contributes to the isolation of Slovakia from the broader international context.

Paradoxically, defunding has also sparked a backlash and mobilization within the very circles it was intended to target. There is a unification process in the cultural community, a convergence of independent and state-funded culture through joint statements and protests, as well as increased mobilization towards securing other sources of funding from the public (crowdfunding) or the private sector.

2.4. Responses from Civil Society

Civil society, as indicated in the previous section, is responding to the current situation with increased activity. The cultural community is in a constant state of alert and is reacting strongly to all authoritarian and unprofessional interventions in cultural governance. Protest rallies, marches, and events – including public discussions and forums – are being organized. Appeals, statements, open letters, and petitions are being drafted. Information is being corrected, falsehoods are being refuted, and hoaxes are being debunked. Background materials and analyses are prepared for proposals and contributions to public debate; developments in various areas are monitored, and procedural violations are documented. Complaints are filed with the prosecutor's office, the Supreme Audit Office, the Public Defender of Rights, and other institutions. NGOs create know-how and tools how to help themselves and adapt to the new situation, organize crowdfunding and build relationships with donors. There are also attempts to negotiate with partners from the government.

At the strategic level, responses can be observed, for example, in efforts to maintain partnerships with the state administration (development aid), building relationships and cooperation with partners from other sectors (companies, entrepreneurs, academia, research), or creating spaces for critical reflection on the situation and internal strengthening of individual communities. A key part of this effort involves fostering international collaboration and establishing project partnerships with partners from abroad.

2.5. Recommendations

Key recommendations for NGOs include not letting themselves be broken or divided, not giving up, and continuing their work even under difficult conditions, as well as collaborating, networking, and coordinating with one another. Part of the recommendations aimed at internal strengthening also involves paying attention to the well-being and mental health of organizational staff, who are under significant pressure. Equally important is the recommendation to diversify funding sources through alternative grant strategies, partnerships with companies, fundraising and crowdfunding campaigns, and building networks of allies and supporters. Finally, it is advisable getting involved in European consortia.

Strategic recommendations for NGOs include increasing the visibility and transparency of the results of their work, so that donors and the public understand why their activities are meaningful. It is also important to create solidarity mechanisms and reserve support funds for similar situations with the aim of increasing the ecosystem resilience of the non-governmental sector and the support infrastructure for civil society.

Recommendations for public administration include the need to restore trust, build partnerships with the non-governmental environment on an equal footing, and generally normalize relations to a standard form. Part of these recommendations is also the creation of frameworks for long-term and predictable cooperation with multi-year funding and increased transparency of decision-making processes, criteria, and focus on results and their quality.

Another significant set of recommendations for public administration concerns improving the funding system – both in terms of process by involving civil society in its development and by increasing the volume of allocations, for example through automatic adjustment for inflation. One of the recommendations in this area is to ensure more balanced multi-source funding for culture as well as to establish safeguards for the independence of public cultural funds. Last but not least, the recommendations for public administration also mention the need for strategic targeting and capacity building to implement programs in specific areas. One of the recommendations is also directed at the European Commission to create a co-financing option for LIFE-type projects, that can be used in cases of uncooperative governments.

The recommendations for local governments and cities focus on strengthening systemic support for infrastructure and public services in specific areas, especially in culture, creating transparent grant and subsidy schemes, and providing multi-year support as well as offering various forms of non-financial assistance. A similar **recommendation is also directed at the private sector**, where it is recommended to support long-term partnerships as well as informal groups of active citizens, with the aim of increasing the resilience of local democracy, and the development of the local economy.

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Ludovít Nápoký is an activist and manager active in the field of independent art and culture. Since 2022, he has been the coordinator of Anténa – network for independent culture, which brings together 34 independent cultural centers in Slovakia. Through Anténa, he advocates for better cultural policies and a more sustainable cultural environment. Since 2017, he has also been part of A4 – space for contemporary culture in Bratislava, where he serves as executive director and project manager. In addition, Ludovít is a founding member of the Open Culture! platform and a committee member of the Culture Strike movement.

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5. About the Platform for Democracy

The Platform for Democracy is an umbrella organization that represents more than 80 civil society organizations and initiatives. It actively contributes to the protection and development of civil society in Slovakia. The Platform advocates for the positive development of the institutional, legislative, and financial framework for the functioning of civil society organizations in Slovakia. It strengthens the integrity, transparency, and cohesion of the civil sector and creates space for cooperation among civic initiatives and organizations.

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