

# Vibrant Civil Society in Slovakia? NGOs Supported by the CEE Trust Are Still Largely Dependent on External Financing After 20 Years\*

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**Abstract:** Large-scale funding of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) by states and corporations (external funding) can impact their functioning and diminish their civic character. It is therefore of importance to understand whether and how NGOs can become financially independent of external funding. In Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), many NGOs were kickstarted by large sums from foreign state and corporate sponsors with the hopes of creating an independent civil society reliant on domestic sources: a ‘vibrant civil society’. However, did these NGOs become financially independent? This article examines a sample of 14 NGOs in Slovakia financed by the Trust for Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE Trust), an organisation started by six private American foundations. Their funding is compared year by year, and it is found that between 2000 and 2020, foreign funding decreased from 97.2% to 55.2%, and corporate funding dropped from 92.1% to 31.2%. However, public sector funding increased from 1.2% to 35.6%. Civic funding remained low over the entire period, rising from 0.1% to 8.6%. Thus, external corporate funding was largely replaced by another type of external funding (public funding), and the role of one major foreign donor (the Trust) was largely replaced by another major foreign donor (European Union (EU) and European Economic Area (EEA) funds). The results suggest that it is difficult for NGOs kickstarted by external funding to achieve financial independence, at least on a timescale of 20 years.

**Keywords:** civil society, non-governmental organisation funding, financial independence, civic funding, income diversification

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## **Introduction**

A functioning civil society is considered an essential element of democracy. Its traditional role is often seen as counterbalancing the influence of the state with its potential power abuses on the one hand and the interests of big business with its strong lobby on the other (Habermas, 1989; James & Caliguire, 1993; Wang, 2006). To fulfil this role, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) need autonomy in operation, which is least at risk when they are financially independent of both the state and corporations (and other entities controlled or financed by them) and have their own sources of funding (Banks et al., 2015; Diamond, 1994). Such independence would also likely benefit the plurality of the civic sector (with no particular ideology being disproportionately supported by large donors) and enable NGOs to focus on creating innovative solutions instead of catering to sponsors' needs and bureaucratic requirements (Ochman, 2019).

An often-used strategy to kickstart civil society in countries where it is just emerging is to source large sums of money from external subjects (mostly private companies and states) to fund NGOs. While this approach has its positives, mainly enabling civil society to sustain its activities, it can also pose some risks. It may damage civil society in the long run, making NGOs accustomed to or even dependent on external aid. Such NGOs may not be able or willing to seek or effectively build up other sources of funding. It may also support NGOs that do not resonate with the local population or may even seek to support interests that run against prevailing public opinion (Demenet, 2001; Edwards & Hulme, 1998; Henderson, 2002; McMahan & Niparko, 2022).

The question of whether large-scale external funding may lead to an independent and functioning civil society can be approached from various sides (financial independence, organisational independence, democratic legitimacy, etc.). Countries that have only recently transitioned to democracy – the buildup of their civil societies concentrated in a rather short period for which data is usually readily accessible – provide ample opportunities to study this research problem. Since large-scale external investments into civil society were characteristic of the former Eastern Bloc countries (McMahon & Niparko, 2022; Pickering, 2022; Pietrzyk-Reeves, 2022), answering these questions is relevant for the entire region and may reveal insights on many important issues.

This article specifically examines financial independence, under which we understand the capacity of NGOs to acquire funding from sources other than states and corporations. The funding of a group of NGOs in Slovakia kickstarted by large external financing is examined: 25 NGOs supported since the early 2000s by the CEE Trust (for 14 of which there are quite comprehensive data). More than 20 years have passed since. What shape does their financing take now? Were they able to build up their own capacities based on community funding? Have they become more financially independent of states and corporations, or do they still largely rely on external actors? We focus solely on financial independence and do

not address organisational independence or analyse in detail the exact nature of these NGOs' activities. In addition, as detailed below, although we primarily use a quantitative approach, the scope of our data is limited, and our conclusions are arguably closer to a case study in terms of their generalisability.

Large-scale external investment into civil society in the 90s and the decrease in foreign funding in recent years are patterns typical of the former Eastern Bloc countries (McMahon & Niparko, 2022; Pickering, 2022; Sundstrom et al., 2022). While several authors have noted that activists often compensate for lack of funds by using new forms of activism (McMahon & Niparko, 2022; Sundstrom et al., 2022), to our knowledge, no detailed studies were done specifically examining the extent to which the NGOs were able to substitute external financing. Thus, answering the stated questions is relevant for the CEE region and may shed light on many important issues.

### *The financing of civil society and its independence*

As with all organisations, civil society organisations need financial resources to function properly. These can be acquired from several sources, each having its benefits and downsides (Dluhá & Marček, 2009). Financial sources can be broadly divided into external (spanning various subjects such as foreign or domestic governments, corporations, or other NGOs, which, in turn, can have various sources of financing) or internal, which derive from the activity of the NGO itself, such as membership fees or income generated by providing services or selling the NGO's property (Laciňák, 2013). In this article, we understand civic funding (small voluntary citizen donations and entities funded predominantly by them) as also part of internal funding since it is endemic to the civic sector. Thus, we contrast it with external funding (from states, corporations, and entities funded predominantly by them).

Many authors have expressed concern that external financing – especially financing provided by states, corporations, and entities financed primarily by them – may potentially adversely influence NGOs' activities. Critics argue that such financing may lead to 'undermining the independence' of NGOs (Bútorá, 1998) and 'political manipulations' (Ghimire, 2006), come with 'strings attached', or at least cause the receiving institutions 'to mute any criticism of the donor' (McGann & Johnstone, 2005). According to Filho and Vargas (2017), such financing can distort 'the very nature of these organizations as representative of interests of society' (p. 2). An often-cited problem is 'donor-centered accountability', which is a shift of accountability from ordinary citizens to state or corporate donors, thus diminishing community participatory processes (Ochman, 2019; Sundstrom et al., 2022).

Other critics stress the changing character of many NGOs due to the 'over-financialization of the environment' (Cerrato & Ferando, 2020). NGOs face strong pressure from globalist, capitalist, and neoliberal discourses, leading them to of-

ten adhere to 'market logic', while alternative visions are 'marginalised' (Cerrato & Ferando, 2020; Ochman, 2019; Vogel, 2016). Functioning in a highly competitive environment may undermine cooperation and lead to a loss of innovation (Ochman, 2019). The fundamental civic character of NGOs may be lost as they become 'professional organizations based on technical competence and cost efficiency' (Ochman, 2019).

Some authors go as far as speaking directly of 'civil society capture'. Vogel (2016) claimed, using the example of Cyprus peacebuilding efforts, that top-down interventions and international donors 'create homogenized discourses that are not representative of the diversity of local notions of peace' and 'tend to support their orthodox top-down approaches from below rather than encouraging the formation of local alternatives' (p. 1–2). Similarly, Kover (2015) stated that civil society in Hungary is captured by the state and church. Simsa (2019) noted indications of civil society capture by the state in Austria.

However, these opinions are not shared by all researchers. Many of them view external funding as a critical enabling factor for civil society (Adolfová, 2009; Strečanský et al., 2017), stressing that it makes possible the development of civil society in an environment where it would otherwise be impossible or take an unfeasible amount of time. As NGOs face the 'fundamental revenue problem' (i.e. practically permanent resource scarcity; Anheier & Themudo, 2004), any resources helping them accomplish their mission are welcome.

External funding may also be crucial when transferring skills related to democracy to countries where the public has had little exposure to democratic government. This notion is personified in the words of George Soros (1991), a major sponsor of NGOs in Eastern Europe:

People who lived their whole lives in a totalitarian system may yearn for open society, but they lack the knowledge and skills to make it come to life. They need help from the outside so their dreams can become reality. (p. 90–91)

Furthermore, since the economic situation is unfavourable in many countries transitioning to democracy, the people will likely often prioritise fulfilling basic economic needs and may not be able or willing to invest in NGOs. Citizens may likewise not be aware of the critical role of democratic public discourse and institutions and, thus, would not be able to sustain these types of activities of their own accord.

Another argument is that NGOs can retain organisational independence (i.e. the discretion to make their own decisions), at least to some degree, despite being financially dependent on external sponsors (Themudo, 2004). Typical strategies include demand-avoidance (in a way that is difficult to discover, NGOs simply do not fulfil the demands of sponsors), 'buffering strategies' (using language and symbolism that attract sponsors but does not significantly impact the NGO's decision-making processes; Ebrahim, 2003), and joining NGO networks or alliances 'to increase their bargaining power with donors' (Themudo, 2004, p. 83).

Resource diversification is probably the most used strategy for decreasing dependence on donors (Crisan & Dan, 2018; Hudock, 1999; Milelu, 2018). When an NGO has many donors, then, although it is generally dependent on external financing, any single donor is, in principle, expendable and, therefore, cannot easily impose its will on the NGO. However, this does not solve the issue where all or a large portion of donors have similar or identical goals. In that case, it is not the dependence on a particular sponsor that is problematic but rather the dependence on a certain type of sponsor.

It can also be argued that external financing is relatively uncontroversial in the case of service NGOs that provide public goods in areas such as healthcare, social support, sports, or public space rejuvenation. However, it may be problematic in cases where NGOs enter the political arena, mainly if external financing disproportionately supports one side of the debate and even more so if foreign funding promotes the minority view on a heated topic (Jurášek, 2021).

Nevertheless, others have implied that citizen funding may contribute to the fragmentation of civil society and the enforcement of particular interests. According to theories such as ethics of recognition (Fraser, 1997; Honneth, 2014), a democratic society depends on inclusion and recognition for all citizens in addition to efforts to secure the good of the whole. However, this may be difficult to achieve by citizen funding alone, especially in countries where various forms of prejudice are widespread.

Although the opinions of authors differ, hardly anyone doubts that financing from states and corporations carries at least some risk and that NGOs financed largely by internal resources and small citizen donations is, *ceteris paribus*, the optimal model, even though this is not easily achieved in practice, given the current circumstances. Even if external financing may seem unavoidable, the question of how to make NGOs at least less dependent on external financing should be asked. To answer this question, it is interesting to examine countries where civil society has been built up in recent decades and study the dynamics of its funding. This brings us to the case of Slovakia.

### *Funding of NGOs in Slovakia*

Before 1989, the conditions for NGOs were generally unfavourable due to the undemocratic regime of Czechoslovakia. There is little information on the financing of NGOs from this period (many functioned outside of the official system), and we did not find any comprehensive study on this topic. However, apart from self-financing and small donations from citizens (Huba, 2008), traces of foreign support for parts of civil society date to this period (Demeš, 2014). For example, the CIA financed the establishment of a Charter 77 documentation centre in 1986, and the BBC and Radio Free Europe paid samizdat authors on a per-article basis (Nezbeda, 2017). By 1989, George Soros had already established his institutions in the USSR, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and even China (Soros, 1991).

After the Velvet Revolution, foreign support intensified, and many major NGOs were established as branches of foreign institutions: Open Society Foundation (Demeš, 2014), Transparency International Slovakia (Transparency International, 2022), and Foundation for a Civil Society (today the Pontis Foundation; Foundation for a Civil Society, 2022), to name a few. There is wide consensus in the literature that foreign financing significantly impacted the development of the Slovak civic sector in the 90s (Adolfová, 2008; Ekopolis, 2003; Reichardt, 2002; Trust, 2004). More than 9,000,000 EUR were invested into civil society in 1998 alone to support election mobilisation projects (sum converted to 2020 EUR; Reichardt, 2002).

However, more detailed research into NGO funding in Slovakia that provides exact numbers is surprisingly sparse. One factor is the dearth of data before 2000. Most major NGOs publish their annual reports only back to the year 2000. The Statistical Office collects some data on NGO funding, but it cannot be viewed at the level of individual NGOs. Kuvíková and Vaceková (2009) and Svidroňová and Vaceková (2012) studied the diversification of financing sources in NGOs. They conducted surveys asking NGOs what types of financing they use. Since the authors only asked whether a particular type of financing was used or not, but not to what extent, it is impossible to determine the proportions of contributions from various sources. For example, 84% of NGOs claimed they used self-financing, but this does not mean that self-financing makes up 84% of their overall funding. Svidroňová and Vaceková (2012) mentioned research from 2009 where NGOs estimated the proportions of various sources of income, but these provided only very broad categories (for example, private funding and individual funding are merged into one category). Other publications that we were able to find dealing with NGO financing in Slovakia are either only theoretical in nature or only reference the aforementioned data (Adolfová, 2008; Kuvíková & Svidroňová, 2013; Strečanský et al., 2017; Svidroňová & Vaceková, 2014; Vaceková & Svidroňová, 2014). Thus, we could not find a published dataset that would allow us to examine changes over time in NGO funding. A good opportunity for such analysis is provided by the data on NGOs supported by the CEE Trust.

### *The CEE Trust*

The Trust for Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe was established in 2000 by six major American foundations (Atlantic Philanthropies, German Marshall Fund of the United States, Ford Foundation, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Open Society Foundations, and Rockefeller Brothers Fund; Trust, 2004). The Trust closed its activities in 2012, dispensing more than 78,000,000 EUR in seven central and Eastern European countries,<sup>1</sup> of which Slovakia was selected as the first for

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<sup>1</sup> The countries were Slovakia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovenia, and Poland.

programme implementation. More than 10,000,000 EUR was allocated in Slovakia alone over 12 years (sums converted to 2020 EUR; Trust, 2013). During the Trust's operation years, its founders continued to financially support other NGOs independently of the Trust's scheme. By the time of its inception, the CEE Trust was by far the largest programme in Slovakia aimed at developing civil society.

The Trust's establishment presented a paradigmatic shift in NGO funding. In the 90s, Western financial support was largely ad hoc and project-oriented, supporting one-time activities, or simply involved transferring resources from the mother organisation to its local branch. However, the Trust spelt its goals in terms of 'long-term sustainability' by 'building infrastructure and capacity' (Trust, 2004), which should allow the NGO to 'operate independently in the future' (Trust, 2013). Instead of supporting short-term projects, the Trust claimed it took the 'long view' and saw itself as a 'bridge for the nonprofit sector to move from reliance on foreign support to increased indigenous and European funding' (Trust, 2004). Its goal was to cultivate 'self-sufficiency and sustainability' to ensure that 'its work will be felt for years to come' (Trust, 2013).

Over its existence, the Trust supported 25 NGOs and one university. The NGOs' areas of interest were variable, but common topics included ecology, good government, anti-corruption, inclusion, integration into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the EU, and global learning. While these NGOs are not a representative sample of all NGOs in Slovakia, they undoubtedly form an influential group. For example, nine out of ten of the most quoted NGOs in the media were financially supported by at least one organisation from our sample.<sup>2</sup> Ekopolis and Open Society Foundation, which were chosen by the Trust as national partnership organisations, also administered NGO support programmes of the EEA funds a few years later, which surpassed the Trust's programme in the overall volume of funding.

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<sup>2</sup> Data aggregated for 2002–2017 based on the analyses of Slovak Press Watch, Medan and Newton Media: <https://spw.blog.sme.sk/c/73682/Kto-su-najcitovanejsi-experti-v-slovenskych-mediach.html>; <https://spw.blog.sme.sk/c/131268/Mediami-najcitovanejsi-experti-rebricke-2007.html>; <https://spw.blog.sme.sk/c/180016/Mediami-najcitovanejsi-experti-rebricke-2008.html>; <https://spw.blog.sme.sk/c/216699/PHorvath-a-VVano-medialne-najcitovanejsimi-expertami-roka-2009.html>; <https://spw.blog.sme.sk/c/252762/Najcitovanejsimi-analytikmi-v-roku-2010-boli-J-Baranek-a-VVano.html>; <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1DVTids4sMChJD-KNYi2WbFkALw44d2HzAjvfxzkM7fs/edit#gid=0>; <https://www.medan.sk/jan-baranek-je-uz-stvrty-rok-najcitovanejsim-analytikom/>; <https://www.newtonmedia.sk/sk/pre-media/tlacove-spravy/v-roku-2015-bol-najcitovanejsim-analytikom-jan-baranek>; <https://www.newtonmedia.sk/sk/pre-media/tlacove-spravy/v-roku-2015-bol-najcitovanejsim-analytikom-jan-baranek>; <https://www.tasr.sk/ots/ots-jan-baranek-po-siedmykrat-najcit/21814-clanok.html>; <https://www.medan.sk/top-trojka-najcitovanejsich-analytikov-za-rok-2017/> (all accessed February 11, 2021).

## **Methods and data**

### *Sample selection*

Our sample consists of all NGOs in Slovakia financially supported by the CEE Trust. Over 12 years, the Trust supported 25 NGOs. The NGOs' annual reports and official websites were examined to retrieve financial information for the period up to 2020. If the NGOs were no longer active, archived versions of their websites were examined. At least partial financial information was retrieved for 14 of the 25 NGOs.

Only annual reports that showed a comprehensive picture of the financing of the NGO in a particular year were used. Some annual reports only named the sponsors without specifying particular sums, while others listed particular sums for some sponsors but not for others. After filtering out incomprehensive annual reports, 186 were left.

As can be seen from Table 1, Ekopolis and Open Society Foundations were by far the largest beneficiaries of donations from the Trust. These finances were further distributed to dozens of NGOs, including ones supported by the Trust directly. For example, Open Society Foundation (OSF) provided more than 163,000 EUR to the Fair Play Alliance, and OSF and Ekopolis together provided more than 587,000 EUR to Citizen and Democracy from 2001 to 2012 (sums converted to 2020 EUR).

### *Financial analysis*

In the annual reports eligible for analysis, all incoming transactions, numbering 3,209, were examined. To avoid duplication when analysing all the NGOs as a whole, all incoming transactions stemming from NGOs in the sample were filtered out, leaving 3,095 transactions. In individual NGO analyses, all incoming transactions were considered. Based on the sponsor, each transaction was classified as belonging to one of three sectors (public, corporate, or civic) or as coming from an unknown sector. This classification was not made based on the sponsor's organisational type but on its dominant source of financing (i.e. an NGO majorly funded by EU funds would be classified as public sector). When the dominant source of financing could not be established, the sponsor was classified as belonging to an unknown sector. The civic sector category included citizen donations, self-financing, tax assignment,<sup>3</sup> and income from organisations financed

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<sup>3</sup> In 2002, the Slovak statute on income tax introduced the possibility for income taxpayers (both natural and legal persons) to assign 2% of their paid income tax (under specific circumstances, slightly more or less) to certain types of NGOs. The usage of this form of financing has been increasing in recent years (Ministerstvo financií Slovenskej republiky, 2022; Rebaták & Bartošová, 2020).

**Table 1. NGOs funded by the CEE Trust in Slovakia and available information on their funding**

NGO	CEE Trust support 2001–2012 (in 2020 EUR, rounded)	Annual reports eligible for analysis	Incoming transactions
Open Society Foundation	4,263,511	21	367
Ekopolis Foundation	4,288,276	19	413
Institute for Economic and Social Reforms (INEKO)	127,140	19	232
Citizen and Democracy	89,399	19	278
People in Need	48,808	18	392
Fair Play Alliance	133,936	17	196
Conservative Institute of M. R. Štefánik	123,156	16	170
Milan Šimečka Foundation	50,668	16	361
Center for Philanthropy	47,765	14	168
Via Iuris	242,568	13	241
Transparency International Slovakia	35,983	6	126
League of Human Rights Advocates*	29,557	4	57
Pontis Foundation	374,935	3	199
The Center for Civil and Human Rights	33,525	1	9
Institute for Public Affairs	289,864	0	0
First Slovak Nonprofit Service Center	107,410	0	0
Slovak Donors' Forum	96,901	0	0
The Charta 77 Foundation	93,124	0	0
Partners for Democratic Change Slovakia	67,403	0	0
Friends of the Earth – CEPA	58,563	0	0
Institute of Economic and Social Studies	57,518	0	0
Project Forum	38,001	0	0
Civic Association TATRY	12,667	0	0
Public Policy Institute	12,667	0	0
ISA Slovakia	5,911	0	0
Total	10,729,256	186	3,209

Source: The CEE Trust's annual reports, 2001–2012.

Note: \* Translated as 'Human Rights League' in more recent documents. Throughout the article, for the sake of consistency, we use the term 'League of Human Rights Advocates', as it appears in the CEE Trust annual reports.

predominantly by these means. We refer to public and corporate sector funding jointly as external funding.

Each transaction was further classified as coming either from a domestic or foreign source or a source with an unknown origin. The classification was made not based primarily on the official seat of the organisation but on its dominant source of funding (i.e. an NGO based in Slovakia but financed primarily by an American corporation would be classified as foreign). When the dominant source of funding could not be established, the sponsor was classified according to its official seat. International organisations such as the EU, NATO, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development were considered foreign sources.<sup>4</sup>

Our method for determining the place of origin differs from that used in some previous studies, which often made the determination using formal accounting categories, where the place of origin is identical to its official seat. Thus, a local branch of a foreign company is classified as a Slovak source. A different approach was chosen for two reasons. First, the annual reports often do not differentiate between local branches and the mother company (only the name of the company is provided), in many cases preventing the distinction from being made. Second, for the purpose of this study, formal accounting categories are not as interesting as real power relations. Since local branches of a company are unlikely to have a major influence on core company values guiding its corporate policies and are subordinate to the mother company in important respects, local branches of a foreign company were viewed as foreign sources.

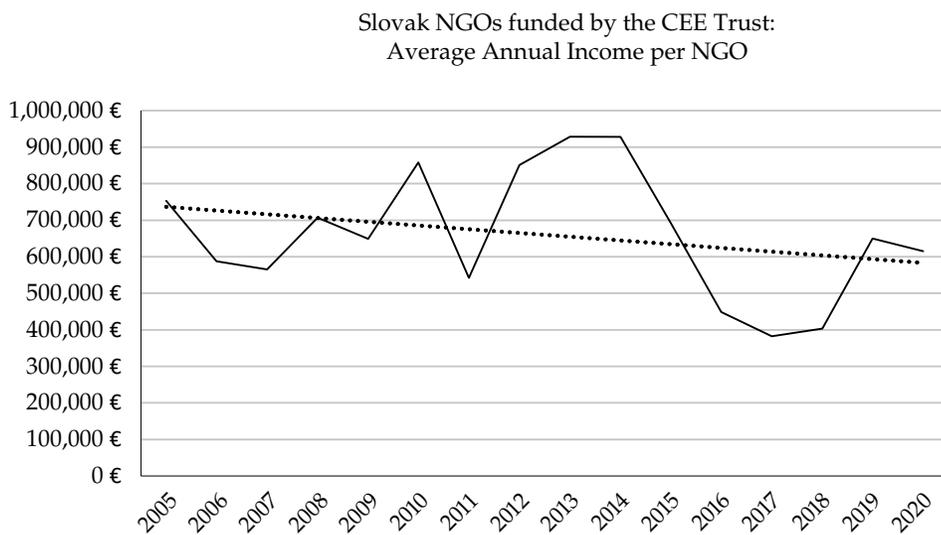
All transactions were converted to EUR based on the current exchange rates provided by the National Bank of Slovakia. Unless otherwise noted, all sums are in real values, converted to the value of EUR in 2020.

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<sup>4</sup> It could be argued that EU funding should not be considered a foreign source, as Slovakia is a member state of the EU. However, there are several good reasons for considering the EU a foreign source:

- EU and its member states are clearly different entities.
  - EU and its members can, and often do, have competing interests (members of the EU commission pledge an oath to the ‘general interest of the Union’ and not take instructions from any other government).
  - Slovakia’s ability to influence the EU in the case of conflicting interests is limited.
- Similar arguments can be made for other international organisations.

**Figure 1. Average annual income per NGO, calculated from eight NGOs with the most complete annual report records (Fair Play Alliance, People in Need, Ekopolis Foundation, Institute for Economic and Social Reforms (INEKO), Conservative Institute of M. R. Štefánik, Milan Šimečka Foundation, Open Society Foundation, and Citizen and Democracy). A simple linear trendline has the  $R^2$  value of 0.08.**



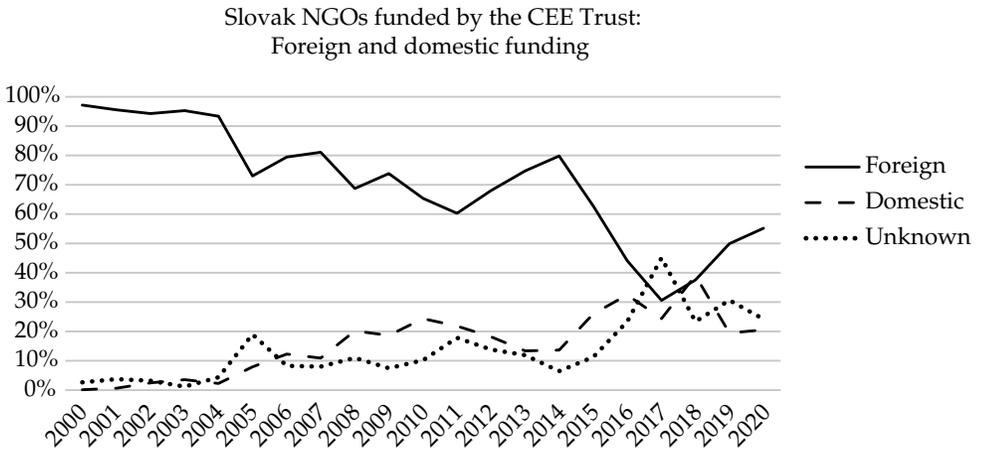
## Results

### *Overall funding*

When the NGOs funded by the Trust are viewed as a whole, the overall annual funding increased from 7,671,544 EUR to 10,331,481 EUR. However, this sum is mostly illustrative since the number of NGOs and eligible annual reports varies widely over the years, and the NGOs themselves largely differ in terms of income. Analysing the eight NGOs with the most complete annual report records (accounting for more than 83% of the known income of the whole sample)<sup>5</sup> reveals that between 2005 and 2020, the average annual funding fluctuated significantly around the value of 650,000 EUR, as shown in Figure 1. A simple linear regression displays a decreasing trend overall, but the very low  $R^2$  value of 0.08 shows this to be insignificant.

<sup>5</sup> Fair Play Alliance, People in Need, Ekopolis Foundation, Institute for Economic and Social Reforms, Conservative Institute of M. R. Štefánik, Milan Šimečka Foundation, Open Society Foundation, and Citizen and Democracy. From 2006 onwards, 96% of their annual reports (115 out of 120) are eligible for analysis.

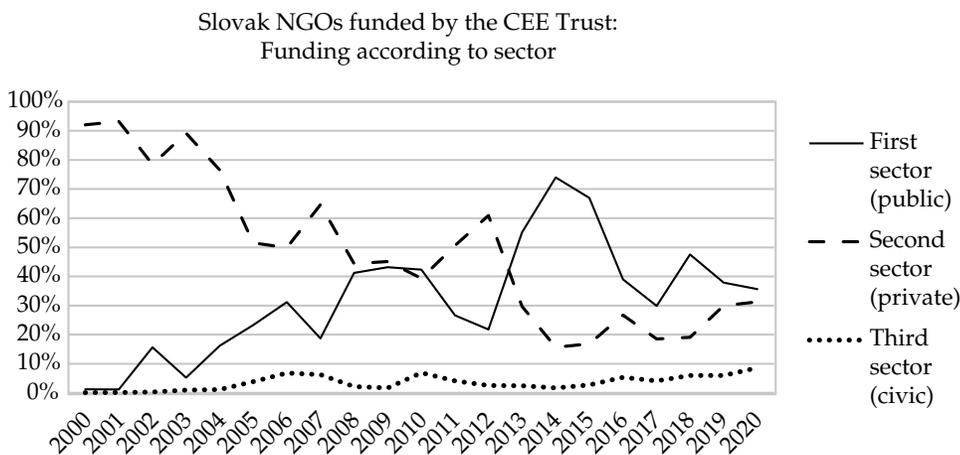
**Figure 2. Funding from foreign sources, domestic sources, and sources of an unknown origin. Taken from the whole sample of 14 NGOs.**



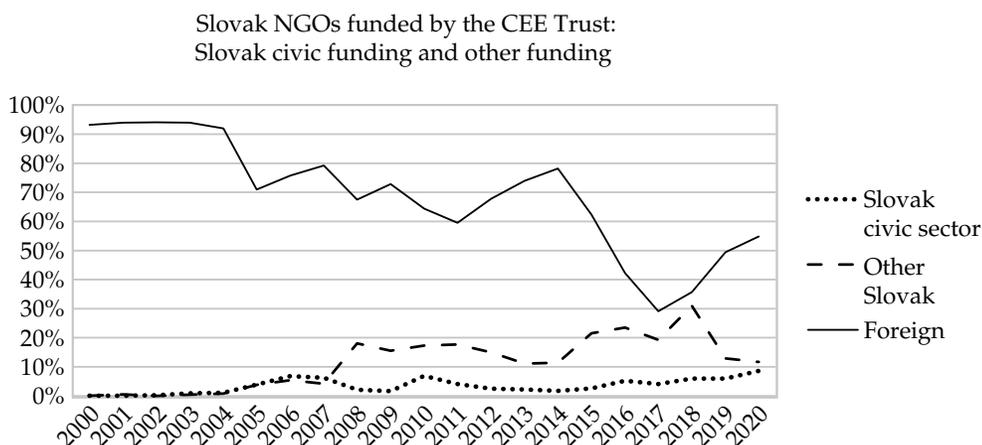
**Figure 3. Funding from the USA and the EU. EU funding also includes the EEA and Norway Grants and the Swiss Financial Mechanism. Taken from the whole sample of 14 NGOs.**



**Figure 4. Funding from the first (public), second (private), and third (civic) sectors. Transactions from an unknown sector are not shown, thus not every year adds up to 100%. Taken from the whole sample of 14 NGOs.**



**Figure 5. Slovak civic funding compared to other types of funding. Transactions from an unknown sector or of an unknown origin are not shown, thus not every year adds up to 100%. Overall, the Slovak civic sector accounts for only 3.5% of funding. Taken from the whole sample of 14 NGOs.**



Regarding the breakdown of funding between domestic and foreign sources, a clear decrease in foreign funding can be seen. While still being the dominant source of funding, it decreased from 97.2% in 2000 to 55.2% in 2020. In the same period, domestic funding rose from 0.1% to 20.5%. However, the sharp decrease in foreign funding occurred partly due to an increase in funding of unknown origin (from 2.7% in 2000 to 24.2% in 2020). If only those transactions where the place of origin could be established are considered, foreign financing decreased from 97.2% to 72.8% (and domestic rose from 0.1% to 27.2%).

Within foreign financing, the share of EU sources (together with EEA funds and Swiss Financial Mechanism) has been continually rising. In 2004, they first exceeded 5% (7.3%). In 2013 – coinciding with the departure of the Trust – they first surpassed US financing (19.5% vs 44%) and rose as high as 62.7% in the following year. Accordingly, funding from the USA has declined significantly – from 91.2% in 2000 to just 6.3% in 2020. The last year US funding was the dominant source was 2013 (48.8%). The development of funding by place of origin is shown in Figures 2 and 3.

Foreign and domestic sources can be further divided by sectors. Financing from the second (corporate) sector clearly decreased, from 92.1% in 2000 to 31.2% in 2020. However, this gap was mostly not filled in by the third (civic) sector but rather by the first (public) sector, rising from 1.2% to 35.6%. Civic sector financing has stayed continually low, rising from 0.1% in 2000 to 8.6% in 2020. If the transactions where the sector could not be established are filtered out, the changes are as follows: 98.6% to 41.3% for the corporate sector, 1.3% to 47.2% for the public sector, and 0.1% to 11.4% for the civic sector. Funding by sector is shown in Figures 4 and 5.

### *Funding at the level of individual NGOs*

A pattern reproduced in almost all NGOs with sufficient data (more than five eligible annual reports) is the gradual decline of the proportion of funding from the USA (the only exception is Citizen and Democracy). Another pattern is the reliance on external funding. For every year and every NGO, civic funding is always a minority source, usually less than 5% (if all years and all NGOs are considered, it is 3.5% of the overall sum). This trend was found in all NGOs apart from the Center for Philanthropy (CPF) in 2020 and the Conservative Institute of M. R. Štefánik (KIMRŠ). These cases will be discussed below.

Some NGOs, such as Ekopolis, People in Need, Citizen and Democracy, Milan Šimečka Foundation, and League of Human Rights Advocates, rely more on public sources. Others, such as Open Society Foundation, Center for Philanthropy, Transparency International, VIA IURIS, Fair Play Alliance, or INEKO, use private sources to a greater extent. Most NGOs are predominantly foreign financed, with two exceptions: Nadácia Milana Šimečku (35.3% foreign, 42.4% domestic) and People in Need (25.4% foreign, 53.7% domestic).

**Table 2. Major transitions in dominant sources of funding according to sector and place of origin**

NGO	Dominant pre-transition	Transition year	Dominant post-transition
Ekopolis Foundation	Foreign private	2009 (approx.)	Foreign public
Milan Šimečka Foundation	Foreign public	2011	Domestic public
	Significant foreign private		
People in Need	Foreign public	2011	Domestic public
Open Society Foundation	Foreign private	2013 (approx.)	Foreign public
INEKO	Foreign private	2015 (approx.)	Foreign public
			Significant domestic public

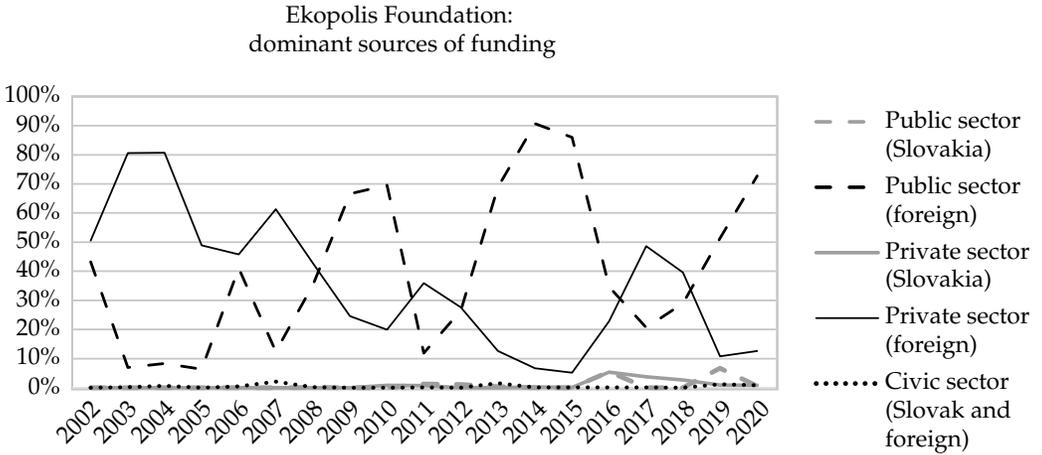
The predominant sponsor type (sector, place of origin) tended to remain stable over the years in most cases, but there were several cases in which the dominant source of funding changed. They are shown in Table 2. There seem to be two basic rules regulating these transitions: private funding shifting to public (and never the opposite) and foreign funding to domestic (and never the opposite). Furthermore, there was no successful switch to predominantly civic funding. The dynamic of the predominant funding types is shown in Figures 6–10 for all five transitions identified.

As is clear from Table 1, Open Society Foundation and Ekopolis – national partners of the CEE Trust – relied most on funding from the Trust. How did they fare after its departure? Their stories differ somewhat. Both became the administrators of EEA programmes to support civil society (these started already before the Trust's departure), which contributed to their transition to predominantly foreign public funding, as can be seen in Table 2. Ekopolis was more successful than OSF in compensating for the loss of financing from the Trust using other sources, mostly EEA, EU, and foreign corporate funding. Nevertheless, its average income since 2016 is only roughly half the average from 2000 to 2015.

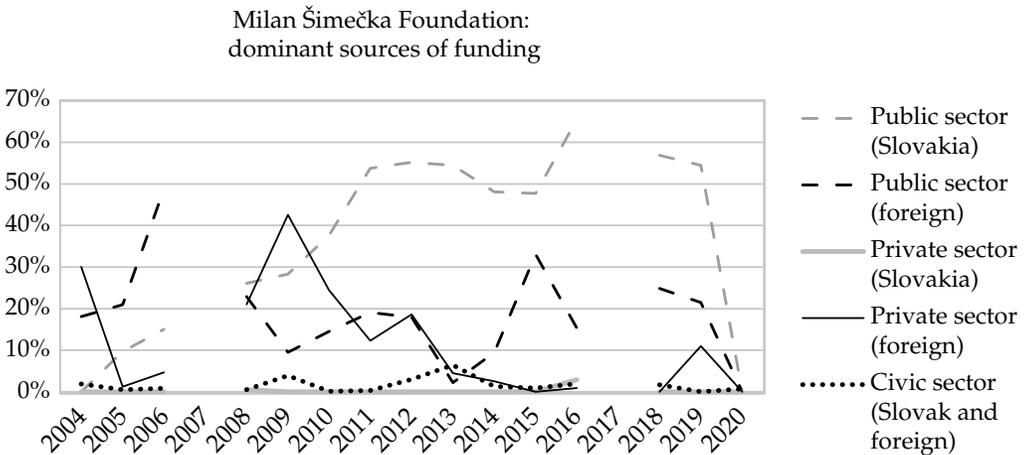
In contrast, OSF has faced a sharp decrease in funding since George Soros radically cut direct funding to Slovakia in 2014.<sup>6</sup> Income from EEA projects has not fully made up for this deficit, and in 2016, when EEA funding decreased, OSF's income shrank to less than a quarter over one year. In 2017, the NGO

<sup>6</sup> This cut-off was not absolute, however. Contrary to what is sometimes claimed, such as by Gehrerová (2018), since 2014, the Slovak branch of OSF has received more than 700,000 EUR from Soros' organisations, according to its annual reports.

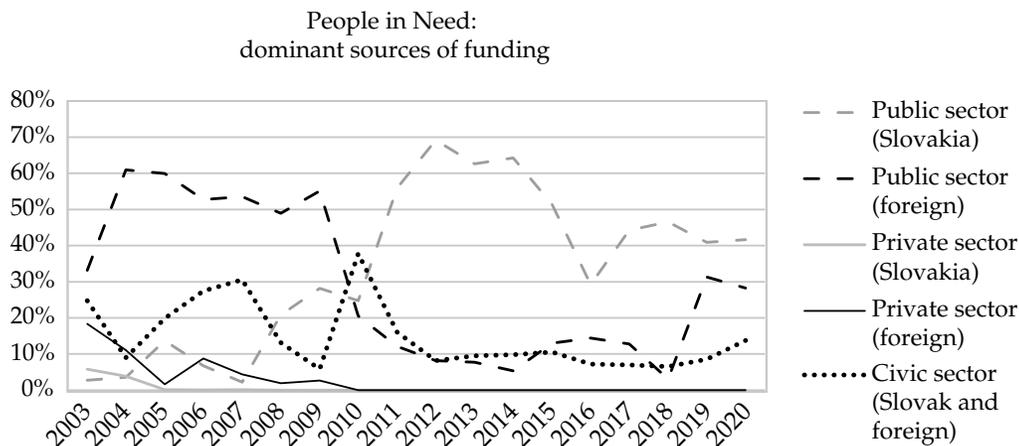
**Figure 6. Dominant sources of funding for Ekopolis Foundation. The transition from foreign private to foreign public sources can be seen around 2009.**



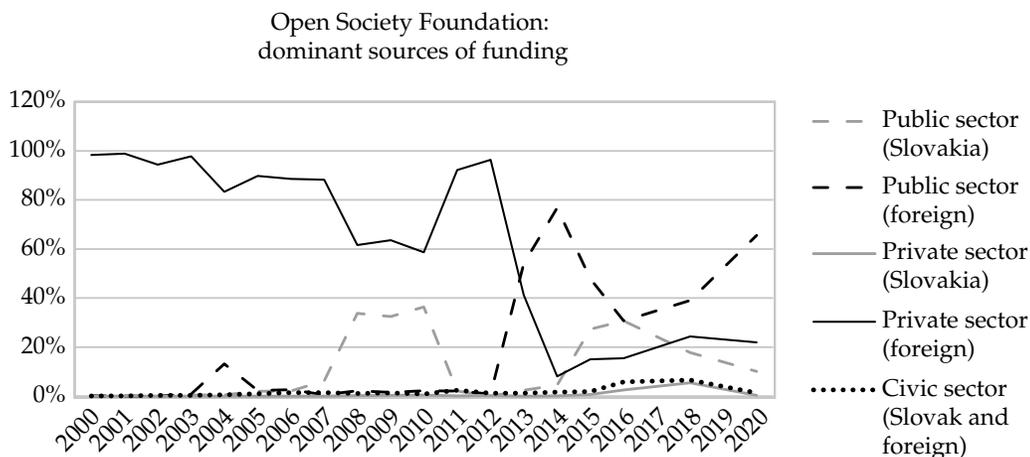
**Figure 7. Dominant sources of funding for Milan Šimečka Foundation. The transition from foreign public to domestic public sources can be seen around 2011.**



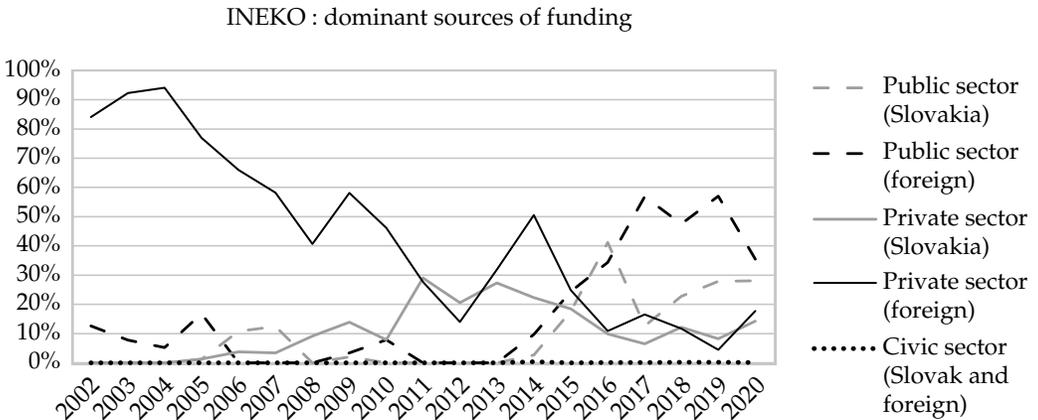
**Figure 8. Dominant sources of funding for People in Need. The transition from foreign public to domestic public sources can be seen around 2011. People in Need is the only major NGO in our sample with significant civic funding, but it still comprises less than 15% of its overall funding.**



**Figure 9. Dominant sources of funding for Open Society Foundation. The transition from foreign private to foreign public sources can be seen around 2013.**



**Figure 10. Dominant sources of funding for Institute for Economic and Social Reforms (INEKO). The transition from foreign private to foreign public sources can be seen around 2015.**



was even moved to sell more than 600,000 EUR worth of its security portfolio (more than 70% of its income in 2017). In 2018 and 2020, further financial injections from foreign branches of OSF arrived, and in 2020, Ekopolis provided more than 1,000,000 EUR. Nevertheless, the average income of OSF since 2016 is less than a third of the average from 2000 to 2015. Civic funding of OSF has seemingly increased in recent years. However, this is mostly because external sponsors withdrew their support; in absolute numbers, the income has changed little (in the past five years, the annual average was 32,363 EUR, while in the preceding 15 years, it was 31,334 EUR). However, it never surpassed 8%.

Only two NGOs have had at least one year of predominant civic funding (in both cases, domestic civic funding). First is the Conservative Institute of M. R. Štefánik (KIMRŠ). Historically, its largest sponsors are the Trust and the EU. However, after 2009, they stopped their donations completely. Thus, KIMRŠ was left to rely practically exclusively on modest donations from a few companies, tax assignment, and citizen financing. The latter is its most stable source of income and has provided the overall majority since 2013. Since 2013, KIMRŠ has had no foreign funding. Unlike other NGOs, KIMRŠ was unable to find a viable replacement, and its activities were cut substantially. Its average annual income since 2013 is less than one-eighth of the average annual income from 2001 to 2012. Thus, even though citizen funding predominates, KIMRŠ is not a case of a successful transition to citizen funding.

The second case is the Center for Philanthropy. Historically, it has been working with several foreign companies, administering their corporate social responsibility programmes. Foreign corporations have amounted to more than 70%

of overall funding, and the trend has been stable over the years. The only exception is the year 2020 when an unusually large sum was acquired by fundraising on the CPF website, which amounted to more than 62% of its income for the year. It is not yet clear whether this will become a long-term trend.

Comprehensive tables and figures for each year and a breakdown of income types by all categories for the Trust NGOs as a whole and each NGO individually can be found in supplementary materials.

## Discussion

The results clearly show that NGOs from our sample (at least those for which sufficient data is available), which were kickstarted by huge external donations, were largely dependent on external funding after 20 years. This period may probably be extended even to almost 30 years for some NGOs since many of them existed before 2000 and were largely externally financed (but annual reports are missing).

### *Stability of high-level patterns of funding*

The high-level patterns of funding (external vs civic funding) generally tend to remain stable over time. Thus, it might be said that the NGOs funded by the Trust are not financially independent after 20 years but rather dependent on a different type of external sponsor.

Data (analysed by the same method as in this article) are also available for several NGOs that did not start with large-scale external financing but bottom-up from civic funding. For example, Forum of Life (a Christian pro-life organisation) was 60.1% civic funded in 2010, up to 69% in 2018. Overall, its public sector financing is 0.6%, private sector financing is 0%, and foreign financing is 5%. Ladislav Hanus Fellowship was 48.8% civic funded in 2012, up to 64.7% in 2019 (however, this rises to almost 100% if transactions of unknown origin are filtered out). Overall, its public sector financing is 7.3%, private sector is 0%, and foreign financing is 3.9%. Detailed tables and figures are provided in supplementary material, along with several other NGOs which follow similar trends. While this is not a systematic comparison, it lends more support to the thesis that high-level patterns of NGO funding remain relatively stable.

Our data contradict the often-stated claim that foreign financing of Slovak NGOs has dropped so dramatically that only 6% to 9% of NGO funding comes from abroad (Gehrerová, 2018; Praus, 2018; Pontis Foundation, 2022). There are two reasons for this contradiction. First, this article deals with a specific group of NGOs kickstarted by large external donations, while the aforementioned claims apply to Slovak NGOs in general. Second, a different methodology of ascribing

the place of origin to the sponsors (with the goal of putting more emphasis on real power relations instead of formal bureaucratic categories) was used in our article, as described in the methods section.

### *Transition from private to public funding*

As noted in the results section, even though the share of external and civic funding changed little, changes in the predominant type of sponsor were quite commonplace. They seemed to follow two basic rules: from foreign to domestic and from private to public funding. A trend of concern in the 21st century has been the privatisation of profits and socialisation of costs. Companies are eager to privatise lucrative parts of the economy, such as select parts of the healthcare or social systems, but often devise ways of transferring their costs to public finances. Several of the Trust's founders were successful businessmen who also worked with politicians and funded political parties. Many top-level politicians in Slovakia (including two prime ministers) hailed from NGOs financed by the Trust and its sponsors (Vladovič, 2008). It would be interesting to study the process by which state funding schemes for NGOs were set up, which, in effect, saved the resources of private companies.

### *Possible causes of low citizen funding*

There are several possible explanations for why NGOs supported by the Trust could not acquire large proportions of citizen funding. The first may have to do with low effort. Organisations that rely on mass citizen funding often use elaborate schemes to elicit small donations (Dauksza et al., 2020). It is possible that the NGOs supported by the Trust might have garnered more civic funding if they put more effort into this type of fundraising. However, this was perhaps not seen as effective (or even needed, but this is unlikely due to the fundamental revenue problem) since external donors provided enough funding.

Another (and related) possible explanation has to do with organisational culture. The six founders of the Trust were predominantly endowment foundations which acquired most of their property from rich entrepreneurs and did not develop (and import to Slovakia) sophisticated fundraising schemes oriented towards ordinary citizens. A similar pattern may perhaps be seen in the Slovak NGOs supported by the Trust, which may be due to the reproduction of a cultural pattern (Konecki, 2006; Patterson, 2010).

A third explanation might have to do with the prevailing values of society. A 'detachment' of foreign-funded activists from the local population has been reported in other CEE countries (Pickering, 2022; Pierzyk-Reeves, 2022; Sundstrom et al., 2022). Profant (2015), writing about the situation in Czechia, stated that

new forms of activism are often interested in 'postmaterial' goals (such as human rights), which resonate with the local population less than 'traditional' goals (such as social security). He further noted that postmaterial goals are often advocated by small, professional groups and that it is only thanks to their sponsors that many NGOs can campaign for topics that garner little interest in the local populace. The situation in Slovakia may be similar. Assessing the extent to which this factor might be in play in the present sample would require separate research with a more stringent methodology, but some indications can be pointed to.<sup>7</sup>

A case in point to illustrate these three factors is the conservative Slovakia Christiana Foundation (SCF), which stands in contrast to many NGOs funded by the Trust. SCF is worth reviewing as an illustrative example, although, of course, a larger sample and a more detailed analysis would be needed to draw substantial conclusions. SCF was founded in 2016 by the Piotr Skarga Institute of Poland. During its first year of existence, 100% of the funds (11,000 EUR) came from the mother organisation, meaning it was kickstarted by a foreign sponsor. However, SCF launched a large-scale fundraising campaign, essentially copying the Piotr Skarga Institute model (Dauksza et al., 2020) and was able to rise to full financial independence within two years. In 2017, it raised 328,894.54 EUR (74%) from citizen donations, simultaneously acquiring 117,000 EUR (26%) from the Polish mother organisation. In 2018, it raised 695,605.97 EUR from citizen donations (100%) and has had no financial support from Piotr Skarga Institute since. With SCF, there is a great effort towards citizen funding, cultural transfer, and a relatively high resonance with majority values. Two of its key tenets, protecting Christianity and national sovereignty, have strong support in Slovak society, according to public opinion polls (Bútorová & Gyárfášová, 2017).

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<sup>7</sup> On the one hand, the NGOs supported by the Trust covered many topics generally supported by the Slovak society – anti-corruption, rule of law, support of educational infrastructure, and education of minorities. Such activities likely constitute the bulk of their public engagement. On the other hand, many of these NGOs have also taken unpopular stances on several topics often deemed very sensitive. For example, Open Society Foundation (2000, 2021), Pontis Foundation (2018, 2020), Milan Šimečka Foundation (2020, 2023), People in Need (2016, 2023), and League of Human Rights Advocates (2019, 2023) have supported LGBT activists, multiculturalism, and diversity. Slovakia is generally a conservative country (Mikušovič, 2020) where only 36% of people feel 'close' to liberal democracy and 32% to multiculturalism and cultural diversity, while 68% feel 'close' to protecting national sovereignty and 63% to protecting Christianity from Islam (Bútorová & Gyárfášová, 2017). Moreover, 75% are worried about the possibility of many migrants arriving in Slovakia, and more than 73% would be bothered by a neighbour of Muslim origin (Bútorová & Gyárfášová, 2017). Thus, a non-negligible part of the public may be dissuaded from contributing to these NGOs.

### *Did the Trust fulfil its goal?*

When evaluating the result of its work, the Trust did not spare any praise, writing in 2012, 'The current diversity, vibrancy and strength of civil society throughout the [CEE] region are a testament to the success of the CEE Trust and similar actors in the last two decades' (Trust, 2013). However, from our results, it is clear that neither Slovak NGOs supported by the Trust as a whole nor any individual NGO has become independent in the sense that it is predominantly civic funded; predominantly domestic funding is rare and owes to state support. On the other hand, examples of NGOs were presented that managed to become financially independent without the Trust's support and in an even shorter time.

However, if a somewhat broader view of financial independence is taken, wherein the NGOs draw upon a larger overall number of sponsors and various types of financing and can, to a large degree, acquire sponsors with their own fundraising processes, it might be said that many of these indicators improved. Furthermore, it is true that these NGOs rely, to a greater extent, on indigenous and European financing, exactly as the Trust envisioned in 2003 (Trust, 2004).

### *Limits*

Our research is limited by our sample being unrepresentative (although influential) and the descriptive study design. The data are also incomplete (for many NGOs, eligible annual reports are not available for all years). In addition, it can be argued that 20 years is not a sufficient period for a truly independent civil society to emerge and fully emancipate from its state or corporate sponsors. Another limitation is that the empirical data come only from one country, a rather small one. A final limitation is that the study is narrowed down only to financial independence and did not address organisational independence. Further research in these directions may shed more light on the topic of concern. When interpreting our data, various contexts and pieces of information should be considered. While civic funding is an important principle, other factors need to be considered when assessing the current state of civil society and its trends. High reliance on external funding should not automatically be seen as undesirable in civil society.

### **Conclusion**

Many authors have observed that civil society in Slovakia was heavily influenced by external financing. To our knowledge, this article is the first that analyses this phenomenon in exact numbers and deals with the changes in the structure of financing over two decades. The method used in this article is novel in that it studies primary data and categorises each sponsor and transaction individually and is not based solely on accounting categories which do not reflect underlying

ownership and funding relations. This gives us a more detailed picture. Overall, our data show that NGOs that were kickstarted by the CEE Trust are still largely dependent on external funding. Although some changes in sponsor composition occurred – external corporate funding was largely replaced by another type of external funding (public funding), and the role of one major foreign donor (the Trust) was largely replaced by another major foreign donor (EU and EEA funds) – civic funding remained low (less than 10%). This might be explained by the sufficient financing provided by external donors (so seeking other sources is not felt as effective), the reproduction of the financial model of the Trust's founders, or the limited support for the NGOs in the local population. Further research is needed to determine the extent to which these factors might have influenced the funding patterns. Although the generalisability of our findings is limited due to a rather small sample and incomplete data, they are consistent with the view that the basic patterns of NGO financing generally remain relatively stable over time, at least on the scale of two decades.

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