NADÁCIA OTVORENEJ SPOLOČNOSTI

STEFAN BATORY FOUNDATION

Open Society Foundation Bratislava invites you to a seminar

BUILDING RESILIENCE AGAINST SHRINKING CIVIC SPACES

THE CASES OF POLAND, SLOVENIA AND SLOVAKIA

Dates
14 -15 November 2024

Venue
Open gallery at Open society foundation
Baštova 5, Bratislava

Organized by
Open society foundation Bratislava (SK)
Stefan Batory Foundation (PL)

Support
Ekopolis Foundation (SK), Open Society Prague (Cz),
Center for Information, Cooperation, and Development
of Non-Governmental Organizations - CNVOS (SI)

Iceland Liechtenstein Norway Active citizens fund

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SCOPE OF THE AGENDA

This seminar addresses the role of civic activism and NGOs amid the gradual erosion of civic freedoms in Central Europe, with Hungary's shift toward "illiberal democracy" under Viktor Orbán in 2010 as a critical starting point. Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine, followed by the full-scale invasion in 2022, underscored the urgent need for regional stability, placing Central Europe as yet another local frontline in the global struggle between authoritarianism and democracy.
While Poland, Slovenia, and Slovakia each have unique political contexts, a shared trend emerges: an authoritarian push to reshape democratic systems from within, including altering electoral rules, restricting media and judicial independence, and shrinking space for NGOs. Tactics like fear-mongering and intimidation increasingly target civic spaces, aiming to silence dissent.
Participants, including NGO leaders and activists from Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Slovenia, will engage in conversations through round table, presentations, and panel discussion, addressing essential questions: How can civil society remain resilient? What motivates activists despite high personal costs? And what strategies most effectively counter these authoritarian pressures to uphold democratic endurance?

AGENDA AND PROGRAM

Thursday 14th November

15:00 - **Welcome, registration**

15:30 - 17:15
ROUNDTABLE: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO HAVE A STRATEGY?

The session aims to provide strategic insights, guiding NGOs on how to select and implement the most effective approach for sustained impact.
Open and facilitated discussion will explore two distinct approaches NGOs use to advocate for their causes. One strategy operates "behind closed doors," using slow, bureaucratic, and expert-driven methods, including participation in working groups, governmental committees, mass legislative notices, and lobbying. The other approach embraces public advocacy, utilizing press conferences, media, petitions and street protests to rally broad support.

Introductory remarks

Adam Znášik is a political strategist and co-owner of Komplot Advertising, an agency specializing in political marketing. Over the years, he has played pivotal roles in various political campaigns, including those for SDKÚ, Most-Híd, and Andrej Kiska. He was part of the stratcom team supporting Robert Mistrík's presidential bid and later contributed to Ivan Korčok's presidential campaign efforts.

Discussants:

Katarzyna Batko-Tołuć, Managing Director of the Foundation for Poland, Board Member of the Citizens' Network Watchdog Polska, vicepresident of the board of the National Federation of Non-Governmental Organizations (OFOP).

Ewa Kulik-Bielińska, director and member of the board of the Stefan Batory Foundation, Polish-English translator of fiction, during the communist period: opposition activist, editor of independent periodicals.

Mirosława Makuchowska, Advocacy director, Vice-President of the Campaign Against Homophobia (KPH). In KPH since 2006.

Katarína Batková is the Executive Director of VIA IURIS, a prominent Slovak non-governmental organization dedicated to upholding the rule of law, advocacy, and legal counseling. Prior to joining VIA IURIS, she served as the Director of the Slovak Youth Council.

Lucia Szabová is the coordinator of the Climate Coalition, a leading Slovak platform dedicated to environmental advocacy. She focuses on policy development, strategic campaigning, and fostering collaboration among various environmental organizations.

Karolína Farská is a civic activist who gained prominence in 2018 as a co-founder and leading figure of the initiative "Za slušné Slovensko" (For a Decent Slovakia). This movement organized mass protests following the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová, demanding government accountability and systemic changes.

Juraj Rizman is a communication advisor. He served as the director of Greenpeace Slovakia and later worked as a project coordinator at the legal advocacy organization Via Iuris. In 2019-2020, he was a key advisor to Slovak

President Zuzana Čaputová, focusing on environmental and civil society issues.

Goran Forbici, Center for Information, Cooperation, and Development of Non-Governmental Organizations (CNVOS). Slovenian civil society leader, serving as the director of≈Slovenia's umbrella network for NGOs.

Rasťo Kužel is the Executive Director of MEMO 98, a media monitoring organization. With over 25 years of experience, he specializes in media environments, election monitoring, and combating disinformation globally.

Katarína Mišíková is a civic activist, serving as core member of the Open culture initiative. Film scholar and historian, serving as an associate professor at the Film and Television Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava.

Marian Staffen digital FR coordinator from Million Moments for Democracy, Cz

Jana Miléřová (Director at Glopolis and NeoN Network Coordinator, CZ)

Session host:

Fedor Blaščák, Open society foundation Bratislava, director, philosopher, activist and publicist

18:00 - 19:30 – **Dinner**

Friday 15th November

9:30 - 10:00 **- Morning coffee, registration**

10:00 - 12:00

PLENARY SESSION: STORIES OF CIVIC MOBILIZATION FROM POLAND, SLOVAKIA, SLOVENIA

This plenary session brings together stories of civic mobilization from Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia. The session will feature three presentations, each 20 minutes long, followed by a 20-minute open discussion.

Presenters will share insights from recent research and studies conducted in their respective countries, highlighting the diverse strategies, challenges, and successes of civic movements. This session offers a deep dive into how citizens and NGOs have mobilized for change, providing valuable lessons on resilience and adaptation across different social and political landscapes.

Speakers:

Paweł Marczewski, Stefan Batory Foundation, sociologist, historian of ideas, publicist, head of the research unit Citizens at the ideaForum, think tank of the Batory Foundation, a member of the Carnegie Civic Research Network.

Goran Forbici, Center for Information, Cooperation, and Development of Non-Governmental Organizations (CNVOS). Slovenian civil society leader, serving as the director of Slovenia’s umbrella network for NGOs.

Fedor Blaščák, Open society foundation Bratislava, director, philosopher, activist and publicist

12:00 - 13:15 – **Lunch**

13:15 - 15:00

AFTERNOON SESSIONS: IN-DEPTH PERSPECTIVES ON CIVIC MOBILIZATION IN POLAND, SLOVAKIA, AND SLOVENIA

The afternoon sessions aim to deepen and expand understanding of civic mobilization in Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia. A dynamic series of three 30-minute panel discussions will address issues not covered in the morning presentations, offering a richer view of the challenges and strategies employed by civic groups.

Discussions could reveal smart ideas and tactical innovations that helped move initiatives forward, shifted the course of events, and how these strategies were developed.Panelists will explore “behind-the-scenes” drivers, decisive moments of impactful campaigns or negotiations.

Discussing questions:

How defunding of civic spaces was addressed?

Who were the unexpected allies? Role of social capital and personal networks during hard times.

How to keep people engaged when mobilization efforts seem to fall short?

What can be done when progress is stalled by the return of old patterns?

13:15 - 14:00

PANEL DISCUSSION: WHAT AFTER CHANGE? THE CASE OF POLAND

Panelists:

Anna Chmielewka, OCALENIE, Board member and Integration Programmes Director at the Ocalenie Foundation, carries out integration activities for migrants and refugees as well as provides humanitarian aid on the Polish-Belarusian border.

Wiktoria Jędroszkowiak, INICJATYWA WSCHÓD (Initiative EAST), Climate activist and co-founder of the EAST initiative. In 2018, she was one of the initiators of the Youth Climate Strike.

Paweł Marczewski, Stefan Batory Foundation, sociologist, historian of ideas, publicist, head of the research unit Citizens at the ideaForum, think tank of the Batory Foundation, a member of the Carnegie Civic Research Network.

Ziemowit Nowak, Member of the Committee for the Defence of Democracy (KOD). Founder of KOD in the Świętokrzyskie Region, administrator and editor of the main KOD (https://www.ruchkod.pl) website.

Kacper Nowicki, Varia Posnania, inhabitant of Poznań, President of the Youth Council of the City of Poznań 2020-2021. Student of European Administration at the European School of Law and Administration in Brussels.

Dominika Sitniska, journalist and columnist for OKO.PRESS, writes about politics, the media and the European Union.

Session host:

Anna Fedas, Stefan Batory Foundation, bilateral and regional cooperation coordinator in the Active Citizens Fund - National programme

14:00 - 14:30

PANEL DISCUSSION: WHAT IF NOT READY FOR SUCCESS? THE CASE OF SLOVENIA.

Panelists

Goran Forbici, Center for Information, Cooperation, and Development of Non-Governmental Organizations (CNVOS). Slovenian civil society leader, serving as the director of Slovenia's umbrella network for NGOs

Katarina Bervar Sternad, a human rights lawyer and Director of PIC – Legal Centre for the Protection of Human Rights and the Environment

14:30 - 15:00

PANEL DISCUSSION: WHAT IN THE MIDDLE OF A STORM? THE CASE OF SLOVAKIA

Panelists

Katarína Batková is the Executive Director of VIA IURIS, a prominent Slovak non-governmental organization dedicated to upholding the rule of law, advocacy, and legal counseling. Prior to joining VIA IURIS, she served as the Director of the Slovak Youth Council.

Lucia Szabová is the coordinator of the Climate Coalition, a leading Slovak platform dedicated to environmental advocacy. She focuses on policy development, strategic campaigning, and fostering collaboration among various environmental organizations.

Victor Breiner is the Executive Director of the Institute for Resilience Building in Bratislava, Slovakia. He is an expert in international security with over 15 years of experience in hybrid threats, foreign influence, and strategic communications. He worked in a strategic role at the Slovak Ministry of Defence, leading public policy efforts on non-kinetic security.

15:00 - 16:00

PANEL DISCUSSION: WELL-BEING, REALLY?

This panel dives into the psychological dimensions of resilience, exploring what sustains individuals and teams in the often adversarial world of civic activism. Panelists will address the negative psychological consequences that come with continuous exposure to a high-stakes political environment, where frequent setbacks and constant opposition can lead to frustration, and even burnout.

Questions such as *How can one prevent the slide into frustration, protect mental health, and avoid burnout?* and *How can a pragmatic, even cynical perspective, help maintain mental resilience?* will guide this conversation.

Exploring ways to maintain balance, stay grounded, and resist the lure of negativity underscoring the critical roles of camaraderie, humor, and a supportive atmosphere to maintain positivity and team cohesion even when resources are scarce, and stress is high. Emphasizing practical well-being practices, this session will reveal how resilience-building tactics, from cultivating supportive networks to embracing small moments of joy, help keep teams energized, sane, and committed.

Panelists:

Karolína Miková (PDCS, SK), **Michal Bača** (Liga za duševné zdravie, SK), **Zuzana Wienk** (Bystriny, SK)

Session host:

Andrej Vršanský (Liga za duševné zdravie, SK)

15:45 - 16:00 **Closing remarks**