

RESISTING THE ILLIBERAL TURN IN POLAND, SLOVENIA AND SLOVAKIA

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FOREWORD

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**FROM RESISTANCE TO ACTION
CIVIC MOBILIZATIONS
IN POLAND 2015-2023**

Goran Forbici

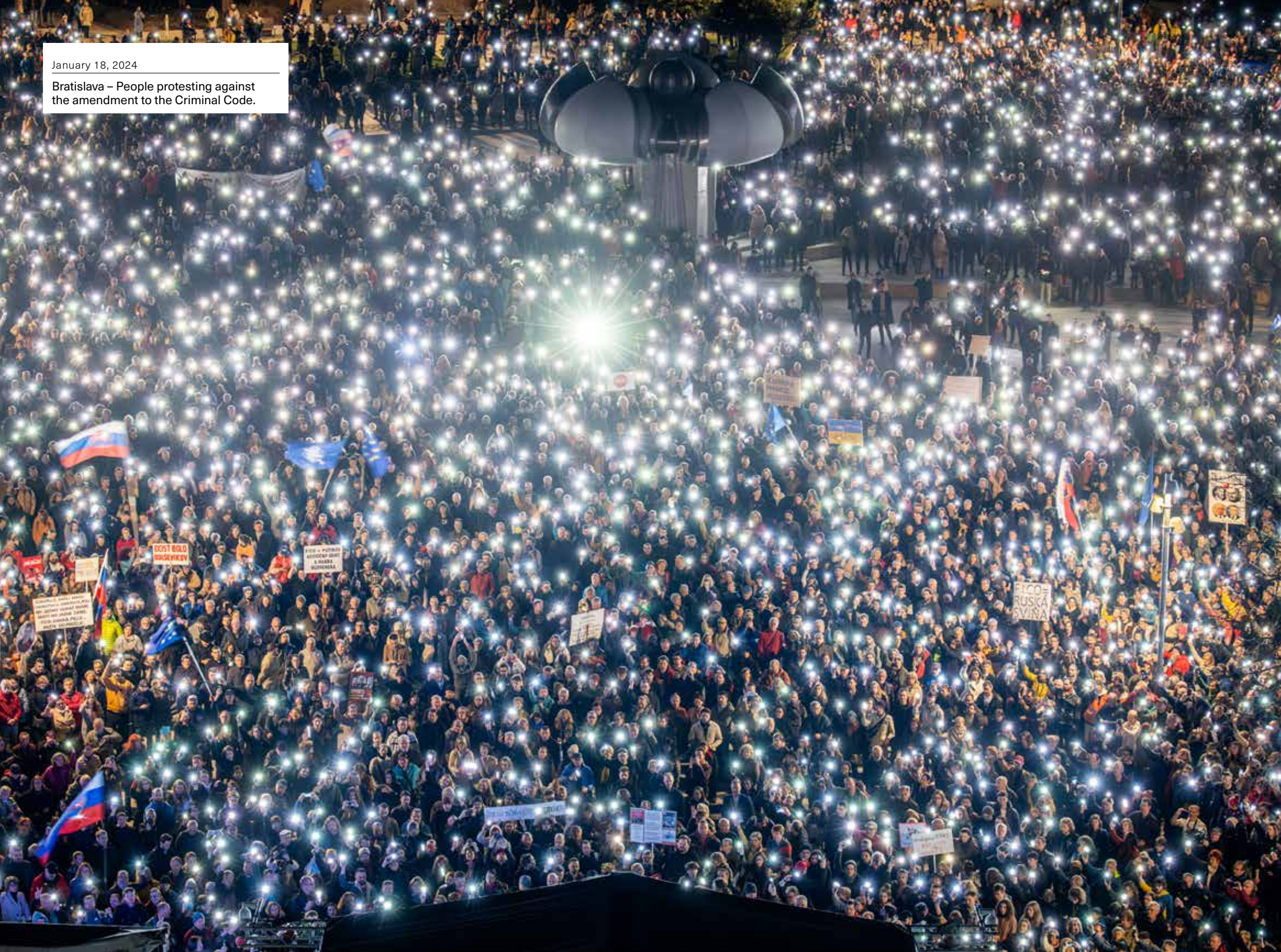
**PANDEMIC, POPULISM,
AND PROTEST
SLOVENIA'S FIGHT
FOR DEMOCRACY 2020-2022**

Fedor Blaščák

**2024: A YEAR IN THE SQUARES
HOW SLOVAK CIVIL SOCIETY
RESISTS AN ILLIBERAL TURN**

January 18, 2024

Bratislava – People protesting against the amendment to the Criminal Code.



FOREWORD

The past decade has seen the liberal democratic order face an unprecedented array of challenges. A series of economic and social crises has eroded trust in democratic institutions, paving the way for the rise of populism and authoritarian tendencies. Across the globe, and particularly in Central Europe, these forces have left societies at a crossroads, grappling with questions about the resilience of democracy and the role of civil society in safeguarding it.

This book documents the experiences of Poland, Slovenia, and Slovakia in the period 2015-2024 – three countries with unique political and historical contexts yet bound by a shared trajectory of grappling with the illiberal turn. It highlights both the oppressive strategies employed by governments aiming to undermine democratic principles and the unwavering resistance from vibrant civic sectors.

The purpose of this publication is twofold: to chronicle this pivotal moment in our history and to offer insights into the mechanisms of building civic resilience. By doing so, we hope to contribute to the social history of peaceful protest movements and inspire activists, donor communities, and policymakers alike.

The contributions in this book address a spectrum of challenges and responses. Poland and Slovenia are examined retrospectively, through the lens of civic mobilizations against the governments of *Law and Justice* in Poland during 2015–2023 and Janez Janša in Slovenia during 2020–2022. These chapters offer firsthand accounts from key actors, combining oral history with analytical insights. Extensive quotes are presented anonymously to highlight the collective spirit of the events, as if the testimony were given by a collective voice. They point to larger political phenomena and more general social processes, rather than individual perspectives.

In contrast, the essay on Slovakia, written amidst the ongoing struggles under the Robert Fico government (2023–present), combines a reporter's and insider's perspective to examine current events, offering a forward-looking analysis of the structural and political challenges facing civil society.

This approach bridges past lessons with present strategies, creating a dynamic blueprint for action.

The shared experiences across these countries reflect a critical period marked by paradigm shifts, where liberal values are under siege, yet resistance continues to flourish. Central Europe's civil society, deeply rooted in traditions of dissent from totalitarian regimes, exemplifies both vulnerability and strength. From Poland's mass protests against undermining independence of the judiciary to Slovenia's innovative use of legal tools and grassroots mobilization, and Slovakia's multifaceted campaigns safeguarding civic freedoms and public accountability – each case reveals the power of collective action and the importance of strategic resilience.

This book is aimed at a broad international audience, activists and policy makers, and scholars interested in the evolution of civic spaces in Central Europe. It provides not only a detailed account of events, but also practical lessons learned and insights into advocacy strategies.

The juxtaposition of historical contexts and present challenges serves as a reminder that the defense of democracy is an ongoing endeavor, requiring adaptability, creativity, and collaboration. While the specific contexts differ, a common thread unites the narratives in this book: the recognition that illiberalism does not emerge over night. Its roots can be traced in the failure of liberal governments to effectively address the social challenges arising from recent economic, migration, and other crises. These repeated shortcomings create fertile ground for illiberal tendencies, gradually undermining democratic norms with the promise of simplistic and deceptive solutions. Similarly, resistance does not emerge by chance; it is cultivated through networks, expertise, and shared values.

By documenting these struggles, we aim to honor the courage and ingenuity of civil society leaders alongside crowds of active citizens who stand as the last line of defense against authoritarian encroachments. In doing so, this book affirms the role of civil society as both a participant in and a guardian of democratic systems.

Whether looking back on past victories or strategizing for future battles, this collection underscores a simple yet profound truth: the survival of democracy depends on those who refuse to let it falter.

September 2020

Banner caption: Rebellion! A climate for change!

Extinction Rebellion activists organised four marches through the streets of the capital to protest against the inaction of those in power in the face of the unfolding climate crisis.



FROM RESISTANCE TO ACTION

CIVIC MOBILIZATIONS IN POLAND 2015-2023

Dr. Paweł Marczewski

Sociologist, head of a research unit Citizens
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The story of civic activism in Poland during 2015-2023 is first and foremost a story of perseverance against adversity and increasingly difficult operating conditions. It is a story of building competence and resilience during the great crises of the COVID-19 pandemic, large-scale migrations forced by the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, and effective resistance to government actions that violate citizens' basic rights. It also chronicles the acquisition of increasing public trust and visibility, as well as the emergence of entirely new cross-sector networks and new forms of civic self-organization.

The survey *The Image of Civil Society Organizations*, carried out by the *Klon/Jawor Association*, shows that despite increasingly difficult working conditions and a decreasing number of organizations cooperating with state institutions (according to official state data on CSOs, between 2015 and 2021, the percentage of organizations cooperating with public institutions decreased by 4.2 pp.¹), the number of Poles who had experiences of personal contact with civic organizations was growing.² In 2014 it was declared by 13% of respondents, in 2023 already by 24%. In 2023, 63% of respondents in Poland expressed trust in CSOs, a higher level compared to the global average of 59%, as reported by the *Edelman Trust Barometer* survey and much more than the Polish government and ministries, which were trusted by 34%. The majority of respondents – 55% – also believed that civic organizations were more effective in helping those in need than state institutions. Particularly significant was the assessment of civic assistance to Ukraine and those fleeing war in Ukraine. 56% of respondents thought that civic organizations were doing a good job of dealing with these challenges. In the case of the government, positive assessments were significantly less frequent, 45%.

The nationwide survey, commissioned by the *Foundation for the Development of Local Democracy* in the late 2022 and early 2023, that is, after both the mass protests against stricter abortion laws and the large-scale mobilization in support of those fleeing the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, showed the enormous potential for civic engagement.³ As many as 86% of respondents said they had participated in at least one form of civic activity among those listed in the survey, ranging from those requiring

the least time and attention, such as signing a petition (50.3%) or voting in a participatory budget (48%), to the most engaging, such as participating in a protest (8.6%) or attending a municipal council session in person (4.6%). Commenting on the survey results, Dr. Anna Dąbrowska points out that they are higher than those in other surveys on the subject, such as the *European Social Survey*, which may be due to the effect of public expectations or methodological differences.⁴ However, even if the results of the FRDL survey are higher than actual participation, they point to a certain ideal of an engaged citizen to which Poles aspire. Not only do they value the effectiveness of civic organizations, but they also value personal involvement and consider it important.

The high trust in CSOs and the value attributed to civic engagement show an important context for the transformation of civil society between 2015 and 2023. The most important change, as emphasized by almost all the people who agreed to be interviewed for this report, was a new level of cooperation between grassroots organizers and those engaged in a more formalized way, within associations or foundations. To describe this phenomenon of cooperation between people engaging in very different ways to achieve a common goal – opposing actions of the authorities considered a violation of democratic standards – one can successfully use the concept of *counter-democracy*, formulated by French scholar Pierre Rosanvallon.⁵ In his view, counter-democracy is the co-government of engaged citizens who decide to personally control the state in which they lose trust. Such engagement sometimes goes hand in hand with declining voter turnout and a decline in other types of participation in the official institutions of representative democracy (e.g., low levels of membership in political parties).

So how did the Polish counter-democracy form between 2015 and 2023? At what moments did citizens and CSOs lose trust in the state and recognize that they need to start looking at it? What did it look like to build new forms of cooperation between citizens and civic organizations? And what were the real achievements of the counter-democratic, civic power?

TURNING POINTS - AN ATTEMPT AT CHRONOLOGY

One of the most important features of civic mobilizations in 2015-2023, indicated by those involved in various initiatives of civic resistance against the authorities during that period, was the combination of the efforts of organizations that already had experience in watchdog activities, in controlling authorities or in organizing protests, with the nascent, spontaneous activity of individuals and new organizations without previous experience of self-organization. The cooperation of “new” initiatives, often undertaken without a long-term plan, with experienced organizations was extremely important for overcoming difficulties – maintaining commitment, finding effective, out-of-the-box ways to act, and finally, without it, there would be no increase in trust in civil society. However, the fact that some initiatives benefited from previous experience, while others were just acquiring it, also meant that after the 2015 elections and the United Right’s seizure of power, they had different awareness of the threats to democracy, chose to engage at different moments, and defined their goals differently.

Organizations with previous experience of defending democratic standards watched the Law and Justice program closely and expected that the coming to power of a coalition led by this party would mean major changes for the state system, potentially dangerous to the rule of law. Some organizations also had experience of confrontation with the authorities during the previous Law and Justice governments in 2005-2007. Organizations working with people with migration and refugee background were also very concerned about the anti-refugee rhetoric in the Law and Justice’s election campaign, and expected a vilification along with increasing difficulties in financing their activities.

The program of the Law and Justice party was known, it was presented, among other things, at the Poland Great Project congress. Then it was presented at the party’s program conference, clarifying some of its elements. Thus, from the beginning it was clear what changes the new government intends to introduce, what vision of Poland to pursue. The turning point was already Duda’s electoral victory. Regardless of whether Komorowski was graced with an electoral defeat, there was something frightening about Duda’s success. Such peculiarly Polish-tinged populism. Because it was not a victory in democratic terms, a political triumph. Duda did not win the presidential election, but came back as if an incarnation of the late Lech Kaczynski, to regain the royal insignia illegally seized by Komorowski a traitor, an abrasive, etc. This struck and hurt me terribly.

This 2015 was not the kind of moment when the change of this power told us nothing at all. We had the experience of 2007, the negative experience of two years of rule by Law and Justice, but it also told us because we remembered very well the moment when the anti-immigrant current appeared in the election campaign, which, to be honest, shocked us. Personally, I knew that this was not a party that favored a pro-migrant narrative. No right-wing parties in Europe favor it. Neither are they neutral on this issue, they always show immigration as a greater or lesser threat that correlates with other threats, often completely untrue and abstract. On the other hand, despite everything, this spot talking about diseases carried by migrants and refugees was nevertheless some new quality. The appearance of this very disturbing tone indicated to us that there was bound to be a tightening of course.

Local organizations and initiatives have a slightly different perspective. Since transparency of governance has been a challenge for many local authorities regardless of which party happened to be in power, for local watchdog initiatives the PiS’ rise to power was not initially a great revolution, rather continuation of the status quo.

October 2020

One of the protests of the All-Poland Women's Strike – a social initiative to rename one of the central places in the capital (where protests and demonstrations often take place), the Roman Dmowski Roundabout, as the Women's Rights Roundabout.



I believe that we have been indifferent as an environment for a very long time. This is also due to the fact that we work with people acting locally, whom no one spared, whom no one respected for many years, as a result of which they, when they heard about what Law and Justice is doing, said "What's the big deal? We experience it every day." And it was as if our sensitivity to the various actions of the Law and Justice Party, and awareness that the changes they were introducing would lead to something bad, was very low for quite a long time.

In organizations that dealt with very specific aspects of democracy, such as the rights of non-heteronormative people, the recognition of the threat to democracy by the new government sometimes came gradually, especially since previous governments were not particularly open to making changes to improve their situation.

It was a bit like boiling a frog, everything changed gradually. Here something happened, here Ziobro did something, there some motion to the Sejm, police arrests and detentions of protesters. I don't feel that this 2015 was such a moment of very clear awareness that something was going in a very bad direction. But then came the moment that was really a turning point for us and probably the most difficult one. And then we already knew, it was a little bit so apocalyptic – the moment when anti-LGBT resolutions started to be passed in 2020. That's when the avalanche started, which then rolled on for two years.

At times, the realization that the new government meant a new, undemocratic way of implementing change, ignoring the voices of some professional and expert circles, came with specific legislative changes. The first were the very early changes to the Constitutional Court Act, which worried a great many circles and people, including those who had not previously been civically involved.

The first moment when the authorities said "we don't have your coat and what are you going to do" was the failure to swear in duly elected judges of the Constitutional Court. The second was the non-publication of the Constitutional Court verdict. I'm not talking about such trifles as the abolition of the civil service in order to give posts to the loyal and the illegal takeover of the media, the shortening of the term of office of Janusz Leszczyński. (...) Seeing the problems with the Law and Justice Party, we had no reason until 2015 to say "this is evil itself and only evil, it must be stopped." This evil manifested itself the moment it came to power. The swearing in of parliament was in October, I think, and at the end of November a Facebook group was formed called the Committee for Defense of Democracy. Within days, thousands of people from different cities joined it. And there people poured out their grievances, poured out their resentments, and someone got the idea to formalize it.

The turning point also came very quickly for those involved in educational initiatives.

This was already Minister Zalewska's first reform, which she announced basically a second after she was appointed to office. It was a reform abolishing compulsory preschool for five-year-olds and schooling for six-year-olds, already announced in December 2015. And we, together with our colleagues from the department, from the university, embarked on such a meticulous analysis of this reform, because it was a matter that we had dealt with academically and also practically. And we undertook it with such genuine surprise that things can be done in such a way. How can a whole reform be thrown in the trash? Of course the reform was not flawless, but the substantive argument for children to start education earlier was legitimate and sensible. And all of a sudden the government changes, all of a sudden everything gets knocked down, and we reacted with genuine disagreement and faith that, after all, in politics one should listen to experts. We thought that it must have come out by mistake that here no one who was involved in preschool and early childhood education was asked for advice. We were genuinely

surprised that no one was asking teachers. That's probably where such a fierce commitment to this issue came from, because it directly affected us. Well, but then, as we began to dig into the subject, to our dismay it turned out that this was the intention, that it was not by accident that teachers were left out, but that indeed a change affecting hundreds of thousands of children is simply being decided at the ministerial desk.

The new government's plans for illegal logging in the Białowieża Forest were clear to those involved in conservation from the start, as they represented a continuation and acceleration of actions already planned.

The logging plans were prepared by the State Forests when the previous government was in power. We must realize that the Forests are a kind of separate political entity, against all appearances very independent of politics, unfortunately, in the sense that these changes at the top do not change much in the State Forests. I also knew perfectly well that a PiS victory would mean the return to power of Minister Szyszko. I knew what he was capable of. The pact between Minister Szyszko, PiS, Radio Maryja, the State Forests, and the hunters formed again just like in the case of Rospuda in 2004. Unfortunately, the outgoing government did very little to stop this from happening, except for Minister Korolec, who restricted logging and was then dragged through the courts for 6 years.

NEW WAYS OF SELF-ORGANIZATION

Some of the civic initiatives that opposed the erosion of democracy in 2015-2023 arose spontaneously, in response to moves by the authorities, while some existed beforehand. Some were active in very specific areas or topics, others had a broader profile of activity. All of them, however, had to find new ways of organizing opposition and defending democratic standards, since their violations, even if expected, were unprecedented. They took place in many different spheres of civic life at once – in the judicial system, in the media, in education, in the Białowieża Forest – and went further than many people expected. They therefore required, as was quickly realized, new ways of engagement in the face of the fact that the democratic fuses in the state system had proven to be faulty, and some of them had simply been twisted.

The most important innovation, which many involved in the 2015-2023 period consider crucial to success, was the establishment of cross-sector cooperation between organizations and initiatives that had no previous experience of joint work and activity, as well as between experienced organizations and spontaneous initiatives of citizens. The new situation required a holistic rethinking of the forms of involvement.

In fact, all activism has changed. The activism we knew and were used to, ways of doing advocacy based on democratic mechanisms, on civic participation, monitoring, applying to relevant bodies, writing petitions or dialogue with the authorities, were completely ineffective. This was completely not the time for them. And a whole generation of grassroots activists came to the fore, who got involved in political, civic activities, engaged in street resistance actions, marches, protests. (...) We, with our ways of doing things, were completely unprepared for this. Over the years we had invested in our institutional development, expanded our internal processes, and thus had a slower pace of response. We

tried to find our way in this new situation by supporting those who are struggling on the street. And it was such a stretch where we found ourselves doing the things we know and can do, rather than pretending to be street protesters. But we also focused on the things we know and have experience in, which is lobbying and international advocacy at the European Commission.

A brand new alliance of spontaneous civic initiatives and professional organizations has been formed to defend the Białowieża Forest from logging.

Against the backdrop of our previous thinking about CSOs, what happened in 2017 during the defense of the Forest was a novelty. The fact that in addition to professional environmental organizations like Greenpeace and Pracownia na Rzecz Wszystkich Istot, so many citizens spontaneously joined the protests, was crucial. This was the key to success – we knew that if we were to win, we had to have a strong grassroots movement, the support of the media, the European Commission, and very strong scientific arguments so that the Commission could successfully sue the Polish government in the EU Court of Justice.

The defense of the rule of law required action that was completely unprecedented. A group of lawyers represented *pro bono* judges in cases against the state, on whose behalf these judges were to rule, in front of European judicial institutions.

This required actions carried out with Swiss precision. The courageous judges of the Supreme Court and the Supreme Administrative Court decided to cooperate with a civic organization of lawyers who represented them against the state on whose behalf these judges were to rule. (...) Several won cases encouraged more. As a result of this battle, over the years probably a hundred of these rulings accumulated.

Collaboration between organizations that have not previously worked with each other, but also between organizations and spontaneous grassroots initiatives, would be impossible, were it not for a shift in thinking from competition with cooperation. Formalized community organizations, even if they are networked with each other, often apply for funds from the same grantors, which inevitably puts them in the role of competitors. Effective action in a situation where the democratic foundations of the state were threatened required a move away from this “grant” logic of competition. One example of the success achieved through this change is the initiative *Our Ombudsman* – a show of support for a common candidate for Ombudsman by more than 140 organizations that also managed to persuade opposition parties to get behind her.

More and more joint initiatives began to emerge, and a strong sense of the need to work together, to reinforce each other and exchange information, rather than focusing on competing for funds in the same grant competitions. The “Our Ombudsman” campaign succeeded thanks to this cooperation, it was a gigantic success for CSOs. They managed to put forward a candidate supported by all the opposition parties, which could not agree with each other on any other issue.

Mutual trust and a move away from competition enabled also the formation of the *Migration Consortium*, an initiative that brings together a number of organizations working on behalf of people with migration experience.

The basis for the creation of our network was the abandonment of the kind of formula that worked before, which was simply competition for funds. Instead, we focused on jointly seeking money for all, and still according to the principle of not equality, but to each according to his needs. It is very difficult to build trust between partners who are very different, in such a way that the budget, which is shared, is divided not equally, but according to needs. I remember that we had a very tiny amount of money to rent the premises we had at the time, and another

organization had huge rental costs. OK, but we don't need more, and they do, because they do a whole lot of things. And for me it's OK that these resources are not equal.

Collaboration also required the development of new ways of communication between the organizations.

Over these eight years, communication has changed. We have learned that you can ask each other questions and find partners for specific activities. Someone knows something, will answer, will help, and you don't have to commit all your resources. There are expert organizations, there are those who create content, there are those who edit that content, but there are also those who will help manage that editing. This was the case with the election information, or that of the referendum. There was a cooperation of people who began to trust each other, that is, that I will not take away from you and attribute success to myself, because we also began to share going out to the media. In this or that editorial office, they are looking for a person who can speak on a particular topic. Who among you will go, who will give an interview? Or suggesting to journalists who to talk to. Some of the heads of organizations have broadened their thinking on this, gone outside their box and found that sharing knowledge and resources has a better effect overall.

People from organizations working in different areas – nature conservation, LGBT+ rights, or the rule of law – also point out how important cooperation with international organizations and, above all, with European Union institutions has been to the success of their work.

We were actually in constant dialogue with the Commission, at meetings, through petitions we issued, but also through grassroots actions to collect signatures on petitions we handed to EU commissioners. Getting involved in the discussion about making European funds

conditional on adherence to the EU's fundamental values helped stop this avalanche of anti-LGBT resolutions.

Without informing the European Commission about the undermining of the rule of law in Poland, simply filing cases by judges would not be able to put the brakes on changes in the judiciary.

In short, we had to find a client in Poland, but we also had to find a listener in the Union, because the destruction was going so fast that court cases alone would not be enough. They take a year, a year and a half, so how would we clean up in the meantime? We had to do some marketing around these issues in this Union. Well, and then there was a key moment in July 2017, when Frans Timmermans announced that the Commission was seriously preparing to trigger Article 7 against Poland.

The new forms of action did not always involve building broad networks between organizations, or advocacy work in the European Union. Sometimes they took the form of “donation voting.” The new political situation and confrontation with the authorities over the rights of migrants, which culminated in the autumn of 2021, during the Polish-Belarusian border crisis, created a new kind of relationship between organizations and individual donors. Organizations working in very specific areas became, for some of their supporters, a generalized voice of opposition to the authorities. This was particularly true for people who did not or could not get involved themselves, but wanted their protest to be heard through the activities of specific organizations.

As an organization supporting migrants, we operated in a certain political and social context. The best example is 2021 and the Polish-Belarusian border crisis, when we recorded a very rapid and unexpected increase in individual donations. People told us directly that they were supporting us because they saw it as a form of resistance to the authorities. Our money is supposed to go to you, because that way we show that we disagree.

October 2021

On 17 October 2021, thousands of people marched through the streets of Warsaw in a demonstration under the slogan 'Stop torture at the border'. Participants carried flags made from thermal blankets, which are used to help people at the border, as well as pictures of missing children of asylum seekers at the Polish-Belarusian border.



SUCCESSES DESPITE ADVERSITY

The years 2015-2023 have been a very difficult period for many organizations. Many of them, above all those engaged in the protection of human rights, especially the rights of minorities, were denied the opportunity to apply for public funds. This was the case, for example, of organizations working for people with migrant experience. Many organizations, and the people who work in them, have become the target of a public media vilification – this was the case with organizations defending the rule of law, the rights of LGBT+ people, or organizations working with people with migration experience.

Despite adversity, CSOs, as shown in the previous section, have managed to develop new and effective ways of operating. They built cross-sectoral networks, practiced effective advocacy in the European Union, and acquired support of individual donors. They have also been able, as in the case of the *Our Advocate* initiative, to successfully convince the parliamentary opposition of their cause.

So what achievements do those involved in the various civic initiatives between 2015 and 2023 consider to be the biggest successes? According to one interviewee, a huge success has been stopping of logging in the Białowieża Forest.

What we achieved in 2017 was a gigantic success. The machinery of destruction set in motion by the government did a lot of damage, but it was stopped many times faster than I expected, and I am a born optimist. That was the first surprise. The second surprise is that these gains have been sustained. (...) The question is, what will the new government do? Does it understand what happened there? It is also a success that all these forestry movements began to act at a very grassroots level. People began to reclaim their forests.

Another person pointed in the interview to a whole range of successes of civic organizations, not least the aforementioned *Our Advocate* initiative.

Another success story was the National Recovery Plan, which would not have been introduced in its current form, had it not been for civic mobilization and had it not been for the consultations forced on the government by the civic side. Employers' organizations, trade unions, local governments and civic organizations forced creation of a monitoring committee, which, after all, was not required by the EU (...) Another success was the blocking of the postal ballot in the presidential elections of 2020. On the one hand, Jarosław Gowin's opposition worked, but it would not have been effective, had it not been for grassroots pressure from organizations. Our organization first published an expert opinion, which concluded that local governments have an absolute right not to share their residents' data. Then, together with other organizations, we intensively opposed postal ballot in the public debate and succeeded in blocking it, convincing local governments to boycott it.

Cooperation with the local government was also cited as a great success, this time during the migration crisis forced by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

I certainly cooperated with the local government to one goal, and it was clearly established that this was our joint task. The goals and conditions of this cooperation were clearly defined. At our place in Lublin, we did not have any major blunder. And I feel that this was a huge success in view of the enormity of the tragedy that happened at the time. I remember one funny moment when we discovered that our hotline, operated in several languages and set up on the City Hall switchboard for people who wanted to donate or offer accommodation, was called twelve thousand times in a month. I began to wonder, how is this even possible? Ok, we distribute flyers with this number, people find out about it through the snail mail, but it's impossible for the information

to reach so many people through these channels. I understood what was going on only when someone from one of the international organizations or one of the foreign press agencies told me that, after all, this number is listed on the ministry's website.

They also emphasized the great success of the civic elections monitoring campaigns.

With the resources we had, we could count on 780 people for civic control of the elections, and in the end 27,000 got involved. We constructed this campaign in such a way that we spoke the language of young people, well, because it is known that the young will not go to control the elections, the old will go. But when you speak the language of young people, the old go to watch, and the young then say "well, if 27 thousand people go to watch the integrity of the elections, at least I can go and vote. I won't go to the pool, I won't go to the pub, I'll just go and vote, even if I stand in line until three in the morning."

ELECTIONS 2023 - CHANGE OF POWER

The October 2023 parliamentary elections were held with a record turnout of 74.3%. In addition to the electoral campaign conducted by political parties, it was preceded by 27 go-out-to-vote campaigns conducted by various CSOs and civic initiatives. According to the Batory Foundation's research, last-minute mobilization raised turnout by about 7 percentage points.⁶ Among respondents who said they had seen the campaigns, 81% also said they had participated in the election. In the group that had not been exposed to them, 63% declared they had voted. Two-thirds of all respondents said the campaigns had influenced their decision to participate in the elections.

Mobilization before the elections in some organizations was linked to a very strong belief that another term of PiS rule would mean changes that would irreversibly undermine Polish democracy.

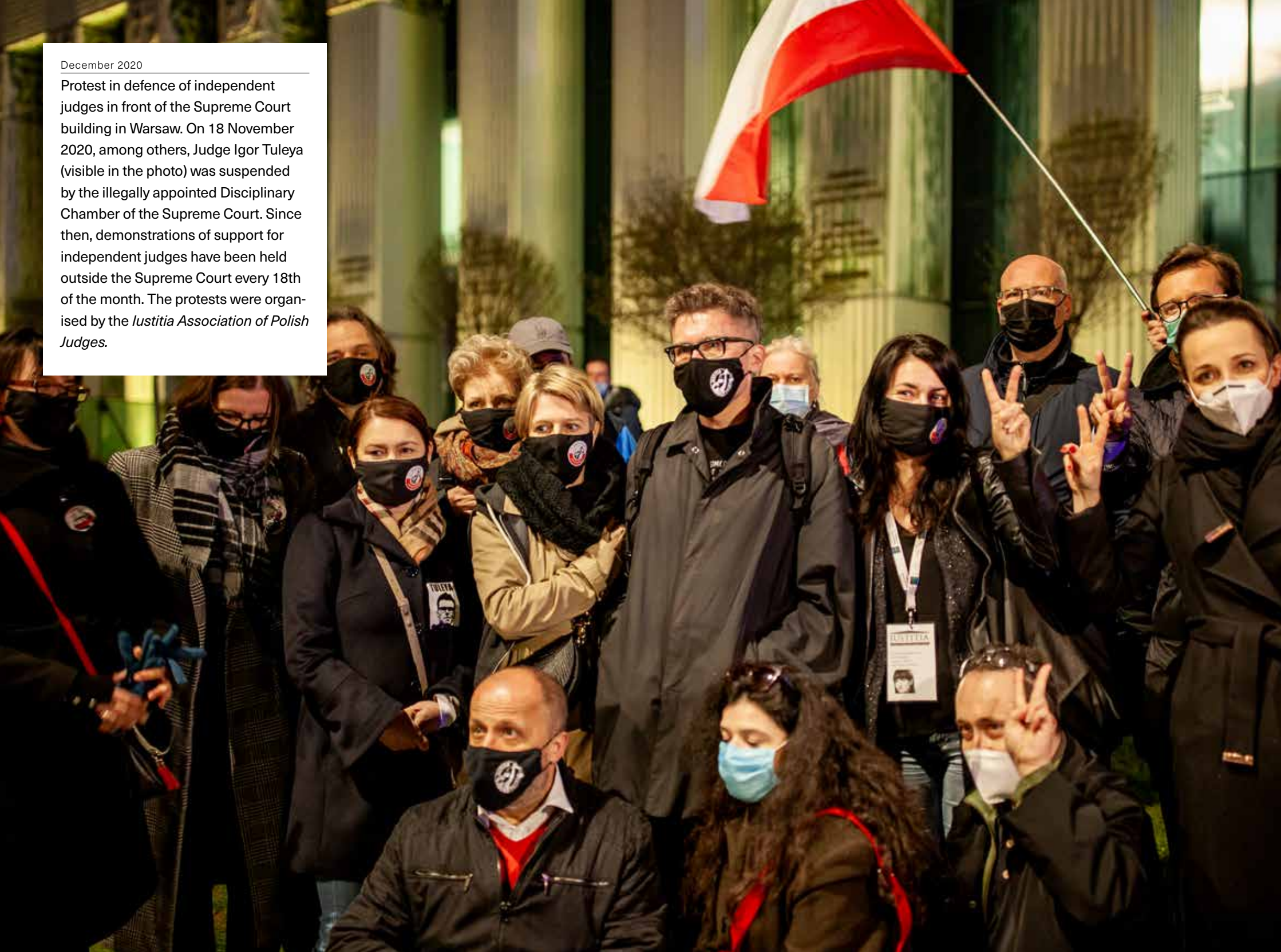
I had the feeling that it was to be or not to be. That is to say, I believed that if the opposition lost this election, the system would be closed and after the next one it would be like in Hungary, you simply would not be able to win anymore. That's why I considered it so important for CSOs to show a program of democratic change, motivating the parliamentary opposition. At the same time, I had absolutely no illusions that the eventual win would be big enough to make serious changes right away. I expected that the win would be very narrow and that it could be contested, just like in the case of the US elections and Trump's loss. But if we won, there would be no going back to what we had before, and as a civil society we would form a new front in the fight for the renewal of democracy.

Not all CSOs involved in go-out-to-vote campaigns believed that PiS could lose the elections; not all felt that the elections were "to be or not to be."

Our internal scenarios were going in the direction that PiS would win these elections and have the ability to form the next government. So it was a surprise to us that it turned out differently. We didn't go into these elections with any hope at all. We also had more of a sense that our level of influence on the overall situation and how it would later translate into the outcome of the elections was so negligible that it was a waste of our resources to do so. Of course, we got involved in these general, large campaigns, but we did not involve all our resources and ideas. We knew that this was the last moment in the sense that if there were another Law and Justice term, it would be worse, so we tried to stop it. But we rather didn't count on the fact that a new government could be elected that would try to repair the damage of the previous one.

December 2020

Protest in defence of independent judges in front of the Supreme Court building in Warsaw. On 18 November 2020, among others, Judge Igor Tuleya (visible in the photo) was suspended by the illegally appointed Disciplinary Chamber of the Supreme Court. Since then, demonstrations of support for independent judges have been held outside the Supreme Court every 18th of the month. The protests were organised by the *Iustitia Association of Polish Judges*.



Immediately after the elections, many analyses and commentaries stressed that the mobilization of young people was crucial to the change in power. How did the involved young people themselves assess it? Kacper Nowicki, who heads the *Varia Posnania Foundation* in Poznan, wrote in his text, published in the volume *The Truth About Elections*, published by the Batory Foundation⁷: *“The turnout was therefore the winner. It was achieved thanks to the record mobilization of young people, women, and those uninterested in politics, but sympathetic to Mickiewicz’s belief in the Romantic need for a mass movement. What distinguished this one from previous elections was the definition of target groups during the go-out-to-vote campaigns, the ordinariness of engagement geared precisely to the defense of values. Directly, little was said about PiS in them, instead simple alternatives were presented. Right to abortion or pregnancy registry? Two billion for cancer treatment or for public television? A dignified life or living to the first? Social media, used more efficiently than before by the democratic opposition, and the sincere involvement of the third sector, which felt the breath of PiS on its back in the form of financial and legal whiplash, helped. Material fatigue was key.”*

Zofia Krajewska wrote in the text, published in the same volume⁸: *“Many commentators say that the result was determined by the participation of the younger generation and women. Among them could be found the largest number of so-called undecideds. Let’s take a look at these people. For the most part, they declared a lack of interest and distance from politics, especially in the face of polarization, from which they saw no way out. They were characterized by a general disillusionment with the political class as a whole, seeing it as focused on their own interests and apathetic in the absence of proposals for real change. Women, in particular, were deterred by the violent, conflicting discourse. Among the younger generation senselessness and frustration resounded. Its representatives said there was no point in voting when politicians “do not fulfill their election promises” (38%), “constantly quarrel and do not settle important issues” (25%), “put out only current fires, and do not have a long-term plan for Poland” (24%).*

People with such a critical view of politics, who ultimately cast their vote, do not fit into the logic of pure opposition. I doubt they were persuaded by any specific program proposals either, since they don’t believe in implementing them. Evidently, they saw the systemic corruption of politics and had no confidence in its credibility. But something must have brought a spark of motivation and hope even among the politically withdrawn and resigned.

I put forward the thesis that it has succeeded in successfully identifying PiS with what some Poles and Polish women criticize in politics as a whole. Kaczynski’s party was portrayed, among other things, as focused on its own interests at the expense of citizens, populist, and opportunistically using the short term rhythm to offer voters deals that do not take into account debts incurred towards the future. Among Poles, 82% felt tired of political conflict in October 2023, and 77% perceived that we are a divided society under PiS. The opposition was thus able to position itself in contrast – as an option that is not affected by these problems and will show an alternative: a new quality of democracy. This provides a clear basis for the legitimacy of the new government.”

The cited voices of young public figures show that they themselves view the mobilization of the youngest voters as a manifestation of a broader phenomenon of weariness with partisan politics, detached from everyday problems, practiced by politicians who do not enjoy public trust and do not listen to voters. Whether the change in power that took place in the October 15 elections brought a new quality and greater openness to citizens, however, remains a matter of debate.

LONG-TERM SOCIAL CHANGE

The results of the October 15, 2023 elections were the result of civic mobilization at the ballot box. Not all successes, however, were equally readily apparent. Nor were they all about achieving concrete, easily

identifiable results, such as blocking the cutting of a primeval forest, stopping the dismantling of a particular institution, or providing effective aid in a time of crisis. Sometimes the success was in initiating more long-term, broad-based social change. Thanks to the protests in the Białowieża Forest, many people in Poland began to pay closer attention to nature, appreciated its importance, and began to look more closely at how authorities treat forests. It was also extremely important to show the proactivity that people organizing on their own initiative can have, and to build a willingness to cooperate among women. One interviewee spoke about this as follows:

It seems to me that success is first and foremost causality, the realization that our vote really does matter. We can see this even from such local elections here in these small towns. Right now we have village leaders being elected again, and here it turns out that sometimes you win by just two votes, so people are very eager to come to such elections, because they know that it matters. And the second thing is that I see how we women, at least in my environment, support each other a lot, help each other. (...) We are united by common topics and issues, we offer each other support in all sorts of areas, whether in social or local government activities. I think that after the protests, as women we get along much better.

During the debate *Protest of the Local Poland*, organized by the Batory Foundation on December 11, 2020, shortly after the mass protests against the ruling of TK Julia Przyłębska, Beata Siemaszko spoke about the long-term results of the protests⁹: *"I'd like to talk about something we haven't touched upon here yet, namely the benefits of these protests. The first and main one was that the ruling of the so-called Constitutional Court was not published. This effect is prolonged, because it can't be said to have been achieved, we still don't know what the final decision will be. The second benefit is the activation of a huge mass of people and the involvement of the younger generation to speak out. Importantly, after these protests, a large number of people will not vote for Law and Justice and the*

Confederation. (...) This should guide us further to take advantage of the power that has awakened."

This statement is significant because it pointed to the potential for political change created by changing attitudes and citizen involvement almost at the time when they occurred. Citizen mobilizations do not always bring immediate political change, they do not always bring down governments, but this does not mean they failed.

Another example of long-term success, a change in public attitudes, was brought by protests against conservative reforms of the education system that revived public debate about schools.

As the campaign for the October 2023 parliamentary elections began, basically all the politicians who had made education their cause talked about the protests, used our arguments, spoke our language, and said that the civic side was important, that change was important. Of course, they also took over those demands that came up in this discussion. It's undoubtedly a success, and it's also a success that in general the topic has spread a bit and gone under the radar a bit. Today we are discussing cuts in the core curriculum, the demographic crisis, the fact that there are no teachers. Who discussed these issues before? In the media, the topic was occasionally mentioned, but it was not as present as it is today, when it became genuinely popular. Suddenly it became clear that this was our common issue, just like health care or roads.

The role of CSOs in the opposition's electoral victory is undeniable. So how do they assess the situation after the elections and the formation of the new government? Has their work become easier? Do they think that those in power are taking their voice into account? Have the financial conditions for their work, which were very difficult for many organizations in 2015-2023 for political reasons, improved? According to some, the change in power has opened a window of opportunity.

Organizations are partners in substantive conversation for the government, this window of opportunity is very wide open, this is a very big change that also affects what tools civic organizations use. (...) At this point, it is possible to work together with the media and convince for political change, but it is more difficult, for example, to mobilize people to protest, even if there are issues that prompt protests, such as the unsettled issue of the right to abortion.

Although the change at the ballot box has stopped the most negative changes introduced by the Law and Justice Party, some of those involved are convinced that it has not brought change for the better.

This is generally such a decline in mobilization and interest in political and civic affairs in general. It is definitely more difficult to mobilize people for action. There is a very high level of frustration about the fact that there are no changes. They were promised and, in our understanding, have been not delivered for months. In fact, nothing has changed in terms of statutory changes or at the level of regulations. The avalanche of taking away the rights of LGBT+ people, anti-LGBT social campaigns, or discriminatory actions by law enforcement have stopped, but positive change is lacking.

According to one interviewee, the successes of the civic mobilization for education were at the same time, in a sense, failures, because the huge revival of the education debate did not translate into real political change after the elections.

In a situation where the educational discourse for eight years was created by the civic side, and I say this with full responsibility that we did it, as the ministry certainly did not, there were high expectations that the new government would benefit from this experience. Meanwhile, a single consultation body was established, which the ministry uses at its convenience. This is not democratization of educational decision-making. What happened to the idea of the National Education

Commission, which was suggested by CSOs? It's not that we thought it up and were actors in the show, and the politicians nodded. The politicians themselves were enthusiastic about the idea and suddenly changed their minds after the elections. This is a big surprise and disappointment.

As for the rights of people with migration experience, according to some, there was even a deterioration after the elections.

As for our main activities, helping migrants and refugees, the government amended the law and even invited us to consultations and listened for a while. But when it comes to the Polish-Belarusian border, it sucks completely and the situation is even worse than I expected. PiS did very bad things, but what the current ruling coalition is doing is even worse. And this also needs to be made clear. We have a law that allows the use of firearms with impunity. Under the Law and Justice government, you couldn't just pull out a gun and shoot at someone. The narrative around those helping at the border is extremely negative. There is no room for dialogue. The ministry is not interested in coming up with a solution. However, after the outflow of funds from international organizations that got involved after the outbreak of full-scale war in Ukraine, we were hoping for a unfreezing of funds from the European Union in Poland. It turned out, however, that some of these funds will simply not go to CSOs, because resources from the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund go through regional authorities. The pool of funds that will eventually go to organizations is much lower.

For some people, eight years of civic mobilization against governments that restrict civil rights and freedoms is a missed opportunity because it has not led to a breakthrough in thinking about Polish democracy and the way it works.

I believe, looking back, that these eight years of PiS rule were a unique opportunity for us. We were able to experiment boldly with democracy

and to mobilize people for truly democratic values. But we ended up with a simple victory of one party over another.

SUMMARY - THE NEW CIVIL SOCIETY

The problems of civic organizations did not end after the elections. Some point out that their proposals, eagerly picked up by politicians during the election campaign, were not taken seriously by the new government. Others point out that in some respects their work is even more difficult today than it was in 2015-2023. Some people indicated in interviews that it is much harder today to persuade people to protest on the streets. In the surveys discussed in the Batory Foundation's report, published before the 2024 local and European elections, respondents declared a rather wait-and-see attitude – they watched the government's actions and waited for concrete changes.¹⁰ The statements cited above also do not lack specific examples of the deterioration of the financial situation of some organizations, especially those working with people with migration experience.

Despite these difficulties and a certain state of "suspension" of the ability to mobilize, civil society today is different than it was before PiS came to power. It has experience of intersectoral cooperation, of effective organization in crises, as well as expert resources that allow it to allow it to take part in substantive discussions about changes in the law or reforms of public institutions.

It is high time for those in power to see that there is no going back to the past; to treating civic organizations like supplicants or background in bogus consultations. CSOs have not only achieved real successes in 2015-2023, but have felt their power and learned their value. They expect partnership treatment from the authorities, they are ready to cooperate with them, but also to effectively hold them accountable for the fulfilment of their promises. They are one of the most important resources in the

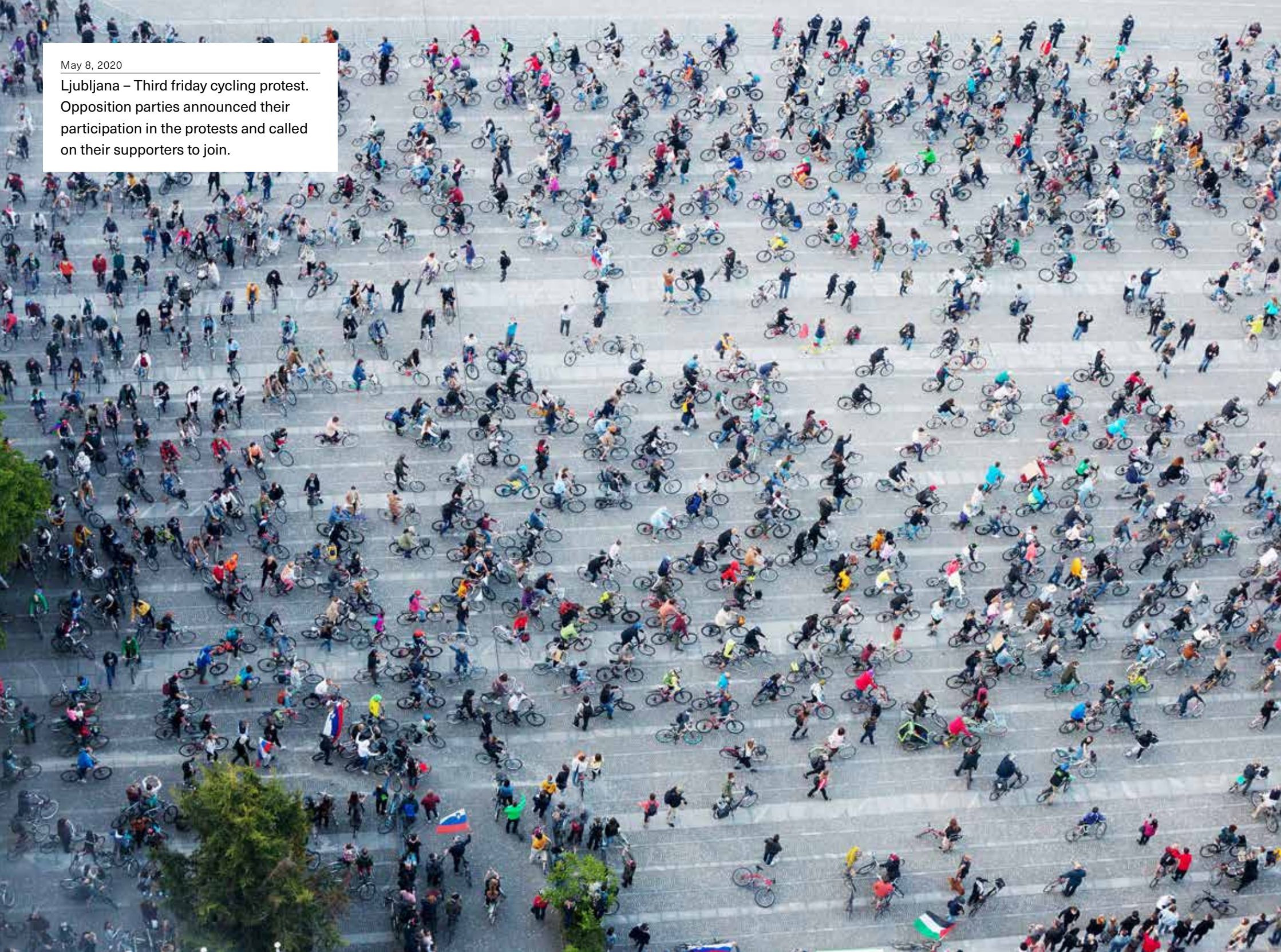
democratic state. And in this sense, the "awakening" of the new civil society is arguably more important than the opposition's victory in the parliamentary elections in October 2023, because it means a real change of Polish democracy for the better.

Preoccupied with fighting political opponents, politicians whose primary goal is re-election will not allow citizens to have greater co-governance by themselves or "in recognition of merit." All governments eagerly seek support from committed citizens when they are fighting for power, but once have it, they stress that they are the ones with popular mandate to govern. The counter-democratic society, if it wants to continue to effectively exercise control over power, must convince broad sections of society to get involved. There are no shortcuts here through consultations in narrow advisory bodies or expert deliberations behind closed doors. Fortunately, after eight years of practicing counter-democracy, Polish civil society is well prepared for this task.

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May 8, 2020

Ljubljana – Third friday cycling protest.
Opposition parties announced their
participation in the protests and called
on their supporters to join.



PANDEMIC, POPULISM, AND PROTEST

SLOVENIA'S FIGHT FOR DEMOCRACY 2020-2022

Goran Forbici

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BRIEF CHRONOLOGY

January 27, 2020

RESIGNATION OF LIBERAL PRIME MINISTER MARJAN ŠAREC

Prime Minister Marjan Šarec resigns and calls for early elections as soon as possible. In accordance with the constitution, the President of the Republic organizes discussions with parliamentary groups about a potential new candidate for Prime Minister. The leader of the right-wing opposition, Janez Janša, invites all parliamentary parties to talks about forming a new coalition.

February 25, 2020

TWO PARTIES FROM ŠAREC'S FORMER GOVERNMENT CONFIRM ENTRY INTO JANŠA'S GOVERNMENT

PROTEST AGAINST THE COALITION OF HATRED

More than 1,000 protesters gather in Ljubljana to oppose the formation of a government coalition led by the SDS (Slovenian Democratic Party). Participants highlighted

controversial actions of past governments and expressed dissatisfaction with parties negotiating to join the SDS-led coalition. Under the slogan "Without Fear: Rally Against the Coalition of Hatred", participants marched from the headquarters of SMC to the headquarters of DeSUS. According to organizers, the purpose was to communicate their rejection of MPs breaking their promises and to call out SDS's actions as completely unacceptable.

March 4, 2020

JANEZ JANŠA ELECTED PRIME MINISTER

March 13, 2020

JANŠA'S GOVERNMENT FORMED

The government officially took office on March 13, 2020, after being confirmed by the National Assembly, during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The coalition officially held 48 votes of support.

March 19, 2020

BAN ON MOVEMENT AND GATHERINGS IN PUBLIC SPACES

To curb the spread of infections, a decree temporarily banned movement and gatherings in public spaces. Due to measures to contain the epidemic, it was also impossible to register public rallies as required by law.

March 23, 2020

LIGHTING OF CANDLES

At Republic Square in Ljubljana, individuals lit candles as a sign of disapproval of the government.

April 2, 2020

SOLO PROTEST BY PRIMOŽ BEZJAK

On April 2, Slovenian theatre actor Primož Bežjak held a solo protest at Republic Square, where he marked crosses on the ground, symbolizing safe distancing spots for potential protesters. The next day, police officers visited Bežjak at his home, suspecting a violation of the general ban on movement in public places.

April 4, 2020

PROTESTORS PLAY BADMINTON

Two young women played badminton at Republic Square.

April 22, 2020

FOOTPRINTS OF RESISTANCE PROTEST

Participants arrived individually at Republic Square and placed paper footprints on the ground. Some of the footprints carried various messages. Police recorded the identities of several protesters for violating the decree banning movement and gatherings in public spaces, with fines of €420 issued (enforcement of fines was under the jurisdiction of the Health Inspectorate).

April 2020

BALCONY PROTEST

During the general quarantine period, protesters expressed their dissatisfaction with the current government by banging pots on their balconies for three consecutive Fridays.

April 24, 2020

FIRST FRIDAY ANTI-GOVERNMENT PROTEST ON BICYCLES

On Friday, April 24, protesters rode their bicycles through the centre of Ljubljana for the first time, ending the protest by circling and ringing bells in front of the National Assembly building. Protesters also rode past the RTV SLO building, applauding in support of the

public broadcaster, its journalists, and whistleblower Ivan Gale, who exposed irregularities in public procurement. The fourth consecutive Friday protest, titled “From Balconies to Bicycles,” was organized by 23 groups through the social network Facebook.

April 27, 2020

PROTEST MARCH

Protests organized via Facebook were held again on Monday, April 27. In Ljubljana, several hundred protesters gathered in front of the Parliament, while 100 people (though significantly more, according to media and organizers) protested in Maribor. Smaller demonstrations also took place on the same day in other Slovenian cities, including Nova Gorica, Ptuj, and Trbovlje.

April 29, 2020

BAN ON MOVEMENT AND GATHERINGS

The government issued a Decree on the Temporary General Ban on Movement and Gathering of People in Public Places, Spaces, and Areas in the Republic of Slovenia.

Late April 2020

PROTEST GRAFFITI IN MARIBOR

The graffiti read: “Death to Janšism, Freedom to the People.”

May 1, 2020

SECOND FRIDAY CYCLING PROTEST: TWO PROTESTS IN LJUBLJANA AND FIRST PROTESTS IN OTHER SLOVENIAN CITIES

May 8, 2020

THIRD FRIDAY CYCLING PROTEST

Opposition parties LMŠ, SD, and Levica announced their participation in the May 8 protests and called on their supporters to join. The SAB party emphasized the need to respect citizens' right to protest. Support for the protest was also expressed by 118 signatories of the Forum for Democracy, which includes prominent Slovenian figures. Approximately 5,500 protesters gathered in Ljubljana. Due to part of Republic Square being closed, protesters filled several nearby streets. The convoy of protesters also stopped at the Ljubljana University Medical Centre (UKC LJ), where they applauded in solidarity with healthcare workers. In Maribor, over 600 protesters participated (around 400 on bicycles), riding through the city center and applauding in front of the Večer newspaper building.

Early May 2020

GOVERNMENT APPROVES AMENDMENT TO THE NATURE CONSERVATION ACT

The amendment significantly restricts the ability of non-governmental organizations to participate in administrative procedures related to nature conservation. Around 90% of organizations operating in this field were excluded from such participation.

May 12, 2020

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTEST IN FRONT OF PARLIAMENT

On May 12, several hundred protesters gathered in front of the parliament to oppose the adoption of the amendment to the Nature Conservation Act, which was being debated that same day.

May 15, 2020

FOURTH FRIDAY CYCLING PROTEST

Second Half of May 2020

ANTI-GOVERNMENT GRAFFITI ACROSS SLOVENIA

In the first half of May, graffiti with slogans such as “Death to Janšism, Freedom to the People” and other protest messages appeared in Beltinci and Gornja Radgona.

May 22, 2020

FIFTH FRIDAY CYCLING PROTEST

May 26, 2020

PROTEST IN FRONT OF THE MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT AND CULTURE

On May 26, a group of environmental protesters gathered in front of the Ministry of Environment to express dissatisfaction with the restrictions imposed on the operations of environmental, nature conservation, and non-governmental organizations under emergency epidemic laws. Police, called by a ministry security officer, identified the protesters, physically removed four of them, and took them to a police station. On the same day, the Activist Collective of Cultural Workers protested in front of the Ministry of Culture due to dissatisfaction with the ministry's work, particularly its lack of response to the “questions, letters, appeals, and initiatives” of cultural workers. Protesters plastered the ministry's facade with their unanswered letters.

May 29, 2020

SIXTH FRIDAY CYCLING PROTEST

June 2, 2020

SECOND PROTEST OF CULTURAL WORKERS

On June 2, following the initiative of the Activist Collective of Cultural Workers, around 500 participants gathered at Prešeren Square and marched to the Ministry of Culture, leaving protest props at the ministry's entrance. During the protest, two participants stripped down to their underwear, and one of them glued their clothes to the ministry's entrance.

June 5, 2020

SEVENTH FRIDAY CYCLING PROTEST

June 9, 2020

THIRD PROTEST OF CULTURAL WORKERS

June 12, 2020

EIGHTH FRIDAY PROTEST

Approximately 5,000 participants gathered at the protest in Ljubljana on June 12. Protesters initially assembled at Prešeren Square and later moved to Republic Square. This protest took place without cycling.

June 16, 2020

FOURTH PROTEST OF CULTURAL WORKERS

On June 16, the Activist Collective of Cultural Workers organized another protest in front of the

Ministry of Culture. Protesters sat in front of the ministry building and then applauded loudly.

June 19,

2020

NINTH FRIDAY PROTEST

On June 19, the police fenced off the entire Republic Square and parts of the surrounding area, preventing the protest from taking place in close proximity to the parliament building.

June 24, 2020

PROTEST "ANTI-CELEBRATION" OF STATEHOOD DAY AND COUNTER-PROTEST BY YELLOW VESTS

Protesters held a protest "anti-celebration" of Statehood Day at Prešeren Square in Ljubljana, starting two hours before the official Statehood Day ceremony at the Congress Square.

June–October 2020

10th to 26th FRIDAY PROTEST

July 17, 2020

PROTEST PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY

More than 3,000 protesters gathered in Ljubljana to discuss the future direction of Slovenia.

October 20, 2020

INTRODUCTION OF A CURFEW

October 20, 2020

WATER ACT AMENDMENT

On October 20, 2020, the Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning submitted the Draft Amendments to the Water Act for public consultation.

October 23, 2020

TEMPORARY SUSPENSION OF FRIDAY PUBLIC PROTESTS

The organizers of the regular Friday anti-government protests announced in October that, due to the worsening COVID-19 epidemic in Slovenia, they would temporarily cease public protests starting Friday, October 23, and called for alternative ways to express opposition to the government. Representatives of the protests gathered in front of the government building and held a press conference. At the end of the media statement, the police, accompanied by health inspectors, approached the protesters and recorded the identities of four individuals for allegedly violating the decree limiting gatherings (despite the decree allowing gatherings of up to six people). Upon leaving, the group of protesters left a bicycle at the entrance of the government building.

October 23, 2020

PROTEST ACTION BY THE ACTIVIST COLLECTIVE OF CULTURAL WORKERS

November 5, 2020

PROTESTS AND RIOTS IN LJUBLJANA

January 25, 2021

ESTABLISHMENT OF THE LEGAL NETWORK FOR THE PROTECTION OF DEMOCRACY

March 15, 2021

EPIDEMIC EXTENDED UNTIL APRIL 16

March 29, 2021

NEW MEASURES AND RESTRICTIONS TO CONTAIN COVID-19

Restrictions included movement limited to regions and the suspension of public life.

April 5, 2021

CONTROVERSIAL WATER ACT AMENDMENT: INITIAL SIGNATURES FOR REFERENDUM COLLECTED

July 12, 2021

REFERENDUM SUCCESS: CITIZENS REJECT CONTROVERSIAL WATER ACT AMENDMENT

August 20, 2021

PROTEST ON MOUNT TRIGLAV

The 70th cycling protest was held on August 20, 2021, at the peak of Mount Triglav. About a dozen protesters displayed a flag featuring a red depiction of Triglav and a bicycle, brought a bicycle to the

summit, and unfurled banners with anti-government messages.

January 19, 2022

138 DEMANDS BY GLAS LJUDSTVA

The civil initiative Glas ljudstva (Voice of the People) presented 138 demands to political parties planning to run in the April parliamentary elections. These demands were divided into 11 thematic areas, including social rights, environmental protection, the rule of law, and democracy.

March 16, 2022

LAW TO REDUCE INEQUALITY AND POLITICAL ABUSE AND ENSURE THE RULE OF LAW

The March 8 Institute submitted a bill to parliament aimed at reducing inequality, reversing harmful political actions, and ensuring the rule of law. The bill sought to undo most of the damaging legislative changes implemented during Janša's government. On March 30, the National Assembly announced a 60-day period for collecting voter signatures in support of the bill. The required 5,000 signatures were collected on the first day.

March 17, 2022

INTRODUCTION OF THE VOLITVOMAT

The civil initiative Glas ljudstva introduced Volitvomat (Voting Compass), an online tool for voters.

April 15, 2022

PRE-ELECTION DEBATE AT REPUBLIC SQUARE

Glas ljudstva organized a pre-election debate for political parties at Republic Square, the central square in Ljubljana and Slovenia.

April 24, 2022

PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS AND END OF FRIDAY PROTESTS

Following the parliamentary elections on April 24, 2022, in which the Freedom Movement (Gibanje Svoboda) won the majority, the Friday protests ended after 105 weeks. On Friday, April 29, the organizers held a "closing gathering" in Ljubljana to mark the conclusion of the protests.

INSTEAD OF AN INTRODUCTION

The story of civil mobilization in Slovenia from 2020 to 2022 is primarily a story of resistance against the government of Janez Janša and its undemocratic measures. At that time, the third rise of Janez Janša to the position of prime minister was a surprise for the entire country and society. Probably even for Janša himself. The government was not formed after the elections. These took place in June 2018, and after them, a coalition of four liberal parties formed the government in September 2018, with the support of the Levica party (The Left), which voted for the government but formally remained outside it. The prime minister became the liberal Marjan Šarec. However, after a year and a half, due to disagreements within the coalition and the resignation of several ministers, he unexpectedly resigned in January 2020 and called for early elections.

You surprised your coalition partners, to put it mildly. They say you didn't tell them you were going to resign, that you essentially handed over the formation of the government to Janez Janša.

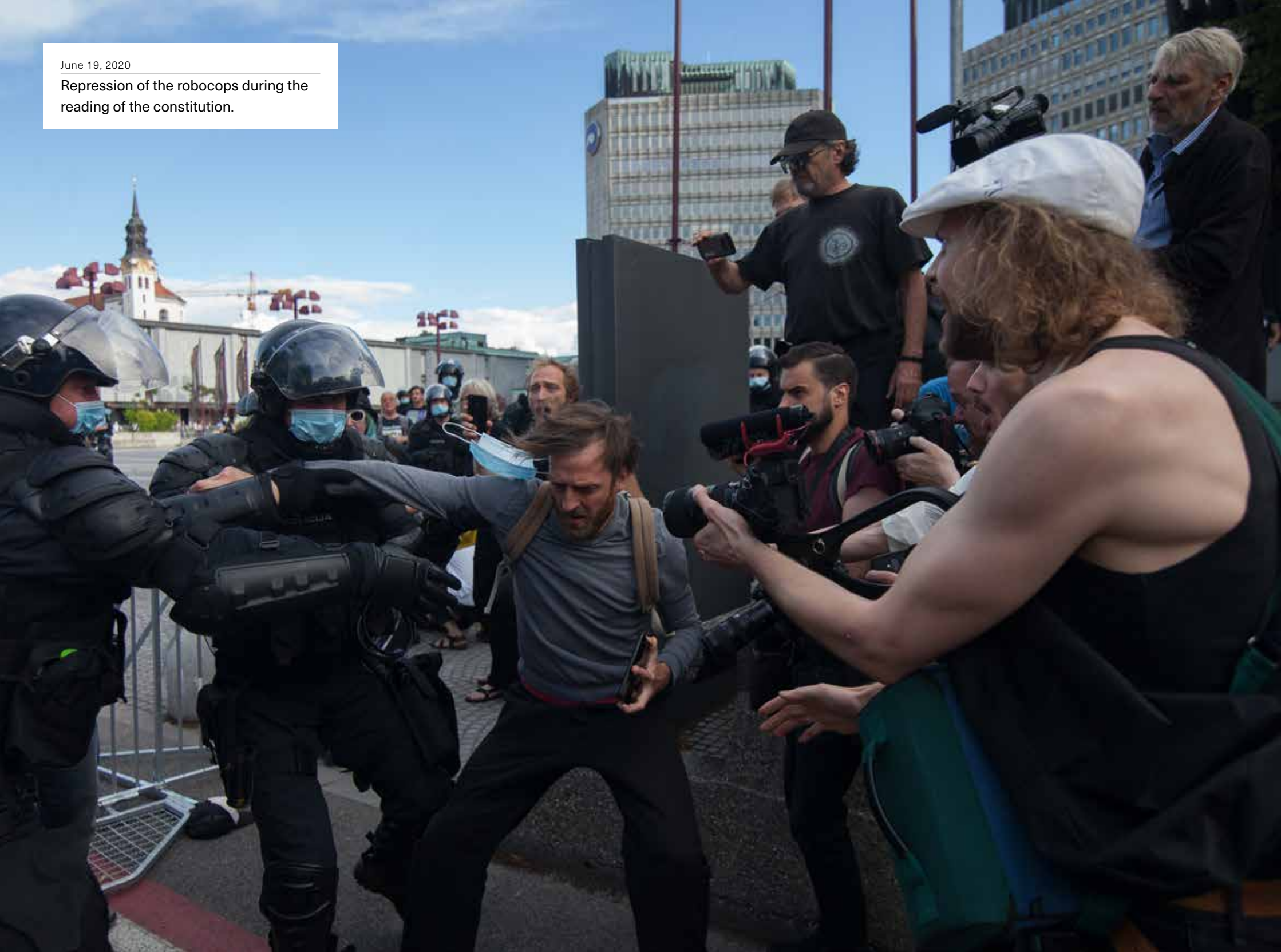
"Ah, not at all. I was counting on the words from 2018, when everyone swore they wouldn't work with Janez Janša. If they stick to that, then they really have no reason to complain."

Marjan Šarec in a conversation with a RTV Slovenija journalist, February 2020

Despite the explicit pre-election promises of all the coalition parties from 2018 that they would, under no circumstances, enter into a coalition with Janez Janša, two parties, SMC and DeSUS, after Šarec's resignation, agreed to talks with Janša about forming a new government. A month later, their governing bodies formally voted to join Janša's government, which, alongside his SDS, was formed also by the previously opposition NSi.

June 19, 2020

Repression of the robocops during the
reading of the constitution.



This led to the first civil society protest on February 28, when more than three thousand protesters gathered at Ljubljana's central Republic Square. It did not help. On March 4, Janša was elected prime minister in parliament. Nine days later, on March 13, his government was also elected. The coalition had 48 votes of support in the 90-member parliament. The beginning of the government's mandate directly coincided with the start of the COVID-19 epidemic, which was officially declared on March 12, when childcare and educational institutions were closed. A week later, the new government adopted a series of additional measures, including a decree on a complete ban on movement and gatherings in public spaces in Slovenia.

The new government soon gained notoriety for a series of controversial actions. On its first day, it set the highest possible salaries for ministers and state secretaries, and on the same day, after assuming power, it replaced the leadership of the police, army, and intelligence services. The dismissed police director had been warned shortly before by an SDS MP to "think about her future" after she did not comply with the parliamentary oversight committee's request to provide information that she did not have the authority to share. In a short period, the government replaced two acting directors of the *National Institute of Public Health*, which coordinated the epidemiological measures. The second was dismissed shortly after labelling some of the government's pandemic containment measures as medically unfounded. Government politicians, led by the prime minister, publicly discredited journalists and journalistic organizations. At the same time, media revelations and whistleblowers showed that government-affiliated politicians had attempted to influence the public procurement process for protective medical equipment and had promoted suppliers they personally or familially knew. When the police launched an investigation into suspected irregularities, the head of the *National Bureau of Investigation*, which was conducting the investigation, was soon dismissed.

The controversies continued in the following two years. The government ruled primarily by decrees, which the *Constitutional Court* eventually ruled as unconstitutional, stating that they lacked a legal basis in the *Infectious Diseases Act*, excessively restricting public movement

and gatherings in order to prevent protests against it. Under the pretext of controlling the epidemic and providing assistance to the population and the economy, the government passed a series of omnibus laws aimed at subordinating all state institutions and societal subsystems, from independent state agencies to public institutions and NGOs.

The government's actions indeed immediately faced sharp criticism from the media, experts, and civil society, but the specific epidemiological circumstances also dictated a specific form of civil society organization and mobilization. The period from 2020 to 2022 was thus not only a time of the previously unimaginable epidemic and the government's actions, but also a time of civil society innovation and previously unknown methods of civic mobilization.

NEW WAYS OF CIVIC MOBILIZATION AND ORGANIZATION

Since public movement and gatherings were prohibited from March 2020 onwards (except in exceptional cases, e.g., for recreational purposes), expressing disagreement with government measures required some creativity.

Immediately after the change of government, very disturbing reports began to emerge, ranging from open threats against RTV Slovenia to the accelerated hiring of people who were not professionally qualified. We also received early reports about various scandals and corrupt practices in the procurement of protective equipment. At that time, I was one of those who felt that we couldn't just stay at home and wait to see what would happen, and somehow remain silent about what was going on. So, personally, I first began with individual actions during the Covid lockdown. For example, I exercised with banners, filmed it, and posted videos. Then, the initiative for Friday protest cycling rides emerged.

**PROTEST
FROM BALCONIES
YOU WILL NOT
TAKE OUR FREEDOM!**

In the weeks when we, as a society, are responding in solidarity to the challenges of the epidemic, Janez Janša's government, under the guise of fighting the virus, is imposing a state of emergency and daily restricting our freedoms. One controversial move after another by the authorities: increasing police powers, sending the army to the border, spreading fake news about the allegedly irresponsible behaviour of citizens, excessively and unrealistically restricting people's movement, inciting hatred toward migrants, excluding the most precarious from social welfare measures, spreading intolerance, and personally attacking journalists and press freedom. None of this has anything to do with fighting the epidemic; rather, it points to the current government's desire to implement autocratic rule, militarize society, and reinforce the privileges of a small elite that holds power and wealth in this society. We say NO to all of this!

WHAT CAN WE DO?

In our kitchens, we might not all have food right now, but we certainly have pots and spoons with which we can make loud noise to clearly reject the alarming measures of the authorities during the epidemic. The protest with pots and spoons is a firm NO to the autocratic rulers and a strong YES for solidarity, life, mutual help, humanity, and health FOR ALL. Resistance can take many forms – we can hang posters on our windows and share them with friends, play our favourite protest song (and let it be really loud!), shout slogans, hang socks from our balconies, and more...

Let's be creative!

WHEN?

This Friday at 7 p.m., we will gather on windows and balconies to express our dissatisfaction. Let our dissatisfaction be louder than the voices of the government and their confusion, spreading of fear, and empty promises from the television screens!

TELL YOUR FRIENDS!

Show that we are not afraid. Invite your Facebook friends and call your neighbours. Print out a poster and hang it in your building. Record your protest and share it on this event, as well as on your Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter. We are not afraid, and they will not silence us!

Others found their way by lighting candles or placing crosses in front of the parliament building in Ljubljana's Republic Square as a sign of disagreement with the government. Mass protests were also held from balconies and windows.

At the end of April, protests from balconies transitioned to bicycles, since COVID-19 decrees had allowed recreational cycling, even in groups: "Gather your team and hit the streets – maybe we cannot afford golf and tennis, nor our own weekend homes and yachts, but that doesn't mean we're just going to sit at home! Ring the bells, make noise with pots and spoons, attach protest flags to your bikes, and take a few laps around the city – and maybe we'll meet around 7 P.M. in city centres."

Most protest movements, both in Slovenia and around the world, have a phase where they grow and grow, eventually reaching a peak, at which point something dramatic happens – either the government falls or someone resigns – or, if the primary goal is not achieved, they begin to decline. People realize that nothing will change in the near future, and interest in protests fades. With the Friday cycling protests, it was crucial to prevent the momentum from fading. We feared that if we stopped protesting and expressing our disagreement with the corruption scandals, the intimidation of dissenters, and the police repression in public spaces, the situation would actually get worse. The government would become more confident that it could do whatever it wanted because, apparently, civil society and citizens on the streets couldn't change anything. Therefore, we recognized the need to expand the protests with cultural content, with additional actions involving theatrical elements, and more structured criticism of what was happening – not just a crowd shouting "thieves, thieves, guilty, guilty!" So, on the one hand, we began to focus on a specific theme for each Friday protest, highlighting a particular scandal or violation of the rule of law, and supporting it with music, speeches, large puppets, etc. On the other hand, we started addressing the mass media more actively. For each Friday, we prepared a special statement describing what we were focusing on that week. These texts were widely picked

up by the mass media, allowing us to convey our critical opposition to what was happening each week to the broader public, including those who couldn't attend the protests, especially during the period when movement between municipalities was restricted.

At some point, a question arose: "Okay, you're against Janša and the current government, but what do you actually want? Are you just being negative?" We decided, partly because we had the time and there was nothing else to do on Fridays, to focus on looking ahead and agreeing on the minimal framework of the kind of country we wanted to live in. We organized a protest people's assembly, with 3,000 participants, which took place in Ljubljana's Argentine Park. We identified ten areas – such as culture, global politics, the environment, healthcare, education – and then invited all participants to collaborate. We tried to form guidelines for the future, outlining the kind of country we wanted to live in. Based on the input, we later published a booklet, "Guidelines of the Protest People's Assembly."

The novelty of the civil society movement of 2020-2022 was also the close collaboration between activists, informal civil groups, and professionalized civil society organizations.

The potential of civil society was mobilized (...) Experts from universities, who were not formal members of any NGO, also participated in large numbers. We mobilized civil society more broadly, including individuals, and the essence of Glas ljudstva was that it brought together institutional civil society – us, with our offices, projects, employees, or at least regular collaborators – and ad hoc civil society, which mobilized around a specific issue and is non-institutional. I count the Friday cyclists among them. The coexistence of these two parts of civil society is Glas ljudstva. Especially in its early days, it was the richest because, from the very first day, these two energies were together: on the one hand, the expertise of professional NGOs (environmental, anti-corruption, media, human rights, etc.) and on the other, the creative potential of activism and artistic activism, which fused and connected.

Among the Friday protesters, there were also many active citizens who were experts in their fields and who came to the protests, giving them the space to articulate and share their expertise.

When reflecting on the benefits of such broad collaboration, one of the key civil society actors from the time stated the following:

Participation seems very important to me, at every step... with the activism brought by the activists, our messaging was much stronger... at events, press conferences, anywhere. I mean, most people are visual types, plus it adds another layer of creativity through which you can address political decision-makers or motivate people. It seems to me that, thanks to the collaboration of groups and individuals from different fields and with diverse interests, we now finally understand that most of the problems we face in our respective areas are interconnected and have common causes. I think we are all wiser because of this collaboration. For example, I now better understand healthcare, while someone else now better understands the seriousness of the climate crisis. There's also this realization that, when addressing problems in our own areas of interest, we must be careful not to deepen problems in other areas. This, to me, is a truly significant added value of a broad coalition spanning diverse fields.

A third significant novelty in civil society mobilization during 2020-2022 was the organized and systematic use of legal remedies (against controversial government measures and actions).

The trigger for this was, on the one hand, the illegal adoption of decisions regarding COVID measures (which were made based on decrees and had no legal basis), and the obvious arbitrary actions of the government. On the other hand, there were the fines imposed on protesters. Initially, these fines were brought privately to B. R., and this area was also taken up by Danes je nov dan (Today is a New Day), which helped people through legal assistance. Everything was relatively fragmented at

first. Then, two colleagues approached me. They felt that law was the last line of defence against the arbitrary actions of the authorities and that it would be good to connect. I then called the Legal Centre for the Protection of Human Rights and the Environment and Amnesty Slovenia. Then, Danes je nov dan also got involved, and that's how it continued.

The result of the discussions was the establishment of the *Legal Network for the Protection of Democracy* (LNPD), coordinated by four non-governmental organizations, including the *Open Institute*. The Legal Network was established in January 2021. During its most active period, the Legal Network, whose goal from the very beginning was to unite as many legal experts, professors, and attorneys as possible, involved more than 50 attorneys.

A major challenge was convincing external experts, especially attorneys, to participate. Attorneys are very cautious about their reputation and fear being labelled as activists. In this country, in this world, you are valued if you earn a lot of money, even if it's dirty, but you are worth nothing if you work for free and someone calls you an activist. It was necessary to come up with various forms of collaboration to ensure everyone was satisfied according to what mattered to them.

At the beginning, we were very concerned about how difficult it would be to work with attorneys. This was also because these are people who are accustomed to being well-paid for their work and who are very cautious about when to take a stance. However, it turned out that they were relatively willing to cooperate, even pro bono or for lower fees, which was a positive surprise. This was particularly important because we saw it as a potential breaking point – something that could significantly hinder or even prevent the work of LNPD. It turned out that they also perceived the situation as extraordinary enough to be willing to get involved and express their opinions, even though they are usually cautious about doing so.

After a few months, it became apparent that managing such a large network of lawyers was very demanding, that maintaining relationships was challenging, and that it was easier to collaborate with only some of them.

We were fortunate to find external individuals who were very productive... And the fact that within one year, we managed to raise over €40,000 in donations from supporters, which enabled us to work and remain financially independent.

In total, in almost a year and a half, the Legal Network assisted in over 2,000 cases, filed more than 250 appeals related to the right to protest, and initiated two (successful) constitutional complaints against government decrees.

I think its greatest contribution was that people were still able to protest because they felt they wouldn't face consequences like having their homes seized. Without LNPD, the fines would have continued to discourage protests, as people would have paid them. I don't know whether the protests would have lasted or not. Many people were afraid to protest because of the fines, which served as a threat. Another important point is that LNPD demonstrated how much organized legal action is lacking in civil society and how difficult it is to maintain it. My conclusion is that legal knowledge and legal procedures are underestimated in the non-governmental sector. Why? Access to those in power is often quick; they are very close to us. However, when a government comes into power where you don't know any ministers or secretaries, you see how important the law is. But legal competence must be maintained. It is essential to have legal precedents, institutions, and even courts that understand these matters. On our side, we also need to maintain capacity.

The legal achievements of the Legal Network were impressive.

At the Legal Network, we practically didn't lose a case – virtually none. This is a significant success, and the European Parliament later awarded us the European Citizen's Prize. LNPD succeeded in establishing legal remedies as a means of protecting human rights and democracy. Various organizations had been doing this before, but I believe that since then, we've made significant strides in developing legal tools, something that was previously lacking in the non-governmental sector.

The novelty was also that, for the first time, civil society systematically and continuously informed and alarmed the international public about what was happening in Slovenia.

This internationalization played a crucial role. During Janez Janša's government and its attacks on journalists and civil society, even the broader Slovenian public became more aware of what was happening and why it constituted an attack on democracy. Our media quoted international outlets, there were ongoing echoes or visits from international institutions, and reports consistently reinforced our narrative that this was an attack on democracy and that spaces for freedom of journalists and civil society were shrinking. Sometimes, daily or weekly, I would send alerts to numerous addresses across Europe, where we had established contacts in some organizations. We were regularly in touch with the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights, connected with the office of Věra Jourová, European Commissioner for Values and Transparency, and constantly informed international media and organizations. They, in turn, issued monthly or even daily warnings about what was happening in Slovenia. This mobilized the international civil society, intergovernmental organizations, the European Commission, the Council of Europe, and international media, while we ensured a continuous flow of information.

NEW WAYS – NEW ORGANIZATIONAL AND TACTICAL CHALLENGES

In the broader protest group, there was a significant gap between the willingness to do something and the ability to do it. The fact is, not everything needs to be done immediately, but there are tasks – unglamorous, invisible ones – that must be done urgently. Reaching agreements on this was challenging. For instance, instead of making another 8-meter-tall paper puppet today, it would be better to have a three-hour Zoom call with our representatives, friends, and trusted partners from 10 cities across Slovenia to plan what we'll do in 10 days. Prioritization or time management is a term one might despise with every fiber of their being, but it's indispensable. If you look at examples like the national liberation struggle or the Spanish Civil War, you realize how crucial it is to organize effectively, manage resources wisely, and direct them strategically. You have to be prudent – smart! For this reason, we eventually parted ways with some people.

Two years after the conclusion of the protests, questions have arisen among the leading actors about whether the intensity of protest activities might have been too high. Could the same or even better results have been achieved with a lower frequency of protests that were better prepared?

The periodicity of protests could probably have been less intense. Instead of every week, for example, once a month. Then we would have had more time for preparation, and it wouldn't have been an automatic thing – just showing up every Friday to protest. Instead, we could have done proper promotion. People might have also looked forward to protests more, as they would have been rarer and not something they grew tired of. I think it would still have worked. At the peak of the Friday protests, we had anywhere from a thousand to tens of thousands of

people. Toward the end, only a few hundred people remained who were genuinely committed to showing up every Friday. These were people who had internalized the protests. But I'm not sure it would have been possible – no matter how well-organized the protests or how bad the government – to sustain a pace where thousands of people protested every Friday for two years. People naturally feel a need for some normalcy in between.

Open questions also remain about tactics for bridging civil society and political parties. Should civil society collaborate with political opposition when the government seriously threatens the rule of law and constitutional order, or should it avoid risking its integrity and non-partisan stance? One of the actors from that time recounts:

It was tricky. Part of the group strongly resisted when I suggested that, starting the next morning, we should regularly meet or speak with opposition party leaders. They weren't on board. A few months later, they implemented this idea, but by then it was already too late. The opposition parties had formed their KUL coalition, built closer ties, and started collaborating more effectively. As a result, the civil society front was weakened, losing the opportunity to exert greater influence on promises the opposition might have made before the elections or to negotiate positions within future institutions once 'our side' came to power. By delaying our connection with the parties, we missed a critical opportunity.

Another actor from that time points out that opinions varied then and continue to do so today:

When we talk about challenges and what troubles us, the question arises: why doesn't civil society enter the electoral arena? Why doesn't someone from among us run for office? Why doesn't any of this evolve into a new party or align with an existing one? In other words, are we or are we not an alternative? This is also a question for civil society in

June 19, 2020

October 5, 2021 - Police use a water cannon, with added tear gas, on Slovenska street.



Hungary, Serbia... We observe and see that in some cases, like Serbia, the opposition offers nothing to mobilize people. Should civil society in such situations directly engage in building a political alternative – a movement or party that will run candidates and take responsibility? In our case, the general answer so far remains 'no.' We in civil society are not ready. No one is willing to run for office. We've discussed this many times, but only briefly because the answer is always no. Still, the question remains: what should or could civil society do to foster an atmosphere of trust in democracy, where new democratic groups and parties emerge?

SUCCESS DESPITE DIFFICULTIES

"Fatigue is a global issue plaguing protests," observed Chris Eckert from the Organisation for World Peace in 2020 while monitoring protests around the world. "With protests breaking out over the past few months alone in Chile, Lebanon, the U.K., Belarus, India, Colombia, and Spain, there is clearly room for burnout amongst protestors. In the U.K., anti-India protests failed to meet the expected number of protests, a senior community leader who helped organize the protest cited fatigue as a reason for the low turnout. There is a physical factor involved as well". A psychology student who took part in the protests in Chile, José Solís, thinks "there's a fatigue factor. People are now more than 10 days into coming to protest every day, most from the outskirts of Santiago." Others identify finances as a major strain on protests. While many view the issue as focused on a lack of funding for the organizations that help organize the protests, the fact of the matter is many people cannot protest for extended periods because they need to return to their jobs and provide for their families. These forms of protest fatigue are a threat of pro-democracy movements. Giving up on challenging injustice simply because it feels overwhelming only enables it to persist.

In 2020, protest fatigue also threatened Slovenian protesters and civil society.

The first thing we learned is that there is no magical number of protesters that automatically leads to change. At the beginning, we were under the impression that it would be like in 2012: when enough people gathered, the government would resign because they'd realize the public was truly dissatisfied. However, it quickly became apparent that if decision-makers in parliament have no personal interest in stepping down, they can get away with violating the constitution, ignoring criticism from the European Commission or anyone else, and nothing will change. Protests can perhaps sway things when circumstances are on the edge, but they alone aren't enough when the political will is absent. Hence the biggest victory of these protests was their persistence – they continued despite rain, strict bans on public gatherings, and other obstacles. Even when public gatherings were completely prohibited, we found ways to protest, like demonstrating in cars. This continuity of resistance was a major achievement. It could have gone differently, as it often does under authoritarian regimes, where dissent is punished, and people eventually become too afraid to speak out. Even when dissatisfaction is widespread, the fear of sanctions silences criticism. That's why the sustained criticism of the government was such an important aspect of these protests. It encouraged others to voice their dissent, whether at work, over coffee, or in private, knowing they weren't alone.

The legal and judicial victories of the Legal Network for the Protection of Democracy were also crucial in maintaining this momentum. Additionally, the successful referendum on the Water Act Amendment in the summer of 2021 provided fresh energy and hope to the protest movement.

Immediately after the Janša government came to power, there was immense pressure on environmental and climate policies. Everything was geared towards benefiting corporations, both national and

international. Environmental protections were being stripped away from core legislation governing spatial planning, construction, and environmental oversight. The government also developed long-term climate strategies and key action plans that contradicted the principles of a just green transition. Then came the Water Act amendment, which was even more overtly capitalist in intent, pushing for construction projects near water bodies that were previously prohibited, such as gas stations, parking lots, hotels, and restaurants. Initially, the amendment even allowed the construction of factories handling hazardous substances in water protection areas.

The opposition to the amendment mobilized nearly all of civil society, extending far beyond environmental groups. Trade unions and other NGOs joined the fight. Notably, the environmental organizations entrusted the coordination of the referendum campaign to the March 8 Institute, which is not an environmental organization.

Environmental organizations approached us because we had previously succeeded in gathering 5,000 signatures for the 'Yes Means Yes' campaign to redefine rape laws. That was the first citizen-led legislative initiative to gather the necessary signatures and achieve parliamentary approval. Successful civil initiatives are rare, which is why they turned to us for help with the Water Act referendum. Initially, we hesitated, as we knew little about the subject matter. But the consensus among environmental organizations encouraged us – it's rare to see such unified opposition to a specific law. So, we decided to step in as a campaign organization experienced in mobilizing support, knowing that 40,000 signatures would be required for the referendum, which is a daunting task. We also hoped this referendum would serve as a symbolic victory against the government, while emphasizing the importance of engaging people through legal and institutional channels, not just through protests.

This referendum also became a learning experience for the organization.

In reality, we didn't know much, and we had to change our system hundreds of times because it wasn't working. For example, we realized that we lacked volunteers in one region but had plenty in another. Working with people is always somewhat unpredictable. During the Water Act referendum, we were inexperienced, unsure of how to manage a referendum campaign. Two years later, during the referendum for RTV Slovenia, we already had a clearer idea of the necessary materials, how to structure a campaign, and how to optimize the four weeks of campaigning, especially leading up to early voting. By then, we had developed a mailing list and a stronger community, making us far better prepared than during the first referendum. One of the most important aspects of civic mobilization is building alliances. We never carried out any campaign entirely on our own – there is always a group of organizations involved. This provides greater protection against any kind of attacks because you are part of a team. At the same time, we are far from knowing everything, so we need to include organizations that bring expertise to the table. It is also crucial, from a communication perspective, to include personal testimonies. That is why we always collect them. Not just for communication purposes, but also to give people the space to express themselves. Additionally, this allows us to concretely illustrate the nature of the problem and why it needs to be addressed, as these issues have real consequences for real lives. Only then do people truly understand and respond effectively.

The water referendum took place on July 11, 2021. 788,968 voters took part in it. The voter turnout was 46.46%. 682,760 voters or 86.75% of all who participated voted against the amendment to the Water Act. Only 13.25% of participants supported the government.

TOWARDS THE 2022 GENERAL ELECTIONS

By mid-2021, it was evident that mass protests and legal victories were not enough to achieve a change in government. The focus shifted towards the parliamentary elections scheduled for April 2022. Civil society groups, recognizing the stakes, coordinated closely to mobilize democratic potential among citizens.

Our goal was to mobilize the democratic potential of citizens, hoping that this alone would lead to a change in policies that suppress civil society and destroy democratic institutions in the country. However, we didn't say, "Let's overthrow Janez Janša's government," but rather, "Let's mobilize people to vote with the aim of making democracy work." We acted with the awareness that democracy is truly democratic only when people participate and that elections are genuinely democratic only when voter turnout is high. This was the core around which we mobilized and connected, and from there, we began planning what we would do.

Two prominent campaigns emerged: *Gremo volit* (Let's Vote) by the March 8 Institute and the *Glas ljudstva* (Voice of the People) campaign.

LET'S VOTE

The March 8 Institute's electoral mobilization campaign stood out for its innovative approach. Instead of merely encouraging voter participation, they introduced a citizens' legislative initiative to reverse many harmful laws enacted by the Janša government.

We knew that we would need to put in extra effort and mobilize for the elections. We prepared a law that addressed 11 different pieces of legislation. We conducted an analysis of the legislation passed by Janša's government and its most obvious violations of the rule of law, human rights, and institutional independence. We prepared a legislative package aimed at restoring the previous state of affairs before Janša's government's interventions and began collecting signatures for it during the pre-election period. This approach seemed important to us because it provided a concrete action, not just empty promises and commitments. At the same time, we saw it as an opportunity to remind people of all the negative interventions by Janša's government in very tangible areas, such as the judiciary, police, education, and so on. We also found it important to frame this positively – to show that we were not only against what had happened but also for an independent police force, an independent judiciary, independent education, workers' rights, and more. We were convinced that people needed to be mobilized for the elections through something very concrete.

The March 8 Institute submitted the proposed bill to parliament on March 16, just one month and a week before the parliamentary elections scheduled for April 24, 2022. In accordance with the law on citizens' initiatives, the *National Assembly* was then required to announce a 60-day period for collecting voter signatures in support of the bill. The legislation stipulates that when citizens submit a bill, it must gather 5,000 signatures to proceed to the legislative process. This tactical move allowed the Institute to conduct its mobilization campaign during the pre-election period without having to register as one of the official organizers of election campaigns. This was the case even though the required 5,000 signatures were collected on the very first day of the signature collection period, March 30. The campaign and signature collection continued until the elections, involving the mobilization of a large number of volunteers across various Slovenian towns where signatures were gathered in support of the law. The Institute also demanded clear positions on the bill from all non-coalition parties participating in the elections to prevent the bill from

being stalled in the legislative process after the elections. All the parties that formed the government after the elections supported the bill and, despite some hesitation, passed it after the elections. This demonstrated the foresight behind the idea of submitting the proposed bill as even the new coalition hesitated to reverse certain measures to their original state immediately after the elections. In the end, however, due to the clear pre-election promises, they did not dare deviate from what had been agreed upon and pledged.

THE VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

The initiative *Glas ljudstva* today unites over 100 civil society organizations and thousands of individuals from various social fields. These include professional organizations focused on democracy protection, human rights, environmental issues, social welfare, labour, housing policy, media, culture, infrastructure, global justice, health, education, the economy, and other key areas for our collective future.

This is how one of its initiators recalls its beginnings:

How did Glas ljudstva come about? Together with other environmental organizations, we often pondered what to do for elections – whether to demand something from MPs, create a green scorecard for party programs, or something else. Every time, there was always something. This time, we thought about what we could do differently. We met with another environmental organization and quickly realized that we needed to broaden our perspective. We organized a meeting, and even at that first gathering, there were many organizations from different fields. From that meeting, Glas ljudstva emerged. The socio-political context of the time was special and cannot be overlooked. On one hand, there were the ‘cyclists’ who had already organized 70 or 80 Friday cycling protests and remain an important group within Glas ljudstva. Then there were the professional NGOs. But the simple reason we

came together was that we didn’t just want to stop the dismantling of democracy, social systems, and environmental protections. We didn’t want to merely oppose something; we wanted to articulate what we wanted to demand from politics.

Another member points out that the question was how do you coordinate such a massive group of over 100 organizations? How do you gather all the ideas and ensure a democratic process for their collection? We had to involve the public and supporters, determine our capacities, and plan on-the-ground activities. It was a novelty in a way because civil society, organized into such a network, had not participated in election campaigns before. These were newly developed methods of work and decision-making, and it was a particularly large undertaking.

Bringing together various socio-political expectations in one place was a novelty in the 2022 elections.

In previous elections, some organizations had individually verified their demands with candidates. This time, we said, ‘Let’s connect and pose different themes and questions’ – environmental, rule of law, minorities, foreign policy, economic topics – all as civil society, presenting our view of the future and democracy. This led to a process of articulating demands, grouped into 11 areas, with widespread involvement of university experts who weren’t formally part of any NGOs. These demands underwent editorial refinement to streamline and energize the text. We then invited broader civil society to join, going beyond just the 20-30 of us writing the demands. Over 100 NGOs and thousands of individuals joined us at that stage.

In the next phase, *Glas ljudstva* called on all political parties to respond to 136 collected demands via an online questionnaire.

From responses, we created the ‘voting compass.’ It’s an online tool – we couldn’t include all 136 demands because answering them would have taken citizens too long. So, we narrowed them down to a little over

30 key issues. Based on their answers, people could see which party aligned best with their views. The tool worked well; over 100,000 people used it, fulfilling our goal of enabling informed voting – ensuring voters checked who matched their views on various societal issues before casting their ballot.

At the same time, we came up with a few additional mobilization actions... we are particularly proud of the public debate between candidates and the people at Republic Square. We, as *Glas ljudstva* (The Voice of the People), keep returning to Republic Square because the Parliament is in front of us, the government is behind us, and it is also a square where protests have taken place in the past. It is where the declaration of independence was celebrated, so it carries symbolic significance. Most importantly, we return to this square because the Friday protestors protested there, and we wanted to signal that this is a continuation of that movement, of people's desire for democracy. They braved the cold, heat, and rain to protest. It was at this square that we organized a live debate between candidates, inviting anyone to attend – not just watching on television or at party-organized picnics – but to have candidates answer questions live, from both citizens and civil society. We invited people via email, receiving over 100 questions. We also set up a mobile number during the event so people could send in their questions in real time during the debate. (...) These scenes greatly marked the pre-election period and contributed to mobilizing the people of Slovenia to vote, fostering a sense that we decide. That was also our core message: a democratic Slovenia, not one where protestors are beaten, NGOs threatened, journalists insulted and intimidated, and public media undermined.

When asked about their greatest success, *Glas ljudstva* members almost unanimously highlight the high voter turnout.

Our greatest success is undoubtedly higher voter turnout. While not solely due to our activities, we contributed to it. The nearly 20% p.p. increase in voter participation awakened a democratic potential and confidence among people that they decide, proving we all have a shared democratic culture and potential that can't be taken away. This democratic consciousness, demonstrated during the elections, stays in collective memory and strengthens citizens' confidence. In countries where democratic decline is more permanent, such as Serbia or Hungary, it's challenging to revive the confidence that change is possible. That's why, beyond the high voter turnout, our true achievement is awakening people and proving that we, the people, can protect democracy and make a difference.

Voter turnout in the 2022 elections was 70.79%. A total of 1,203,373 eligible voters cast their votes. This represented the highest voter turnout since 1996. In 2018, the turnout was 52%, in 2014 it was 51%, and in 2011 it was 65%. The parties of Janša's government collectively secured only 35% of the votes. The members of *Glas ljudstva* are also proud of the raised level of pre-election debates.

It seems we chose the right topics and key questions that people wanted to discuss. I would even dare to say that we managed to steer the pre-election campaign toward being more content-driven than it would have otherwise been, and that we created pressure with monitoring promises for the future as well.

In my opinion, the biggest success was that the majority of parties signed on to most of our demands, that they engaged with us, attended debates. Honestly, back then there was greater mass mobilization, which is probably primarily thanks to Janša – people were a bit more active, they paid attention. We can see that when a centre-left government comes to power, we become far too tolerant of what's happening."

AFTER THE 2022 ELECTIONS: NEW GOVERNMENT - OLD CHALLENGES

After the elections, the government was formed by the democratic opposition. The prime minister became Robert Golob, the leader of the victorious party Gibanje Svoboda (Freedom Movement), which won 34% of the votes. This was a new party, established only six months before the elections.

For the civil society movement that had taken shape through protests against Janša's government, the new government posed a new challenge: how to ensure that the 122 demands of *Glas ljudstva*, which the new coalition parties agreed to before the elections, would actually be implemented. And what kind of stance to take toward the government? The situation was further complicated by the fact that the new opposition, led by Janez Janša, blocked three passed laws shortly after the elections and demanded referendums on them.

It was difficult to figure out what the best strategy was with the change of government. On the first day, it would have been hard to push too much, but the situation was also really frustrating when the opposition blocked the government law, and we had to have a referendum on it. If you wanted to move anything forward, you effectively had to lobby for the government, as there wasn't much room for criticism at that point.

The *Glas ljudstva* coalition continued after the elections and today operates as a platform for monitoring the fulfilment of government commitments. Due to the symbolic capital gained during 2020–2022, it made sense to stay together – primarily for greater strength in case the government failed to deliver on its promises. As one of the founding members put it:

The wish was for elections not to be about personality-driven politics but to focus on substantive issues and campaign promises. The goal was – perhaps somewhat idealistically – to achieve a higher-quality government. (...) At the beginning, I truly understood Glas ljudstva as a network through which we would come together if there were problems in any area.

It did not fully work out.

Shortly after the elections, when the government first broke its commitment and transferred state construction land to SDH (the Slovenian Sovereign Holding) instead of to Housing Funds – which is absolutely insane – we mobilized strongly and realized that we were all, in reality, too preoccupied with ourselves, lacking the capacity and ability to come together in that way. (...) I regret that we weren't able to do this. (...) Glas ljudstva and the Friday protests had broad support back then, and I understand that much of that support was lost after the elections; still, some things were poorly communicated, and certain messages were not even coordinated within the group. What was once a strong community no longer exists.

Another member shares a similar perspective:

The question is how much mobilization potential remains after victory: by continuing with Glas ljudstva, watching over the current government, and occasionally taking to the streets, we're trying to find the strength within ourselves to maintain that rebellious mobilization element. But it's a big challenge to mobilize ourselves and citizens when there's no obvious major threat to democracy.

In the new circumstances, under a liberal government, the challenge is simply to maintain one's own credibility.

After the elections, and still today, a major challenge has been how to maintain our credibility. I don't mean just in keeping a watchful eye on the government, but also in ensuring that we ourselves are not seen as allies of the new government... In other words, maintaining the independence of civil society and an equally critical stance toward the new government, which pledged to fulfil our demands. How do we establish a sharp distance while still cooperating with them, because it is in our interest to have civil society collaborate with the authorities? Democracy requires such participation, and it's necessary. It's in our interest that these commitments are fulfilled, that housing gets built, etc. For instance, if we have an answer on what a law should look like for public healthcare to survive, it would naturally make sense for us to want to participate in drafting it, but at the same time, we have to defend our independence so we aren't consumed in the process. These are enormous challenges we constantly face.

Two years after the elections, *Glas ljudstva* is also reflecting on its past and future strategies regarding the number of pre-election political demands, and consequently, on the priorities of civic engagement and its focus.

*Another issue is the sheer number of commitments. We're questioning ourselves, wondering if it might have been more sensible to focus on a smaller number of commitments – say, 20 – but really refine them. There's no guarantee it would have been better, but it would certainly have been easier to track and communicate. On the other hand, this would require reduction, and some important issues might have been left out. The process of formulating them would likely have been even more complicated – who decides, and who makes the selection? Still, I think the key to *Glas ljudstva*'s existence lies in maintaining a sense of solidarity, trust among the participating organizations, and a shared understanding that certain basic societal values must come first. For example, we can't have a healthy environment without human rights, or higher subsidies for culture without simultaneously protecting workers'*

rights. In short, all these areas are interconnected, and we must fight for them collectively, rather than each focusing solely on their own niche.

Another member of *Glas ljudstva* shares a similarly critical view regarding the number of demands, both past and future:

When the state of key issues is overall so poor, you can't fight for particular issues because it's pointless. The government might fulfil a good number of our demands, but if it doesn't address the fundamental ones, we can't be satisfied. ... I think we didn't emphasize this enough. There are some basics that must be fulfilled for everything else to work or have a meaning.

DECEMBER 2024 – HOW TO MOVE FORWARD?

Slovenian public opinion polls have been showing for at least a year now that the government's support barely reaches one-third. People are disappointed. Most of the promised reforms aimed at improving public services, significantly reducing healthcare waiting times, providing everyone access to a doctor, and solving the housing crisis for young people remain unfulfilled. The government has completely failed with some reforms. For some time now, Janez Janša's party has been by far the most popular. It would be supported by a quarter of respondents, almost twice as many as the party of the current prime minister Golob. No other party enjoys even a third of the support that Janša's party has.

In *Glas ljudstva*, there is already deep concern about the upcoming elections in the spring of 2026.

This is also a huge challenge, you know. When we have regular strategic meetings, we ask ourselves: what now? Who will even listen to us when we call on people to vote again? We fear they'll throw it back in our

faces: what did we get out of this last time? That's why it's so important for this government to succeed in terms of democratic standards, to deliver on the reforms it promised. Otherwise, neither they nor we will have any credibility left."

Thus, the challenges faced by civil society did not end with the 2022 elections, despite the experience gained in the fight for democracy during 2020–2022 that makes civil society better prepared should similar circumstances arise again. There is more collaboration and networking across different areas, connections are maintained between professional CSOs, informal groups, and individual activists. There is also much more legal knowledge and experience in effectively and quickly utilizing legal remedies. The know-how regarding organizing mass campaigns is highly developed, and a vibrant network of volunteers across Slovenia is ready to mobilize locally if needed. None of this was available in 2020.

However, it is also a fact that none of the aforementioned alone helps to curb the spread of autocratic right-wing populism, nor does it effectively prevent the danger of a repeat government hostile to the rule of law and democracy. All these efforts are primarily reactive – useful for the fight when democracy and the rule of law are already under threat or attack. They are not helpful, however, when left-liberal governments are in power and fail to fulfil their promises of a more socially just state. As it seems, what harms democracy and the rule of law the most are not the autocratic populists but the neoliberal policies of our liberal political elites. People do not vote for populists out of ignorance about democracy and the rule of law but because they perceive that these populists recognize their economic and social problems and offer solutions for them.

In such a situation, civil society can do the most for democracy and the rule of law not by directly defending them but by mobilizing for fair and sufficiently high progressive taxes, investments in public health and education, decent pay, pensions, and social support, etc. In other words, the rise of populists to power today can only be prevented if we are able to compel liberal governments to genuinely address the economic and social problems that plague most people today. That is, only by fighting for the revival and reaffirmation of the welfare state.



2024: A YEAR IN THE SQUARES

HOW SLOVAK CIVIL SOCIETY RESISTS AN ILLIBERAL TURN

Fedor Blaščák

Philosopher, activist, Director of the Open Society
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This essay outlines foundations of Slovak civil society's resilience and, through examples of advocacy campaigns and protest movements, examines its current struggle against the new government's efforts to restrict civil rights, defund CSOs, weaken institutions, and silence dissent – actions which align with the broader trend of an *illiberal turn* threatening liberal institutions and values worldwide.

In Central Europe this trend is often referred to as the *Orbán playbook*, which includes altering electoral systems, undermining judicial independence, restricting civic space, targeting activists and media with smear campaigns, and eroding media independence. All of this is currently happening in Slovakia – though some aspects remain in the hypothetical phase (e.g., changing electoral rules seems very unlikely).

This is a story – written from the perspective of a close observer and direct participant – of political oppression and unwavering resistance, and above all, of solidarity and building common ground among diverse actors. It reflects both defeats and victories, achieved through a blend of advocacy efforts with a great deal of professionalism and the spontaneity of ad hoc platforms and innovative forms of protests.

Ultimately, the year 2024 was notable not only for the number of protests but also for the diversity of their organizers, ranging from opposition parties and civic activists to the cultural community, farmers, and employees of both the public and private TV broadcasters. What stood out was that these protests also took place in smaller towns across the country. Their common thread was resistance to the policies of the ruling coalition.

FOUNDATIONS OF THE ILLIBERAL TURN

Less than three weeks after winning election on September 29, 2023 the new governing coalition of Direction-Social Democracy (SMER – SD), Voice – Social Democracy (HLAS – SD), and the Slovak National Party (SNS) signed a coalition agreement. At the subsequent press briefing, Prime Minister Robert Fico linked the significance of the new government's formation with an attack on the civic sector, stating that “*the era of CSOs ruling this country is over,*” and he further declared that “*CSOs funded from abroad must be labeled as foreign agents.*”

By that point, Fico was no longer a politician adhering to basic democratic standards, unlike during his previous three terms in government (2006-2010, 2012-2016, 2016-2018). Take, for instance, the years 2012–2016, when he led a single-party government. At that time, he refrained from attacking CSOs, left the independence of public media intact, and even declared the ambition of positioning Slovakia within the so-called core of the EU.

A turning point occurred in February 2018 when the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová led to mass protests spearheaded by the informal civic movement *For a Decent Slovakia* (*Za slušné Slovensko*), organized by young activists. These protests not only led to the resignation of then-Prime Minister Fico, but also marked a shift in political discourse as in his reaction to protests Fico unexpectedly adopted an anti-Soros narrative, labeling CSOs as agents of the West – a type of rhetoric not much seen in Slovak political discourse since 1998.

In 2020, Fico's SMER – SD party lost the election and moved into opposition. By spring 2021, Peter Pellegrini, the party's second most popular figure, left SMER – SD along with a group of prominent members to form a new party, HLAS – SD. Support for SMER – SD subsequently dropped below 10%, while Pellegrini attracted around 15% of voters –

primarily moderates for whom Fico's increasingly radical rhetoric posed a significant issue.

In this context, it is noteworthy that Fico adopted radically anti – mainstream positions during two of the most significant crises of recent years: the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war against Ukraine. During the pandemic, he opposed public health measures, organized street protests alongside extremists, and openly questioned vaccines portraying them as a business scheme of pharmaceutical companies. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, he aligned himself with the pro-Russian camp, standing beside Viktor Orbán.

Through these moves, he managed to attract a new base of anti-system and far-right voters. According to a September 2024 survey conducted by *IPSOS*, approval of Russian President Vladimir Putin among SMER – SD voters reached 66% – the same level as among the voters of the far-right Republic party – while Putin's overall approval among the general population stood at 30%.

Therefore, his voters in 2023 found no issue with statements about the rule of CSOs and the need to label them as foreign agents. Such seemingly conspiratorial statements also did not provoke panic among liberals, who had simply grown used to them.

It is important to highlight that Fico and a couple of other SMER – SD leaders gradually built an overwhelming dominance in social media, especially Facebook – a key platform for political communication in Slovakia. At least since 2021, Fico's social media reach has far exceeded that of his opponents, amplifying his messaging even while in opposition. To illustrate Robert Fico's dominance on Facebook, a comparison of engagement metrics (likes, comments, shares) on several posts by Fico, who has 300,000 followers, and Kamala Harris, with 5.3 million followers, reveals a striking result – in August 2024, during the peak of Harris's U.S. presidential campaign, Fico outperformed Harris by a shocking 2.5 times in terms of engagement.

FOUNDATIONS OF RESISTANCE

The resilience of Slovak civil society is rooted in its experience with the semi-authoritarian regime of Vladimír Mečiar, marked by Slovakia's 1997 exclusion from NATO accession talks and its infamous designation by then-U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright as the "*black hole of Europe*." Safeguarding democracy peaked with the 1998 pre-election mobilization campaigns, which pioneered *get out the vote* initiatives, achieving a historic voter turnout of 84% and later inspiring similar efforts in Croatia, Serbia, Ukraine, and beyond.

In many ways, the so-called *Orbán playbook* has its predecessor in the *Mečiar playbook* of the 1990s – and is thus a Slovak "invention" of sorts – an anti-authoritarian vaccine whose effects continue to influence generations of activists. This legacy includes heightened sensitivity shaped by personal experiences with political wrongdoing but, more importantly, a belief in the possibility of success, as demonstrated by Mečiar's electoral defeat in 1998 and subsequent EU and NATO accession in 2004 and in the 2018 mass protests after the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak that led to the resignation of then-Prime minister Fico. However, it is important to note that civil society alone did not remove Mečiar from power. His electoral defeat was made possible by coalition-building among opposition political parties, highlighting the crucial interplay between civic activism and political organization in achieving such milestones.

POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Slovak society and the electorate have traditionally been divided into three roughly equally sized ideological streams (labels are very tentative):

- Pro-Western, modernization-oriented faction: Advocates for liberal democracy, European integration, and societal progress.
- Traditionalist, anti-modernization, anti-Western faction: Opponents of liberal democracy, characterized by political radicalism and populist, often vulgar, rhetoric.
- Value-fluid center: A group with undefined or shifting views that holds the political balance of power in post-electoral set up.

While the results of elections and the subsequent political set up depend heavily on which faction can sway the value-fluid center or successfully form coalitions with its representatives, Slovakia's political landscape reveals a stable anti-modernization voter base alongside a growing pro-Western bloc.

While the anti-Western camp has remained consistent, with around 1 million votes in both 2002 and 2023 elections (in 2002, HZDS, KSS, and two versions of SNS garnered this total, comparable to SMER-SD, SNS, and Republika in 2023), the pro-Western bloc – represented by Progressive Slovakia (PS), Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), and Christian Democrats (KDH) – achieved a record 923,296 votes in 2023, surpassing the major anti-Mečiar coalition of 1998, which earned just 884,497 votes despite an 84% turnout – 15 points higher than in 2023.

This shift underscores the growing strength of the pro-Western voter camp while the opposite bloc remains stable. Currently, Robert

Fico leads the anti-Western faction. While the value-fluid center may no longer directly vote for him, it increasingly consumes narratives of his anti-Western rhetoric.

The bad news is that pro-Western, modernization-oriented politicians have largely abandoned efforts to engage with the fluid center. This disengagement has left them struggling to effectively communicate with a crucial segment of the electorate, which hampers their ability to shape the country's political trajectory.

MATTER OF TRUST

Between 2019 and 2024, Slovakia witnessed significant changes in the perception of civic activism and CSOs. Trust in CSOs fell from 55% to 37%. At least part of this decline could be attributed to differences in data collection methods or the phrasing of survey questions.

In 2023, the *DEKK Institute* introduced an innovative way of measuring trust in CSOs, separating trust in *political* from *charitable/humanitarian* CSOs. The results reveal that trust in charitable organizations remained above 50%, while trust in political CSOs reached only 32%. With overall trust averaging around 37%, this suggests that people primarily associate CSOs with those focused on advocacy and social change – a perception likely influenced by their prominent presence in the public sphere as well as the intensified negative rhetoric of politicians targeting these organizations which, paradoxically, represent only a small subset within the civil sector that remains traditionally dominated by politically indifferent organizations dedicated to leisure-time activities, charity, sports, social services, and similar areas.

The true challenge – and a clear indicator of certain structural shifts – lies in the results of surveys on attitudes regarding the role of CSOs in a democratic society and volunteering participation, which dropped to 9% in the overall population in 2024, down from 35% in 2019 and 46% in 1998.

A similar trend is observed among youth in the 15–26 age group, where volunteering participation dropped from 67% in 2018 to 27% in 2023.

While the decline in volunteering could practically be attributed to pandemic lockdowns, or theoretically explained by differences in question phrasing or data collection methods, a far more concerning trend is the drop in public agreement with the statement *CSOs belong to a democratic society*, which fell from 81% in 2019 to 63% in 2024. Similarly, the *perceived societal usefulness of CSOs* declined from 74% to 58%.

Notably, this decline occurred despite the massive civic mobilization during two recent major crises – the COVID-19 pandemic and the influx of Ukrainian refugees after the onset of the war in Ukraine – where CSOs, churches, and volunteers showed exceptional engagement and effectiveness.

Instead of capitalizing on these reputational gains, civic sector leaders failed to translate successes into strategic communication efforts that could bolster public trust to CSOs. It was as if they surrendered to growing political pressure – which significantly contributed to the decline – as Fico and other prominent SMER – SD and far-right figures targeted the civic sector directly or indirectly by, for instance, associating CSOs with then-President Zuzana Čaputová. Shortly after taking office, Čaputová, a former CSO leader, became the main focus of SMER – SD's intense hate and smear campaigns.

Attacks on President Čaputová and continued smearing and vilification of CSOs by highly visible politicians combined with criticism of pandemic measures and growing opposition to aid for Ukraine throughout 2020-2024 shaped a prevailing narrative that collaterally damaged the public image of civic space. As a result, the portion of people in Slovakia who agree with labeling CSOs which receive foreign funding as *organizations with the foreign support* reached 60% in 2024, and the portion of those who reject the belief that *most CSOs serve their foreign sponsors and foreign interests* dropped from 43% in 2019 to 29% in 2024.

When Robert Fico returned to power for the fourth time in October 2023, Slovak civil society could draw from its historical experience in resistance, supported by established networks among their leaders

and well-developed advocacy expertise. However, public support was weakened by political attacks, which were expected to intensify due to the populist need for an *internal enemy* as an obvious driver for advancing illiberalism.

CHANGES IN CRIMINAL CODE AND FIRST BIG PROTESTS

Despite threats from the newly formed government to immediately “*deal with CSOs and the media*”, the first major wave of civic mobilization and protests erupted in an entirely different context.

Just weeks after taking office, the government announced – contrary to its pre-election promises – a sweeping reform of criminal codes and plans to abolish the *National Criminal Agency* (NAKA) and the *Special Prosecutor's Office*. These institutions had previously investigated dozens of high-ranking police officials, prosecutors, and active politicians for corruption during Fico's earlier governments.

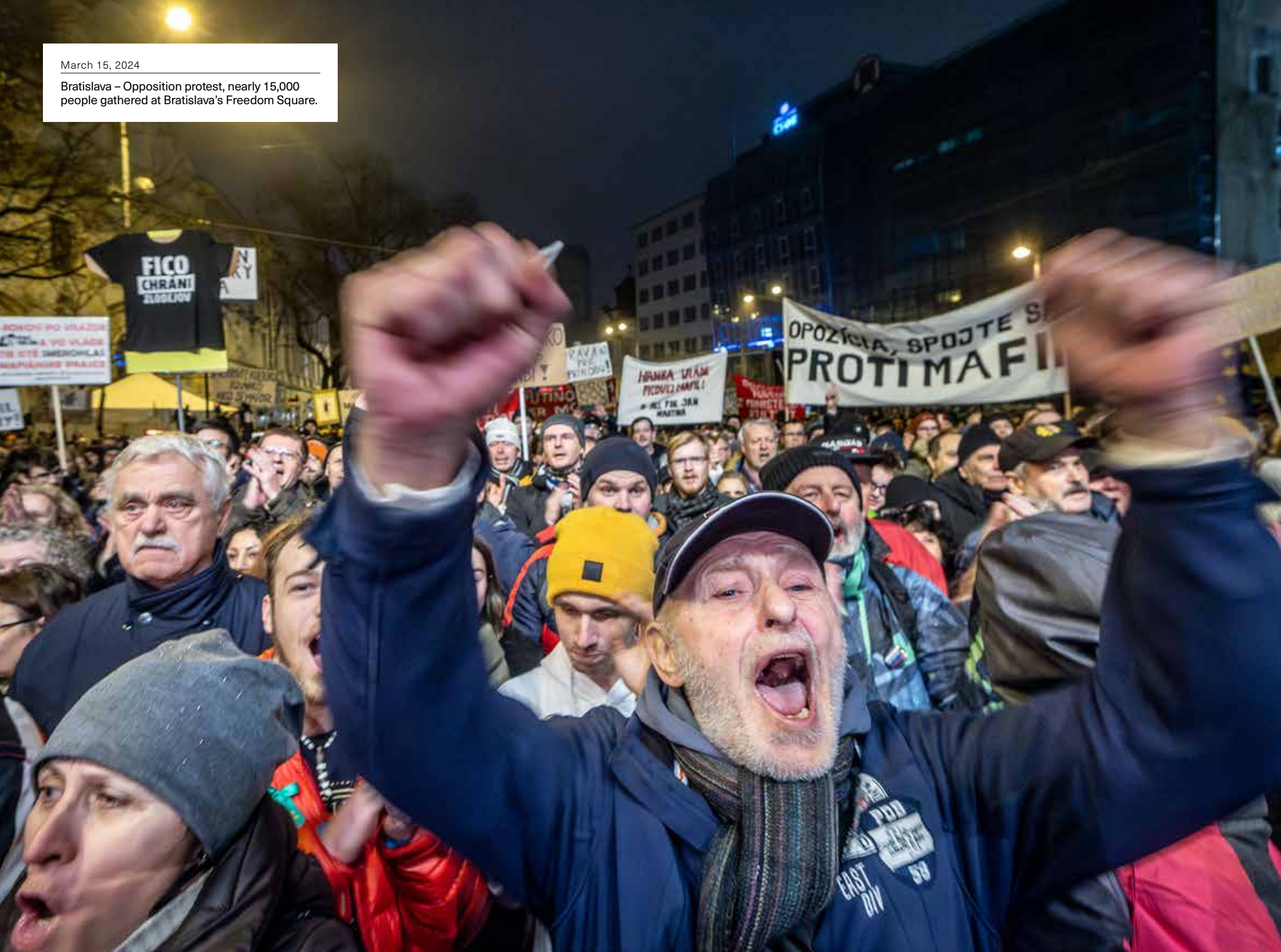
Under the guise of easing strict penal policies – such as 20-year sentences for certain economic crimes – the government proposed drastically reducing sentences and shortening statutes of limitations. This effectively amounted to amnesty for most of the prosecuted former SMER – SD, HLAS-SD, and SNS affiliates.

The announcement sparked public outrage, leading opposition parties to organize the first large protests. Combined with parliamentary obstruction, these efforts delayed Fico's plan to pass the reform by the end of 2023; however, it was eventually adopted in February 2024.

The issue was inherently political, and the opposition naturally took the lead. Initial protests in the capital quickly spread to smaller towns, where independent civic activists often took over organizing. This created an interesting dynamic in regions where political parties lacked agile local structures, blurring the lines between party politics and civic activism – a phenomenon absent during the 2018 *For a Decent Slovakia* protests,

March 15, 2024

Bratislava – Opposition protest, nearly 15,000 people gathered at Bratislava's Freedom Square.



where no active politicians (except for then-President Andrej Kiska) appeared on stages.

Protests against changes to the criminal codes extended into early 2024, coinciding with the presidential election campaign. An interesting phenomenon emerged when independent candidate and former Foreign Minister Ivan Korčok, backed by opposition parties, harnessed the momentum of the protests. Before the runoff, he held several spectacular rallies in major cities squares – a campaign style never seen before in Slovakia.

Despite massive mobilization, Korčok was unable to defeat the ruling coalition's candidate, Peter Pellegrini, who assumed office in June 2024, succeeding Zuzana Čaputová, who chose not to seek a second term.

CIVIC ACTIVISM AND PARTY POLITICS

The blending of civic activism and party politics raises questions about their boundaries, extending beyond public perception of the protests to how individuals view their own participation.

Unlike in 2018, when a clear divide existed, there is now no universal approach. Party members more often join civic protests, particularly in smaller towns, while independent activists occasionally participate in party-led events.

A lingering question is: are political parties part of civil society? While this might seem self-evident in a standard democracy, in Slovakia it reflects a deeper issue – the failure of political parties within the system of representative democracy. Parties are often short or mid-term projects controlled by small leadership circles, lacking substantial membership bases and regional networks. With trust in parties consistently low (around 20%), they are rarely seen as spaces for decent political engagement.

The debate over party members' involvement in protests alongside independent activists lacks a clear resolution. Practical experience shows that in smaller towns local party members are more welcome as speakers.

Their lower political prominence and closer ties to local communities help preserve the grassroots nature of protests, making it reasonable to blur lines between party representatives and nonpartisan activists in smaller cities.

In contrast, in the capital, where opposition party leaders would naturally dominate the stage, their involvement should be approached cautiously, as it could overshadow the independent character of protests.

This distinction matters not only for managing public perception, but also for how participants view their involvement. Some protesters assess the organizers' profiles and may wish to avoid their attendance being seen as blanket support for specific opposition parties.

FIRST SMALL STEP – SAFEGUARDING TAX DESIGNATION MECHANISM

In November 2023, Erik Tomáš, Minister of Labor, Social Affairs, and Family, unexpectedly proposed a major change to an important funding source for CSOs – the tax designation system. In 2023 alone, this mechanism generated over €100 million; since its introduction in 2002, the system has raised over €1 billion for the civic sector.

Minister Tomáš suggested allowing individuals to allocate their 2% tax designation not only to CSOs but also to their parents as a replacement for the parental pension he proposed to abolish. Since this was enshrined in the Constitution, the government – lacking a constitutional majority – could not simply abolish it; therefore, the minister sought an alternative solution. He claimed it was not targeted against CSOs but was the only constitutionally viable way to implement his plans for changes in the pension system.

However, such a change would significantly disrupt the current well – functioning mechanism. In financial terms, it would lead to a significant decrease in funding for organizations, estimated to be at least €15 to €20 million. The minister's plan promised to compensate CSOs for losses

through a new state fund, but – interestingly – only for so-called *good or noble* CSOs (those purely charitable or recreational) while *political* organizations (basically all those going beyond traditional activities) would not be supported. While this proposal was never implemented, the effort to divide CSOs persisted, as we will later explore.

More importantly, many organizations rely on fundraising efforts to secure 2% tax designations, but these campaigns would face serious practical and moral challenges, as it would be difficult to persuade individuals to prioritize their favorite CSO over their own parents.

After the Minister's announcement, civil society responded swiftly. A task force group was formed to design a public and media campaign through which they clarified how the system supports vulnerable groups. A public appeal garnered 33,000 signatures in weeks, and a special website shared data and stories. At a subsequent press conference, civil society leaders urged the government to preserve the system. An important nuance was that the key spokespersons were leaders of organizations helping vulnerable groups, such as cancer patients, pediatric palliative care patients, or church charities. These efforts led to negotiations with government officials, resulting in a halt to the proposed changes.

The tax designation system faced further threats in 2024. The Slovak tax system allows not only individual taxpayers, but also legal entity taxpayers to designate a percentage of corporate income tax. During the summer, the official think tank of the ruling coalition HLAS-SD party repeatedly proposed eliminating tax designations for these legal entities. Civil society advocacy efforts to protect the system continued, including a small media campaign in August when the Ministry of Finance was preparing a fiscal package and there was a real risk that €50 million from this source could be lost to fiscal consolidation.

Surprisingly, it did not happen. While the exact reasons remain unclear, the ongoing campaign against the change likely played a role. Another factor may have been the government's plan to introduce a new financial transaction tax, requiring commercial banks – as administrators of tax collection – to cooperate and to update their IT systems. These same banks, through their foundations, also manage a significant share of the

2% tax designations. Thus, preserving the tax designation system for legal entities may have also been part of a tactic to maintain good working relations with banks.

HAPPY ENDING?

The unsettled issue of the parental pension was later addressed as part of the government's fiscal consolidation package in September 2024. Individuals can now allocate 2% of their taxes to CSOs and an additional 2% (+2%) to each parent, replacing the earlier choice between CSOs and parents. Ironically, this solution – proposed by civic sector negotiators in December 2023 but initially rejected – may actually boost CSO funding.

Approximately one third of the designable tax pool, around €27 million in 2023, remains unused annually, with perhaps over half linked to higher-income individuals. The opportunity to allocate 2% of taxes to parents could therefore serve as a decisive behavioral incentive, drawing these individuals into the system and also benefiting CSOs. Thus, the actual adjustment presents a communication opportunity for the civic sector to raise tax designation revenue from individuals from 65% to, perhaps at least 80% in the coming years, potentially generating an additional €10 million annually for CSOs.

EXCLUDING THE CSOs FROM THE TRANSACTION TAX – A QUIET BATTLE

Another advocacy success, again related to financial resources, came in November 2024, when civil society negotiators secured an exemption for CSOs from the obligation to pay the financial transaction tax, which was introduced by the government as part of its fiscal consolidation package aimed at generating €500-700 million annually. Civil society responded swiftly through an initiative led by the *Slovak Catholic Charity*, which initially estimated its annual losses from the tax at €130,000. The total cost for the civic sector was approximately €1.2 million.

An informal group was formed to exchange information and design a strategy. A group of negotiators representing key platforms was set up. Although the package initially included the tax for CSOs, the Minister of Finance had promised revisions. Weeks later, the law was amended to exempt CSOs from the tax.

This advocacy effort was notable for its quiet approach – negotiations and lobbying rather than media pressure and public campaigns. The success was driven by strong spokespersons from social service organizations, likely supported by the fact that the political costs outweighed the minimal revenue the CSOs would generate.

A contentious aspect was the repeated attempt to somehow legally differentiate between *bad* and *good* CSOs, exempting only the latter from the tax. However, the government failed to find a way to implement this clearly discriminatory measure as banks – the administrators of the new tax collection – would refuse to participate in such politically motivated discrimination. As a result, the exemption was successfully negotiated for all CSOs.

MONITORING COMMITTEES FOR EU FUNDS – ANOTHER QUIET BATTLE

In July 2024, the government quietly approved a resolution to change how civil society representatives are nominated and removed from EU funds monitoring committees. The proposal aimed to shift the selection process from CSOs themselves to the *Office of the Plenipotentiary of the Government for the Development of Civil Society*, which is a state body. Civil society groups saw this as a significant threat and violation of the *partnership principle*, a legal cornerstone of EU funds allocation policies.

This was especially critical because the newly appointed head of the *Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for Civil Society* was an unknown figure, lacking trust not only due to her anonymity but also because of the manner of her appointment. Made without consultation, this violated established practices and signaled that the Office of the Plenipotentiary would no longer serve as a reliable partner for civil society.

Politically, it signaled an attempt to limit public oversight of EU funds and silence critical voices, affecting about 20 CSO experts involved in various monitoring bodies. This highly technical work, conducted in a bureaucratic environment, rarely attracts public or media attention, especially in the middle of summer.

Without public interest to leverage, civil society representatives turned to classic advocacy methods. They unified, prepared strong counterarguments, and formed strategic alliances, particularly with the *European Commission Representation*. The Commission also formally objected to the proposed changes in letters to the minister responsible for the agenda, citing violations of the *partnership principle* – concerns the minister could not ignore.

Through strategic negotiations and delaying tactics, civil society representatives managed to halt the plan for the rapid implementation of the changes. By December 2024, the Office of the Plenipotentiary accepted

all key demands, and the plan was shelved. The authority to nominate representatives would remain within the CSO sector.

This quiet success contrasts sharply with advocacy efforts in the cultural sector (see below). While invisible to the public, negotiators were producing expert analyses and took part in the number of closed-door negotiations. Their collaborative approach, expertise, and effective strategy secured a subtle but crucial victory for maintaining the status quo and good standards of participation and public oversight in EU funds allocation.

AMMUNITION FOR UKRAINE – CIVIL SOCIETY AS A FOREIGN POLICY ACTOR

In February 2024, during the *Munich Security Conference*, Czech President Petr Pavel announced that the Czech government had identified sources of ammunition abroad that could be delivered to Ukraine. That is how the Czech government's ambitious initiative to deliver ammunition to support the Ukrainian army emerged. The initiative eventually gained the support of 15 nations.

Slovakia's Prime Minister Robert Fico, however, refused to join the effort. In response, a group of Slovak and Czech activists and organizations, deeply involved in assisting Ukraine since the war began, launched a crowdfunding campaign called *Ammunition for Ukraine* under the slogan "*If the government won't, we will.*"

The campaign aimed to symbolically align Slovakia with the Czech ammunition initiative. Its ambassador and spokesperson was Otto Šimko, a 100-year-old veteran of the Slovak National Uprising during World War II. Within days, the campaign became the largest and most successful crowdfunding effort in Slovakia's history, raising €1 million in just couple of days and more than €4.7 million from over 70,000 donors overall.

The campaign received extensive international media coverage, with outlets like the *BBC*, *Reuters*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Politico* reporting on it. The campaign's success became widely known across

Ukraine. Otto Šimko received personal thanks from Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, and over 20 prominent Ukrainian figures signed an open letter of gratitude to Slovakia.

In September 2024, more than 2,700 rounds of 122mm caliber ammunition were delivered to the Ukrainian army.

As Prime Minister Fico's pro-Russian stance increasingly distanced Slovakia from supporting Ukraine, this remarkable achievement demonstrated how civic action can counterbalance government inaction in key foreign policy agendas.

It was a political demonstration of its kind, with tens of thousands of individual donors taking the place of protesters in the squares, expressing their opposition to the government through their financial contributions.

OPEN CULTURE! – NEW LEADER OF CULTURAL RESISTANCE

On January 17, 2024, cultural activists launched a public petition demanding the resignation of Martina Šimkovičová, Minister of Culture. Within ten days, over 188,000 people signed. Building on this momentum, the *Open Culture!* initiative emerged as a response to the Minister's perceived arrogance and incompetence, aiming to resist her authoritarian interference in culture.

Šimkovičová is a nominee of the Slovak National Party and former popular TV presenter ousted for xenophobic posts during the 2015 migration crisis. She later built a career spreading disinformation and hate speech on her YouTube channel. This attracted a niche group of anti-system and far-right supporters, sustaining her political career as an MP since 2020.

Her tenure sparked outrage due to her hostile rhetoric, particularly against the LGBTI+ community, as well as purges within the Ministry and cultural institutions. Under Šimkovičová's leadership, laws were passed to subordinate public broadcasters and undermine independent

December 12, 2024

Bratislava – People from the cultural sector have been protesting against the actions of the Ministry of Culture for a year.



cultural funding bodies, effectively crippling hundreds of independent and municipal cultural institutions.

Prominent cultural leaders, including those of the national theater, national gallery, and national museum, were dismissed and replaced with unqualified individuals.

Open Culture! quickly became the central voice of resistance for the whole cultural sector. With a horizontal structure and a collective leadership, it retained its grassroots and informal character. In addition to several big protests, the group organized innovative actions like a cultural strike and a cultural march, rallying thousands of individuals and hundreds of organizations from over 150 cities and villages. They even initiated the founding of cultural unions.

Despite its enormous efforts, the initiative could not unseat the Minister, who enjoys strong backing from Prime Minister Fico. While the cultural community has united and voiced strong opposition, the government's determination to dismantle institutions – deeming artists and cultural workers as non-supporters – has proven relentless.

The story proves that when political power is determined to push through at all costs, it becomes nearly impossible to stop, even with open dissent from some coalition MPs. Since cultural policy falls exclusively under domestic jurisdiction, the platform lacked chances to gain significant political allies, such as support from European institutions.

Ultimately, *Open Culture!* has become a powerful symbol of defiance, highlighting the authoritarian tactics seen in Slovakia, echoing patterns observed in Hungary under Orbán, Poland under PiS, and Italy under Giorgia Meloni.

Despite not achieving its goals, it remains a significant and vocal center of resistance, serving as an inspiring example of determination, perseverance, and resilience.

UNITED WE STAND – THE FORMATION OF THE PLATFORM FOR DEMOCRACY

Platforms, umbrella networks, and coalitions are vital to civil society. They consolidate expertise, provide mutual support, and create a united front against attacks. Coordinated groups are harder to target than isolated organizations, which are more vulnerable.

The number and viability of platforms are good indicators of a civil sector's resilience. However, independence is essential. Organizations dependent on government funding for service delivery naturally exercise caution in openly criticizing political power, underscoring the importance of autonomous advocacy bodies.

Immediately after Fico's election victory, it became evident that civil society needed to strengthen existing and build new collective structures to advocate and protect its interests.

This prompted the creation of a fully independent, capable structure.

The *Platform for Democracy* was already in place. An informal network since 2018, it connected dozens of diverse organizations, facilitating information-sharing and regional activities with modest support from the Civitates Foundation. Despite its lack of legal status, it had a formal governance structure led by an Executive Committee. In February 2024, the Committee decided to formalize and professionalize its operations to address three priorities: (1) improving coordination between the center and regions and strengthening regional networks; (2) developing a proactive communication strategy; and (3) enhancing advocacy with stakeholders including political actors.

Currently representing over 70 organizations, it continues to attract new members, striving to unite diverse groups under one umbrella while avoiding narrow ideological alignment.

The Platform quickly became integral to most important advocacy campaigns – some of which are described in detail in this text – sometimes taking a leading role. It demonstrated its organizational strength by

coordinating Slovakia's largest-ever civic celebration of the Velvet Revolution across 21 cities in cooperation with *Cities for Democracy*, a new informal network of regional activists.

Platform for Democracy, alongside initiatives like *Open Culture!*, environmental networks, and network of independent cultural hubs *Anténa*, collectively form a robust, independent core of civic resistance.

SQUARING THE CIRCLE – CSOs AS FOREIGN AGENTS OR RATHER LOBBYISTS?

In March 2024, a group of MPs from the Slovak National party proposed a law to label CSOs receiving over €5,000 annually from foreign sources (excluding EU funds) as “*foreign-supported organizations*.” These CSOs would face additional reporting, registration, and labeling requirements.

While marketed as a transparency measure, the law's vague and broad scope raised serious concerns about violations of fundamental rights, such as freedom of association, privacy, and the free movement of capital. “*It is a legal travesty, violating both the Constitution and European Union law*,” said former Minister of Justice Mária Kolíková. The proposal mirrored Hungary's 2017 *Law on the transparency of organizations supported from abroad*, but was even stricter in some respects – such as granting the Ministry of Interior the authority to dissolve organizations without judicial oversight.

From Russia to Hungary, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and beyond (today Slovakia and Serbia), such *foreign agent* style laws have become effective tools for authoritarians to stigmatize and isolate independent civil society and media and silence dissent. However, in the EU context, such laws are legally untenable.

The Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) struck down Hungary's law in 2020, ruling that it violated several EU principles. Slovakia would likely face a similar legal challenge with the same outcome, as the CJEU had already set a precedent.

Despite widespread criticism, including from EU Commissioner Věra Jourová during a visit to Bratislava, the coalition approved the law in its first reading in April 2024. Even some coalition MPs who shared concerns and opposed the law supported it in the vote out of coalition loyalty, but publicly called for amendments. Ultimately, disagreements within the coalition – and perhaps Prime Minister Fico's concerns about straining already poor relations with Brussels – stalled the legislation in parliament. By summer 2024, the law was shelved.

In the fall, the initiative was taken over by the *Government Office* led by Juraj Gedra, a close ally of Fico. Seeking a more palatable alternative to restrict and label CSOs under the guise of increasing transparency, a new idea emerged: instead of labeling CSOs as foreign agents, they would now be classified as lobbyists.

Lobbying as such remains unregulated in Slovakia and the proposed amendment targeted CSOs exclusively, which was clearly discriminatory. It would require CSOs to report all interactions with public officials and any activities potentially influencing their decision-making. The lack of clear definitions made the law a cudgel for targeting anyone critical of the government. Violations could result in the Ministry of Interior dissolving the offending organization after three infractions.

In response, the *Platform for Democracy* launched the “*We Will Not Be Silenced*” campaign. Social media was flooded with photos of CSO leaders with mouths taped shut. Strong voices joined the opposition, including labor unions, representatives of employers and business chambers, and the Ombudsman. The proposal, initially expected to pass in December 2024, faced significant pressure and was removed from the parliamentary agenda, delaying its consideration until 2025.

It was yet another success. Furthermore, this delay reflected deeper cracks within the coalition, with dissent from three former SNS MPs and rebel MPs in HLAS-SD, weakening its slim majority. Controversial proposals not included in the coalition agreement, like this one, became increasingly untenable. How this situation will unfold remains uncertain and will only become clear after the publication of this report in early 2025. However, I dare to offer a prediction.

Given the deep divisions within the coalition, Fico's government is unlikely to last, and Slovakia will face early elections, most likely in 2026 rather than 2025.

Fico will likely push through the anti-CSO law – whether under the guise of *foreign agents* or *lobbyists* – to fulfill his promises to voters. Following his shocking visit to Putin in the Kremlin on December 22, 2024, Fico's reputation as a pro-Russian Trojan horse in the EU will no longer matter to him. An EC lawsuit against this blatantly discriminatory law, as well as Slovakia's eventual loss at the European Court of Justice, will only be considered minor blemishes on his already tarnished image.

Ultimately, as seen in Hungary, restrictive legislation is not necessarily passed with the aim of actual implementation, but to sustain an environment of insecurity and fear; therefore, such a law in Slovakia in 2025 would effectively achieve its political purpose.

HOW TO SCORE GOALS WHILE PLAYING DEFENSE?

In this essay I have outlined only a few examples of the government's assaults on the civic sector. In reality, there were dozens of smaller and larger attacks creating a sense of constant crisis.

Restrictions on participation and public oversight, especially in environmental protection and culture, along with purges and the dismantling of institutional expertise, became routine.

Slovakia after 2023, alongside Hungary, has become another testing ground in the EU for a new form of illiberalism, echoing its historical crossroads during the Mečiar era of the mid-1990s.

The country's vulnerability to Russia's hybrid war, strong pro-Russian sentiment within parts of society, and Prime Minister Fico's openly pro-Russian stance—combined with the fragmented democratic camp—make reversing this trajectory exceedingly difficult.

A debate persists about who or what is the ultimate safeguard of democracy. Some argue that courts, particularly the Constitutional Court,

are key defenders of democratic principles enshrined in the Constitution. Others contend that civil society is the decisive actor.

I lean toward the latter view. While political power can manipulate judicial appointments, it cannot strip citizens of their agency to choose their destiny. History shows that major struggles for democracy and freedom—whether in 1989, 1998, or in the future—must be fought by the people themselves, in public squares and ultimately at the ballot box. Therefore, maintaining the standard of free and fair elections remains the most significant challenge for preserving democracy.

To conclude on a lighter and more practical note—building resilience against illiberalism can be likened to a football analogy: how to score goals while playing defense?

In such circumstances, delaying tactics are key. Defending the status quo means time works in your favor and defending institutions is most effective from within. This requires leveraging every opportunity to participate in internal processes and holding the line as far as possible. While stepping away as a moral stand against wrongdoing may feel just, it is impractical.

In the end, legitimately elected authoritarians have the right to attempt to change the democratic system. The rest of us have the duty to prevent it. The fight will only be won through relentless commitment, systematic efforts, and discipline.

December 23, 2024

Thousands of people gathered a day before Christmas to protest against Robert Fico's meeting with Vladimir Putin, organized by Peace for Ukraine (*Mier Ukrajině*) initiative.



RESISTING THE ILLIBERAL TURN IN POLAND, SLOVENIA AND SLOVAKIA

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108, 116 (published in Denník N)

Design and layout

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Published by

Open society foundation Bratislava

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2024

The publication is a follow-up of the research initiative that was concluded by a seminar that took place in Bratislava in November 2024. Both were funded by Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway from the EEA Funds under the regional cooperation of the Active Citizens Fund programmes in Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.

The initiative was organized by

– Stefan Batory Foundation, Poland

– Open society foundation Bratislava, Slovakia

– Center for Information Service, Cooperation, and Development of Non-Governmental Organizations (CNVOS), Slovenia



The seminar and the publication is funded by Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway from the EEA Funds under the regional cooperation of the Active Citizens Fund programmes in Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia

