



GOOD PRACTICES OF CIVIC SPACE RESILIENCE

IN CZECH REPUBLIC,
SLOVAKIA, CROATIA
AND SLOVENIA



DECEMBER 2025



Contents

Introduction.....	5
Methodology.....	6
What is civic space resilience?	6
Country cases: Czech Republic.....	8
INFLUENCING THE PUBLIC NARRATIVE ON MIGRATION – CONSORTIUM OF MIGRANTS ASSISTING ORGANISATIONS (KONSORCIUM NEVLÁDNÍCH ORGANIZACÍ PRACUJÍCÍCH S MIGRANTY)	12
FLOODED WITH HATRED - CRISIS MANAGEMENT IN FRIENDS OF THE EARTH CZECHIA (HNUTÍ DUHA).....	15
INITIATIVE ZA BYDLENÍ (“FOR HOUSING”)	19
Country cases: Slovakia	22
PLATFORMA PRE DEMOKRACIU (“PLATFORM FOR DEMOCRACY”).....	26
IMPACT LAB	29
DENNÍK N	33
I WANT TO STAY (CHCEM TU ZOSTAŤ) CAMPAIGN	37
#GUARDIANSOFDEMOCRACY (#STRÁŽCOVIADEMOKRACIE)	40
Country cases: Croatia	44
HRVATSKA MOŽE BOLJE (“CROATIA CAN DO BETTER”) - CIVIC INITIATIVE FOR QUALITY EDUCATION REFORM IN CROATIA	47
#SPASIME (“SAVE ME”) – CIVIC INITIATIVE AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE	51
NE DAMO NAŠE AUTOCESTE (“WE WON’T GIVE AWAY OUR MOTORWAYS”)	54
ZA HRVATSKU SLOBODE (“FOR CROATIA OF FREEDOMS”) – CIVIC INITIATIVE FOR THE PROTECTION OF ARTISTIC AND MEDIA FREEDOM.....	58
Country cases: Slovenia	60
PRAVNA MREŽA ZA VARSTVO DEMOKRACIJE (“LEGAL NETWORK FOR THE PROTECTION OF DEMOCRACY”).....	63
NE GREMO Z METELKOVE! (“WE ARE NOT LEAVING METELKOVA!”)	67
GREMO VOLIT! (“LET’S GO VOTE!”)	71
ZAobSTAnek («For the Slovenian Press Agency to Stay»)	75
Comparative analysis of civic space resilience	79
Conclusion	84



Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or EACEA. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.



Resilience report authors:

Authors of country chapters:

CZECH REPUBLIC:

Pavλίna Müllerová & Tereza Majerová (Glopolis);

Anna Uhnak Kárník & Vendula Menšíková (Network for the Protection of Democracy);

Jakub Múčka (Consortium of Migrants Assisting Organisations);

Katarína Šrámková (Platform for Social Housing)

SLOVAKIA:

Ján Janočko (Malý Berlín)

CROATIA:

Kristijan Kovačić (CROSOL)

SLOVENIA:

Tjaša Turnšek & Brankica Petković (The Peace Institute)

EDITED BY Tjaša Turnšek & Brankica Petković (The Peace Institute)

Introduction

The report *Good Practices of Civic Space Resilience in Czech Republic, Slovakia, Croatia and Slovenia* examines how civil society actors across four Central-Eastern European countries respond to pressures that challenge democratic governance, fundamental rights and the enabling environment for civic participation. Over the past decade, the region has experienced democratic backsliding, heightened political polarisation and increasing use of administrative, legal and discursive tools to restrict independent media, human-rights organisations, grassroots movements and community-based initiatives. These dynamics create environments in which civic actors must defend not only their operational autonomy, but also the broader principles and institutional frameworks on which democratic life depends.

The aim of this report is twofold. First, it documents specific cases of civic space resilience, understood as the capacity of civil society actors to withstand, adapt to and counter pressures threatening their ability to operate freely. Second, it provides a comparative synthesis that identifies cross-cutting patterns and mechanisms of resilience across different political, institutional and cultural contexts. By examining concrete practices, the report highlights how civic actors mobilise legal expertise, public communication, community organising, coalition-building and participatory tools to protect democratic space and defend public interest.

The report builds on a structured, cross-country methodological approach. In each country, researchers mapped up to ten good practices and selected several for detailed case-study analysis. These cases were analysed through a common analytical template, ensuring comparability while allowing for contextual specificity. The core of the report consists of country chapters (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Croatia and Slovenia) each containing three to five detailed case studies. These cases illustrate diverse forms of resilience, from legal mobilisation and

community advocacy to narrative shaping, participatory democratic innovation and cross-sectoral coalition-building. The subsequent comparative analysis synthesises findings across countries, identifying structural similarities, contextual variations and strategic repertoires that shape civic resilience in the region.

By systematically documenting these practices, the report seeks to contribute to regional learning, support evidence-based policymaking, and strengthen recognition of the indispensable role that civil society plays in maintaining democratic norms, protecting public interest and safeguarding fundamental freedoms. The cases show that even under conditions of institutional pressure or political hostility, civic actors can generate meaningful democratic outcomes when supported by strong networks, strategic communication, legal expertise and engaged communities. The report therefore positions civic space resilience not as a static condition, but as a dynamic capability grounded in collective action, shared values and sustained commitment to democratic principles.



Methodology

The mapping of good practices of civic space resilience in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Croatia and Slovenia was conducted with the aim of identifying and prioritising relevant good practices in each of the four countries and elaborating in greater detail the most significant practices per country. The overall purpose of the methodology was to generate a structured and comparable overview of civic space resilience initiatives, to facilitate cross-country learning, and to strengthen understanding of the mechanisms through which civil society actors effectively respond to pressures on civic space.

The research design followed a two-step process. First step involved the identification and shortlisting of up to ten good practices per country. Researchers developed the initial list through desk research, consulting publicly accessible sources, including official documents, project descriptions, media reports, and information published by relevant organisations. Further data were collected from expert input and, where appropriate, from consultations with the national expert panels established in WP2 of the PROSECO project to support civic space monitoring. Each practice was classified according to its thematic area, type of threat addressed, scope, implementing organisation(s), timeframe, and status. Prioritisation was based on estimated relevance, with practices ranked from most to least significant in terms of their contribution to civic space resilience.

Second step consisted of an in-depth elaboration of three to five selected practices per country. Selection criteria included scope, impact, reach, creativity, complexity, duration, and the availability of data. Detailed case studies were prepared through a combination of desk research and correspondence or semi-structured interviews with relevant actors. The interview guide mirrored the analytical dimensions of the case-study template, encompassing the origins and aims of the practice, organisational structures, modes of implementation, achievements,

communication strategies, challenges, threats encountered, financing, and sustainability prospects. The elaboration of selected practices was produced in a descriptive yet analytical narrative form, following a uniform structure to ensure comparability across countries. This structure was designed to allow for both systematic documentation and interpretative assessment of how civic space actors respond to direct or indirect pressures and threats.

What is civic space resilience?

Civic space resilience refers to the capacity of civil society actors (civil society organisations, informal citizen groups, grassroots movements, and individual activists) to withstand, adapt to, and recover from pressures that threaten their ability to operate freely. In contexts of shrinking civic space, resilience is not only a matter of survival but also a strategic capability that enables civic actors to maintain their functions, defend democratic norms, and continue advocating for social justice and human rights. It encompasses the ability to manage crisis situations, navigate structural imbalances, and identify new opportunities for engagement despite restrictive conditions (Deniz, 2019¹; Longstaff et al., 2010²).

This resilience is tested by direct threats, such as restrictive legislation, limitations on assembly and protest, administrative or judicial harassment, smear campaigns, physical or online attacks on activists, and constraints on funding. It is also shaped by indirect threats that affect the broader environment, including declines in media freedom, weakening of the rule of law, political polarisation, disinformation campaigns, and other systemic challenges to democratic institutions. Together, these pressures create an operating environment in which civil

1 Source: <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/blog/3845-the-quest-for-resilience>

2 Source: <https://calhoun.nps.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/d88c24ba-73d8-4751-bfed-ba74b1d88ebf/content>

society must continuously adapt to protect both its own functioning and the civic space more broadly (European Civic Forum, 2023³).

Civic space actors respond to these challenges through a diverse set of resilience strategies. Communication-based resilience includes developing public messaging, countering disinformation, raising awareness of restrictive measures, mobilising supporters, and establishing channels for alerting domestic and international stakeholders. Legal and legislative resilience involves using legal instruments to contest restrictive policies, defending activists in court, initiating legal reforms, or mobilising citizen participation through petitions and referendums where such mechanisms exist.

Another key dimension is collective resilience, expressed through coalitions, alliances, and networks that enable solidarity, shared resources, joint advocacy, and coordinated action across organisations, sectors, and borders. Civic space actors also build safety and digital security capacities to protect themselves from physical violence, online harassment, surveillance, and data breaches. Financial resilience includes diversifying funding sources, resisting restrictive financial measures, and developing alternative fundraising models such as crowdfunding or micro-donations.

Civic space resilience also encompasses protest and public mobilisation, including peaceful demonstrations, creative public actions, and collaborations between civil society and artists, so called *artivism*⁴. Additionally, administrative resilience allows organisations to continue their work despite bureaucratic restrictions, for example by adjusting registration structures or developing alternative operational frameworks. Systematic monitoring and documentation of civic space violations further strengthens resilience by providing evidence for advocacy, legal action, and public communication.

Certain sectors, such as human rights, environmental protection, gender equality, minority rights, LGBTIQ+ rights, media freedom, labour rights, anti-corruption efforts, and digital rights, tend to be more frequently targeted and thus often become key actors in developing innovative and effective resilience practices.

Overall, civic space resilience captures the ways in which civil society adapts to both acute pressures and long-term structural challenges. It reflects the ability of civic space actors to preserve democratic participation, protect fundamental rights, and sustain their mission in environments that are increasingly complex and, at times, hostile to independent activity.

3 Source: <https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Civic-Space-Report-2023-European-Civic-Forum.pdf>

4 In art activism or artivism, the artist (artist + activist) uses their artistic talents to fight and struggle against injustice and oppression - by any medium necessary. The artist merges commitment to freedom and justice with the pen, the lens, the brush, the voice, the body, and the imagination.

Country cases: Czech Republic

List of 10 good practices of civic space resilience in Czech Republic:

NAME

Migration Consortium

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Public communication, media engagement, countering disinformation, shaping public narrative on migration	Indirect	National	Migration Consortium (Konsorcium nevládních organizací pracujících s migranty v ČR)	2017 - ongoing	Ongoing

NAME

Hnutí DUHA

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Crisis communication, organisational resilience, countering attacks, rapid response to disinformation	Direct	National	Hnutí DUHA – Friends of the Earth Czechia	September 2024	Completed

NAME

Initiative “For Housing”

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Evidence-based advocacy, legislative reform, cross-sector cooperation, public communication on social rights, countering misinformation on housing	Indirect	National	Coordinated by Platforma pro sociální bydlení	2019 - ongoing	Ongoing

NAME

Díky, že můžem

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Civic engagement, democratic culture, public events, youth-oriented communication, cultural and educational programming	Indirect	Local with national impact	Korzo Národní	Since its founding (ongoing annually on November 17th)	Ongoing

NAME

Iniciativa Hlavák

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Humanitarian aid, refugee support, civic resilience, volunteer coordination	Direct	Primarily local (focused on the main railway station in Prague), with national	Volunteer-driven initiative	2022 (start of Ukrainian refugee arrivals) - ongoing	Ongoing (at smaller scope)

NAME

Milion Chvilek

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Civic engagement, democracy protection, political accountability, peaceful protest	Indirect	National	Milion Chvilek („Milion Moments for Democracy“)	2018 - ongoing	Ongoing

NAME

Česko.Digital

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Volunteer IT support, digital tools development, technological resilience, civic engagement, support for public administration, schools, refugees, and nonprofit organizations	Indirect	National	Česko.Digital, volunteer-driven IT community	2012 - ongoing	Ongoing

NAME

HateFree Culture

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Prevention of hate, support for vulnerable and marginalised groups, promotion of tolerance, inclusion, and respectful coexistence, combating disinformation and stereotypes	Indirect	National	HateFree Culture	2016 - ongoing	Ongoing

NAME

Nevypust' duši

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Mental health awareness, education for young people, destigmatization of mental health challenges, workshops, educational programs for schools, support materials for teachers and parents	Indirect	National	Nevypust' duši	2014 - ongoing	Ongoing

NAME

Chce to souhlas

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Human rights advocacy, feminist activism, legal reform, public education, campaign for modernising the legal definition of rape	Indirect	National	Coalition including Konsent and Amnesty International Czech Republic	Since January 2021	Completed

INFLUENCING THE PUBLIC NARRATIVE ON MIGRATION – CONSORTIUM OF MIGRANTS ASSISTING ORGANISATIONS (KONSORCIUM NEVLÁDNÍCH ORGANIZACÍ PRACUJÍCÍCH S MIGRANTY)

What is the good practice about?

The good practice focuses on how the Consortium of Migrants Assisting Organisations in the Czech Republic has sought and tested various approaches in public relations and communication between 2017 and 2025. Across this period, the organisation worked through three distinct phases. During the 2015–2017 “refugee crisis”, it operated from a marginal and defensive position, concentrating mainly on strengthening the PR and communication capacities of its member organisations while exploring initial opportunities for cooperation with media outlets. In the second phase, during the 2022–2024 Ukrainian “refugee crisis”, the organisation implemented four large-scale campaigns aimed at the general public in the Czech Republic, promoting messages around the integration of Ukrainian refugees and reaching several million unique users, with the initial campaign alone engaging 3.627.000 real users at an average frequency of 7,2. Since 2025, the organisation has entered a third phase, focusing on new approaches that influence the general public indirectly through targeted collaboration with media outlets and journalists, such as building a community around a dedicated portal and developing structured media partnerships.

Who is implementing the good practice?

In the long term, the organisation aims to implement communication activities in close cooperation with its member organisations, with each partner ideally taking on a clearly defined role. While the mass campaigns in 2022–2023 were developed together with a marketing agency, the organisation now seeks to establish more direct and lasting partnerships with media outlets. To facilitate collaboration within its network, the Consortium has been actively using

a joint media working group that brings together representatives from individual member organisations. This group serves as a platform for discussing potential joint initiatives, coordinating activities and strengthening collective communication efforts across the Consortium.

How it works?

During the largest of its direct mass campaigns targeting the general public, carried out between October 2022 and January 2023, the organisation focused on educating the Czech population about the importance of accepting and integrating Ukrainian refugees by communicating the benefits of such acceptance for Czech society. The campaign relied on a simple website and a series of video spots disseminated across social media, online media space, YouTube, cinemas, supermarkets and trams through paid advertising, and it was reinforced by dozens of media outputs and appearances, including coverage in mainstream national media. Altogether, it reached 3.627.000 real users at an average frequency of 7,2⁵. This effort was followed by three slightly smaller but similar campaigns that promoted the integration of Ukrainian children into schools, encouraged municipalities and solidarity families to continue offering accommodation, and highlighted the integration of Ukrainians into the labour market. Looking ahead, the organisation is considering the development of a comprehensive portal on migration and integration designed to inform and educate journalists about relevant developments in Czechia and internationally, while also fostering a small, well-connected community of informed journalists. It is also

⁵ Average frequency refers to how many times the average user saw the campaign.

exploring the idea of a long-term educational campaign aimed at the Czech public, focused on key terms, data and phenomena related to migration both nationally and globally. This campaign would rely on a central interactive website and close cooperation with media outlets, influencers, and other NGOs and institutions, for example through educational info-boxes, hypertext links, quotations and adapted infographics.

Achievements / successful and creative elements

The experience demonstrates the growing ability of NGOs to shape the broader public debate, and the organisation believes that its large-scale direct campaigns (especially those implemented in 2022) helped counter the declining public interest in supporting Ukrainian refugees at that time. Since then, willingness to accept refugees from Ukraine has remained stable at around 60 %. The organisation's approach is also innovative in its efforts to build new forms of collaboration with influential media outlets, particularly through the creation of a dedicated information resource for journalists, the development of a small community around this resource and the establishment of a specialised website that media outlets can reference and link to in various ways. In addition, the organisation aims to explore different models of long-term media partnerships to further strengthen its communication impact.

Access to communication and influencing public sphere

The practice reflects the organisation's ongoing effort to make use of new opportunities and explore fresh approaches to communication and influencing the public sphere. It began with the use of comprehensive channels for a large-scale direct campaign that relied on paid advertising across social media, national media outlets, radio, cinemas and supermarkets, complemented by a very active organic presence in the media. During this phase, the organisation organised press conferences and round tables for

journalists, resulting in more than 200 media outputs in 2022 alone. In the current period, the organisation is placing greater emphasis on building a long-term community of journalists who regularly engage with its informational content, establishing media partnerships (such as developing informative boxes, using hyper-text links and quotations) and strengthening networks with journalists as well as influencers. Rather than launching short-term mass campaigns lasting only a few months, the organisation is now considering the potential of a long-term, continuous educational campaign, possibly spanning two years.

Lessons learned and challenges

The organisation continues to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of short-term, large-scale direct campaigns in comparison with long-term, continuous educational efforts. It believes that a long-term approach which is based on indirectly reaching the general public through sustained partnerships with media outlets and influencers may be more effective and capable of generating lasting impacts, even though it requires continuous work and is likely to achieve a smaller overall reach. While short, intensive mass campaigns can reach millions of unique users, they also involve very high costs. In contrast, developing organic partnerships with media outlets demands the creation of valuable informational products for journalists and long-term relationship-building within the media environment.

Threats and attacks

The organisation has not yet faced serious threats or attacks, although it recognises that this situation could change quickly with the formation of a new government. Its main challenge at present lies in achieving sufficient reach and generating organic interest from journalists, influencers and the general public. To address this, the organisation needs to develop roles, products and types of content that are both relevant and compelling enough to be naturally

consumed and shared. A key long-term consideration for the Consortium is how to move beyond its relatively marginal position in the broader public debate and, instead, establish a stronger influence on mainstream stakeholders and public opinion.

Financing

For its first large-scale campaign, the organisation secured approximately 5,2 million Czech crowns (about 214. 000 €), with funding obtained relatively easily at a time when donors were highly motivated to support Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees. The campaign was funded by UNHCR, the Blíž sobě Foundation, the Abakus Foundation, the RSJ Foundation and Czech Charity. The three subsequent campaigns received support from UNICEF, the Česká spořitelna Foundation (part of ERSTE), IOM and the Czech Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. At present, however, fundraising has become significantly more challenging. The organisation now plans to systematically seek resources for the development of the portal, which would also serve journalists, as well as for a long-term campaign centred on media partnerships and collaboration with influencers. In doing so, it intends to focus primarily on private foundations, individual philanthropists and corporate donors.

Sustainability: possibility for continuing the work

The organisation's current strategy centres on long-term communication efforts built around developing a community of journalists, forming media partnerships and strengthening networks with influencers. It believes that this approach can generate durable results, as strong relationships with journalists may continue to yield benefits over time. To support these activities, the organisation plans to seek new funding both at the outset and throughout the multi-year process. There is also potential for the portal to receive long-term financial support from regional administrations, municipalities or relevant ministries, which could in turn help sustain the journalist community and possibly contribute to the broader long-term communication campaign.

FLOODED WITH HATRED - CRISIS MANAGEMENT IN FRIENDS OF THE EARTH CZECHIA (HNUTÍ DUHA)

What is the good practice about?

The good practice case describes crisis management following a false accusation by a government minister of ecological organisation Hnutí DUHA - Friends of the Earth Czechia, which resulted in a wave of hatred and threats on social media. The case includes information on rapid response strategy, narrative development and communication and lessons learned.

Who is implementing the good practice?

The organiser of the crisis response was Hnutí DUHA - Friends of the Earth Czechia, an ecological NGO from Czechia with over 30 years of experience in advocacy campaigns on topics such as energy transition, sustainable forestry and agriculture or protection of large carnivores. Hnutí DUHA has over 30 employees and several local action groups working on various topics including flood control/management projects.

How it works?

In September 2024, due to a sophisticated monitoring system, it became clear that major floods are going to hit some parts of Czechia, especially Northern Moravia. A local action group of Hnutí DUHA has been disputing construction of a dam for years and proposing a construction of a dry polder instead, which would have saved lives but also protect nature. After the culmination of the flood wave, when two large cities of the region were partially flooded, the minister responsible for flood control accused Hnutí DUHA of “blocking” the construction of the dam and thus being responsible for the loss of lives and damage to property. This resulted in a PR catastrophe for the organisation. A crisis response was launched within 24 hours of the minister’s statement being published.

The Rapid Response Strategy of Hnutí DUHA contained the following elements:

- setting up PR team and communication channels,
- agreeing on strategy of crisis communication,
- mobilising external resources,
- external communication,
- internal communication,
- measures to ensure well-being (crisis intervention capacity),
- legal consultation and action.

Achievements / successful and creative elements

Over the course of about four to five weeks, the organisation managed to get mostly neutral or positive media coverage that pointed out the low effectiveness of the state and river basin authority and highlighted its proposal for a dry polder. During this time, the minister dismissed the authority’s director, and the new director showed a strong willingness to cooperate. The organisation also received active support from other NGOs on social media, with many resharing its posts, creating their own content on the issue, and backing it in the comments, while individual supporters produced videos, articles and posts that helped fill gaps caused by the exhausted internal team. At the same time, the organisation lost around 40 regular supporters, resulting in several hundred thousand Czech crowns less per year in donations, and its core rapid response team became completely worn out, leading to lasting effects such as self-censorship in response to the pressures experienced. Despite these difficulties, the organisation gained 1.300 new contacts through an online petition and filed a criminal complaint against 16 people for their comments on social media networks. It also put pressure on the minister to apologise (although he never did)

through a petition directed at his political party ahead of its congress, where he was running for party leader. The situation helped bring the topic of CSO resilience into the spotlight within the climate and environmental movement, where a working group was preparing improvements ahead of the 2025 parliamentary elections, and it also triggered discussions within broader CSO networks across the social, human rights, education and other sectors. Alongside this, the organisation managed to mobilise external support, including pro bono assistance from experts in crisis intervention, defamation cases, crisis communication and (cyber)security.

Access to communication and influencing public sphere

The organisation's crisis communication focused on promoting several key narratives across all available channels, including television, radio, social media, direct e-mailing, press releases and existing media contacts. It aimed to defend the right of NGOs to participate in construction and administrative procedures related to major strategic projects, to present evidence that delays in the construction of the dam were primarily the result of ineffective management by the state, particularly the ministry and the Odra river basin district authority, and to demonstrate that an alternative solution, e.g. the proposed dry polder, could provide comparable flood protection without inflicting large-scale environmental damage, highlighting that the organisation acted as a constructive opponent to the authorities' plans. It also sought to argue that the minister had overstepped acceptable boundaries and that his statements amounted to an attack on civil society, contradicting the stated values of his own party. A crucial component of spreading these messages on social media was the engagement of Hnutí DUHA's supporters, who took detailed information from posts and press releases and actively used it in comment sections to debunk myths and defend the organisation's position. The framing of the situation as an "attack on civil society" proved especially effective, helping the organisation gain approximately 1.300

new supporters through an online petition built around this narrative. In its media relations, the organisation often could not rely on long-standing relationships with journalists who usually covered its work, as reporting on the floods and the broader debate about flood management was largely handled by entirely different media staff. Nevertheless, the organisation responded swiftly to every major media output with timely press releases, gradually helping to shift the discourse in its favour. It also attempted to engage influencers with whom it normally collaborates, but these efforts were unsuccessful, as the rapid unfolding of events made prompt reactions difficult to secure and some influencers declined to participate due to the highly contentious nature of the issue.



The minister of agriculture Výborný blames Hnutí DUHA for the extent of damage from floodings, asserting that it is the NGO that delayed the construction of the dam.



A news article capturing the „witch hunt“ on employees and volunteers of Hnutí DUHA following the minister's allegations.

Lessons learned and challenges

The organisation noted that one of the key lessons learned was the need to stay constantly alert and able to react immediately, as media dynamics move quickly and leave little room for delay. It also recognised that strong constituency support is indispensable and often more effective than any formal communication strategy. Internally, the organisation identified the importance of establishing structured communication processes, including a dedicated space for emotional processing across the entire organisation, not only within the rapid response team. Another insight was the value of “surfing the crisis wave” by using moments of heightened public attention to mobilise additional supporters around the broader issue of threats to civil society and democracy. Finally, the organisation acknowledged the importance of staying engaged with the experience rather than distancing itself from it too quickly. Despite the trauma associated with the situation, openly reflecting on it within the organisation and discussing it with other NGOs proved essential for learning and collective resilience.

Threats and attacks

The organisation faced an intense wave of online hostility following the minister's public accusation, which triggered widespread hatred, threatening comments and coordinated negative engagement on social media. Communications staff and the rapid response team were exposed to sustained psychological pressure, leading to exhaustion and long-term effects such as increased self-censorship. The organisation also encountered reputational attacks in the media sphere, where narratives portraying it as responsible for flood-related damage gained traction before the crisis communication strategy gradually corrected the discourse. In response to particularly harmful online comments, the organisation filed a criminal complaint against 16 individuals, underscoring the seriousness of the threats and the need for legal protection mechanisms in such situations.

Financing

There was no additional funding secured, the costs were taken from the regular budget of the organisation.



Hnutí DUHA fights back in high profile media interviews with the minister.



Hnutí DUHA, with the support of their volunteers, communicates the timeline of the dam construction to illustrate what caused the delays and the various state actors responsible for them.

Sustainability: possibility for continuing the work

The organisation's ongoing work is focused on strengthening its own resilience as well as that of the broader green movement, addressing several key areas that emerged from recent experiences. This includes fostering both cyber and physical security measures, improving internal procedures to better protect communications staff who may be exposed to attacks, and ensuring that evidence is effectively collected in cases where legal action becomes necessary. The organisation is also prioritising learning from colleagues in other countries (such as Slovakia) where NGOs have faced government pressure for a longer period and have developed valuable strategies for coping with such challenges. In addition, it is updating its Rapid Response Strategy to integrate the lessons learned from this case and is actively sharing its experience with other NGOs to raise awareness about potential threats and the organisational capacities required to respond effectively.

Stát selhal, uznal ministr nad plány přehrady, která mohla zastavit povodně



TOMÁŠ SVOBODA, MARTINA KOPECKÁ
vybral autory ke sledování

579



O přehradě v Nových Heřminovech se mluví už sto let. Po průtazích se má stavět od roku 2027.

Minister Výborný acknowledges that the delays in the dam construction were the state's failure, affirming the NGO's arguments.

INITIATIVE ZA BYDLENÍ (“FOR HOUSING”)

What is the good practice about?

The initiative Za bydlení (“For Housing”) is a long-term civic cross-sectorial effort aimed at implementing a systemic solution to housing needs in the Czech Republic through legislative change. Its primary goal is to secure a legal framework that would reduce the number of people living in housing deprivation and would establish an effective framework for collaboration between the state and municipalities within this regard. In the Czech Republic, as many as 161.000 people are affected by housing deprivation, including around 62.000 children. The initiative is a coalition of experts in social policy, social service providers, municipal governance, public representatives and civil society organisations. The initiative works with an evidence-based approach to advocacy. It feeds its advocacy, policy and communication work with data, as data and experience from the field/practice is crucial for building dialogue with decision-makers and other key stakeholders.

Who is implementing the good practice?

The core group consists of NGOs, academia, policy experts, legal specialists and representatives of municipalities who collaborate on legislative drafting, advocacy and communication. The initiative was established in 2019 as a response to the long-term absence of a legal framework for housing support. It builds on the long-term efforts of the Platforma pro sociální bydlení (Platform for social housing), founded in 2013, whose strategic goal was to develop functional legislation ensuring access to decent housing for vulnerable households. The initiative is coordinated by Platform for social housing.

How it works?

The initiative operates as an open and broad coordinated platform that connects experts from NGOs, academia and municipalities around

a common, agreed baseline for good legislation on preventing and addressing housing needs. Its work is organised into several activity streams that run in parallel and reinforce one another. One stream focuses on policy and legislative work: within the initiative, members have identified a shared consensus on a draft bill on housing support, and this framework was later reflected in the government’s legislative proposals. Another complementary stream centres on cooperation with municipal representatives, who are involved through consultations, roundtables and direct negotiations to ensure political feasibility and practical implementation at the local level. Public communication and advocacy form a third stream, with the initiative organising campaigns, publishing arguments in accessible formats and mobilising public support through media, petitions and collaboration with public figures. A fourth stream is analytical work: members collect data, prepare reports on housing exclusion from different perspectives and use this evidence in negotiations with decision-makers. Za bydlení functions as a coalition of more than fifty actors, supported by a core coordination team that manages strategy, communications and outreach. The initiative also adapts its approach in response to political developments and maintains flexible strategies, including step-by-step legislative advancement.

Achievements / successful and creative elements

One of the most significant achievements of the initiative is the preparation and successful promotion of the comprehensive Law on Housing Support. The framework for the legislative proposal was developed and agreed upon by experts within the initiative, and this consensual proposal was subsequently adopted as the basis for the government’s draft legislation. The Housing Support Bill was signed by the Czech President in June 2025, with its entry into force planned for January 2026. The law introduces

several systemic instruments aimed at preventing and reducing housing deprivation, including housing guarantees, assistance during the transition to secure accommodation and the establishment of local contact points that will provide specialised counselling and support.

Access to communication and influencing public sphere

The initiative has developed a strong capacity to communicate its goals publicly and to influence both policy debates and public opinion. Through public campaigns such as “Zasadme se za bydlení!”, it has raised awareness of housing exclusion and mobilised support for legislative change. The campaign featured well-known public figures, including actors appearing in video spots, which helped increase its visibility and media coverage. Petitions and public appeals were used to demonstrate public backing and apply pressure on legislators. The initiative also communicates through traditional media, social media, press materials and public statements. It draws on research reports, expert analyses and data on housing exclusion to legitimise its proposals and to counter disinformation or stereotypes about people in housing need. Press conferences and media partnerships have enabled the initiative to bring housing issues into mainstream public debate and link them to concrete legislative solutions. Engagement with municipalities, networks and NGOs further amplifies its communication reach, as local actors help disseminate information to their own audiences. The initiative addresses both supporters and critics, actively working to shift narratives in municipalities that were initially sceptical. Its visibility in national debates and cooperation with expert platforms give it direct access to public broadcasters, print media and online outlets.

Lessons learned and challenges

One of the main challenges faced by the initiative was the sheer number and diversity of participants, and the need to align municipalities,

NGOs, experts and interest groups around a shared goal. To prevent fragmentation and strengthen internal resilience, the initiative developed a set of ten common principles (“desatero”), which served as an anchor of legitimacy and a practical tool for internal decision-making. Negotiating compromises, defining red lines and tailoring narratives for different political audiences became essential skills. Communication was initially a weak point, and the initiative learned that consistent, professional messaging and strong internal coordination are crucial for effective long-term advocacy. Resilience was also demonstrated in the area of evidence-based work. Because the state did not collect reliable data on housing deprivation, the initiative built its own analytical capacity, produced reports and referred to Czech pilot projects to counter ideological objections. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted existing working methods but led to hybrid formats that strengthened participation from regional actors and helped maintain engagement. Political shifts and changes in ministerial leadership required constant adaptation, including the ability to identify new windows of opportunity and to switch from advocacy mode to watchdog mode when state actors assumed responsibility for drafting legislation. The initiative also learned to navigate political transitions, both between governments and across changing ministries, by maintaining non-partisan relationships and continuously seeking new opportunities for influence. A key lesson was the importance of a stable core team and trust-based internal communication: distributing responsibilities according to expertise and sustaining motivation across the wider network helped prevent burnout and ensured continuity despite external pressures.

Threats and attacks

The initiative operated in a politically sensitive and ideologically contested environment. Advocacy for social housing and support for vulnerable households is generally not politically attractive. At the local level, it is often viewed as risky, and some supportive municipal

and regional representatives have not been re-elected in subsequent terms. At the national level, parts of the right-wing political spectrum framed the proposal as excessive regulation, and interventions in municipal autonomy became another major point of contention. The initiative's flagship reports (mapping the scope and forms of housing need, presenting data and drawing on field experience) served as crucial tools of legitimacy, enabling it to maintain coherence and credibility in the face of ideological attacks. Resilience was demonstrated in its response: rather than confronting opponents directly, the initiative broadened its coalition to include municipalities as active partners, showing that the law would not impose rigid obligations but instead allow for locally tailored solutions. Presenting evidence from already piloted tools in the Czech context helped neutralise ideological objections and shifted the debate from ideology to practical feasibility. Another threat emerged when political changes in city councils led to attempts to dismantle existing social housing schemes. The initiative responded by sharing good practice examples across regions and maintaining national-level advocacy to safeguard continuity. Funding from international donors also represented a potential vulnerability, as opponents could use it to allege foreign influence. The initiative addressed this by ensuring transparency and proactive communication about its funding sources, preventing such narratives from taking hold. Support from the media, experts, selected politicians at both local and national levels, and public figures further strengthened its resilience during moments of backlash.

Financing

Securing stable funding was essential for sustaining coordination and advocacy. Although long-term financing was not guaranteed, a three-year grant made it possible to establish a professional advocacy core team responsible for managing and developing the broader coalition. Additional project-based resources supported specific activities such as communication, analytical work and stakeholder engagement. The Platform for Social Housing also contributed its own staff capacities to initiate and reinforce the initiative, in line with its strategic objectives and planning. Transparency about funding sources remained important throughout in order to prevent discrediting narratives in a politically sensitive environment.

Sustainability: possibility for continuing the work

The future continuity of the initiative is closely linked to the practical implementation of the Housing Support Act. As long as the initiative's supporters, including the coordinating organisation, the Platform for Social Housing, maintain their shared commitment and continue to recognise the initiative's legitimacy, it will remain active, particularly in its current role focused on watchdog functions and proposing corrections or amendments. However, the availability of adequate funding for continued coordination on the Platform's side remains an important factor influencing the initiative's long-term sustainability.

Country cases: Slovakia

List of 10 good practices of civic space resilience in Slovakia:

NAME

Platforma pre demokraciu (Platform for Democracy)

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Protecting civil society and democratic values	Direct	National	Over 80 non-governmental, non-profit organisations from across Slovakia that collaborate within a democratically governed structure	From 2016	Ongoing

NAME

ImpactLab

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Supporting civic organisations, with a thematic focus on education, democracy and inclusion	Direct	National	Pontis Foundation	From 2023	Ongoing

NAME

Crowdfunding campaign to start Denník N

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Launching a new independent media outlet and defending editorial freedom, media integrity and public trust in journalism	Direct	National	Journalists and members of editorial office of Denník N	2015	Completed

NAME

Chcem Tu Zostať (I Want to Stay)

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Increasing young people's interest in elections and public affairs	Indirect	National	Initiative of the Platform for Democracy, Memo 98, the Open Society Foundation and the Pontis Foundation, with support from dozens of non governmental organisations	2023	Completed <i>The original campaign for the parliamentary elections in autumn 2023. Later, additional campaigns and activities followed under the same name.</i>

NAME

#StrážcoviaDemokracie (Guardians of Democracy)

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Strengthen democratic awareness and civic responsibility among young people across Slovakia	Indirect	National	Post Bellum Slovakia foundation	2025	Completed

NAME

Munícia pre Ukrajinu (Ammunition for Ukraine)

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Support in the defence of Ukraine in the war	Indirect	National	Fedor Blaščák, Vladimír Šimíček and several civic initiatives	From 2024	Ongoing

NAME

Demagog.sk

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Monitoring the public statements of politicians and assessing their truthfulness	Indirect	National	SGI	From 2010	Ongoing

NAME

Mechanizmus prevencie radikalizácie a extrémizmu (Mechanism for the prevention of radicalisation and extremism)

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Helping municipalities prevent radicalisation and respond to early signs of extremism at the local level	Indirect	National	Centre for the Research of Ethnicity and Culture (CVEK)	2023	Completed

NAME

Digital Security & Digital Citizenship Training

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Strengthening the resilience of civil society organizations and youth by equipping them with critical thinking, digital safety skills and awareness of online human rights	Indirect	National	digiQ	N/D	Ongoing

NAME

Konšpirátori.sk (Conspirators)

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Fact-checking and public awareness project that monitors and evaluates websites spreading disinformation, hoaxes, and conspiracy theories	Indirect	National (international)	Coalition of media experts, journalists and advertising professionals	From 2016	Ongoing

PLATFORMA PRE DEMOKRACIU (“PLATFORM FOR DEMOCRACY”)

What is the good practice about?

The Platform for Democracy represents a coordinated civil-society initiative aimed at safeguarding democratic principles, protecting the enabling environment for non-governmental organisations and ensuring that citizens and civic actors can participate freely in public life in Slovakia. Its establishment responded to a rising wave of hostile narratives, increasing political polarisation and growing attempts by political actors to restrict civic freedoms. The platform’s primary objective is to maintain a stable, transparent and secure civic space in which organisations and individuals can operate without the threat of illegitimate pressure, administrative burdens or political intimidation. The initiative focuses on defending the legislative and financial conditions necessary for the functioning of civil society, strengthening public understanding of democratic values and countering disinformation that undermines trust in independent NGOs. Its activities are nationwide and address NGOs, students, professionals, journalists, municipalities and the general public.

Who is implementing the good practice?

The Platform for Democracy comprises more than 80 non-governmental and non-profit organisations from across Slovakia that collaborate within a democratically governed structure. Member organisations elect the Executive Committee and Council, while the General Assembly decides on the admission of new members, ensuring transparency, plurality and balanced representation of interests. The Executive Committee consists of five members, including activist and public figure Juraj Rizman. The platform builds on earlier efforts initiated in 2016–2017, when civil-society leaders began monitoring developments in neighbouring countries (particularly Hungary and Russia)

where governments systematically targeted independent NGOs. This early coordination evolved into a formalised platform committed to collective defence of civic space. Its operations follow principles of voluntarism, partnership, solidarity, subsidiarity and active engagement by its members.

How it works?

The organisation conducts its work through several interconnected streams aimed at protecting civil society and strengthening democratic resilience. A central component is the monitoring of legislation affecting NGOs, which includes identifying risks, preparing expert assessments, issuing recommendations and coordinating joint responses to restrictive proposals. Member organisations collaborate on drafting comments and alternative proposals within legislative processes, ensuring that the civil sector’s voice is represented. Advocacy and public campaigns form another core activity. The platform has organised coordinated actions such as a national campaign against the proposed “Russian law”, which would have imposed disproportionate administrative burdens on NGOs. It also cooperates closely with regional actors and municipalities, organising discussions, educational sessions and coordination meetings to strengthen local civic capacities. Internal communication and collaboration represent an essential part of the platform’s functioning. Member organisations share expertise, coordinate responses to threats and divide responsibilities across specialised working areas such as legislation, regional cooperation, campaigns and communication. This division allows a broad coalition of actors with differing profiles and capacities to act strategically and consistently.

Achievements / successful and creative elements

The Platform for Democracy has played a significant role in defending civic freedoms in Slovakia. One of its key achievements has been safeguarding the autonomous selection of civil-society representatives in bodies overseeing the preparation and monitoring of European funds. The platform successfully prevented attempts to centralise this process under a government-appointed commissioner, thereby maintaining the independence of CSO representation. In 2024, in collaboration with the initiative Cities for Democracy, the platform organised the largest civic celebrations of 17 November (the Day of the Fight for Freedom and Democracy) across 25 Slovak cities, involving dozens of organisational partners. These events reinforced the visibility of democratic values and contributed to collective mobilisation. Creative elements of the platform's work include a regular expert newsletter reaching nearly 300 organisations beyond its membership base, and coordinated regional initiatives that strengthen cooperation among local civic actors. These activities have enhanced the capacity of organisations across Slovakia to recognise and respond to threats to civil society, contributing to a more coherent and resilient ecosystem.

Access to communication and influencing public sphere

The platform places strong emphasis on shaping public opinion and strengthening trust in civil society. Its communication strategy combines traditional media (including print, radio and television) with digital channels, particularly Facebook, which remains a key platform for public discourse in Slovakia. Through regular messaging, expert statements and media engagement, the platform advocates for democratic principles and counters misleading narratives directed at NGOs. Regional fieldwork plays a central role in expanding outreach beyond the capital. By organising public discussions, training sessions and coordination meetings

throughout Slovakia, the platform contributes to building local resilience against disinformation and promotes active civic participation.

The platform also influences the public sphere through its legislative advocacy. It actively engages with state institutions, local governments, journalists and the expert community to reinforce the role of NGOs as legitimate participants in policymaking. This multi-level approach has strengthened the visibility and credibility of civil society across various sectors.

Lessons learned and challenges

The Platform for Democracy faces significant challenges in an increasingly polarised political context. One of the most pressing issues is the mainstreaming of hostile narratives against NGOs. As noted by Rizman, discourses that previously appeared primarily in conspiratorial media or among extremist actors have been adopted by members of the governing coalition. This shift requires the platform to respond rapidly and to develop strategic communication that explains democratic principles in accessible and depolarised terms. Another challenge is maintaining cohesion within a broad and diverse coalition whose members differ in size, expertise and regional reach. Ensuring effective coordination requires clear internal processes, strong leadership and sustained communication efforts. Legislative monitoring also demands specialised legal and policy expertise, which is unevenly distributed among members and must be supplemented through cooperation. Despite these difficulties, the platform has demonstrated that coordinated action is more effective than isolated efforts. The experience emphasises the importance of trust-based collaboration, capacity-building and fostering a shared understanding of democratic threats and opportunities.

Threats and attacks

The platform regularly faces verbal attacks from political actors and disinformation groups. These attacks target the legitimacy of NGOs, accusing them of foreign influence, political interference or subversive activities. In some cases, political representatives have even alleged that the platform was connected to an “attempted coup”, a claim that was entirely unfounded and part of a broader propaganda effort aimed at discrediting civil society and protests against the government’s pro-Russian policies. Hostile narratives circulate primarily on social media but also appear in traditional press and political discourse. They are occasionally accompanied by attempts to introduce restrictive legislation. In response, the platform has implemented internal security protocols, strengthened crisis communication and provided legal support to its members. Coordination with allied organisations, municipalities, international partners and the expert community has played a crucial role in mitigating the effects of these attacks. The platform’s ability to maintain credibility, public support and visibility in the media has helped counteract disinformation efforts and sustain trust among democratic actors.

Financing

The Platform for Democracy operates on a mixed funding model designed to ensure independence and stability. Its core funding derives from membership fees, which provide an autonomous source of income and limit dependence on external actors. Additional resources come from project grants and support from domestic and international foundations, ensuring diversification of its financial base. This model enables long-term planning and supports coordination, legislative work and regional outreach activities. Partnerships with democratic municipalities, international allies and private foundations strengthen the platform’s resilience and increase its capacity to respond to emerging threats.

Sustainability: possibility for continuing the work

The platform ensures continuity through diversified funding, expanding its membership base and developing internal capacities. Knowledge-sharing, coordinated action and joint advocacy among member organisations strengthen resilience to crises and support long-term sustainability. Looking ahead, the platform’s priorities include defending civil society interests in the ongoing preparation of lobbying legislation, monitoring changes to the law on public collections and evaluating the government’s intention to amend the so-called “Russian law”. As Rizman notes, parts of the government have recognised that the existing law imposed disproportionate burdens on NGOs and are considering revisions - the platform will continue to monitor developments to prevent further deterioration. By maintaining strong partnerships, consistent communication and active regional engagement, the Platform for Democracy is positioned to continue protecting Slovakia’s civic space and supporting democratic actors in the long term.

IMPACT LAB

What is the good practice about?

Impact Lab is an innovation programme designed to strengthen the capacities, organisational development and societal impact of civic organisations in Slovakia, particularly those working in the areas of education, democracy and social inclusion. As an initiative of the Pontis Foundation, it aims to support early-stage and emerging civic initiatives, help organisations professionalise, and provide systemic backing to the civic sector so that it can function as an effective and resilient pillar of democratic society.

The programme offers a combination of financial support, structured mentoring and access to networks spanning the civic, public and corporate sectors. Its overall mission is to ensure that civic organisations (especially smaller, less established ones) can scale their activities, increase their effectiveness and contribute to social innovation at local, regional and national levels.

Who is implementing the good practice?

Impact Lab is implemented by the Pontis Foundation, one of Slovakia's leading non-profit organisations working at the intersection of the civic, public and business sectors. The programme forms part of the foundation's broader social-innovation portfolio. It is delivered through a cross-sectoral partnership that brings together mentors from the corporate sector, experienced staff from established NGOs and expert teams focusing on education, organisational development and impact measurement. The programme benefits from Pontis Foundation's extensive network of partners, enabling access to know-how, professional skills and supportive infrastructures. This collaborative model ensures that participants receive not only funding but also tailored mentoring, strategic consultations and opportunities for knowledge-sharing across different sectors.

How it works?

Impact Lab operates through two complementary pillars: the Incubator and the Accelerator. The Incubator targets early-stage and smaller organisations. It offers a structured educational programme consisting of workshops on financial sustainability, impact measurement, organisational set-up and project development. Participating organisations may receive up to 30.000 € in financial support. The Incubator provides opportunities for networking with more experienced organisations and functions as an entry point from which successful participants may advance to the Accelerator.

The Accelerator is a more intensive three-to four-month programme designed for established organisations with clearer strategies and demonstrated potential for scaling. Each participant is paired with an individual mentor who provides 40 hours of strategic guidance, supplemented by 20 hours of tailored consultations and 20 hours focused specifically on impact measurement. Grants for Accelerator participants can reach up to 60.000 €, enabling organisations to invest in personnel, operations, communication or expansion activities. Mentors come from both civic and corporate backgrounds, reflecting the programme's aim to combine sector-specific experience with insights from the business environment, particularly in areas such as



Tomáš Bálint, chairman of Civic Association FRAJ, will speak at the Impact Summit in 2024.



Discussion at the Impact Summit on the topic “Who is responsible for the development of society?”.

management, communication and fundraising. Over two programme cycles, 38 organisations completed the Incubator and 25 organisations completed the Accelerator. Many organisations experienced significant growth, with some expanding their operations from school-level activities to regional or national initiatives.

Achievements / successful and creative elements

Impact Lab has become one of Slovakia’s most influential mechanisms for supporting organisational growth and social innovation within the civic sector. A notable achievement lies in its ability to integrate financial support with high-quality mentoring, a combination that enables organisations to professionalise while scaling their impact. Participants report that the programme allowed them to secure additional funding, expand their activities and formulate clearer long-term strategies. The programme’s strong emphasis on impact measurement is another innovative element. Organisations learn to develop theories of change, establish data-collection systems,

analyse results and communicate impact effectively. This increases their credibility with donors and strengthens their capacity for systemic engagement. Impact Lab’s systemic ambition is further reflected in its support for transferring successful social innovations into wider practice, including through legislative or policy change. Its design enables participating organisations not only to grow individually but also to contribute to strengthening the broader civic and social-innovation ecosystem in Slovakia.

Access to communication and influencing public sphere

Impact Lab prioritises both internal capacity-building and external visibility. Its communication strategy includes traditional media, social-media channels, thematic events and direct support to participating organisations in articulating their impact publicly. Through its website, newsletters and media partnerships, the programme raises awareness of the value of social innovation and highlights successful civic initiatives.

The flagship event of the programme is the Impact Summit, which brings together more than 300 participants and around 40 speakers (primarily from abroad) to discuss democratic resilience, social innovation and responses to societal challenges. Each edition of the Summit has focused on strengthening democracy, and the upcoming edition (“Power Within”) will address societal resilience. These events facilitate knowledge-sharing, cross-sectoral networking and the dissemination of innovative approaches to civic engagement. By showcasing successful projects and providing training in communication and impact reporting, the programme contributes to building public trust in the civic sector and increasing its visibility in the public sphere.

Lessons learned and challenges

Several challenges have emerged during programme implementation. The first concerns the cultural and operational differences between civic and corporate actors. While corporate mentors bring valuable experience in management and strategic planning, they sometimes lack understanding of the constraints facing small civic organisations. In response, the programme adapted its approach by involving experienced NGO practitioners to lead workshops, particularly in the Incubator, where practical relevance is essential. A second challenge relates to impact measurement. Many organisations initially approach impact measurement as a formal requirement for donors rather than as a tool for organisational learning. Impact Lab invests considerable effort into shifting this mindset and teaching organisations how to embed evaluation into their internal processes. External pressures also affect organisations within the programme. Some NGOs (particularly those working on democracy, inclusion or LGBTIQ+ rights) have faced the loss of key donors or partners due to political polarisation or reluctance to support value-driven projects. This environment underscores the importance of building strong organisational resilience, sustainable funding models and reputational safeguards.



A view of the audience during one of the discussions at the Impact Summit event hosted by Impact Lab.

Threats and attacks

The programme itself has not yet been subject to direct political attacks. Occasional negative comments appear online, but these have not escalated into coordinated campaigns. However, many organisations participating in Impact Lab operate in sensitive thematic areas and face verbal attacks, disinformation narratives or reputational risks. The programme therefore plays an important role in helping these organisations strengthen their communication strategies, articulate their social impact and build alliances that can protect them against reputational threats. Pontis Foundation’s broad network of partners across the civic, corporate and public sectors serves as a protective factor, providing both expert and reputational support when needed. This contributes to strengthening the democratic resilience of the civic sector as a whole.

Financing

Impact Lab is primarily funded by the European Commission through the CERV (Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values) programme. Additional resources come from corporate partners and individual donors committed to supporting socially beneficial initiatives. The programme has 5,8 € million available for grants across two programming periods (2023–2028). This diversified funding structure enables Impact Lab to provide substantial grant support to participants while maintaining programme continuity and independence.

Sustainability: possibility for continuing the work

Sustainability is a central pillar of Impact Lab's approach. The programme trains organisations to build stable financial models, diversify revenue sources and plan long-term growth. Its strong focus on impact measurement helps organisations communicate their results convincingly to partners, donors and public institutions, thereby increasing their chances of securing sustained funding. Impact Lab also cultivates networks of cooperation (connecting civic organisations with corporate and public-sector actors) which continue beyond the duration of the programme cycles. The possibility of expanding into repayable financing represents a further step towards long-term sustainability, enabling organisations to develop resilient financial strategies.

The programme's recurring structure, offering opportunities to progress from the Incubator to the Accelerator, provides a long-term development pathway for civic organisations. By focusing on organisational maturity, innovation and systemic impact, Impact Lab contributes significantly to the long-term resilience and sustainability of Slovakia's civic sector.

DENNÍK N

What is the good practice about?

Denník N is an independent media project combining a daily print newspaper with a comprehensive online news platform. It was established in late 2014 by a group of journalists who left the publishing house Petit Press after the financial group Penta entered its ownership structure. From its inception, the project sought to defend editorial independence and develop a model of journalism free from political and oligarchic influence. Denník N has since become one of the most influential media outlets in Slovakia. It is known for high-quality investigative reporting, analytical journalism and comprehensive coverage of political, social and economic affairs. Its mission includes exposing corruption, addressing systemic problems in healthcare, education, and the judiciary, monitoring state procurement, and reporting on environmental issues, human rights and abuses of power. The outlet targets a wide audience and operates nationwide, with activities extending to the Czech Republic through Deník N and cooperation with the magazine Respekt.

Who is implementing the good practice?

Denník N is operated by the independent media company N Press, owned primarily by its journalists and contributors. The outlet emerged from Projekt N, an initiative created by former SME journalists in response to perceived threats to editorial independence. Early public support (both moral and financial) was crucial, with thousands of individuals offering help within the first days of the project's announcement. The newsroom now consists of more than 120 journalists, editors, researchers, designers and technical specialists. Departments are organised by thematic areas such as politics, economy, culture, healthcare, sports and social issues. Editors coordinate coverage, verify facts and ensure journalistic standards, while technical teams manage the website, applications and digital tools. The organisational structure supports rapid reporting, high editorial quality and diversified content formats, including print editions, online articles, newsletters, podcasts, books and minority-language content.



The editorial staff of Denník N photographed on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of its founding.



Denník N team in 2024.

How it works?

Denník N operates as a multi-platform newsroom producing approximately 30 articles per day. Its content appears in several formats: a daily print newspaper (Monday–Thursday), an expanded weekend edition (Friday), a rapid online news feed (*Minute by Minute*), podcasts, newsletters and interactive multimedia outputs. Editorial processes include modern fact-checking, consultation with experts, internal quality control and cross-team coordination. Each article undergoes review to ensure accuracy, independence and contextual depth. The newsroom integrates text reporting with infographics, interactive maps and visual storytelling, enhancing accessibility and reader engagement. Denník N's activities extend beyond journalism. The outlet organises public discussions, debates and educational projects across Slovakia, supporting critical thinking and direct engagement with readers. It also produces school materials, handbooks on disinformation and public events focused on media literacy.

The expansion to the Czech Republic and the development of platforms such as Napunk (for the Hungarian minority in Slovakia) demonstrate the project's capacity for cross-border collaboration and innovation.

Achievements / successful and creative elements

Denník N's primary achievement is the establishment of a fully independent media outlet based on a subscription model. This model has ensured freedom from political and economic pressures and allowed the newsroom to prioritise investigative reporting and long-term, resource-intensive journalism. The REMP system (Readers Engagement and Monetization Platform) further enhances independence by enabling direct engagement with readers, detailed analytics and sustained financial support. Creative strengths include combining print and digital journalism, producing visually rich and interactive content, and developing innovative

formats such as specialised newsletters and thematic multimedia projects. Expansion abroad (co-founding Deník N in the Czech Republic, launching the Hungarian-language platform Napunk, and acquiring stakes in Respekt and Heroine) illustrates the outlet's capacity for regional influence and adaptation. Denník N has become a model for reader-funded journalism in Central Europe, demonstrating that independent, high-quality media can be sustainable and can shape national public discourse.

Access to communication and influencing public sphere

The outlet communicates with the public through a broad mix of channels: its print editions, website, mobile applications, the Newsfilter newsletter and social media. These platforms allow Denník N to reach national audiences and provide timely, context-rich reporting. Public outreach includes debates, discussions and events held in cities across Slovakia, enabling the newsroom to connect with readers outside the capital and foster community engagement. The outlet's educational activities (school lectures, guides on media literacy and counter-disinformation events) further extend its influence by strengthening critical thinking and civic awareness. Denník N is actively involved in countering disinformation, using fact-checking, verified sources and expert collaborations. It publishes analyses, interviews and case studies documenting the impact of disinformation on individuals and institutions, such as healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through these efforts, the outlet plays a significant role in shaping public opinion and promoting democratic resilience.

Lessons learned and challenges

Denník N's experience highlights significant challenges related to building a fully independent newsroom in a polarised environment. Initially, the project faced technical limitations, including reliance on a temporary website built by a journalist, which could not sustain the



Photo of the Denník N editorial office in its early days.

surge of user interest. These early difficulties underscored the need for robust digital infrastructure and strategic planning, leading to the development of improved technological systems. Managing a growing newsroom required establishing clear organisational processes, coordination mechanisms and internal standards. The outlet learned to maintain credibility by adhering to transparency, consistent quality and responsiveness to reader expectations. It also demonstrated the importance of adapting to technological change and audience behaviour while maintaining editorial values.

Another major challenge has been navigating a political climate in which segments of society and certain political actors openly target independent media. Persistent verbal attacks and hostile rhetoric increase pressure on journalists and demand constant attention to security, communication and community support.

Threats and attacks

Denník N journalists face frequent verbal abuse, gendered harassment, and, in some cases, direct threats of violence, primarily online but also in person. These attacks are exacerbated by political rhetoric that implicitly encourages hostility toward independent media, often through "dog-whistle" communication that frames journalists as enemies or "anti-Slovak" actors. Such rhetoric fuels aggressive behaviour among extremist supporters while allowing politicians to evade direct responsibility. The newsroom has also encountered attempts by individuals

to force entry into the premises, prompting strengthened security measures. Denník N responds to threats by coordinating with the police, using legal instruments, and maintaining transparent communication. Reader solidarity increases after each attack, as subscriptions and donations temporarily rise, reinforcing the newsroom's resilience. Despite these pressures, Denník N has maintained continuity of work, safeguarded its staff and strengthened its credibility among democratic audiences.

Financing

Denník N's financial model is based primarily on subscriptions, which ensures editorial independence and shields the newsroom from political or commercial influence. Advertising plays only a secondary role and is limited according to IAB standards.

Initial investment came from co-owners of the cybersecurity company ESET, but ownership is now largely in the hands of journalists and contributors, reinforcing accountability and independence. The subscription model, combined with diversified projects such as book publishing, special editions, multimedia content and international expansion, ensures stable revenue and long-term sustainability.

Sustainability: possibility for continuing the work

Denník N's sustainability is grounded in its strong subscription base, diversified content portfolio and commitment to technological and editorial innovation. The outlet continuously adapts to evolving trends in global journalism, invests in new formats and strengthens its engagement with readers. Future plans include maintaining high-quality investigative journalism, expanding international collaborations and exploring strategic opportunities aligned with its mission, such as further media partnerships or acquisitions that support demanding and costly forms of journalism funded directly by readers. By prioritising independence, building strong community support and expanding its presence regionally, Denník N has established itself as a durable institution capable of contributing to democratic resilience in Slovakia and beyond.

I WANT TO STAY (CHCEM TU ZOSTAŤ) CAMPAIGN

What is the good practice about?

The initiative Chcem tu zostať (“I Want to Stay”) represents a nationwide civic-mobilisation campaign focused on increasing youth participation in elections and strengthening long-term civic engagement in Slovakia. It emerged as a response to persistent challenges: low levels of political interest among young people, distrust towards democratic institutions, susceptibility to radicalisation and disinformation, and the steady outflow of young talents abroad. The campaign’s core objective was to empower young people aged 16–30 to recognise their political agency, participate in the 2023 parliamentary elections, and engage more actively in civic life. Beyond election mobilisation, the campaign addressed broader topics such as civic education, democratic values, prevention of radicalisation, and community participation. Although triggered by the electoral context, its strategic ambition extended into 2024, aiming to contribute to sustainable civic-education efforts and to maintain a network of cooperating institutions and young volunteers across Slovakia.

Who is implementing the good practice?

The initiative was launched collaboratively by the Platform for Democracy, Memo 98, the Open Society Foundation and the Pontis Foundation. It developed into a broad multi-stakeholder platform uniting more than 120 partners, including NGOs, civic initiatives, expert institutions, independent content creators, marketing professionals, academia, local community actors and private companies. This cross-sector collaboration provided the campaign with expertise in communication, data analytics, community outreach and impact monitoring. Corporate partners contributed by offering media space, technical support and professional know-how. The organisational structure consisted of a central coordination and strategic team, a communication and content-creation

unit, regional coordinators, and a network of external partners and volunteers. This set-up enabled effective division of labour and rapid adaptation to changing public discourse and the needs of young audiences.

How it works?

The campaign combined several interconnected activity streams designed to reach young people both online and in their local communities. A strong communication component relied on short videos, infographics, shareable visuals and other digital content tailored to young audiences and disseminated via Instagram, TikTok and other social-media platforms. Influencers played an important role in increasing outreach and credibility, with more than 70 creators contributing content to their respective communities.

An educational stream focused on developing civic-education materials, organising school workshops and discussions, providing methodological tools for teachers and strengthening critical thinking and political literacy among secondary-school and university students. At the same time, a community-engagement stream mobilised young people across regions through local partner organisations and volunteers. These activities included concerts, festival formats, school events and community gatherings. In total, more than 200 offline events were organised, involving over 120 organisations and reaching tens of thousands of participants. This multi-layered approach enabled the integration of online and offline outreach, strengthening both visibility and meaningful engagement. The campaign also relied on data-driven monitoring, which allowed continuous measurement of reach, identification of effective communication formats and real-time strategic adjustments throughout the mobilisation period.

Achievements / successful and creative elements

One of the key achievements of Chcem tu zostať was its ability to meaningfully mobilise young voters at a scale not seen in Slovak civil society for decades. The campaign's integration of professional marketing approaches with civic-education content proved particularly effective, as it met young audiences in their preferred communication environments without sacrificing factual accuracy. Humorous explainer videos, visually appealing formats and the involvement of well-known public figures helped translate complex election-related topics into accessible messages. Between April and election day, youth voter turnout increased significantly. According to post-election estimates, turnout among young voters aged 18–26 reached approximately 69 %, up from pre-campaign projections of around 51–52 %. This represents an increase of roughly 17 percentage points, equivalent to 70.000–90.000 additional voters (about 2–3 % of total turnout).

Another achievement was the campaign's brand recognition, reaching 38 % among the general population and as much as 46 % within its main target group. The partnership between NGOs and private-sector actors proved highly innovative in the Slovak context, enabling a professional and data-driven execution supported by expertise that extended beyond traditional CSO capacities.

Access to communication and influencing public sphere

The initiative demonstrated a strong capacity to reach young people and influence public discourse on civic participation. Its communication relied primarily on social-media channels such as Instagram and TikTok, where the campaign reached approximately one million accounts per month. Influencer marketing ensured high organic distribution, particularly among first-time voters and young adults aged 18–26. Offline activities enhanced trust and visibility, with the campaign's presence at festivals, schools

and community events ensuring engagement beyond digital spaces. This hybrid model strengthened credibility and made the initiative more resilient to potential online manipulation. The campaign was explicitly designed as data-driven, enabling continuous monitoring of reach, engagement and message impact. Data guided the selection of content formats, platforms and messaging strategies, ensuring that communication responded swiftly to trends, misperceptions and emerging narratives in the public sphere.

Lessons learned and challenges

The main challenge related to timing, as the campaign launched during the summer, a period when reaching young people is notoriously difficult. The campaign addressed this by securing visibility at festivals and outdoor events, meeting young people in spaces they naturally frequented. A second challenge concerned the coordination of a large number of partners with varying capacities and levels of motivation. Managing more than 120 organisations required intensive communication, shared tools, and continuous support to ensure consistent engagement. A key lesson learned was that while diversity of partners significantly increases impact, it also necessitates strong central coordination, clear division of responsibilities and well-defined communication channels. Another insight concerned donor engagement. The campaign attracted a number of new donors who had not previously supported non-partisan civic initiatives. This expanded donor base represented both an opportunity and a challenge, as it required the campaign to strengthen transparency, reporting and communication to maintain trust across a diverse set of supporters.

Threats and attacks

Although offline activities remained incident-free, the campaign was subject to online attacks from political actors and disinformation networks. Narratives attempted to delegitimise

the initiative by questioning its independence, funding sources and motives. The most prominent example was a video by then former prime minister Robert Fico, who falsely claimed that the Open Society Foundation misused funds intended for supporting Ukrainian refugees to influence elections. Online disinformation included collages, memes and posts portraying the campaign as foreign-controlled, primarily referencing George Soros. These narratives mirrored common attack patterns directed at civil society in Slovakia. The campaign responded through transparent communication, proactive clarification of funding sources, and cooperation with expert organisations specialising in counter-disinformation work. Crisis communication was supported by partner NGOs and allied networks, contributing to the initiative's resilience in the face of attempts to undermine its legitimacy.

Financing

The total budget of the campaign amounted to 449.874 €. The Open Society Foundation contributed 232.883 €, while additional resources came from the Pontis Foundation, Memo 98, the Platform for Democracy and other partners. Part of the funding originated from international donors, including a grant from the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) and support from a Dutch foundation. Domestic fundraising efforts played a significant role, with a public collection generating over 45.000 €. The financing model combined institutional grants, philanthropic contributions, project resources and public donations, reflecting a diversified funding approach that contributed to the campaign's sustainability and independence.

Sustainability: possibility for continuing the work

Although Chcem tu zostať was initially conceived as a one-off mobilisation campaign linked to the 2023 parliamentary elections, it established a solid foundation for long-term civic-education and youth-engagement efforts. The network of partners, volunteers and regional actors remains active and prepared for further collaborations, while the campaign's know-how, data and communication channels can be re-used or adapted for future civic-mobilisation projects. Sustainability is further supported by links to ongoing educational and community programmes implemented by the platform organisations, ensuring continued engagement with young people beyond electoral cycles. The initiative thus strengthened the long-term infrastructure for youth participation in Slovakia and demonstrated the capacity of civil society to implement large-scale mobilisation efforts with significant societal impact.

#GUARDIANSOFDEMOCRACY (#STRÁŽCOVIADEMOKRACIE)

What is the good practice about?

#GuardiansofDemocracy is an educational and civic programme implemented by Post Bellum Slovakia, aimed at strengthening democratic awareness, historical memory and civic responsibility among young people and the wider public. It focuses in particular on secondary-school students and teachers across Slovakia. The programme uses interactive workshops, experiential simulations and storytelling based on authentic testimonies of people who lived under authoritarian regimes. By confronting participants with the reality of totalitarian rule, restrictions of human rights and abuses of power, it seeks to develop critical thinking, deepen understanding of democracy and reinforce the ability to resist radicalisation, disinformation and anti-democratic tendencies. The initiative was created in response to growing threats to democracy, increasing social polarisation and a shrinking civic space. Its overarching goal is to contribute to a resilient society that remembers the past, recognises warning signs and is capable of defending democratic institutions and values.

Who is implementing the good practice?

The programme is implemented by Post Bellum Slovakia, a civic association that has for many years documented and disseminated memories of people who experienced authoritarian regimes in Slovakia and the broader region. Since 2011, Post Bellum has been recording, archiving and publishing testimonies of witnesses to key events in modern Slovak history, in line with the concept of "European memory". For #GuardiansofDemocracy, Post Bellum cooperates with a wide range of partners: primary and secondary schools, cultural institutions, church communities and municipalities. These actors provide venues, outreach and local support. The project thus operates as a cross-sector



A group photo after one of the discussions at high school.

partnership that connects schools, civil society, cultural organisations and local governments, enhancing its reach and impact across regions.

How it works?

The programme Guardians of Democracy: Why Do We Need Democracy? is structured into three main pillars:

1. Teacher education and exchange of experience: expert lectures, methodological trainings, discussions with historians, sociologists and other specialists, as well as international study visits focusing on modern history, the Holocaust and human rights. These activities equip teachers with tools and methodologies that they can incorporate into regular teaching practice.
2. Youth education: interactive workshops, simulations, experiential learning activities and film screenings for students aged approximately 15–19. Students participate in role-playing exercises that simulate decision-making in times of democratic crisis, enabling them to better understand the

fragility of democratic institutions and the consequences of authoritarian rule.

3. Public discussions and community events: open debates, multi-genre events and film screenings for the broader public across different regions of Slovakia, aimed at fostering dialogue about democracy, raising awareness of disinformation and strengthening civic engagement.

Achievements / successful and creative elements

In 2023, Post Bellum organised 19 events in multiple regions. Nine events targeted schools (mainly secondary) and ten were open to the general public, reaching approximately 630 students and around 600 adults. Feedback from teachers and students was predominantly positive, indicating strong engagement and perceived relevance. A particularly successful and creative element of the programme is the combination of historical testimonies with experiential education. Role-playing, simulations and discussions based on real-life stories make abstract concepts like democracy, human rights and authoritarianism tangible and emotionally resonant. This approach helps participants form deeper connections to historical events

and recognise parallels with current political developments. Another important achievement lies in the deliberate inclusion of people with differing or even opposing views, including critics from the political scene and social media. Facilitating discussions across ideological divides has helped strengthen societal resilience and encourage democratic debate beyond closed “bubbles”. The attention paid to the programme by political parties known for manipulating information about democracy reflects both its visibility and its perceived impact.

Access to communication and influencing public sphere

Post Bellum and the #GuardiansofDemocracy programme actively engage in public communication on democracy and disinformation. They use social media, regional media, podcasts, their website and public events to reach diverse audiences. Cooperation with journalists, experts and local institutions has allowed the project to shape public debate in regions that are often neglected by mainstream discourse. A significant portion of events took place in socio-economically disadvantaged areas with a strong presence of disinformation, often referred to as “Slovakia’s hungry valleys”. Participants



Screening of a documentary with memories of the survivors of authoritarian regimes in Slovakia.

frequently emphasised that such open debates are rare in their regions and that they often feel isolated within their communities. Discussions comparing democracy and totalitarianism, and examining the risks of radicalisation, were seen as particularly valuable. The project's emphasis on public dialogue, including with critics, contributes to building a culture of respectful, fact-based discussion. It also helps connect isolated citizens and teachers with a broader community of people committed to democratic values.

Lessons learned and challenges

The programme's implementation revealed several important lessons and challenges. One recurring difficulty is the insufficient teaching of modern history, World War II and the Holocaust in some regions, especially in north-eastern Slovakia. Some teachers avoid these topics or pass the responsibility to colleagues, resulting in students receiving incomplete or superficial knowledge. This gap underlines the importance of teacher education and methodological support. Another challenge lies in organising events in a highly polarised environment, where some schools and local actors fear political repercussions. Ahead of the parliamentary elections, certain schools withdrew from participation because they were worried about the consequences if particular candidates or parties came to power. Teachers expressed concern that teaching about the 20th century, the Holocaust and authoritarian regimes might become more difficult in the future. The project also learned that attendance and engagement vary across regions. While turnout was lower than expected in places such as Revúca or parts of Košice, events in cities like Zvolen and Banská Bystrica exceeded expectations, reflecting a stronger tradition of local civic activism. Post Bellum identified the need to further strengthen outreach to regions with weaker civic infrastructure and to facilitate more structured dialogues with participants holding opposing views.

Threats and attacks

#GuardiansofDemocracy has faced direct hostility, particularly from far-right and populist actors. In some localities the project provoked strong reactions, including threats and disinformation. One SNS candidate publicly spread false accusations that the project was a form of political propaganda allegedly linked to a specific political party. She sent warning messages to schools and parents, which led at least one school to cancel participation, forcing the organisers to find an alternative partner within 24 hours. The same candidate later attended a public event and engaged in sharp, confrontational debate. In several cases, the project received direct threats prior to events. The police responded by increasing security measures, and organisers received offensive and hostile messages online. In the face of these pressures, Post Bellum relied on support from partner organisations, experts, local communities and church and cultural institutions that provided safe venues. The organisation implemented measures to protect staff, guests and participants, coordinated with the police and worked to safeguard its reputation. Despite the hostility, the project remained active and maintained continuity.

Financing

The project Guardians of Democracy: Why Do We Need Democracy? has been funded primarily through the EEA Financial Mechanism 2014–2021 and the state budget of the Slovak Republic, as part of the Bilateral Relations Fund. The funding scheme is administered by the Ministry of Investments, Regional Development and Informatisation of the Slovak Republic. While this financial support enabled the implementation of events, study visits and educational activities across multiple regions, it is time-bound and dependent on grant cycles. The programme does not have a guaranteed long-term funding source, which makes future continuity sensitive to political developments and donors' priorities regarding democracy and human-rights-focused initiatives.

Sustainability: possibility for continuing the work

The long-term sustainability of #GuardiansofDemocracy relies on building durable relationships with teachers, schools and regional partners, as well as on creating methodological materials that remain in use beyond the project's formal funding period. By training teachers and equipping them with tools, lesson plans and methods, the programme ensures that democratic education and critical reflection on the past continue in classrooms even when specific project activities end. Post Bellum is working to expand its network of cooperating schools, experts and local institutions, aiming to run further cycles of the programme and to adapt it to evolving needs. However, sustainability will depend on future grant opportunities and continued willingness of donors and public institutions to support democracy-focused education in an increasingly polarised environment. Despite these uncertainties, the programme has already established a replicable model that can be scaled or adapted in different regions and contexts, contributing to the long-term strengthening of democratic culture and resilience in Slovakia.



Discussion with singer Katarína Koščová and Juraj Rizman from the Post Bellum organisation for high school students.

Country cases: Croatia

List of 10 good practices of civic space resilience in Croatia:

NAME

Hrvatska može bolje (Croatia Can Do Better)

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Education reform, civic education	Indirect	National	Good Initiative	2016	Completed

NAME

#SpasiMe (#SaveMe)

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Gender based violence	Indirect	National	Currently none, but the Fund for Women is administered by Solidarna Foundation	2019-2020	Mainly complete, but still active in the form of the Fund for Women

NAME

Ne damo naše autoceste (We Won't Give Away Our Motorways)

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Public goods/ privatisation of roads	Direct	National	Trade unions, primarily Independent Motorway Union	2013-2015	Completed

NAME

Za Hrvatsku slobode (For Croatia of Freedom)

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Human rights, freedom of speech, civic space, antifascism, freedom of expression, journalism and cultural work	Direct	National	Multiple CSOs, journalists and artists are at the core team	August 2025 - ongoing	Ongoing

NAME

Earthquake humanitarian aid

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Humanitarian aid to earthquake-affected areas	Indirect	Local/national	Solidarna Foundation	2020-2021	Mostly completed, partially active

NAME

Forum 2020

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Inclusion of civil society in EU policy-making	Direct	National/EU-wide	CROSOL	2020-2021	Completed

NAME

Platforma 112 - Za Hrvatsku vladavine prava (Platform 112 - For Croatia of Rule of Law)

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Democratisation, rule of law, human rights, environment, public goods	Direct	National	70 CSOs that are engaged in the protection of human rights, democratisation and peacebuilding	2011-2016	Inactive

NAME

Inicijativa "Za snažno civilno društvo" (Initiative For Strong Civil Society)

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Civic space, democratisation	Direct	National	N/D	2016-2020	Inactive

NAME

Stanovanje za sve građanska inicijativa (Civic Initiative "Housing for Everyone")

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Housing policy	Indirect	National	European Citizens' Initiative "Housing for all"	2019 - 2021	Inactive

NAME

Radio 101 protests

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Media freedoms	Direct	Local	N/A	1996	Inactive

HRVATSKA MOŽE BOLJE (“CROATIA CAN DO BETTER”) - CIVIC INITIATIVE FOR QUALITY EDUCATION REFORM IN CROATIA

What is the good practice about?

The initiative Hrvatska može bolje (“Croatia can do Better”) is a broad civic movement launched in 2016 to defend and promote comprehensive education reform in Croatia. It emerged in response to political interference in the ongoing curricular reform initiated by an expert working group established by the Ministry of Education and led by Dr. Boris Jokić. The reform aimed to modernise Croatia’s outdated education system, but government attempts to replace the expert team and politicise the process triggered widespread public concern. In reaction, numerous civil society organisations, trade unions, teachers, students, parents and individual citizens united in protest. The initiative’s main objective was to demand a high-quality, inclusive and depoliticised education system that would equip young people with competencies needed in the 21st century. Its central message “We demand better schools, not political control” reflected a call for education policy grounded in professional expertise rather than ideology. Between May and June 2016, the initiative mobilised more than 250 organisations and tens of thousands of citizens in cities throughout Croatia, becoming the largest non-partisan civic mobilisation in the country since the 1990s. While its primary targets were decision-makers in government and parliament, the initiative also succeeded in empowering teachers, parents and students to take an active role in defending and shaping the reform process.

Who is implementing the good practice?

The initiative was coordinated by the GOOD Initiative for the Systematic and Quality Introduction of Civic Education, a long-standing coalition comprising more than sixty civil society organisations, including the Forum for Freedom in Education, GONG, the Centre for Peace Studies, RODA, academic experts in the

field of education and several education-sector unions. The coalition remains active today and collaborates with volunteer teachers, academic specialists, student organisations and parents’ associations. This cross-sectoral alliance brought together civil society expertise, grassroots mobilisation and professional credibility. The GOOD Initiative served as the central convener, while local groups organised parallel events within their own communities. Cooperation among NGOs, unions, educators and citizens formed the backbone of the movement’s resilience, legitimacy and capacity to mobilise at scale.

How it works?

Hrvatska može bolje functioned as an open and decentralised civic movement coordinated through the GOOD Initiative’s organisational network. Internal communication was facilitated through online platforms, social media, mailing lists and local coordination committees, allowing rapid information exchange and broad participation across Croatia. The initiative operated through several interconnected components:

- Public advocacy and awareness-raising: The coalition launched a coordinated media campaign to explain the importance of comprehensive education reform, using press conferences, public debates, expert statements and infographics to reach a wide audience.
- Mass mobilisation: On 1 June 2016, simultaneous peaceful protests were organised in more than fifty Croatian cities and abroad, mobilising around 50.000 participants in Zagreb alone (one of the largest civic mobilisations since the 1990s).
- Political advocacy: The initiative submitted formal demands to the Parliament and the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports,

calling for the continuation of the expert-led reform and institutional guarantees of its independence from political interference.

- Community engagement: Schools, universities and youth organisations were encouraged to organise workshops, discussions and symbolic events that reinforced the movement's messages within local communities.
- Monitoring and follow-up: After the protests, the coalition continued to monitor education policies, respond to political developments and publish public reports to hold decision-makers accountable.

Decision-making processes were collective and transparent. Local groups proposed actions which were then coordinated nationally by the GOOD Initiative. The movement relied heavily on voluntary engagement, participatory governance and horizontal communication, all of which strengthened ownership, coherence and trust among diverse actors.

Achievements / successful and creative elements

Hrvatska može bolje achieved several tangible as well as symbolic successes. Most importantly, it succeeded in preserving the integrity of the curricular reform by compelling the government to abandon its attempts at political interference and by reinstating the expert working

group that had originally led the process. The initiative also significantly raised public awareness of education as a cornerstone of social and democratic development. For the first time in Croatia's recent history, citizens mobilised in support of a reform rather than against one, marking a notable shift in the dynamics of civic engagement. The initiative's creativity lay in its non-partisan, inclusive and optimistic narrative. Through simple but powerful messages, strong visual identity and participatory communication strategies, it encouraged teachers, students and parents to become public advocates for reform. The organisation of protests and mobilisation through social media demonstrated new forms of digital civic engagement and illustrated the potential of online platforms for large-scale mobilisation. A further creative element was the coalition-based model that brought together NGOs, trade unions, educators and citizens into a unified civic voice. The initiative's ability to appeal to emotions (particularly the aspiration to secure a better future for children and young people) proved to be a powerful motivating force. Collaboration between state and non-state actors, including civil society organisations, teachers from public schools, academic experts and local authorities, added credibility and broadened the initiative's reach. Equally important was the initiative's continuity and longer-term influence. It contributed to establishing lasting partnerships that continue



“Waiting for the tram”. During the largest protest in Zagreb, where there were over 40.000 people, Minister of Education cinically said about the huge crowd that “maybe these people were just waiting for the tram”.

to shape educational discourse in Croatia. Its impact extended to later policy developments, most notably the “School for Life” programme, which incorporated several principles advocated by the movement. The GOOD Initiative remains active today and continues to work on the systematic introduction of civic education and related reforms.

Access to communication and influencing public sphere

Hrvatska može bolje demonstrated a strong capacity to shape public opinion and influence the broader policy environment. The initiative employed a wide range of communication tools, including press releases, interviews, live broadcasts, viral videos and coordinated social media campaigns under the hashtag #HrvatskaMožeBolje. Traditional media (national television, newspapers and radio) provided extensive coverage, which significantly amplified the visibility of the movement’s demands across the country. A key achievement was the initiative’s ability to frame education reform as a national and fundamentally non-partisan issue, resonating across political divides. Representatives of the coalition appeared regularly on talk shows, in public debates and at parliamentary hearings, ensuring institutional visibility and reinforcing the legitimacy of the reform agenda. Communication strategies were transparent, fact-based and emotionally compelling, relying on positive framing (“Croatia can do better”) rather than oppositional or confrontational rhetoric. The campaign also addressed disinformation surrounding the reform. By publishing verified data about the curricular process, highlighting the professional qualifications of the expert team and correcting misleading claims made by political actors, the initiative contributed to a more informed public debate. Civic-education specialists helped translate complex policy issues into accessible explanations for the general public. Because of its professional credibility, constructive tone and broad civic support, the initiative secured access to both mainstream and alternative media. It built trust among journalists and large

segments of society, making it one of the most visible and effective public campaigns in Croatia in the past decade.

Lessons learned and challenges

The initiative’s experience revealed both the strengths and limitations of large-scale civic mobilisation. A key lesson was that cross-sectoral alliances can significantly amplify impact, but they also require strong coordination and clear internal communication. Managing hundreds of volunteers and organisations within a short timeframe proved demanding and led to uneven levels of participation across different regions. Another challenge concerned sustaining momentum after the initial success. Once the immediate political threat subsided, maintaining public interest and securing resources for continued advocacy became more difficult. The absence of institutionalised mechanisms for civic participation in education policymaking further constrained long-term influence. The movement also learned that positive framing, appeals to shared values and the common good, and evidence-based advocacy resonate strongly with citizens. The initiative demonstrated that people respond more readily to constructive visions than to purely oppositional messaging. Finally, the experience underscored the importance of professional advocacy capacities within civil-society organisations. Despite the obstacles encountered, Hrvatska može bolje provided a replicable model for mobilising citizens around public goods and showed that democratic engagement can safeguard professional autonomy and policy integrity even in a politically polarised environment.

Threats and attacks

Throughout 2016 and 2017, the initiative faced political and media attacks from certain conservative and right-wing actors. Some government officials and commentators attempted to discredit the movement by framing it as “politically motivated” or “foreign-funded,” thereby seeking to delegitimise its demands

and undermine public trust. Organisers were subjected to online hate speech, often labelled as “traitors,” “leftists,” or agents of external influence. The coalition responded by consistently maintaining transparency regarding its organisational structure, decision-making processes and financial sources. All relevant documents were published online, demonstrating the initiative’s independence and non-partisan nature. Strong public trust and substantial media support played an important role in countering hostile narratives. The movement’s broad societal backing also served as a buffer against political pressure, helping to protect individuals involved and preserve the initiative’s legitimacy.

Financing

Hrvatska može bolje was primarily a volunteer-driven initiative operating with minimal direct funding. Core civil-society organisations (such as GONG, the Forum for Freedom in Education and the Centre for Peace Studies) covered logistical and communication costs from their existing budgets and small project grants, mainly sourced from EU-funded programmes in the areas of education and civic participation. Additional support was provided through in-kind contributions, including printing services, venues and transportation, offered by trade unions, partner organisations and individual citizens. The absence of centralised funding safeguarded the initiative’s independence, but it also limited opportunities for professionalisation and long-term planning. Today, the GOOD Initiative continues to rely predominantly on a mix of project-based grants, EU funding and contributions from member organisations, which cover shared activities using their own project resources. This model ensures continuity but remains vulnerable to fluctuations in external funding.

Sustainability: possibility for continuing the work

Although the protest wave subsided after 2016, Hrvatska može bolje evolved into a sustained

advocacy platform coordinated by the GOOD Initiative. Member organisations continued to monitor education policies, publish analytical reports and participate in public consultations, thereby maintaining pressure for transparent and evidence-based policymaking. The networks established through the mobilisation became long-term channels of cooperation among teachers, unions and civil-society organisations. Many participants later contributed to the “School for Life” pilot programme and to national education strategies, demonstrating the initiative’s lasting influence on the direction of education reform. The movement’s sustainability lies in its transformation from a large-scale protest into a continuous civic watchdog promoting democratic, inclusive and high-quality education in Croatia. Beyond policy advocacy, member organisations have remained active in informal learning, civic education and community-based programmes for schools and youth across cities and other regions. These activities ensure that the initiative’s goals continue to shape educational practices and public discourse well beyond the initial mobilisation period.

1.6.2016. ○○○

HRVATSKA MOŽE BOLJE!

Procjenjuje se kako se na prosvjedima u različitim mjestima okupilo više od 50,000 građanki i građana. Prosvjednici su se zalagali za Hrvatsku kao zemlju u kojoj mladi imaju priliku za kvalitetno obrazovanje koje ih osposobljava za život, rad, stvaralaštvo i doprinos boljem društvu.

Veliki prosvjed u Zagrebu okupio je oko 40,000 ljudi!



Akcije podrške održane su u više svjetskih metropola, uključujući, Berlin, Bruxelles, Budimpeštu, London, Pariz i Šangaj.



Summary of protests in Croatian cities.

#SPASIME (“SAVE ME”) – CIVIC INITIATIVE AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

What is the good practice about?

The initiative #SpasiMe (“Save Me”) is a civic movement that emerged in 2019 in response to a series of shocking cases of domestic and gender-based violence in Croatia and the evident institutional failures to protect victims. Triggered by the brutal assault of a woman in Pag and several other widely publicised incidents, the movement aimed to expose systemic shortcomings within law enforcement, the judiciary and social services that left survivors without adequate protection. The initiative sought to accelerate the adoption and implementation of the Istanbul Convention, strengthen the penal code regarding domestic violence, ensure faster judicial procedures, and promote a zero-tolerance approach to gender-based violence. #SpasiMe rapidly transformed into a nationwide mobilisation effort, drawing tens of thousands of citizens to protests held on 16 March 2019 in Zagreb, Split, Rijeka, Osijek and abroad. It brought together women’s rights organisations, unions, student groups, artists and citizens under the shared message “We demand protection, not excuses.” The initiative reshaped public debate on gender-based violence, raised expectations of institutional accountability and empowered survivors to speak publicly, many for the first time.

Who is implementing the good practice?

The initiative was founded by a coalition of activists and public figures, with actress Jelena Veljača serving as its most recognisable spokesperson. Behind the public face of the movement stood numerous women’s rights NGOs, including B.a.B.e. (Be Active. Be Emancipated.), CESI (Center for Education, Counselling and Research), Domine Split, RODA and the Solidarna Foundation. These organisations contributed expert knowledge, logistical support, psychological and legal assistance, and strategic advocacy capacity. Journalists, artists and survivors

of violence were also actively involved, forming a broad cross-sectoral alliance linking civil society, the cultural sector and the general public. The movement thus functioned as a hybrid structure (part grassroots mobilisation, part advocacy platform) rooted in shared values of gender equality, justice and human rights.

How it works?

#SpasiMe operated as a rapid-response civic mobilisation combining spontaneous citizen engagement with professional advocacy structures. The initial phase concentrated on organising mass demonstrations to draw immediate attention to institutional neglect. Social media platforms (especially Facebook and Instagram) served as key organisational tools, enabling swift dissemination of information and coordination of local organising committees across Croatia.

Key activity streams included:

- Public demonstrations: The March 2019 protests mobilised around 50.000 participants nationwide, with parallel events held in several European cities where Croatian communities joined in solidarity.
- Policy advocacy: The initiative presented formal demands for amendments to the Criminal Code and Family Law, stricter penalties for offenders, improved protection orders and mandatory training for judges, police officers and social workers.
- Public awareness campaigns: Survivor testimonies shared online and through media appearances humanised victims’ experiences and reduced stigma.
- Collaboration with institutions: Representatives met with the prime minister, government ministers, parliamentarians and the Ombudsperson for Gender Equality to discuss policy solutions and institutional reform.

Decision-making processes were collective but flexible. A small core team coordinated communications, while NGOs provided expert content and legal analysis. The decentralised and emotionally resonant nature of the movement facilitated broad participation and rapid mobilisation.



#Spasi Me (#Save Me) initiative – campaign visual.

Achievements / successful and creative elements

#SpasiMe achieved significant societal and institutional impact within a short period. Its most visible success was the mass mobilisation of citizens across ideological, generational and regional divides, breaking longstanding taboos surrounding domestic violence. Survivors were empowered to speak publicly and received broad media and societal support. The movement's creative strength lay in blending celebrity visibility with grassroots activism. Well-known actors, journalists and musicians amplified public attention, while survivors' testimonies anchored the debates in lived experience. The hashtag #SpasiMe became a national symbol of solidarity and resistance, widely used across social media platforms. Institutionally, the initiative created sustained pressure on political actors. Within one year, amendments to the Criminal Code (2020) increased penalties for domestic violence and introduced stricter monitoring of restraining orders.

Another innovative component was the use of digital storytelling: anonymous testimonies shared online were later dramatised and

presented in public readings and media features, helping shift social attitudes through art and narrative.

Access to communication and influencing public sphere

#SpasiMe demonstrated exceptional ability to shape public discourse and influence the national agenda. Social media served as the central communication infrastructure. The movement's Facebook page gained more than 50,000 followers within weeks, functioning as both an information hub and a platform for survivor stories. Instagram and Twitter campaigns reinforced the movement's messages through strong imagery and concise slogans such as "Violence is not a private matter". Traditional media provided extensive coverage. National broadcasters aired live reports from protests, survivors and experts appeared frequently on talk shows, significantly broadening the movement's reach. This synergy between digital and traditional media helped transform a spontaneous civic response into a structured political debate. The initiative countered misinformation by publishing verified statistics, expert commentary and legal resources. Close cooperation with journalists specialising in social justice reporting ensured accuracy and visibility. Its communication style, which was transparent, emotional and focused on personal narratives built empathy, reduced polarisation and made gender-based violence a central public issue.

Lessons learned and challenges

The rapid visibility and public support achieved by #SpasiMe also exposed complexities inherent in sustaining grassroots movements. One key lesson was the instability of media attention: after the peak of public mobilisation, maintaining engagement and ensuring policy follow-up proved increasingly challenging. Balancing public visibility with personal safety represented another difficulty. Survivors who spoke publicly were exposed to harassment and online threats. The initiative developed protective measures,

including anonymous reporting channels and collaboration with NGOs experienced in crisis counselling. Coordination between celebrity activists and professional NGOs occasionally created tensions regarding leadership and strategic direction. Nevertheless, this diversity ultimately strengthened the movement by combining emotional appeal with expert credibility. The movement learned that advocacy must extend beyond protest. This realisation led to the establishment of the #SpasiMe Fund, administered by Solidarna Foundation in 2019 (later renamed Fond za žene / Fund for Women), which institutionalised long-term support for victims and professional training.

Threats and attacks

#SpasiMe faced significant backlash from conservative and far-right actors opposing the Istanbul Convention and gender-equality reforms. Politicians and commentators portrayed the movement as a “feminist lobby” or “foreign-funded project,” echoing wider anti-NGO rhetoric in the region. Individual organisers, particularly women in leadership roles, were targeted through online hate campaigns, sexist insults and disinformation. False allegations circulated on social media, including claims that organisers misused donations or aimed to “undermine traditional family values”. The initiative responded through transparency and solidarity, publicly reporting all donations and expenditures and emphasising its non-partisan, humanitarian mission. Support from journalists, public figures and institutional allies (such as the Ombudsperson for Gender Equality) reinforced its legitimacy. Legal support from partner NGOs and digital-security training helped protect organisers. The ability to mobilise empathy and public solidarity, while maintaining a focus on victims rather than ideological confrontation, was crucial in countering attacks and sustaining the movement’s credibility.

Financing

#SpasiMe initially relied almost entirely on volunteer work and private donations, including funds raised through crowdfunding platforms and charity events. Early activities were largely self-financed, and NGOs contributed logistical support and expertise. Following the success of the protests, the #SpasiMe Fund was established within the Solidarna Foundation in 2019. The fund began receiving modest institutional support from the City of Zagreb, UN Women and the Croatian Office for Gender Equality, while continuing to attract numerous small individual donations. The funds supported awareness campaigns, the development of a helpline, emergency assistance and training sessions for police officers, social workers and community professionals. Financial transparency became a hallmark of the initiative and contributed to sustained donor confidence.

Sustainability: possibility for continuing the work

#SpasiMe has evolved from a one-time protest into a sustainable advocacy and support platform. Through the #SpasiMe Fund (later expanded and renamed Fund for Women – “Fond za žene”) the initiative continues to provide legal counselling, public education and professional training related to gender-based violence. Collaboration with ministries, municipal partners and EU-funded projects ensures financial and institutional continuity. The movement’s online community remains active, providing peer support and mobilising rapid responses to new cases of violence. By combining activism with service provision, #SpasiMe has become a permanent actor in Croatian civil society, promoting gender equality, survivor protection and institutional accountability while retaining its grassroots origins and emotional authenticity.

NE DAMO NAŠE AUTOCESTE (“WE WON’T GIVE AWAY OUR MOTORWAYS”)

What is the good practice about?

The initiative Ne damo naše autoceste (“We Won’t Give Away Our Motorways”) was one of the largest civic and trade-union mobilisations in Croatia in the post-independence period. Launched in 2013–2014, it emerged in response to the government’s plan to grant a 40-year concession for the state-owned motorway companies Hrvatske autoceste (HAC) and Autocesta Rijeka–Zagreb (ARZ) to private investors. The concession was presented as a measure to reduce public debt by monetising motorway revenues. However, critics argued that the plan threatened long-term economic sovereignty, risked increasing tolls, and would reduce transparency and public control over strategic national infrastructure.

The initiative sought to:

1. protect public goods from privatisation,
2. secure democratic participation in major economic decisions,
3. promote financial transparency and evidence-based policymaking, and
4. demonstrate that citizens can influence public policy using constitutional mechanisms such as referendums.

The campaign mobilised more than 60 organisations and thousands of volunteers. Within two weeks, the coalition collected 531.000 signatures demanding a national referendum on the concession - one of the highest signature counts in Croatian history. Although the referendum was never formally called, the campaign succeeded in pressuring the government to withdraw the concession proposal, making it one of the most significant victories for Croatian civil society since the 1990s.

Who is implementing the good practice?

The initiative was coordinated by a broad coalition of trade unions and civil-society organisations, including the Federation of Autonomous Trade Unions of Croatia (SSSH), Matica hrvatskih sindikata, Novi sindikat, the Autocesta Workers’ Union, and the civic group Franak, supported by NGOs such as Zelena akcija, Gong, and Mreža mladih Hrvatske. This diverse alliance represented workers, public-sector employees, activists, environmental groups, youth organisations and concerned citizens. A joint organising committee consisting of union leaders and civil-society representatives provided strategic coordination. The coalition was characterised by inclusive leadership and shared responsibility across sectors, combining the organisational infrastructure of trade unions with the advocacy expertise of NGOs. This structure enabled effective mobilisation on a national scale and strengthened the legitimacy of the initiative as a broad public-interest campaign.

How it works?

The campaign operated as a national referendum initiative, using constitutional mechanisms that allow citizens to challenge major government decisions through direct democracy. Activities were coordinated through a central campaign office managed by trade unions, supported by hundreds of local volunteer committees across the country.

Key activity streams included:

- Signature collection: Over 2.000 public stands were set up nationwide, staffed by thousands of volunteers who collected signatures in cities, towns and rural areas over a two-week period.
- Public communication campaign: Press conferences, interviews, social-media outreach



Volunteers collecting signatures for referendum.

and public discussions explained the projected financial risks of the concession, translating complex economic analyses into accessible messages.

- Legal and analytical work: Experts from unions, universities and public-finance organisations prepared detailed assessments demonstrating that the motorway system was financially sustainable without privatisation.
- Public mobilisation and events: Rallies, symbolic actions (such as forming human chains at toll stations), and public briefings helped build broad awareness and unity.
- Institutional engagement: The organising committee submitted formal petitions, expert opinions and legal analyses to the Croatian Parliament and the Constitutional Court.

The organisational model relied on extensive volunteer involvement, horizontal coordination and strong logistical support from union branches across the country.

Achievements / successful and creative elements

The initiative's most important achievement was the withdrawal of the motorway concession

plan following the submission of more than half a million signatures. This demonstrated that civic mobilisation, when combined with strong trade-union support, could halt a major government policy initiative. The campaign creatively used the constitutional right to a referendum not only as a procedural tool, but also as a form of political education and democratic empowerment. It showed that direct democracy can function effectively even in a context characterised by public distrust in political institutions. A notable creative component was the coalition-building strategy, which bridged the traditional divide between trade unions and NGOs. The initiative brought together blue-collar workers, academics, environmentalists, pensioners, young activists and public-sector employees, demonstrating that cross-sector cooperation can overcome ideological boundaries. The campaign also employed innovative communication techniques, relying on simple slogans, a strong visual identity and emotionally resonant messages ("Our roads are not for sale!"). This accessible communication style helped mobilise citizens regardless of age, education level or political affiliation.

Access to communication and influencing public sphere

The initiative maintained a highly visible presence in the public sphere through a combination of traditional and digital communication channels. Frequent press conferences, daily updates and interviews with union and NGO leaders ensured regular coverage in newspapers, on television and on radio. Major national media outlets such framed the debate as a legitimate public-interest issue rather than a partisan confrontation. On social media, the campaign used Facebook and Twitter to mobilise volunteers, share infographics explaining the risks of the concession model and coordinate signature-collection locations. These platforms helped create an engaged online community and facilitated rapid responses to political developments. The coalition also produced educational materials, short explanatory videos and posters, and organised public discussions in universities, markets and town halls. This approach translated complex economic and legal issues into understandable messages for the general public. As public support grew, political parties and local officials began expressing alignment with the initiative, expanding its reach further. The movement successfully re-framed the privatisation debate as a matter of national sovereignty, public accountability and long-term economic stability.

Lessons learned and challenges

The initiative provided important lessons on coalition management, public mobilisation and the use of institutional tools in advocacy. One key insight was that cross-sector alliances can achieve substantial impact but require ongoing coordination, clear communication and shared decision-making. Differences in organisational cultures, particularly between trade unions and NGOs, occasionally led to tensions over strategic priorities and communication styles, but the shared objective held the coalition together. Another challenge was navigating the complexity of referendum procedures. The legal requirements for verifying signatures and submitting petitions demanded meticulous preparation and exposed structural weaknesses in Croatia's direct-democracy framework. The Constitutional Court's reluctance to call the referendum further demonstrated institutional barriers to citizen-led initiatives. Sustaining volunteer motivation after the campaign peak proved difficult, and the movement naturally dissolved after achieving its immediate goal. Nonetheless, it left behind important organisational and strategic legacies for later civic initiatives.



Press conference after successful gathering of signatures which pressured the government to abandon their plans of privatisation.

Threats and attacks

The initiative faced political and media criticism from government officials and business interests advocating for privatisation. Some politicians accused organisers of “populism”, “economic illiteracy” or “threatening fiscal stability”. Pro-privatisation commentators framed the initiative as “anti-European” or “anti-investment”. Local authorities in some municipalities attempted to obstruct signature collection by denying permits for stands or subjecting volunteers to administrative inspections. Nevertheless, the campaign remained peaceful, law-abiding and firmly rooted in public-interest arguments. Support from journalists, academics and opposition MPs helped counter hostile narratives. The breadth of public support made it politically costly to undermine the initiative. Transparent communication and consistent emphasis on the protection of public goods shielded the campaign from accusations of partisanship or ideological bias.

Financing

The initiative was financed primarily through membership contributions from trade unions, small individual donations and in-kind support from civil-society organisations. Trade unions provided essential infrastructure, including printing, transportation, office space and volunteer coordination, while NGOs contributed communication expertise and outreach capacity. The campaign accepted no corporate or political-party funding, which ensured its independence and credibility. All financial information was made publicly available, reinforcing transparency and strengthening public trust. The campaign’s reliance on volunteerism and existing union infrastructure allowed it to remain relatively low-cost while achieving nationwide reach.

Sustainability: possibility for continuing the work

After achieving its objective, the coalition maintained informal cooperation through broader civic and labour networks, but the movement itself dissolved once the concession plan was abandoned. Nevertheless, the experience generated long-lasting organisational and political capital. It inspired several later advocacy efforts, most notably the “67 je previše” (“67 Is Too Much”) referendum initiative against raising the retirement age, as well as campaigns related to public finance, labour rights and democratic participation. The motorway campaign thus served as a model of successful civic mobilisation and demonstrated the potential of constitutional tools for protecting public goods and influencing national policy.



“Citizens were right” poster held by volunteers after successful campaign.

ZA HRVATSKU SLOBODE (“FOR CROATIA OF FREEDOMS”) – CIVIC INITIATIVE FOR THE PROTECTION OF ARTISTIC AND MEDIA FREEDOM

What is the good practice about?

The initiative Za Hrvatsku slobode (“For Croatia of Freedoms”) is a newly formed civic and cultural platform established in 2025 as a response to increasing threats to freedom of expression, artistic autonomy and media independence in Croatia. It emerged after several cases of political interference in cultural institutions, attempts to censor artistic works, and growing pressure on independent journalists. The initiative brings together artists, journalists, writers, academics and civil society organisations in a joint effort to defend fundamental democratic freedoms guaranteed by the Croatian Constitution. Its core aims are to:

1. safeguard the autonomy of artistic and journalistic expression from political or ideological influence,
2. protect public cultural institutions from partisanship,
3. promote freedom of creativity and critical thought as essential elements of a democratic society,
4. mobilise public support for constitutional guarantees of free expression.

Although still in its early stages, Za Hrvatsku slobode has quickly become a visible civic response to deteriorating conditions in the cultural and media sectors and a rallying point for actors committed to defending democratic standards.

Who is implementing the good practice?

The initiative was launched by a coalition of independent organisations, activists, cultural associations and media actors, including Gong, the Croatian Journalists’ Association (HND), and a wide range of artistic CSOs and informal creative collectives. It also involves numerous

independent artists, editors, curators, professors and journalists who joined as individual signatories. Coordination is carried out by a volunteer committee representing cultural, academic and media sectors. This informal leadership model reflects the initiative’s broad civic character and its aim to remain independent from political, economic or institutional influence. The coalition’s legitimacy rests on a wide base of professional actors who share concerns regarding censorship, institutional pressure and shrinking space for cultural and media freedoms.

How it works?

The initiative operates through an informal, horizontally organised structure based on collective decision-making, public mobilisation and advocacy. It combines artistic expression with civic action, relying heavily on volunteers from the cultural and media sectors. The first meetings emerged spontaneously in August



Reading of the Constitution at St. Mark’s Square.

and early September 2025, gathering actors who had experienced or witnessed political pressure in their fields. The initiative officially began with the publication of the open letter *Ustav vrijedi za sve* (“The Constitution Applies to Everyone”), which became the founding document of the movement. The letter was endorsed by thousands of individuals and hundreds of organisations, demanding government guarantees for freedom of expression and institutional independence in culture and media.

Key modes of action include:

- collective drafting of public statements and appeals,
- open forums and sectoral meetings,
- artistic interventions and symbolic actions,
- public communication and media outreach,
- cooperation with legal experts to assess constitutional implications of political interference.

Although still developing its activities, the initiative has already established itself as a prominent watchdog actor defending democratic norms in culture and media.

Threats and attacks

From its inception, *Za Hrvatsku slobode* has faced political and media hostility from conservative commentators and certain government representatives. Critics accused the initiative of “politicising culture”, “orchestrating opposition mobilisation”, or acting as a “foreign-funded advocacy network”. These narratives mirror broader strategies used to delegitimise independent civil society actors in Croatia. Individual signatories (particularly women journalists, artists and professors) were subjected to online harassment, smear campaigns and misogynistic attacks. Disinformation circulated on social media and partisan portals, questioning the movement’s motives, alleging hidden political agendas, or spreading false claims about its funding sources. Despite these pressures, the initiative responded through coordinated

public communication, solidarity among members and a strong emphasis on constitutional principles. The broad professional support it received helped shield it from accusations of partisanship.

Financing

Za Hrvatsku slobode is currently a volunteer-driven initiative without a dedicated budget. Activities rely on in-kind contributions from participating organisations and individuals, including the use of office space, communication tools, technical support and professional expertise. The absence of external funding ensures independence but limits the scope of operational capacities in this early phase. Further development is expected to depend on small-scale grants, crowdfunding and continued voluntary engagement. At present, the initiative functions as a self-organised civic response rooted in professional solidarity and shared democratic values.



Banner saying “This is a place of freedom” in one of Zagreb’s theatres (it was also spread out in many other cultural institutions).



Antifascist march in Zagreb as a response to growing violent outbursts by nationalist and fascist groups such as football hooligans.

Country cases: Slovenia

List of 10 good practices of civic space resilience in Slovenia:

NAME

Pravna mreža za varstvo demokracije ("Legal Network for the Protection of Democracy")

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Rule of law, protection of rights, legal defence	Direct	National	Coalition of legal experts and CSOs	2021 - ongoing	Ongoing

NAME

Ne gremo z Metelkove! ("We are not Leaving Metelkova!")

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Threat to eviction of CSOs from Metelkova 6	Direct	Local	CSOs at Metelkova 6 and supporting organizations	2020 - 2022	Completed

NAME

Gremo volit! ("Let's Go Vote!")

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Electoral participation, political accountability and civic engagement	Indirect	National	Informal coalition Glas ljudstva ("Voice of the People"), Institute 8th March and other CSOs	2021 - 2022	Completed

NAME

ZAobSTAnek ("For the STA to Stay")

*STA = Slovenian Press Agency

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Media freedom and independence	Direct	National	Slovenian Journalists' Association and the Slovenian Union of Journalists	2021	Completed

NAME

My Voice, My Choice

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Reproductive rights	Indirect	EU level	Institute 8th March	2024 - ongoing	Ongoing

NAME

Referendum za vodo ("Water Protection Referendum")

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Environmental protection, public goods, democratic participation	Direct	National	Environmental CSO networks and Institute 8th March	2021	Completed

NAME

RTV je ZAKon - Referendum campaign for the depoliticisation and protection of the public broadcaster

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Media independence, public broadcasting governance	Direct	National	Peace Institute, Slovenian Journalists' Association, Legal Centre for the Protection of Human Rights and the Environment (PIC) and Open - Institute for Diversity Culture	2022	Completed

NAME

Petkovi protesti ("Friday protests")

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Civic activism, protest rights	Direct	National	Informal protest groups, artists, CSOs	2020 - 2022	Completed

NAME

Naj Anhovo zadiha! ("Let Anhovo Breathe!")

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Environmental protection, public health, pollution prevention	Direct	Local	Eko Anhovo in dolina Soče and Institute 8th March	2023 (campaign itself)	Ongoing (as part of broader environmental and legislative advocacy)

NAME

Ljudska iniciativa Velenje ("People's Initiative Velenje")

AREA	THREAT	SCOPE	MAIN ORGANISER	PERIOD	STATUS
Social justice, energy costs, local governance accountability	Direct	Local	Ljudska iniciativa Velenje (grassroot civic group)	2023 - ongoing	Ongoing

PРАВНА МРЕЖА ЗА VARSTVO DEMOKRACIJE (“LEGAL NETWORK FOR THE PROTECTION OF DEMOCRACY”)

What is the good practice about?

Pravna mreža za varstvo demokracije (“Legal Network for the Protection of Democracy”) is a national legal-support network that emerged in early 2021 in response to the deterioration of democratic standards and the rule of law in Slovenia, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, when restrictive and often constitutionally contested measures were used by the then right-wing government to limit protest, penalise dissent and exert pressure on media and civil society. The network provides strategic legal assistance to individuals and organisations who, because of non-violent public engagement, find themselves subject to misdemeanour, civil or criminal proceedings, or other state measures that appear unlawful, unconstitutional or retaliatory. It combines case-based legal defence, systemic legal interventions and public legal argumentation to protect democratic institutions, freedoms of expression and assembly, and the integrity of public systems. The good practice lies in transforming dispersed legal expertise into a coordinated infrastructure for defending civic space. Rather than focusing only on individual cases, Pravna mreža za varstvo demokracije frames them as symptoms of broader democratic erosion. Through litigation, legal opinions, public statements and targeted advocacy, it seeks to reduce the power imbalance between state authorities and citizens, challenge the misuse of law as an instrument of intimidation, and strengthen the culture of constitutionalism in Slovenia.

Who is implementing the good practice?

Pravna mreža za varstvo demokracije operates as an informal consortium of established civil-society organisations and a wider circle of lawyers and law firms who provide professional support. The initiative was first conceptually sparked by IT expert and entrepreneur, who

encouraged the founding team to use legal tools as a means of responding to deteriorating democratic conditions. Its core organisations are the Legal-Informational Centre for NGOs (PIC), Amnesty International Slovenije, Danes je nov dan – Inštitut za druga vprašanja, and Zavod za kulturo raznolikosti Open. These partners began collaborating in January 2021 with the explicit aim of addressing the growing gap between the legal and financial resources of the state and those available to individuals and groups facing excessive sanctions or rights-restricting measures. Together, they coordinate a network of legal experts who provide advice, prepare legal remedies and participate in public debates, while maintaining pro-democratic and non-partisan profile.

How it works?

The network operates through several interlinked pillars. First, it assists with misdemeanour procedures, criminal charges and civil lawsuits, including the preparation of objections, requests for judicial protection and extraordinary legal remedies. In the pandemic period, its activities centred on providing free legal support to individuals and organisations sanctioned for non-violent public action, especially those involved in protest-related cases. Second, the initiative systematically produces legal opinions on measures that restrict fundamental rights. In its early opinions it analysed the legality of fines imposed under pandemic regulations: for example the constitutionality of bans on gathering. These opinions drew on and disseminated key findings of the Constitutional Court regarding the unconstitutionality of the legal basis in the Infectious Diseases Act. Third, it engages in legislative and policy advocacy. It co-drafted proposals to amend the Infectious Diseases Act in line with constitutional standards and has since intervened in debates on

other laws with significant human-rights implications, such as more recent Act on urgent measures to ensure public security in 2025 (so called “Šutarjev zakon”), where it warned of excessive expansion of police powers and risks of mass surveillance. The network also contributed expert groundwork for the 2022 amendment of the RTV Slovenija Act, arguing that the reform was necessary to restore institutional autonomy and editorial independence of the public broadcaster, and published detailed clarifications responding to claims that the law was unconstitutional. Fourth, the initiative invests in legal education and empowerment. Together with Open and Amnesty International, it organises “pravne sprehajalnice” (“legal walkthroughs”): guided workshops that introduce legal institutions, human rights and the functioning of the justice system in different regions to secondary school students. The network also produces explanatory materials on referendums, electoral rights and institutional procedures, making complex legal frameworks understandable to general public.

Achievements / successful and creative elements

The network has become one of Slovenia’s key legal-advocacy actors in the field of civic space and democratic governance. Its work contributed to the successful contestation of numerous fines issued on the basis of unconstitutional or unlawfully extended COVID-19 regulations, enabling affected individuals to seek redress and signalling that rights-restricting measures cannot be used without a solid legal foundation. A notable achievement is its role in drafting and publicly defending key legislative changes, particularly the amendment of the RTV Slovenija Act. The network, together with media experts, prepared conceptual bases for the reform and articulated constitutional arguments in favour of depoliticising governance structures of the public broadcaster. Its interventions in referendum debates further demonstrated how expert legal reasoning can be translated into accessible, citizen-oriented explanations. The network’s creativity lies not in spectacular

public actions but in its ability to employ law, as a form of civic and non-profit engagement, as a tool of democratic defence. It couples traditional legal instruments with innovative formats such as “legal walkthroughs”, visually and linguistically accessible explainer articles, and public letter. In doing so, it bridges the gap between specialised legal discourse and everyday democratic participation. In recognition of its role in safeguarding democratic norms during a period of heightened institutional pressure, Pravna mreža za varstvo demokracije received the European Parliament’s Citizen of Europe Award for 2022. The award was granted for its work supporting individuals and organisations in challenging unlawful, unconstitutional or undemocratic measures, and for strengthening the rule of law through legal opinions, public interventions and strategic advocacy. This European-level acknowledgement not only enhanced the network’s public visibility but also affirmed its position as one of Slovenia’s most influential civil-society actors in the field of democracy and human rights.

Access to communication and influencing the public sphere

The network has maintained a strong presence in Slovenia’s public sphere. Its website functions as an open archive of legal opinions, statements and calls, which media and other actors routinely use as reference points when covering contentious policies or court decisions. By consistently framing issues in terms of constitutional principles, human rights and the rule of law, the network has helped shape the vocabulary through which democratic standards are discussed in Slovenia. It positions legal analysis not as a technical domain reserved for specialists, but as a shared resource for citizens defending their rights. In addition to its formal publications, the network communicates actively through social media, where it reaches a broad audience and significantly contributes to public understanding of rights, institutional procedures and democratic standards; its Facebook page, for example, has more than 8.000 followers. Media outlets

regularly and accurately report on its analyses and statements, and representatives of the network are frequently invited to participate in prime-time debates and expert discussions. These communication practices enhance both the visibility and the educational impact of the network's work.

Lessons learned and challenges

The evolution of Pravna mreža za varstvo demokracije illustrates how crucial it is to have an organised legal infrastructure ready to respond when governments use law in ways that restrict civic space. The experience shows that systematic documentation of cases, combined with high-quality legal analysis, can both protect individuals and trigger broader institutional change. The network's trajectory also underlines the value of cooperation between legal experts and advocacy-oriented NGOs: each brings complementary capacities that would be difficult to mobilise in isolation. At the same time, the initiative operates under conditions that pose significant challenges. The volume of requests for assistance stretches limited human resources and risks overburdening staff and cooperating lawyers. Additionally, translating complex legal questions into accessible public communication is time-intensive, yet necessary to counter disinformation and simplistic narratives.

Threats and attacks

Given its visible role in contesting rights-restricting measures and supporting critical civil society, the network has been subjected to attempts at delegitimisation, particularly from right-wing political parties and its affiliated media outlets. A recent example from the right-wing media outlet portrays the network and its member organisations as closely aligned with the "transition left" and questions the legitimacy of their appeals for donations on the grounds that they receive public funds. Such narratives echo broader pattern in which watchdog organisations and human-rights NGOs are labelled

partisan or "foreign-influenced" in order to undermine their authority. These discursive attacks form part of a hostile information environment in which legal defence of protest rights, media freedoms or vulnerable groups can be framed as ideological activism. The network responds by maintaining transparency about its mission, activities and funding, and by anchoring its interventions in constitutional provisions rather than party-political alignments.

Financing

Pravna mreža za varstvo demokracije began largely as a volunteer-driven initiative, relying on the project resources of its member organisations, pro bono work by lawyers and small-scale donations from supporters. Over time, it has secured more stable support through public funding programmes aimed at strengthening and professionalising civil-society organisations. A current consortium project, co-financed by the Ministry of Public Administration via the NGO Fund, provides support to develop a more systematic and sustainable model of legal protection for democracy. Despite this progress, much of the network's work still depends on unpaid or underpaid labour by committed professionals, and on contributions from ongoing projects within the partner organisations. The continued solicitation of donations, criticised in hostile media, reflects not duplicity but the structural reality that public grants rarely cover the full costs of strategic litigation, comprehensive legal counselling and long-term advocacy.

Sustainability: possibility for continuing the work

The sustainability of the network is grounded on its ability to institutionalise what began as a crisis response into a durable element of Slovenia's civic infrastructure. The multi-year support from NGO fund and the expansion of programmes such as "legal walkthrough" indicate a move toward more professional and geographically dispersed operations. At the same time, the network maintains a flexible, initiative-based structure that allows it to respond quickly to new threats, whether in the form of restrictive draft legislation, problematic court decisions or emerging pressures on protesters. A broader lesson emerging from this practice is that attacks on civil society, protest rights and media freedom often rely on similar legal and procedural mechanisms, regardless of the specific sector targeted. Because of this, the cross-sectoral composition of Pravna mreža za varstvo demokracije (bringing together organisations from the human-rights, media, digital-rights and equality fields) enables actors to share strategies, mutually learn from different types of cases and rapidly adapt tested legal arguments to new contexts. This shared knowledge base enhances not only the resilience of individual organisations, but also the collective capacity of civil society to respond to recurring patterns of democratic backsliding. In this sense, Pravna mreža za varstvo demokracije represents more than a set of legal services: it is an evolving infrastructure of democratic defence that strengthens the rule of law by making it practically accessible to those who most need it.

NE GREMO Z METELKOVE! (“WE ARE NOT LEAVING METELKOVA!”)

What is the good practice about?

The initiative “Ne gremo z Metelkove!” emerged in October 2020 as a collective act of civic resilience in defence of the autonomy and institutional stability of independent cultural, human-rights and research organisations in Slovenia. It was triggered when the Ministry of Culture, during the COVID-19 pandemic and under a right-wing government openly hostile towards CSOs, abruptly announced the termination of leases for eighteen organisations at Metelkova 6 street. What began as an eviction attempt quickly evolved into a wider political and symbolic struggle over the place of independent culture and civil society in a democratic public sphere. Metelkova 6 is not merely an office building: it is the only state-owned property explicitly designated for independent cultural and CSOs, and it holds deep historical significance as part of the former military barracks whose conversion in the 1990s marked the transition from militarisation to civic autonomy. The organisations housed there have, for decades, produced critical research, artistic creation, public debate, human-rights advocacy and international cultural cooperation. The eviction attempt therefore threatened not only their physical infrastructure but also the continuity of Slovenia’s independent cultural and civic ecosystem. The initiative sought to expose these risks, contest the legality and legitimacy of the eviction, and defend the public interest inherent in maintaining cultural and civil-society infrastructures.

Who is implementing the good practice?

The response was jointly organised by the organisations operating at Metelkova 6: eighteen independent artistic, cultural, human-rights, feminist, media and research organisations with long-standing national and international profiles. These organisations coordinated their efforts collectively, commissioning legal

analysis, preparing documentation and jointly organising public communication. They also ordered a structural-safety assessment of the building to pre-empt potential government claims that the premises were unsafe, which could have been used as justification for eviction. Within this collaborative framework, the Peace Institute (Mirovni inštitut) facilitated certain organisational tasks, such as maintaining the online platform where statements, legal opinions and updates were published, but no single organisation “led” the campaign. The coalition acted as a cohesive front, pooling expertise from legal, artistic, advocacy and communication fields. The initiative was embedded in a broad network of solidarity: support came from Slovenian universities, professional associations, cultural and academic institutions, and numerous international networks. Artists, intellectuals and citizens mobilised around the initiative, amplifying its visibility and political impact.

How it works?

The initiative unfolded through an integrated strategy combining legal argumentation, public communication, historical contextualisation and international advocacy. Immediately after receiving the eviction notices, organisations sought clarification and pointed out that the Ministry’s decision contradicted both the legal obligations stipulated in the lease agreements and the government’s 1994 decision dedicating Metelkova 6 to the so-called “Network for Metelkova.” These documents required, among other things, that the Ministry publish a new public call for tenants and provide the existing organisations with alternative premises under comparable conditions. None of these obligations were respected in the Ministry’s decision. Organisations at Metelkova 6 hold the legal status of NGOs operating in the public interest. Under Slovenian legislation, such organisations

are entitled to access publicly owned premises when available, meaning that the offices at Metelkova were provided under minimal-cost arrangements as part of the state's support for public-interest work. The Ministry's attempt to terminate the leases therefore represented not only a breach of procedural obligations but also an attack on a long-established mechanism of structural support for public-interest civil society. When dialogue with the Ministry proved impossible, the organisations produced detailed legal analyses, prepared formal complaints, issued public statements and coordinated a petition. At the same time, they created an online repository of all correspondence, legal documents and background materials, ensuring full transparency and enabling domestic and international actors to follow developments in real time. Public communication remained consistent and fact-based, situating the eviction attempt within a broader context of political pressure on independent culture and civil society. The issue also entered parliamentary debate. The opposition requested an urgent session of the Parliamentary Committee on Culture, where each organisation presented its work, achievements and arguments against the eviction. The session was broadcast live on the public broadcaster's parliamentary channel and covered extensively by the media, further raising public awareness of the political nature of the government's actions. The organisations activated their international networks, triggering a wave of solidarity letters addressed to Slovenian authorities and EU institutions.

Through these actions, the initiative demonstrated an effective model of collective civic defence rooted in legal literacy, transparency and multi-level mobilisation.

Achievements / successful and creative elements

The initiative ultimately succeeded in preventing the forced eviction and keeping all organisations at Metelkova 6. Before this outcome became possible, the eviction procedures initiated

by the Ministry of Culture went through several judicial phases, including both favourable and unfavourable decisions for the organisations. These cases proceeded through appeals and prolonged legal uncertainty, illustrating that the question of eviction was not resolved through the courts alone. The situation remained open and contested until political conditions changed. A decisive turning point occurred in 2022, when a change of government brought a centreleft coalition to power and a new Minister of Culture from the Left party assumed office. This political shift opened space for substantive dialogue. The Metelkova 6 organisations entered into negotiations with the new ministry and ultimately secured renewed lease agreements for a further five years, seen as an achievement that confirmed the legitimacy of their claims. The campaign transformed into a national debate about cultural autonomy, the democratic value of independent CSOs, and the public interest served by maintaining cultural infrastructure like Metelkova 6. A key factor in the campaign's success was the unified response of all affected organisations, which collectively articulated the historical significance of the Metelkova 6 complex and highlighted the long-term contributions these organisations make to Slovenian public life. By presenting not only legal arguments but also their achievements, awards, international collaborations and societal impact, the organisations succeeded in reframing the eviction attempt as an attack on a nationally important cultural and civic ecosystem. The slogan "Ne gremo z Metelkove!" ("We are not leaving Metelkova!") quickly became a symbol adopted by journalists, commentators and supporters across sectors. International solidarity further amplified the message, with prominent European intellectuals, cultural institutions and human-rights organisations endorsing the initiative and framing the case as a key test of democratic resilience in Slovenia. Its achievements extend well beyond the protection of physical space: the initiative reinforced a model of collective civic action and contributed to the resilience of Slovenia's independent cultural and civil-society fields.

Access to communication and influencing the public sphere

Despite operating during the restrictive conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, the initiative achieved remarkable communication reach. The organisations relied on long-standing media relationships to disseminate verified analyses and commentary through major national outlets. The transparency of the initiative (systematically publishing all explanatory materials and media articles) played a decisive role in countering misinformation and building public trust. The ability to frame the attempted eviction as not merely a sectoral dispute but a threat to democratic freedoms and public cultural infrastructure enabled the campaign to secure support beyond the cultural field, including academics, human-rights advocates and international observers. International reporting in media such as Artforum, Deutsche Welle and Süddeutsche Zeitung further legitimised the initiative and increased pressure on the government.

Lessons learned and challenges

The experience highlighted several key lessons relevant to civic space resilience. First, rapid mobilisation was possible because the organisations at Metelkova 6 had long maintained

formal and informal networks, both domestically and internationally. Second, the initiative underscored the crucial role of legal knowledge in defending civic space: accurate documentation, clear procedural arguments and transparency proved essential in challenging state decisions. Third, mobilising during a pandemic required innovative strategies for online engagement, as physical gatherings were restricted. Equally important was the internal synergy among the 18 organisations, which brought together diverse fields (culture, human rights and feminist advocacy, media and research) and pooled their distinct expertise, public reputations, knowledge and international contacts. This collective strength significantly enhanced the credibility, reach and strategic coherence of the response. Thus, the case demonstrated that sustained collective action, backed by legal expertise and international solidarity, can effectively counteract attempts to shrink civic space.

Threats and attacks

The campaign took place in an environment marked by escalating hostility toward civil society. High-ranking government officials and pro-government media outlets repeatedly portrayed NGOs as “parasitic”, illegitimate,



Metelkova 6 building in Ljubljana.

foreign-funded, or ideologically driven actors, deploying narratives designed to delegitimise their public-interest work. Organisations and their staff members were subjected to on-line harassment and smear campaigns. The Ministry of Culture declined to engage in substantive dialogue and publicly misrepresented the legal basis for the eviction. Metelkova 6 was also instrumentalised in political propaganda, becoming a recurring target in pre-election polarisation. The ruling party at the time falsely portrayed the organisations in televised debates and disseminated mass postal leaflets (sent to more than 600.000 households) that misrepresented their work and motives. These tactics framed the initiative as part of a broader culture-war narrative aimed at mobilising voters against independent civil society. Importantly, this pattern of discursive attacks has not disappeared: Metelkova 6 continues to be periodically invoked in right-wing political rhetoric as a symbol through which to stigmatise NGOs and cultural actors, demonstrating that the attempts at delegitimation initiated during the eviction dispute persist in the public sphere.

Financing

The initiative operated without dedicated funding. All activities (including legal analysis, public communication, design of visual materials and coordination of advocacy) were carried out using the regular operating resources of participating organisations. The work depended on volunteer contributions, pro bono legal support and in-kind engagement by artists, designers and allied institutions. While the absence of targeted funding ensured complete independence, it also placed significant strain on organisations already coping with pandemic-related disruptions and political pressures. The financial burden was particularly visible in the judicial proceedings: the costs of litigation represented a significant expense for all organisations involved, and for smaller organisations they constituted a substantial strain on already limited budgets. Moreover, the threat of eviction carried the additional risk that organisations would be forced to seek new premises on

the commercial market - an expense that several of them could not have afforded, potentially resulting in the cessation of their activities.

Sustainability: possibility for continuing the work

Although the immediate goal of preventing eviction was achieved, the initiative stimulated broader debates about the transparent management of state-owned spaces, the vulnerability of cultural institutions to political interference and the necessity of institutional safeguards for independent culture and civil society. While the coalition does not operate as a formal structure, it remains informally active as a solidarity network capable of responding quickly to emerging risks. Importantly, the post-election dialogue with the new government resulted in renewed lease agreements that provide stronger legal security for all organisations at Metelkova 6. Although not a perfect or permanent safeguard, the new contractual framework offers significantly greater stability than the previous arrangements and enables the organisations to plan their long-term work as a community sharing a common space and engaging in joint activities.

GREMO VOLIT! (“LET’S GO VOTE!”)

What is the good practice about?

Gremo volit! (“Let’s Go Vote!”) was the central pre-election mobilisation campaign of Glas ljudstva (“Voice of the People”), an informal civil-society initiative that unites more than 100 organisations and thousands of individuals from across Slovenia. According to its publicly articulated mission, Glas ljudstva brings together actors from diverse sectors: democracy and human rights, environment, social policy, labour, housing, media and culture, public health, education, sustainable economy, infrastructure and global justice, with the shared aim of increasing political responsibility, strengthening democratic participation and ensuring that decisions affecting society reflect the needs and voices of people. The initiative was formed in response to two structural problems: declining voter turnout and the absence of substantive content in political debate, both of which weaken democracy and leave citizens excluded from meaningful decision-making. This dynamic became particularly evident during the 2020–2022 period, when Slovenia underwent a significant decline in democratic standards under a right-wing government, amplified by the restrictive and frequently contested measures introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, Glas ljudstva presented itself as an open, decentralised civic coalition dedicated to empowering citizens and restoring democratic accountability. The Gremo volit! campaign embodied these goals. It sought to bring democratic participation to the forefront of public debate, encourage substantive engagement with policy issues, and motivate voters, especially younger and previously disengaged groups, to participate in the 2022 parliamentary elections. Its methods combined civic education, cultural mobilisation, public deliberation, digital participation tools, and territorial outreach, under a unifying message that “democracy depends on people who actively participate”. Importantly, Gremo volit! functioned not as a single campaign,

but as a constellation of mutually reinforcing civil-society efforts operating under a shared mobilisation frame. Several organisations ran parallel initiatives that aligned with the overarching call to increase voter turnout. Among the most prominent was the Institute 8th March, which, although part of Glas ljudstva, simultaneously conducted an extensive independent field and online campaign. It also coordinated the collection of signatures for an omnibus law intended to repeal harmful and anti-democratic legislative changes adopted between 2020 and 2022 - an effort that succeeded after the elections. These parallel yet synergistic activities significantly amplified the reach and depth of the overall mobilisation.

Who is implementing the good practice?

The campaign in the part we are presenting here was implemented by the broad informal coalition of Glas ljudstva (“Voice of the People”). Its membership ranges from long-standing human-rights NGOs to environmental organisations, youth and student movements, digital-rights groups, cultural institutions, trade union actors, feminist organisations, and, importantly, informal civil groups engaged in the (cycling) protest movement during the 2020-2022 authoritarian government, grassroots local initiatives, but also several thousand citizens. According to the initiative’s own structure, participating organisations and individuals can engage in activities at any time, and internal decision-making proceeds through weekly open meetings and thematic working groups. Glas ljudstva emphasises that it is not a formal organisation and not a political party. It has no founder or single leader. Instead, it functions as a civic platform where distributed expertise (legal, environmental, digital, artistic, social, and community-based) comes together to support democratic engagement. This decentralised form of governance was crucial for Gremo volit!

and allowed many contributors to jointly shape proposals, facilitate events, and organise mobilisation efforts.

How it works?

1. Developing substantive content: 138 demands

A core element of Gremo volit! was the collective formulation of 138 civil-society demands across eleven policy areas deemed essential for Slovenia's future, including democracy, rule of law, public healthcare, education, labour rights, environment, media freedom, housing, green infrastructure and global justice. These demands were developed from the bottom up through working groups, public consultations, four people's assemblies, expert dialogues and inputs gathered at protests. The process began with 96 initial proposals in November 2021 and expanded to 138 after two months of open public deliberation. All political parties were asked to position themselves on the demands. The three parties that formed the post-election government, in 2022, collectively committed to meeting 122 of them, which Glas ljudstva continues to monitor throughout the mandate which ends in spring 2026.

2. "Volitvomat": digital voter-matching tool

The campaign introduced Volitvomat, a voter-match tool designed to help citizens make informed decisions. Unlike traditional party quizzes, Volitvomat was based directly on the 138 civil society demands and on parties' formal



Travelling Festival of Democracy.

responses. Citizens could agree or disagree with policy statements and see which party most closely aligned with their positions. Volitvomat was deployed not only for parliamentary elections but also adapted for presidential and local elections, held also in 2022, significantly contributing to political literacy and informed voting.

3. Potujoči festival demokracije ("Travelling Festival of Democracy")

This travelling festival visited towns and communities across Slovenia with the message "Mi bomo odločali: Gremo volit!" ("We will decide: Let's go vote!"). Through outdoor debates, street discussions, music, workshops, demonstrations of Volitvomat, and direct conversations with residents, the festival brought democratic engagement to places that are often excluded from national civic initiatives. The events served to encourage participation and informed involvement and to reduce political alienation.

4. Public confrontations with candidates (election debates in open outdoor public space)

Glas ljudstva organised large public pre-election confrontations (debates) in front of the parliament, where candidates for parliamentary and later presidential elections answered questions directly from citizens. The format, open-air and participatory, differed from traditional media debates and drew substantial in-person and online audiences.

5. Gremo volit! concert and rally

The mobilisation culminated in a major concert Gremo volit! on Trg republike, the Republic Square 'situated directly in front of the Slovenian Parliament, attended by well-known Slovenian musicians, distinguished cultural figures and representatives of numerous NGOs.

6 The symbolic weight of the location was particularly strong: Republic Square (res publica) evokes the classical notion of public affairs belonging to all citizens, underscoring democratic participation as a shared civic responsibility.

Staged immediately before the election silence and widely reported in the media, the event functioned as a symbolic collective call to participate in the elections and as a public affirmation of democratic empowerment.

6. Monitoring and continued engagement

After the elections, the focus shifted from mobilisation to monitoring the implementation of the 122 commitments made by governing parties. Glas ljudstva continues to participate in working groups, public consultations and advocacy campaigns, such as campaigns on public broadcasting, healthcare, and housing.

Achievements / successful and creative elements

The Gremo volit! campaign significantly contributed to a historic rise in voter turnout: from 52,64 % in 2018 to 70,97 % in 2022, the highest participation in over two decades. Through its creative approach, merging cultural activism, digital tools, democratic deliberation and territorial outreach, the campaign broadened participation beyond traditional activist circles and engaged diverse demographic groups.

Its success rested on several elements:

- Substantive content: the 138 demands offered voters a clear, policy-based anchor for electoral decision-making.
- Participatory processes: citizens and civil society organisations were actively involved in every stage of the campaign, from collecting and refining pre-election demands for policy change, to formulating questions for candidates during outdoor public debates. They also co-organised and contributed knowledge, logistical support and infrastructure for the “Travelling Festival of Democracy”, as well as for rallies, assemblies and the

culminating concert⁷. Through these participatory formats, the campaign embedded civic engagement directly into its design and implementation.

- Digital innovation: Volitvomat empowered users to evaluate parties through reliable issue-based comparison rather than populist rhetoric and propaganda.
- Territorial outreach: the travelling festival decentralised civic action and brought democracy into everyday social spaces.
- Public transparency: the election debates (confrontations of candidates/parties) in open outdoor public space created visible, collective democratic spaces not mediated by media or political marketing structures.
- Cultural mobilisation: concerts and art interventions made democracy more appealing and socially resonant.

Access to communication and influencing the public sphere

Glas ljudstva combined traditional and digital channels with notable effectiveness. Its communication strategy, which was transparent, participatory, accessible and evidence-based, translated complex political issues into understandable formats. Through social media, livestreams, videos, infographics and on-the-ground engagement, the campaign achieved substantial public reach. “Volitvomat” itself became a communication instrument, guiding substantive conversations about social, economic and environmental challenges. The campaign’s visibility, reinforced by hundreds of media appearances, contributed to the restoration of trust in civic participation and repositioned civil society as a legitimate democratic actor.

⁷ In addition to civic actors, a number of socially engaged entrepreneurs and small businesses provided substantial in-kind support, for example by lending technical equipment, offering printing services, supplying stage infrastructure, and contributing professional labour free of charge.

Lessons learned and challenges

The campaign highlighted the value of broad civic alliances, but also revealed the organisational strain of coordinating more than 100 organisations and thousands of individuals. A major lesson was that digital mobilisation must be complemented by in-person engagement, especially in communities distant from urban political centres. Challenges included sustaining momentum after the elections, preventing volunteer burnout, and maintaining neutrality while advocating for policy commitments.

Threats and attacks

Given the highly polarised political environment, the campaign faced delegitimisation attempts primarily from right-wing political parties and media outlets aligned with them. These actors portrayed the mobilisation as politically motivated or even foreign-influenced, particularly because Gremo volit! encouraged voter participation at a time when many citizens expressed dissatisfaction with the authoritarian tendencies of the 2020–2022 right-wing government. Visible organisers and public representatives involved in the campaign were frequently subjected to online harassment, including targeted attacks and defamatory commentary, largely originating from right-wing political representatives and partisan media ecosystems that have historically maintained a hostile stance toward civil-society organisations.

Financing

Glas ljudstva functions largely through voluntary engagement, with the core workload undertaken by the most active member organisations and their representatives. Only selected activities are financed through project resources secured by individual organisations participating in the informal network, while the majority of operational, organisational and mobilisation work is performed on a volunteer basis.

Sustainability: possibility for continuing the work

Gremo volit! was conceived as a pre-election mobilisation, but the networks, tools and working structures developed during the campaign now underpin Glas ljudstva's long-term activities. The coalition continues to monitor the implementation of 122 government commitments, participates in policy processes, and organises campaigns addressing democratic, social and environmental challenges. Building on the model established in 2022, Glas ljudstva has already begun preparations for the 2026 parliamentary elections. The initiative has issued a public call inviting citizens and civil-society organisations to submit proposals for new demands for the 2026 electoral cycle, signalling its intention to once again co-create a comprehensive, bottom-up policy agenda. This process aims to replicate the participatory methodology used for the 138 demands in 2022 and demonstrates the coalition's commitment to maintaining an open, evolving platform for democratic engagement.

Its sustainability rests on:

1. the continuous commitment and collaborative efforts of the organisations in the coordination core team⁸, whose sustained dedication keeps collective activities alive, strengthens participatory mechanisms, and maintains the civic-engagement infrastructure that underpins the legitimacy of elections and democratic processes. Their work also includes actively seeking opportunities for joint fundraising to support future activities within the coalition,
2. the reusability of tools such as Volitvomat and participatory working groups,
3. its credibility among citizens and media as an independent civic watchdog.

⁸ The operational coordination team has been meeting every Wednesday for nearly four years on a voluntary basis, complemented by strategic meetings of the broader circle of organisations and individual supporters.

ZAobSTAnek

(»For the Slovenian Press Agency to Stay«)

What is the good practice about?

ZAobSTAnek (“For the Slovenian Press Agency to Stay”) was a nationwide civil-society mobilisation created in 2021 to defend the independence and financial survival of the Slovenian Press Agency (STA), the country’s key public news service and a central pillar of Slovenia’s professional, reliable news ecosystem. The initiative emerged after the Slovenian government, through the Government Communication Office (UKOM), suspended the disbursement of budget funds for the STA’s legally mandated public service, creating a funding blockade that lasted for 312 days. The crisis unfolded against a background of increasing political pressure on media. As early as late 2020, government representatives publicly questioned the STA’s work and financial transparency, and Prime Minister Janez Janša labelled the agency a “national disgrace” on social media after it devoted less space to his meeting with the Hungarian Prime Minister than to an interview with a government critic. The suspension of funding threatened the STA with insolvency and was widely seen as a systemic attempt to weaken independent journalism and bring public-service news under political control. ZAobSTAnek framed the conflict not simply as a contractual or managerial dispute, but as an attack on media freedom, the right to information and democratic oversight. The initiative therefore aimed to secure the STA’s immediate survival, restore lawful and stable funding, and raise public awareness of the structural importance of independent news agencies in a democratic system.

Who is implementing the good practice?

The initiative was organised by a broad coalition of domestic civil-society actors, journalists’ organisations, media outlets and individual activists. The Slovenian Journalists’ Association as initiator, together with the Slovenian Journalists’ Union, played a central coordinating

role and formally launched the donation campaigns for the STA. Other supporters included diverse civil-society organisations, cultural and artistic collectives, academic institutions, various media-freedom networks, and a large number of media outlets, individual journalists, editors and engaged citizens. STA employees themselves were at the center of the mobilisation, for example they placed large banners with campaign messages and appeals for the protection of media freedom on the windows of the STA headquarters in the centre of Ljubljana, making the crisis visible to the wider public and reinforcing the urgency of defending independent journalism. Journalists and staff continued working for months under conditions of severe financial uncertainty, in some periods receiving only partial income, and became symbolic figures of professional integrity and resistance to political pressure. International actors reinforced the campaign’s legitimacy. The Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) coalition, the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF), the International Press Institute (IPI), the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) and Reporters Without Borders (RSF) repeatedly warned that the funding suspension violated European standards on media freedom and called for its immediate reversal. The European Commission and members of the European Parliament also voiced concern and urged Slovenia to ensure stable financing for the STA as a provider of public service.

How it works?

ZAobSTAnek developed as a multi-layered mobilisation combining financial solidarity, public campaigning, legal advocacy and international pressure. The initiative’s most visible component was a public fundraising campaign. On 3 May 2021, World Press Freedom Day, a month-long campaign “Za obSTAnek” was launched to raise money for the STA, which at that point had



In front of Slovenian Press Agency building.

already gone four months without public funding. The campaign encouraged donations via SMS and direct bank transfers. National daily newspapers simultaneously published messages supporting the STA and advertising the campaign. By mid-2021, the first wave of donations had raised more than 274.000 €, preventing immediate insolvency. As the crisis continued, The Slovenian Journalists' Association launched a second fundraising drive in late 2021, again collecting contributions from citizens and companies to bridge the funding gap created by the government. Through these campaigns, thousands of donors directly financed STA's public service - a role that, under normal rule-of-law conditions, should be stably and fully financed from the state budget as part of its public remit. In parallel, civil-society organisations and journalists' associations coordinated public communication and advocacy. They organised press conferences, issued open letters, and produced explanatory materials outlining the legal obligations of the state towards the STA and the problematic nature of UKOM's demands for editorial and commercial data. The initiative developed a recognisable visual identity ("ZAobSTAnek") and used social media, video appeals and newspaper ads to mobilise public support, turning the case into a symbol of resistance to political interference in the media. International advocacy formed a further pillar of the initiative. EU officials, including Commission Vice-President Věra Jourová and Justice Commissioner Didier Reynders, repeatedly called on Slovenia to ensure stable funding for the STA and criticised the reliance on donations as an "unsystemic"

solution. The Media Freedom Rapid Response mission visited Ljubljana and raised the case at EU level, while the European Parliament's 2021 Rule of Law resolution on Slovenia highlighted the STA crisis as emblematic of a broader "climate of hostility" toward the media. After months of pressure, a new contract between the STA and UKOM was finally signed in November 2021, restoring state funding for the last two months of the year and settling some of overdue payments. This agreement formally ended the immediate financial crisis, though questions remained about the long-term structure and adequacy of the funding model.

Achievements / successful and creative elements

The central achievement of ZAobSTAnek was that it prevented the collapse of the STA during a ten-month period without mandated state funding. Thanks to the donations from citizens, NGOs and companies, the agency was able to continue operations and pay at least partial salaries for its staff, even as reserves were depleted and uncertainty persisted. The prolonged financial insecurity also forced several journalists to leave the agency, as they could no longer sustain their livelihoods or postpone finding stable, regularly paid employment. The campaign's pressure also contributed to the eventual decision to restore funding. International actors explicitly linked the STA crisis to media freedom violations, and the combined weight of domestic solidarity and international scrutiny raised the political cost of maintaining the blockade. The case helped to clarify the legal and normative expectation that public-service media must enjoy stable, predictable funding and editorial autonomy, not be subjected to ad hoc political pressure through financial instruments. ZAobSTAnek was also innovative in the way it translated a complex legal-administrative dispute into a broader public narrative. Artistic collectives and cultural organisations supported performances and symbolic actions; front-page appeals in newspapers and online testimonies from STA journalists illustrated the consequences of "financial asphyxiation" on

everyday journalistic work. The combination of a strong visual identity, emotionally resonant storytelling and clear legal information enabled the campaign to reach beyond traditional media audiences. The crowdfunding effort itself was a powerful symbolic and practical innovation. For many citizens, donating to the STA was their first direct voluntary financial contribution to a public media institution (apart of legally obliged license fee to the public service broadcaster), expressing a sense of collective ownership over independent journalism.

Access to communication and influencing the public sphere

ZAobSTAnek exerted substantial influence on the public sphere by reshaping how the STA crisis was perceived and discussed. Traditional media reported extensively on the suspension of funding, the donation campaigns and the broader implications for media freedom. The fundraising launch itself was synchronised with front-page coverage by major daily newspapers, visually signalling that the STA's fate was a matter of national concern. Digital communication played an equally decisive role. The campaign used websites, social media, online petitions, short videos, and infographics to explain the situation and document developments. The hashtag #ZAobSTAnek became widely recognised, circulating appeals for donations, testimonies from journalists and calls to defend public media. Support for the campaign was also repeatedly expressed within the long-running cycling protests (so called "Friday protests"), which were held weekly for more than 100 consecutive Fridays, where protesters publicly endorsed public-service media under attack and encouraged financial contributions to ZAobSTAnek, including through SMS donations during the demonstrations. International coverage further expanded its reach. Major European outlets reported on the funding suspension and highlighted that the STA had become a test case for EU-level media freedom standards in a member state then holding the rotating Council presidency. The situation also drew the attention of the European

Commission's Vice-President, who later stated that the developments in Slovenia (particularly the STA crisis) helped catalyse the decision to initiate and draft the European Media Freedom Act, given the absence of EU-level mechanisms capable of protecting independent public media at the time. This external attention amplified domestic criticism and increased scrutiny of Slovenia's rule-of-law record.

Lessons learned and challenges

The initiative revealed several key lessons about defending public institutions facing political pressure. First, it highlighted the importance of rapid and coordinated response: the funding blockade escalated quickly, and the ability of journalists' associations, NGOs and activists to mobilise within weeks was crucial for preventing immediate collapse. Pre-existing networks among media workers, civil-society organisations and legal experts provided the foundation for such mobilisation. Second, the campaign exposed the limitations of volunteer-based advocacy in long, high-intensity conflicts. Keeping a news agency afloat and sustaining a large-scale public campaign for nearly a year placed severe strain on organisers, journalists and supporters. Exhaustion and resource constraints were ongoing challenges, especially in a context where the state deliberately prolonged the dispute by proposing legally questionable decrees and contracts. Third, ZAobSTAnek underlined the importance of legal clarity and robust regulatory frameworks. The conflict took advantage of ambiguities in the rules governing STA financing and the relationship between UKOM and the agency. The experience strengthened public awareness of the need for clearer, more depoliticised mechanisms for funding public-service media. Finally, the mobilisation demonstrated that democratic backsliding can be countered through broad, cross-sectoral alliances. Artists, academics, NGOs, journalists and ordinary citizens acted together, signalling that media freedom is not a "corporate" issue confined to the profession but a core democratic concern.

Threats and attacks

ZAobSTAnek unfolded in an environment of growing hostility towards journalists and civil society. Government officials and pro-government media repeatedly questioned the STA's credibility, accusing it of financial mismanagement or partisan bias and personally targeting its then-director, Bojan Veselinovič. Prime Minister Janša's public denunciations of the agency as a "national disgrace" and his frequent attacks on journalists via social media contributed to a climate of intimidation, which STA staff reported as fostering self-censorship and psychological strain. CSOs supporting the campaign were similarly portrayed by pro-government commentators as politically motivated actors seeking to undermine the government. These narratives attempted to delegitimise ZAobSTAnek by framing it as partisan agitation rather than a defence of legal obligations and public interest.

Financing

The initiative itself had no central budget. Activities (such as communication, legal analysis, international advocacy and coordination) were carried out by journalists' associations, NGOs and activists using existing project resources, pro bono legal assistance and volunteer work. Media outlets contributed by providing space and coverage free of charge, while designers, creative professionals in advertising agencies and web developers supported the campaign pro bono, helping to craft messages and maintain communication channels. The core financial instrument was the donation mechanism for the STA, set up specifically to channel solidarity funds from citizens and organisations. This mechanism enabled the agency to continue operating until the state eventually resumed funding. All collected funds were transferred directly to the STA to support its public-service activities, with none used to cover campaign-related costs, a level of financial integrity that proved essential for maintaining public trust and for countering narratives that questioned the legitimacy of the mobilisation.

Transparency regarding donations and their use was important for maintaining public trust and for countering narratives that questioned the legitimacy of the campaign.

Sustainability: possibility for continuing the work

While ZAobSTAnek as a campaign concluded after the contract restoring STA funding was signed in November 2021, its long-term impact continues to shape media governance and civil-society resilience in Slovenia. The experience strengthened cooperation among journalists' associations, media outlets and civil-society organisations, contributing to a more cohesive community of actors ready to defend media freedom in future crises. The case has also informed broader debates on reforming the legal framework for public media funding, ensuring clearer guarantees of editorial independence and insulating public-service institutions from day-to-day political interference. The networks built during ZAobSTAnek remain active and can be reactivated quickly if similar threats arise. Importantly, the initiative also demonstrated that attacks on public media and on civil society often follow similar patterns, which means that different types of organisations can learn from one another and share strategies for responding to pressure. Strengthening cross-sectoral collaboration is therefore essential, as the same repertoire of defensive tools can be applied whenever independent institutions come under coordinated political attack. In this sense, ZAobSTAnek did more than avert the immediate risk of STA's collapse: it contributed to the development of a solidarity infrastructure and a repertoire of strategies that strengthen the long-term democratic resilience of Slovenia's media landscape.

Comparative analysis of civic space resilience

Pressures on civic space across the region

Across Central-Eastern Europe, civic actors have encountered growing pressures resulting from democratic backsliding, political polarisation, deteriorating public trust, and the instrumentalisation of state institutions for partisan goals. Although each national context exhibits its own specificities, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Croatia and Slovenia reveal similar repertoire of state-driven or politically motivated tactics aimed at constraining critical civil-society organisations, independent media, cultural actors, watchdog institutions and grassroots movements. These pressures range from administrative obstruction, financial destabilisation, defamation campaigns, instrumentalisation of legal and regulatory frameworks, to digitally mediated hate speech and the delegitimisation of civic actors as “political” or “foreign-influenced”.

Against this backdrop, the good practices documented in the four countries offer important insights into how civic space actors can construct effective forms of resilience, even when institutional safeguards weaken. What emerges is a complex, multi-layered system of civic resistance that operates across legal, communicative, organisational and symbolic domains. These practices demonstrate that civic resilience is not a fixed capacity, but rather an ongoing negotiation shaped by alliances, public narratives, access to resources and the ability to mobilise diverse constituencies. This chapter synthesises these dynamics across countries, identifying cross-cutting tendencies while attending to contextual differences that shape the functioning and impact of civil society responses.

Threats and attacks across the analysed countries

Across the four analysed countries, the pressures affecting civic space take different forms, yet they share an underlying logic of weakening the legitimacy, stability or operating conditions of civil-society actors. While the specific expressions of these pressures vary, the cases demonstrate that civic actors confront a combination of discursive, administrative and political dynamics that challenge their ability to operate autonomously and influence public life.

In the Czech and Slovak contexts, threats are often rooted in discursive delegitimisation, polarisation and attempts to undermine trust in democratic institutions. The Czech cases highlight how misinformation and politicised narratives contribute to an environment in which organisations working on media literacy, civic education or minority rights must continually assert their neutrality. Slovak organisations face similar dynamics, particularly those engaged in anti-corruption oversight or youth engagement, as political actors and polarised media ecosystems frequently depict watchdog activities as partisan or foreign-influenced. In both contexts, the threat is less a direct administrative obstruction and more a challenge to the credibility and authority of civic actors within an increasingly fragmented public sphere.

In Croatia and Slovenia, threats involve more explicit forms of political or administrative intervention. Croatian cases reveal a pattern of bureaucratic inconsistency, targeted scrutiny and regulatory ambiguity that burdens civil society organisation working on environmental protection, spatial justice or cultural rights. These pressures reduce organisational stability

and deter long-term engagement. Slovenia presents particularly clear examples of institutional pressure: the attempted eviction of organisations at Metelkova 6 and the funding blockade of the national press agency demonstrate how administrative instruments can be mobilised to marginalise critical civic and media actors. In these cases, legal procedures became arenas of political contestation, placing organisations under significant operational strain. The case of Pravna mreža za varstvo demokracije adds another dimension: it shows how governments can employ legal mechanisms themselves (through restrictive measures, fines, prosecutions or constitutionally questionable regulations) to constrain protest, public expression and civic engagement, requiring organised legal infrastructures to mitigate these pressures.

Despite their differences, these cases collectively show how threats to civic space operate across both formal and informal mechanisms. They may range from subtle reputational attacks that erode trust, to prolonged administrative restrictions that hinder organisational capacity. Across all countries, civic actors are required not only to defend their activities but also to counter narratives that question their democratic role. The Slovenian experiences highlight especially clearly that discursive and institutional pressures often occur simultaneously. Legal intimidation, media smear campaigns and administrative decisions are reinforcing one another, which is why legal-support structures have become a central element of democratic defence.

Actors and coalitions driving civic resilience

The actors shaping civic resilience in the four countries form coalitions that reflect the particular nature of pressures they confront. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, organisations with strong educational, analytical and watchdog capacities are central. Their resilience rests on expertise, methodological rigor and the ability to translate complex democratic challenges

into accessible public discourse. These groups frequently collaborate with schools, universities, independent media and community organisations, creating networks grounded in knowledge production and public engagement.

Croatia's cases highlight coalitions rooted in community mobilisation and local activism. Environmental groups, local initiatives, feminist organisations, cultural actors and investigative journalists join forces around specific issues that directly affect everyday life. These alliances are strengthened by their proximity to local constituencies and their capacity to articulate systemic injustices through concrete local struggles. Their legitimacy derives not only from expertise but also from the trust they build through continuous community engagement.

Slovenian coalitions are distinguished by their scale and breadth. The detailed examples of good practices demonstrate how actors from cultural, legal, human-rights, media, research, digital-rights and environmental fields can build extensive alliances during periods of democratic strain. These coalitions combine professional knowledge, symbolic power and public mobilisation capacities, enabling them to act across legal, advocacy, communication and organisational dimensions simultaneously. They illustrate that resilience is strongest when civic actors cooperate across traditional sectoral boundaries.

Across the four countries, despite differences in structure and focus, these coalitions share a commitment to maintaining democratic space by connecting expertise with public legitimacy. Their ability to form alliances, whether around educational goals, local grievances or systemic threats, constitutes a core element of civic resilience.

Strategic repertoires and civic responses

A comparative view shows that civic actors across these countries deploy strategies that reflect both the nature of pressures they face and the organisational cultures from which they emerge. Educational and communicative strategies dominate in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, where organisations prioritise strengthening critical thinking, countering misinformation and building democratic competencies. These strategies respond directly to the discursive threats that characterise both contexts, where attacks on credibility and the spread of false information can erode the foundations of democratic participation. Their resilience is therefore preventative and long-term, aiming to cultivate citizens' ability to navigate contested public debates.

Croatian organisations combine legal action, investigative collaboration and community mobilisation. Their strategies often emerge from concrete disputes over land, environmental protection, cultural rights or local governance, which require both procedural engagement and public pressure. Legal appeals, public assemblies, storytelling, artistic interventions and partnerships with journalists work together to transform local conflicts into matters of wider public concern.

Slovenian cases show the use of multi-layered strategies that combine legal resistance, public communication, mass mobilisation and international engagement. When confronted with institutional threats, Slovenian actors employed legal arguments to expose procedural violations, communication strategies to frame the issues in democratic terms, and mobilisation efforts to build broad public support. The integration of cultural expression, digital participation tools and grassroots organising in initiatives such as Gremo volit! demonstrates a strategic repertoire capable of addressing both institutional and societal dimensions of democratic erosion.

Across all four contexts, these strategies reveal adaptability and contextual sensitivity. While no single approach is universally applicable, all rely on a combination of expertise, communication, public engagement and the ability to translate institutional issues into broader democratic narratives.

Communication and public narratives

Effective communication is central to civic resilience in all four countries, although it serves different purposes depending on the nature of the threats. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, communication strategies counter misinformation and rebuild trust in democratic institutions. Organisations create formats that support media literacy, fact-checking and critical public debate. Their work helps insulate citizens from polarising narratives and strengthens the informational environment on which democratic deliberation depends.

Croatian organisations use communication to connect systemic problems with everyday experiences. Their ability to articulate how administrative or governance failures affect communities allows them to mobilise support beyond activist circles. Collaboration with journalists amplifies their message and ensures that community struggles gain national attention. Their communication strategies humanise policy issues and expose the consequences of opaque decision-making.

Slovenian organisations demonstrate how communication can be both defensive and mobilising. In cases like Metelkova 6 and the STA, transparent communication and clear documentation of events were crucial in countering official narratives. Glas ljudstva further illustrates how communication can empower citizens: through digital tools, public assemblies, explanatory materials and a strong visual identity, it transformed more abstract democratic concerns into accessible calls for action.

Across all four contexts, communication is not merely a supporting mechanism but a key element of civic contestation. The ability to frame issues, build trust, and reach diverse publics is essential for strengthening resilience in environments where information is contested or manipulated. Slovenia's experience suggests that communication becomes particularly powerful when legal, cultural and civic actors coordinate their messaging to challenge restrictive state narratives.

Achievements and impacts

The impacts observed across the four countries demonstrate that civic action can produce tangible democratic outcomes even under constrained conditions. Czech and Slovak initiatives have contributed to strengthening democratic literacy and public awareness, equipping citizens with the skills needed to interpret complex political realities and recognise misinformation. Their influence is long-term and cultural, improving the conditions for informed democratic participation.

Croatian cases show how community mobilisation and legal advocacy can lead to concrete policy changes or prevent harmful administrative decisions. Their successes reinforce the value of participatory governance and demonstrate that local communities can influence broader institutional practices when supported by organised civil society.

Slovenian cases exemplify the capacity of civic actors to prevent institutional degradation and mobilise large segments of the public. The preservation of Metelkova 6, the survival of the STA and the significant contribution of Glas ljudstva to voter participation and post-election accountability illustrate how coordinated civic action can alter political trajectories and protect democratic infrastructure. Pravna mreža za varstvo demokracije demonstrates yet another type of impact: strengthening the rule of law by enabling successful legal challenges,

contributing to legislative reforms, and making constitutional standards publicly intelligible.

Together, these impacts highlight that civic resilience is not only reactive but also generative: it creates new capacities, strengthens democratic norms and expands the possibilities for citizen participation.

Challenges, vulnerabilities and structural constraints

Despite these achievements, civic actors confront challenges that limit their ability to sustain long-term engagement. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, polarisation, disinformation and declining trust place continuous pressure on organisations to defend their neutrality and credibility. Their work is resource-intensive and requires constant adaptation to shifting informational landscapes.

Croatian organisations face challenges related to bureaucratic unpredictability, political resistance and the difficulty of sustaining volunteer-driven efforts over time. The emotional and organisational demands of prolonged community mobilisation can strain capacity, especially in regions where institutional support for civil society is limited.

Slovenian organisations confront vulnerabilities linked to burnout, resource constraints and the need to maintain large coalitions beyond moments of crisis. While mobilisation during periods of democratic strain can be remarkably effective, sustaining such intensity over time requires stable funding and strong internal coordination.

Across all countries, structural constraints include reliance on project-based funding, exposure to political narratives that delegitimise civic work, and the emotional toll of operating in contentious environments.

Sustainability and transferability of resilience practices

Sustainability across the four contexts depends on whether civic actors can institutionalise new forms of cooperation, communication and public engagement. Czech and Slovak practices build democratic skills and knowledge that persist beyond individual projects, making their strategies inherently durable. Croatian initiatives demonstrate that when civic engagement becomes embedded in local communities, it can generate long-term vigilance and participatory cultures. Slovenian practices show that tools and networks created during crises can evolve into lasting democratic infrastructures, supporting accountability and civic dialogue beyond elections or moments of acute institutional pressure.

A key comparative insight is that despite varying political contexts, many threats to civic space follow recognisable patterns, and so do the strategies used to counter them. This makes the practices documented in this report highly transferable. Organisations can learn from one another, adapt each other's tools, and build cross-border collaboration to strengthen democratic resilience.

Conclusion

The analysis presented in this report demonstrates that civic space resilience in Central-Eastern Europe is both highly context-dependent and characterised by several shared structural features. Although the political and institutional environments in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Croatia and Slovenia differ, the pressures affecting civic actors reveal a common repertoire of challenges: discursive delegitimisation, administrative or financial obstruction, disinformation, political interference, and attempts to narrow the legitimate scope of civil-society activity. These pressures highlight the fragility of democratic spaces in the region, but they also illuminate the capacity of civic actors to develop sophisticated strategies for resistance, adaptation and renewal.

Across all four countries, effective resilience emerges from the interplay of expertise, communication capacity, legal defence, public mobilisation and cross-sectoral alliances. The cases demonstrate that no single organisation or tactic can address the complexity of contemporary threats. Instead, resilience is generated through diverse and mutually reinforcing mechanisms. Czech practices show how analytical credibility, public education and targeted communication can counteract disinformation and polarisation. Slovak cases highlight the importance of networked action, such as linking NGOs, independent media, youth initiatives and educational actors when confronting political hostility and discursive attacks. Croatian examples underscore the power of community-rooted mobilisation, investigative collaboration and sustained advocacy around public goods and rights. Slovenian practices illustrate how legal expertise, broad civic coalitions, cultural mobilisation and international solidarity can collectively halt institutional degradation and defend democratic infrastructure under acute pressure.

Several cross-cutting insights emerge from the comparative analysis. First, resilience is relational: it depends on the strength and legitimacy that civic actors derive from building alliances across sectors, generations and geographic regions. Second, resilience is narrative-based: the ability to frame issues in constitutional, social or moral terms profoundly shapes public support and institutional responsiveness. Third, resilience is infrastructural: legal support networks, participatory digital tools, community hubs and volunteer-driven mobilisation structures provide durable foundations that outlast individual campaigns. Fourth, resilience is adaptive: civic actors continuously adjust strategies to new threats, combining rapid response with long-term institutional strengthening.

At the same time, the cases also highlight vulnerabilities that merit sustained attention. Civic actors frequently work with limited financial security, rely heavily on volunteer or underpaid labour, and face increasing emotional and organisational strain. Burnout, fragmentation, and dependence on short-term funding cycles constitute ongoing risks. Furthermore, polarisation and disinformation reduce public trust, making legitimacy a central terrain of struggle. The sustainability of resilience practices therefore hinges on supporting enabling conditions: stable funding mechanisms, legal protections, safe working environments, international solidarity networks and policy frameworks that recognise civil society as a legitimate democratic actor rather than a partisan opponent.

Importantly, the report shows that resilience practices developed in one country have significant transferability to others. Legal defence models, communication strategies, youth-engagement tools, coalition-governance arrangements, and community-mobilisation techniques can be adapted across national contexts. As threats to civic space tend to follow similar patterns (whether administrative pressure, narrative manipulation or institutional capture) so too can resilience strategies evolve through mutual learning and cross-border cooperation.

In conclusion, the cases in this report offer compelling evidence that civil society in Central-Eastern Europe is not merely reactive, but a proactive generator of democratic norms, institutional accountability and civic mobilisation. By documenting these practices, the report underscores that resilience is not an abstract concept but a lived, daily practice of defending the spaces in which democratic life unfolds. Strengthening civic space resilience is therefore essential not only for protecting individual organisations but also for sustaining the broader democratic ecosystem. Continued investment in civil society (its capacities, infrastructures, networks and legitimacy) remains fundamental to safeguarding democratic governance in the region.

