

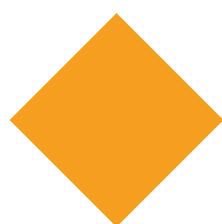
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# CITIZENSHIP AND LIFELONG LEARNING MONITOR 2021

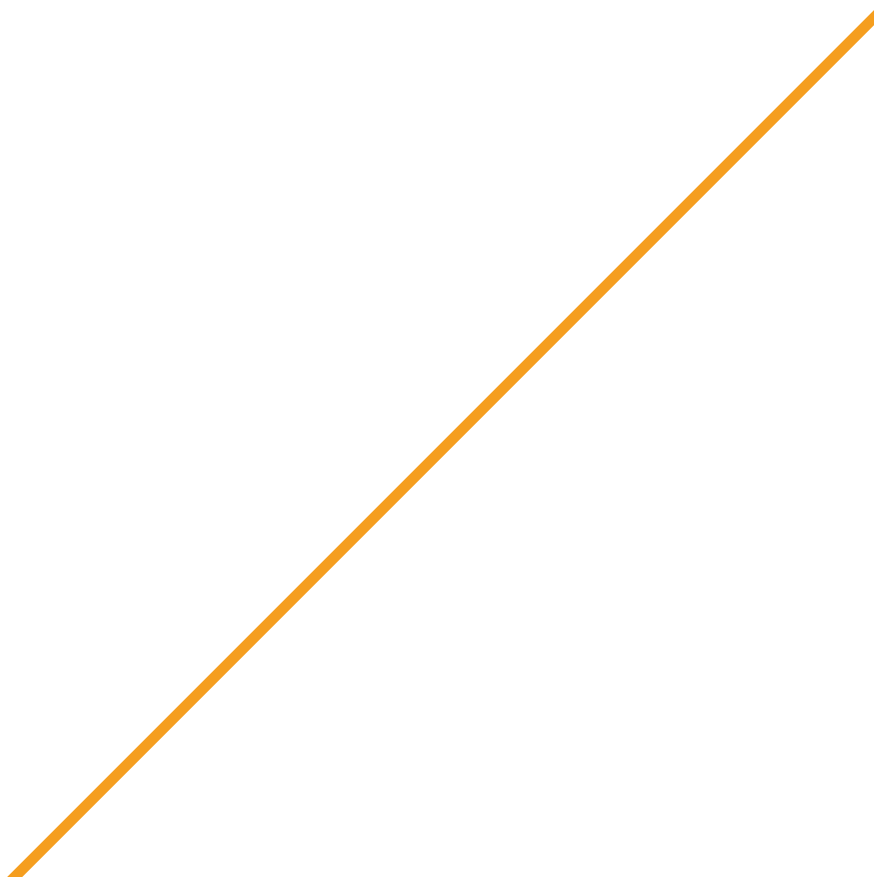
**SLOVAKIA**





# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>EDUCATION FOR ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY IN A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>EES in formal education</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>EES in non-formal and informal education</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>The impact of the pandemic</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>Spotlight: Deprioritisation of gender equality     and lurking far-right sentiments</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>Civil society strikes back</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	<b>17</b>
<b>RECOMMENDATIONS</b> .....	<b>18</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	<b>19</b>



## ABSTRACT

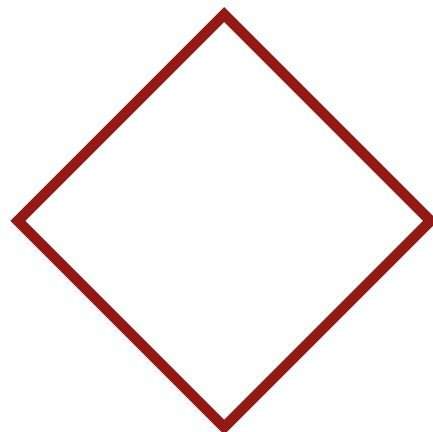
The following report is one of eleven national case studies building up the 6th edition of the SOLIDAR Foundation's annual Citizenship and Lifelong Learning Monitor. The Slovakian case study looks into the implementation of Education for Environmental Sustainability (EES) and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) considering the importance of these two topics in equipping learners with the needed competences to fight against the climate crisis. The report also assesses the possibility of learners to exert the civic and green competences that they acquire in the context of a shrinking civic space in Slovakia. Within this, it will explore the long-term underinvestment in education and the implications that this has had on the implementation of EES and global citizenship education (GCE), while comparing the situation between formal

education, where the topics are still neglected and have not been formalized in the official documentation in the past five years, with the situation in the informal and non-formal education sector where the CSOs and other education stakeholders have been more innovative and supported in providing this type of education. At the same, the report explores the situation of the civic space, to consider if people are free to exert any GCE or EES competences accumulated, presenting the fluctuations in terms of civic space shrinkage in the past years. Though Slovakia is settling into trends that see more support for CSOs and the civic space, the rising of far-right sentiments is threatening to undo these efforts. The report will conclude with recommendations linked to the two main strains of research mentioned above.

# INTRODUCTION

The following report represents one of eleven national case studies feeding into the 6th edition of the SOLIDAR Foundation's annual [Citizenship and Lifelong Learning Monitor](#). The purpose of this case study is to analyse and investigate the changes undertaken in the fields of citizenship education and lifelong learning policies in Slovakia and their relationship with the state of the civic space in the country. The Slovakian report is focused on two main topics: education for environmental sustainability (EES) in the frame of Global Citizenship Education (GCE), and the shrinking civic space and the ways civil society organisations (CSOs) counter this nationally and through cross-border solidarity. Regarding EES and GCE, the report will explore the terms' presence in official documentation linked to formal education and will assess the feasibility of implementing the topic considering structural

challenges in education identified in multiple EU reports on Slovakia<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, the same topic will be followed up in informal and non-formal education, assessing the way CSOs have been promoting it. Regarding the situation of the civic space, as this can be a place for advocating for EES but also a place to EES competences to advocate for more action from public authorities on the environmental crisis, it is important to study its openness. The report will consider recent developments, linked to new actions taken by CSOs, linked to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic but also linked with the recent presidential (2019) and parliamentary election (2020) which have had implications on the decisions taken in relation to the civic space. After the analysis of these two aspects, the report will conclude with a set of recommendations pertinent to the findings.



<sup>1</sup> European Commission (2021). *Analysis of the recovery and resilience plan of Slovakia*. Accompanying the document Proposal for a Council Implementing Decision on the approval of the assessment of the recovery and resilience plan for Slovakia {COM(2021) 339 final}. Pp.9, 16-17, 20, 44. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/system/files/com-2021-339\\_swd\\_en\\_0.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/system/files/com-2021-339_swd_en_0.pdf). Last accessed: 2 March 2022.; European Commission (2020). *Country Report Slovakia 2020*. 2020 European Semester: Assessment of progress on structural reforms, prevention and correction of macroeconomic imbalances, and results of in-depth reviews under Regulation (EU) No 1176/2011 {COM(2020) 150 final}. Pp.36-40. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0524&from=EN>. Last accessed: 1 March 2022.

# EDUCATION FOR ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY IN A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

## EES IN FORMAL EDUCATION

The concept of EES is not frequently used by education stakeholders, with aspects of it being rather encompassed in global education or global citizenship education (GCE). Global education was largely defined in the Slovakian government's National Strategy for Global Education 2012-2016, which was accompanied by a comprehensive Action Plan<sup>2</sup>. The main goal was to inform the Slovakian population on the global problems, preparing learners to seek information about these challenges and also to devise solutions, showing solidarity towards people beyond the borders of their country. The strategy relied on a universal, rights-based approach and contained information on climate challenges, defined as global

challenges as well. The more specific objectives referred to providing training and support to education professionals, to incorporating the topic in non-curricular learning actions, to raising awareness among public officials on the topics, to boosting the implementation of the topic in higher education and also to promoting it via informal learning<sup>3</sup>. In a sense, Slovakia was working on mainstreaming GCE much quicker than many European countries, considering our research in the Citizenship and Lifelong Learning Monitor 2020<sup>4</sup>, but it must be highlighted that upon the conclusion of the National Strategy in 2016, it took many years for the work on a new strategy to start<sup>5</sup>. SOLIDAR Foundation partner, [Ambrela](#), the NGDO (non-governmental development organisation) Platform of Slovakia, details the fact that a new strategy is currently in development, with the involvement of CSOs; however, the gap of five years, especially in light of the recent climate developments, revealed a lack of awareness to the climate needs of the learners and created gaps which will be harder to fill in with the new strategy.

[Ambrela](#) was included in the process of developing the previous strategy, and yet again it is collaborating with the public authorities in the development of the new one. Nonetheless, CSOs are only sporadically and unsystematically included in the policymaking around education or in the validation and implementation of learning for environmental competences.



2 Global Education Network Europe (2020). *Global Education Profile – Slovakia*. Available at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f6decace4ff425352eddb4a/t/616eaa0f436e120111ee228d/1634642448453/Slovakia-GE-Profile.pdf>. Last accessed: 3 March 2022.; Global Education Network Europe (2013). *Global Education in Slovakia*. Pp. 42-44. Available at: [https://slovakaid.sk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/GENE-peer-review\\_Slovakia.pdf](https://slovakaid.sk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/GENE-peer-review_Slovakia.pdf). Last accessed: 3 March 2022.

3 Slovak Government (2012). *Národná stratégia pre globálne vzdelávanie na obdobie rokov 2012 – 2016*. Available at: <https://slovakaid.sk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Narodna-strategia.pdf>. Last accessed: 2 March 2022.

4 Frank, Andrei (2021). *Citizenship and Lifelong Learning Monitor 2020*. SOLIDAR Foundation. Available at: <https://www.solidar.org/en/publications/citizenship-and-lifelong-learning-monitor-2020>. Last accessed: 3 March 2022.

5 Global Education Network Europe (2020). *Global Education Profile – Slovakia*.; Global Education Network (2019). *The State of Global Education in Europe*. Pp. 19, 52. Available at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f6decace4ff425352eddb4a/t/5fc40cf96457125654ba5954/1606683902082/SOGE-2019-web-version+%282%29.pdf>. Last accessed: 28 February 2022.; Slovak Government (2012). *Národná stratégia pre globálne vzdelávanie na obdobie rokov 2012 – 2016*.

Even as [Ambrela](#) representatives have highlighted that CSOs are the most prominent providers of environmental education, they are included only in an ad-hoc fashion into the mainstreaming of these competences, and this is the case only for larger, established networks of CSOs, such as [Ambrela](#). Though SOLIDAR Foundation commends the increased attention provided to GCE, considering the transversal competences promoted which are supporting all learners to adapt to a 21st century society, it must be highlighted that **the approach taken by the Slovak government is more attuned to the field of international cooperation, teaching GCE through this lens, rather than mainstreaming the topic across all subjects of education and turning its implementation towards the Slovakian society.** It is important to follow both trends, therefore also approaching the topic from a more national-oriented perspective, considering how a paradigmatic change is needed for all learners to be able to deal with the environmental crisis which looms over the world.

In the years of the strategy for GCE, environmental education has been included in formal education through 'student performance standards' which are guidelines prescribed to education institutions by the Slovak Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sports. Therefore, education institutions are the ones deciding whether or not to include this topic cross-curricularly or as part of a dedicated subject, while education institutions are encouraged to have a coordinator for environmental education on their premises. This latter

encouragement is not mandatory<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, this loose approach to the topic's implementation risks creating significant divisions among education institutions and across learners in terms of the type of learning that they have access to. Due to the urgency of the climate crisis, but also in light of the universal nature of the right to quality education, this type of provision is worrisome, contributing to the most significant issue in the Slovak education system: the fact that it is seen as failing to promote social mobility<sup>7</sup>. This type of implementation is also strenuous for the teaching profession, considering that they are overwhelmed due to poor working conditions, increasing administrative workloads, and poor remuneration<sup>8</sup>. It becomes difficult to imagine that they can implement EES in this decentralized fashion, with limited additional support.

The situation in formal education is even more dire in Slovakia if we consider the structural issues with which it confronts. The digital infrastructure and digital skills gaps are recognized across the country, with many learners viewed as digitally illiterate, considering that only 54% of the Slovak population has at least basic digital skills, but also with insufficient training provided to the education profession to adapt to including ICT in the classroom<sup>9</sup>. At the same time, the level of segregation across education institutions is significant, which also is leading to large academic achievement gaps. Learners coming from a disadvantaged socio-economic background are being outperformed in reading by their advantaged peers at a rate that is equivalent to a difference of three-years of

6 Global Education Network Europe (2020). *Global Education Profile – Slovakia*; Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic (2022). *Prierezové Témy*. Available at: <https://www.statpedu.sk/sk/svp/zavadzanie-isvp-ms-zs-gym/zakladna-sola/prierezove-temy/>. Last accessed: 1 March 2022.; Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic (2022). *Gymnázia*. Available at: <https://www.statpedu.sk/sk/svp/zavadzanie-isvp-ms-zs-gym/gymnazia/>. Last accessed: 1 March 2022.; Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic (2016). *Rámcové učebné plány a vzdelávacie štandardy vzdelávania na získanie nižšieho stredného vzdelania podľa § 30 ods. 5 a § 42 ods. 4 zákona č. 245/2008 Z. z. o výchove a vzdelávaní (školského zákona) a o zmene a doplnení niektorých zákonov v znení neskorších predpisov*. Available at: [https://www.statpedu.sk/files/articles/nove\\_dokumenty/statny-vzdelavaci-program/ramcove-ucebne-plany-a-vzdelavacie-standarty-vzdelavania-na-ziskanie-nizsieho-stredneho-vzdelania.pdf](https://www.statpedu.sk/files/articles/nove_dokumenty/statny-vzdelavaci-program/ramcove-ucebne-plany-a-vzdelavacie-standarty-vzdelavania-na-ziskanie-nizsieho-stredneho-vzdelania.pdf). Last accessed: 2 March 2022.

7 European Commission (2020). *Country Report Slovakia 2020*. P.37.

8 European Commission (2019). *Education and Training Monitor 2019: Slovakia*. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/default/files/document-library-docs/et-monitor-report-2019-slovakia\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/default/files/document-library-docs/et-monitor-report-2019-slovakia_en.pdf). Last accessed: 28 February 2022.

9 European Commission (2021). *Analysis of the recovery and resilience plan of Slovakia*. P.17.; European Commission (2020). *Country Report Slovakia 2020*. Pp.37-38.





schooling<sup>10</sup>. The segregation is also expanded towards Roma learners, with Roma-only classes and education institutions existing in multiple Slovakian municipalities, without sufficient initiatives taken to combat this segregation<sup>11</sup>. The [National Recovery and Resilience Plan \(NRRP\)](#) that Slovakia adopted in the frame of the [Recovery and Resilience Facility](#) was approved by the European Commission, and is tackling many of the problems linked to digitalization, segregation and academic achievement gaps. Given the substantial challenges that are impacting the capacity of the Slovakian system to deliver quality education to all, it becomes even more problematic to consider how EES can be mainstreamed across the system. Therefore, it is shocking to not see mentions to EES and to development of green competences beyond labour market demands associated with the green transition in the NRRP for Slovakia<sup>12</sup>. **The structural issues are threatening the implementation of EES, also in light of the reduced investment of the Slovakian government in education, with a rate of investment of 3.8% of GDP, significantly below the EU average<sup>13</sup>.** The governmental lack

of commitment to address the structural issues in education raises many alarms in relation to the capacity of the Slovakian learners to adapt to the 21st century and to fight against the climate crisis.

The situation of funding is rounded up by an array of governmental budget lines which were established thanks to investment from foreign donors for global education and for green education. **The project-based type of funding is unsustainable in the long-run** and does not provide the needed resources to implement these crucial topics. The Global Education Fund is set up thanks to funding from the [Global Education Network Europe \(GENE\)](#), and it amounts to 60.000 EUR which are to be disbursed to a minimum of 6 different applicants considering that the maximum amount of funding per applicant cannot exceed 10.000 EUR. The call for proposal for this funding was launched as of 2020. The applicants can be any formal education institution which prioritises in its application topics linked to raising awareness of the global context in education, support for global education in Slovakia through lesson models, educational materials, methodological manuals and other activities, support for bringing elements of good practice from abroad to teaching, implementation of innovative elements in education and shaping students' relationship to global education<sup>14</sup>. The Green Education Fund instead was piloted in 2018, with no clear understanding if this process will continue. The funding foreseen for this was 140.000 EUR but the scope was significantly broader with any kind of environmental-related work being awarded, therefore, education was competing for this also with business applications that were promoting a climate neutral society<sup>15</sup>.

10 Ibid.

11 European Commission (2021). *Analysis of the recovery and resilience plan of Slovakia*. P.17.; European Commission (2020). *Country Report Slovakia 2020*. Pp.37-38.

12 European Commission (2021). *Analysis of the recovery and resilience plan of Slovakia*.

13 European Commission (2020). *Country Report Slovakia 2020*. P.37.

14 Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic (2021). *Globálne vzdelávanie*. Available at: <https://www.minedu.sk/globalne-vzdelavanie/>. Last accessed: 3 March 2022.

15 Slovak Environmental Agency (2017). *Establishment of the Green Education Fund*. Batumi Initiative on Green Economy (BIG-E). Available at: [https://www.greengrowthknowledge.org/sites/default/files/Slovakia\\_BIG-E.pdf](https://www.greengrowthknowledge.org/sites/default/files/Slovakia_BIG-E.pdf). Last accessed: 2 March 2022.

Overall, the state for EES in formal education, in Slovakia, is precarious with even more risks laid ahead given the significant structural challenges faced by the education system.

## EES IN NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL EDUCATION

The Slovakian public authorities have been more keen of implementing EES via non-formal education. [A Sectoral Concept for Environmental Education to 2025](#) was launched, with an overarching goal to create an integrated system of environmental education and awareness raising within the environmental sector, all in the frame of the principles promoted by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This Concept foresees the collaboration of the Centre of Environmental Education 'Dropie', the Slovak Environment Agency, the State Nature Conservancy of the Slovak Republic, the National Zoological Garden Bojnice, the Slovak Museum of Nature Protection and Speleology, the Slovak Mining Museum and the Slovak Water Management Enterprise, among others<sup>16</sup>. The idea is to provide practical environmental education, using interactive elements and formats such as professional conferences, seminars for different target groups, methodological days, continuous professional development courses for teachers, and other editorial and promotional activities. The approach to focus on non-formal education and partner with a wide range of organisations outside the public authorities and formal education is very welcome, and provides many opportunities for adult learning in this context as well. However, the limited connection that this has with formal education and the prioritization of non-formal education is somewhat glaring given the need to implement a model of EES that operates across all levels and type of education, reaching all Slovakian learners. The approach preferred by the Slovakian government is yet again based



on ad-hoc procedures while also pushing the responsibility on other actors.

At the same time, the EEA Grants and the Norway Grants have also remarked the missing concept of EES in Slovakia, the outdated infrastructure and the low resources, therefore, investing in CSOs which are implementing EES via non-formal and informal educational means. The aim of many of these projects is to ensure that CSOs are part of the development of the Concept for Environmental Education to 2030, ensuring that the topic will be sketched out in more detail in this way<sup>17</sup>. The current operational Concept was developed during moments in which the Minister of Education has changed, and the entire process was opaque, with the exclusion of many educational experts from participating in defining the topic, the needs and the way in which it needs to be implemented across the different education sectors. To this end, the grants provided by the EEA and Norway Grants are going to set up a network of 150 empowered environmental teachers, a permanent e-conference for EES and an environmental magazine to raise awareness on the challenges on the topic. In this way, the aim is to strengthen a wider variety of education stakeholders to be involved in the next policymaking rounds on EES<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> Ministry of Environment of the Slovak Republic (2022). Environmental education and education for sustainable development. Available at: <https://www.minzp.sk/en/areas/environmental-education/>. Last accessed: 3 March 2022.

<sup>17</sup> EEA and Norway Grants (2021). Concept of Environmental Education in the Slovak Republic - steps forward. Available at: <https://eeagrants.org/archive/2009-2014/projects/SK10-0006>. Last accessed : 28 February 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.



## CASE STUDY

SOLIDAR Foundation partner, [Ambrella](#), is a member-based organisations. Many of its members are implementing actions to promote the development of green competences. One such example comes from the NGO [CEEV Živica](#), which is the Slovakian implementor of the [Green School Programme](#). This action is aimed at pre-primary, primary, secondary and special schools, reaching already 251 education institutions across the country. The programme is a comprehensive 7-step process through which education institutions can better integrate EES in their daily work while also making sure that the institution itself becomes more environmentally conscious and adopts new teaching methods. Providing support to education institutions via inspiring workshops, methodical teaching materials, professional consultations, peer learning, and partnerships across the network

of Green Schools, the programme is supporting education institutions to run an environmental audit, create an environmental action plan, engage in monitoring and evaluating the plan's implementation, draft an eco-code and in general to boost up advocacy and EES resources. The programme helps education institutions work on developing competences for the learners, such as empathy, creativity, problem solving, critical thinking, respecting for nature and others, among others. This model of continuous support is needed across all education institutions to ensure that EES can be mainstreamed, and the way [CEEV Živica](#) is sharing its expertise on the topic is essential for revealing how formal, informal and non-formal education providers should collaborate, valuing the different perspectives, building up on the accumulated and knowledge and making EES a reality.



Source: CEEV Živica

**The work of CSOs in this context has been greatly appreciated, with them bearing the responsibility to provide EES, ESD and GCE in non-formal and informal ways.**

Member organisations of SOLIDAR Foundation's partner, [Ambrela](#), have been implementing various initiatives across Slovakia. In the box below you can find more details about such initiatives which do not represent an exhaustive list but rather a sample of the complex work that is done on the ground.



Beyond the actual implementation of activities, it is important for CSOs and NGOs to boost their advocacy on the topic to ensure that they are not excluded from the decision-making processes considering their vast expertise on the ground. For this reason, the work performed by [Ambrela](#) is inspiring, with a structured approach to building up its position at local, regional, national and European level, in an effort to influence the way the next strategies of EES and GCE are developed. Below, one can see a case studies from [Ambrela's](#) work, linked to active projects to increase their presence in national policymaking.



## CASE STUDY

SOLIDAR Foundation partner, [Ambrela](#), received a grant from the Active Citizens Fund programme in Slovakia, to implement, from 2021 until 2023, the [EduGlobe project](#) which paves the way to the implementation of the National Strategy for Global Education. The strategic grant aims to support [Ambrela](#) in engaging in the development and implementation of the new Slovak strategy.

The project represents a strategic effort for [Ambrela](#) to continue as a facilitator for the strategy creation, to build up its proposals and positions in relation to the strategy, to participate in the organizational structure of the strategy and to continuously run an information campaign for the general public in relation to the implementation of the strategy. Such approaches are ensuring that the CSOs have ownership over the development of policies and can also support their implementation given the vast expertise that they have on the topic.



It is clear that the non-formal and informal education sector is more developed in Slovakia when it comes to EES, but this proves to be worrisome given the unequal access to quality education that learners experience as a

result and also due to the fact that the CSOs and NGOs providing this type of education are seriously underfunded or reliant on precarious funding and excluded from policymaking.

## SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE

Considering the aforementioned situation on EES in Slovakia, it is important to consider what is the situation regarding the civic space, to see how this can be used for learners to exert their green competences or for learners to pressure public authorities to take seriously the development of green competences in light of the environmental crisis.

### THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC

As with all European countries during 2020, Slovakia announced a state of emergency in March of the year due to the COVID-19 pandemic developments. This limited the capacity of a normal operation of the civic space considering that the curfew imposed was strict, allowing people to leave only for meeting basic needs<sup>19</sup>. In October 2020, a specific resolution, 284/2020, was published, targeting specifically the freedom of assembly, with any gathering of beyond 6 people being prohibited<sup>20</sup>.

Further actions on curfews were extended over November 2020 as well. The situation in Slovakia appears to have been more pronounced than in other countries studied for the Monitor when it comes to the freedom of assembly, movement and privacy, as it spread over

beyond the summer of 2020. In this context, however, it needs to be highlighted that the situation regarding the civic space has been on upward path in Slovakia which started before the pandemic. The horrendous assassination of journalist Ján Kuciak<sup>21</sup> has prompted a great mobilization from the side of the civil society, acting against what was perceived as a brutal murder which was only going to embolden the governmental authorities to crack down more on the civil society. The CSOs and citizens mobilized in this context and they have been active in the run-up to the presidential election, pushing Zuzana Čaputová, an anti-corruption



19 International Center for Not-For-Profit Law (2022). *COVID-19 Civic Freedom Tracker: Slovakia*. Available at: <https://www.icnl.org/covid19tracker/?location=112&issue=&date=&type=>. Last accessed: 3 March 2022.

20 ASPI (2020). *č. 645 k návrhu na prijatie opatrení v rámci vyhláseného núdzového stavu podľa čl. 5 ústavného zákona č. 227/2002 Z.z. o bezpečnosti štátu v čase vojny, vojnového stavu, výnimočného stavu a núdzového stavu v znení neskorších predpisov vyhláseného uznesením vlády Slovenskej republiky č. 587 z 30. septembra 2020*. 284/2020 Z.z. Uznesenie Vlády Slovenskej Republiky. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3uAUNUY>

21 Walsh, David and Crowcroft, Orlando (2020). *Jan Kuciak murder: The crime and trial that sparked a 'renaissance of civil society'*. Euronews. Available at: <https://www.euronews.com/2020/09/03/jan-kuciak-murder-the-crime-and-trial-that-sparked-a-renaissance-of-civil-society->. Last accessed: 1 March 2022.

campaigner and lawyer, to assume power<sup>22</sup>. This has been branded as a direct response to the fact that Kuciak was murdered as he was investigating corruption cases linking high level Slovak officials and the Italian Mafia. The trend of eroding the support of the ruling party associated with these corruption claims has continued in the parliamentary elections, which culminated with a coalition government containing actors from political parties which have branded themselves as prioritizing the fight against corruption<sup>23</sup>. The new government highlighted the importance of CSOs in its Manifesto, committing to improve their financial, legislative and institutional stability. At that point already, transparency and trust in the CSOs sector was promoted with revised rules and procedures for the registration of associations. Beyond the transparency ensured, the new system foresees free-of-charge registration and consultations with CSOs in the process, providing a more favourable environment for such organisations. Further processes followed up as well, with the election of a general prosecutor, preparations for anti-corruption legislation and new agreements for investment partnerships being provided<sup>24</sup>. A strengthening and enabling of the civil space in Slovakia is visible, but it has to be underlined the fact that this started as the situation for CSOs was dire and was prompted by a horrifying murder of a journalist.

At the same time, though commitments have been, fairly recently, made and work on this is being in progress, CSOs are raising awareness on how slow the process of re-enabling a vibrant civic space has been moving from the side of authorities, while they have been also exposing the fact that they have been excluded from numerous policy process or have

not been included with the status of ‘partners’ as foreseen in the government’s manifesto<sup>25</sup>. SOLIDAR Foundation partner, *Ambrela*, confirms this situation though explains that *Ambrela* has managed to participate in such consultations more than the average CSO.

## SPOTLIGHT: DEPRIORITISATION OF GENDER EQUALITY AND LURKING FAR-RIGHT SENTIMENTS



One way in which the public authorities in Slovakia have continued to hit at the civil society even in this period of reconciliation has been through the reduced governmental funding for CSOs working in the field of gender equality. In January 2020, the CSOs have formally criticized the government for these financial reductions that are hitting this specific topic. Far-right and populist movements have been fueling this situation by continuously targeting organisations fighting for women’s rights or for the LGBT+ community. The Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family in Slovakia was even rejecting the term ‘gender equality’, while acting in a non-transparent fashion when it came to the allocation of subsidies. Upon pressures from the Voice of Civic Organisations platform, the Ministry published the assessment grid for all the applicants for subsidies. Though the gender equality organisations were ranking highly in the assessment of the expert evaluators, the Ministry decided to award only 3 of 15 gender equality organisations applying for funding. The Ministry seems to have been supporting conservative, pro-life organisations in its redistribution of funding<sup>26</sup>.

22 Civic Space Watch (2020). *Slovakia: We started discussing shrinking civic space before it was too late – Interview with VIA IURIS’ Ivana Kohutková*. Available at: <https://civicspacewatch.eu/slovakia-we-started-discussing-shrinking-civic-space-before-it-was-too-late-interview-with-via-iuris-ivana-kohutkova/>. Last accessed: 1 March 2022.

23 Politico (2022). *Poll of Polls: Slovakia*. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/slovakia/>. Last accessed: 24 February 2022.

24 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2021). *Protecting Civic Space in the EU*. Publications Office of the European Union: Luxembourg. P.46. Available at: [https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra\\_uploads/fra-2021-protecting-civic-space\\_en.pdf](https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2021-protecting-civic-space_en.pdf). Last accessed: 3 March 2022.

25 Civic Space Watch (2020). *Slovakia: We started discussing shrinking civic space before it was too late – Interview with VIA IURIS’ Ivana Kohutková*.

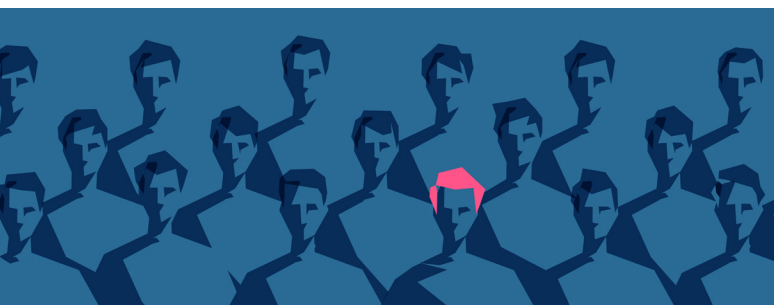
26 Kohutková, Ivana (2021). *Slovakia: Government move risks polarising the civil society sector*. Civic Space Watch. Available at: <https://civicspacewatch.eu/slovakia-government-move-risks-polarising-the-civil-society-sector/>. Last accessed: 1 March 2022.

As the far-right and populist movements are maintaining this fight against gender equality, it is worth directing some attention to them, as they have been growing during the pandemic and have been threatening the gains made by the civil society in terms of the civic space in the past years. The far-right party LSNS has made significant gains in the previous elections and has been the proponent of legislative projects such as the one labeling a significant portion of NGOs receiving funding from abroad as 'foreign agents'. This would have then continued with a Central Register for Foreign Agents, that would have basically amounted to a blacklisting of NGOs<sup>27</sup>. The term 'foreign agents' is essential as this was used by the far-right movement in Slovakia also in relation to the strong civil society movement that erupted from the murder of Kuciak and impacted the most recent elections. This labeling of CSOs has been referred to in Hungary or Poland as well, with populist promotions of conspiracy theories related to foreign intervention into a way the country is being ruled<sup>28</sup>. **This has become a catch-all phrase to effectively try to silence the voice of progressive CSOs on aspects linked to gender rights, migration, EU values, citizenship education, among others.** The attacks coming from the far-right have intensified in the recent years, but the

trend is worryingly making its way towards higher representatives of the Slovak government. Therefore, attention needs to be paid to how this develops as the advancements made so far by the civil society in Slovakia remain fragile.

## CIVIL SOCIETY STRIKES BACK

The most important element in the Slovak example of protecting the civic space has been the quick manner in which CSOs have launched conversations on the shrinking of the civic space. Activists from Slovakia compare their situation to that of Hungary and explain that the quick reaction has helped to prevent authoritarianism to blossom<sup>29</sup>. This has also been supported by the creation of a coalition of CSOs titled Voice of Civil Society Organisations. This common front has been crucial in creating support for CSOs and aiding them in building up a united position against the shrinking of the civic space. This coalition has also worked to strengthen the integrity, transparency and cohesion in the sector which has helped with improving the public opinion on CSOs. As a result of their work, a survey has showed how 55% of Slovak respondents were trusting CSOs, while 64% claimed that CSOs were better positioned, compared to the state, to meet people's needs in some sectors<sup>30</sup>. This was an important development without which the CSOs could not have been able to pressure public authorities and mobilise the needed support to protect the civic space, but it becomes even more important as they have reversed negative trends<sup>31</sup> that have been developing in the years before Kuciak's murder in relation to people's



27 Civic Space Watch (2020). *Slovakia: We started discussing shrinking civic space before it was too late – Interview with VIA IURIS' Ivana Kohutková.*

28 Parrock, Jack (2020). *Hungary breaking EU law over foreign-funded NGO crackdown, says ECJ.* Euronews. Available at: <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2020/06/18/eu-top-court-to-rule-on-hungary-limits-on-foreign-funded-ngos>. Last accessed: 28 February 2022.; Reuters (2020). *Polish government considers law forcing NGOs to declare foreign funding.* Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/poland-ngos-idUSL8N2CT53C>. Last accessed: 3 March 2022.; International Federation of Human Rights (2021). *Laws against "foreign agents": the multi-functional tool of authoritarian regimes.* Available at: <https://www.fidh.org/en/issues/globalisation-human-rights/laws-against-foreign-agents-the-multi-functional-tool-of>. Last accessed: 3 March 2022.

29 Civic Space Watch (2020). *Slovakia: We started discussing shrinking civic space before it was too late – Interview with VIA IURIS' Ivana Kohutková.*

30 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2021). *Protecting Civic Space in the EU.* P.57.

31 Ibid.





perceptions of CSOs. The coalition continues to provide training to CSOs, organize national meetings, run working groups and consultations, engage in monitoring and research<sup>32</sup>. Nevertheless, due to it being relatively new and reuniting CSOs with different capacities, it remains to be seen if it will become more institutionalized or if support for it will wane in the coming years. However, the development of the coalition into something that can last over periods of more calmness and can continue to unite the CSOs should be something to strive for considering how influential it has been in fighting for an enlarged civic space. The example presented above regarding them shining a light on the unethical practices of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family in relation to gender equality CSOs is just one example in which this coalition has successfully stroke back in the name of a better established civic space.

In moments like this, there needs to be consideration over the importance of cross-border solidarity in supporting CSOs and citizens in countries that more prominently confront with

wider challenges but also to ensure that the citizenship in each country is prepared to understand the value of alliances, cooperation and solidarity. SOLIDAR Foundation partner, [Ambrella](#), detailed that CSOs, as providers of innovative solutions, as promoters of policies associated with GCE and the SDGs, must share together and rely on each other, as the lessons learned in one context can be crucial for other CSOs that are in a different advocacy stage. The potential for policy and innovation transfers across the EU and even globally in cases of cross-border solidarity among CSOs can aid significantly in combatting the shrinkage of the civic space. [Ambrella](#), as an organization, walks the talk which can be seen by their active participation in [Bridge 47](#), which started as a [Development Education and Raising Awareness \(DEAR\)](#) funded project but grew to become a global network of practitioners of transformative education, which includes a broad participation of CSOs as informal and non-formal education providers. Below you can read more about this exceptional case of cross border solidarity.

<sup>32</sup> Civic Space Watch (2020). *Slovakia: We started discussing shrinking civic space before it was too late – Interview with VIA IURIS' Ivana Kohutková.*

## CASE STUDY

SOLIDAR Foundation has joined its partner, [Ambrella](#), together with many other members and partners working on GCE to join the [Bridge 47](#) network. As a DEAR funded project, it ran from 2017 until 2021 having as an objective the mobilization of civil society from all over the world to create a more fair, equitable and peaceful world through GCE. It focused directly on [subtarget 4.7 of the Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#), aiming to find a common understanding across civil society from all over the world on how to achieve this subtarget while making use of the rich and diverse understanding of what GCE and transformative education are.

[Ambrella](#) has been one of the founders of the network, together with its development counterparts in Finland, Estonia, Bulgaria, Germany and Slovenia but also together with CIVICUS, the International Council for Adult Education, the European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes. Other partners included organisations from Scotland, Ireland, Denmark, Cyprus and Latvia that

focused specifically on development education and/or GCE.

The vast consortium has created a global network that has shared expertise on the topic over the lifespan of the project, that has also contributed to a collaborative process of drafting a [roadmap on achieving subtarget 4.7](#), various [policy papers on achieving the roadmap](#) and in general has strengthened the presence of CSOs in the policymaking of the topic, while also serving as a reservoir of resources for the implementation of GCE across the world.

**Bridge 47 is a spectacular example in cross-border solidarity, showing the strength that practitioners and civil society can have while allying, beyond the confines of national borders, to tackle global challenges while using global solutions.** Examples such as Bridge 47 are fully supported by [Ambrella](#), which is a strong advocate for cross-border solidarity and alliance building in relation to all its goals and objectives.



Examples like the Voice of CSOs or of the work that [Ambrella](#) is doing need to be replicated, strengthened, supported and nurtured in order to give the chance to provide comprehensive citizenship education to all people in Slovakia, making sure that

they understand the importance of the civic space and reclaim it. Empowering learners is only one tool to protect the ground of the civic space, but it remains a crucial one as it also provides the citizens with the capacity to exert their universal rights.



## CONCLUSION

The current situation in Slovakia regarding education for environmental sustainability, citizenship education and the civic space is complicated to pinpoint, due to the significant oscillations over the years. If GCE, ESD and EES have been on the agenda for long, with governmental strategies on this, there has been a marked absence of this topic in the recent years as the previous governmental strategy on GCE has not been renewed for five years. While the discourse has been promoting these topics, investment on green or global competences has been granted in an ad-hoc or project-based funding, with a significant reliance on foreign funding. All of this is happening on a backdrop of structural issues regarding the infrastructure in education and inclusiveness of the sector which have been caused by years of under-investment. The current renewed interest in EES and GCE is encouraging, but it remains to be seen how it will be materialized, considering the years in which structural issues in education have built up. At the same time, innovation and action on this topic has been coming from the CSOs' side. However,

they have been structurally pushed out of policymaking in education, with the exception of some established actors, while their capacity to use the civic space to advocate for a need for an education reform that prioritises GCE and EES has been diminished. This diminishing of the civic space also experienced significant fluctuations with the case of Kuciak's murder and a newly emboldened civil society that reacted. While this has led to significant gains for the CSOs and improvement of the civic space, it can already be observed that lurking far-right pushback is threatening all these gains which also hinge on a currently favourable relationship with the public authorities. This relationship can change at any moment, which reflects again how fragile the civic space is in Slovakia. Given this, time has come for realistic support to be provided for the reform of the education and for the protection of the civic space, because if these are not treated with urgency there is a risk that the Slovakian people will not have the transversal competences needed to fight against the climate challenge and the rising populism.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

- ◆ Broaden the participation of CSOs involved in the development of the upcoming education strategies linked to global citizenship education and education for environmental sustainability
- ◆ Increase investment in education and provide it in a targeted manner to close the infrastructure gaps, close the digital gaps and to combat the current segregation in education which disproportionately targets Roma learners and learners from other minorities
- ◆ Provided more structured and stable investment in education associated with EES
- ◆ Continue promoting the Sectoral Concept for Environmental Education, increasing the support to it and enlarging the participation of education stakeholders involved in the provision of informal and non-formal education
- ◆ Increase transparency over the way funding is allocated to CSOs and act upon any reveals of funding mismanagement
- ◆ Implement the Governmental Manifesto's promise on the involvement of CSOs in policymaking and decision making, institutionalizing their participation
- ◆ Continue the process of strengthening the civic space through funding and transparent mechanisms, as well as established platforms for structural consultations
- ◆ Increase the efforts for promoting media literacy and for combatting fake news in light of the far-right populist claims that are smearing the CSOs



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