

# Constraints of Collaborative Governance in a Statist Welfare Regime during Crises

## A Slovak Case<sup>1</sup>

Boris Strečanský (Institute of European Studies and International Relations,  
Comenius University)

### Abstract

The New Public Management (NPM) and collaborative governance aim to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public service delivery by moving beyond traditional hierarchical bureaucracy. They emphasize decentralized approaches and a complementary relationship between the state and civil society, where nonprofits are considered partners with the government in providing public goods funded by public resources. There is a gap in understanding how these decentralization-supporting frameworks operate in countries with patterns of delayed democratization or statist civil society development. The paper demonstrates how the statist tendencies in public governance are in an asynchronous relationship with the self-organizing capacity of civil society, which, presents elements of new governance and indigenous agency. The disconnect between the state and civil society became visible during the COVID-19 pandemic and the War in Ukraine which provided the empirical background for the paper. The case examines the role of civil society in responding to crises. It explores patterns of its self-organization, pro-social organizing, philanthropic activity, interactions with the state, and policy formulation. It deploys three complementary lenses to explain the persistence of statist elements in Slovakia's governance – historical institutionalism in public administration, social origins of civil society theory, and welfare regime theory. It suggests network institutionalism as a possible way to explain the nature of civil society agency in Slovakia during crises. It argues that, in the context of delayed democratization, the NPM paradigm takes on hybrid forms influenced by persisting statism, avoiding a complementary relationship with non-state actors.

**Keywords:** Statism, Collaborative governance, Crisis, New Public Management, Network Institutionalism

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## 1. Introduction

This paper presents the case of Slovakia to show that in times of crisis, welfare production emerges from the interplay between structural legacies—shaped by welfare regime type and the institutional trajectory of public administration—and the adaptive capacity of civil society, which can open space for selective New Public Management (NPM) practices. The analysis argues that in a predominantly statist welfare environment, the third sector's role in public service provision becomes more pronounced during crises, drawing on the NPM elements embedded within the PA system. Yet these elements are not systematically institutionalized; instead, they surface contingently, depending on the political constellation of the moment, and remain constrained by enduring historical–institutionalist structures. The NPM in PA emphasizes the importance of market-based approaches, third-party engagement in public services, and, in its newer variation, multi-stakeholder governance and public-private sector partnerships.

This case presents a contradictory picture, showing that while there is evidence of the NPM repertoire at various levels of government in contracting with nonprofit organizations, it appears more a result of externally conditioned necessity (EU funding conditionality) than an intentional policy. Suppose crises are a natural experiment in public administration and civil society studies. In that case, it can be assumed they provoke responses that allow natural qualities and characteristics to emerge. Crises also stimulate the intrinsic agency of civil society.

The first part examines the institutional landscape comprising three components of welfare production in Slovakia: public administration, welfare regime type, and civil society pattern. It does so through the historical institutionalist lens of their evolution over recent decades, placing Slovakia within each component's typology. The second part focuses on the responses of civil society to two crises (COVID-19, War in Ukraine), with particular emphasis on the state-NGO relationship.

## 2. Theoretical considerations

This paper combines a historical–institutionalist perspective with insights from welfare regime theory and the social origins approach to civil society to analyze the evolving configuration of state–society relations in Slovakia. Historical institutionalism emphasizes how path dependence and critical junctures structure the long-term trajectory of PA, allowing us to trace how statist legacies persist across successive reform waves (Pierson 2000; Thelen 1999).

WRT provides a framework for situating Slovakia within broader comparative typologies of welfare production, highlighting the extent to which state, market, and community actors share—or fail to share—responsibility for social welfare provision (Esping-Andersen 1990; Fenger 2007). The literature suggests that the typology, primarily based on the Western development path, does not accurately fit the development in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Some authors define a distinct ideal-typical group of welfare regimes for post-communist transitional countries (Aidukaite, 2009; Aidukaite, 2011; Fenger, 2007). The

welfare regime analysis matters because each influences public service motivation, professional practices, and public support for redistribution (Houston 2011; Nygren et al. 2018; Jaeger 2009). Each welfare regime also has unique institutional arrangements that shape governance practices, including participation and the extent of stakeholder involvement.

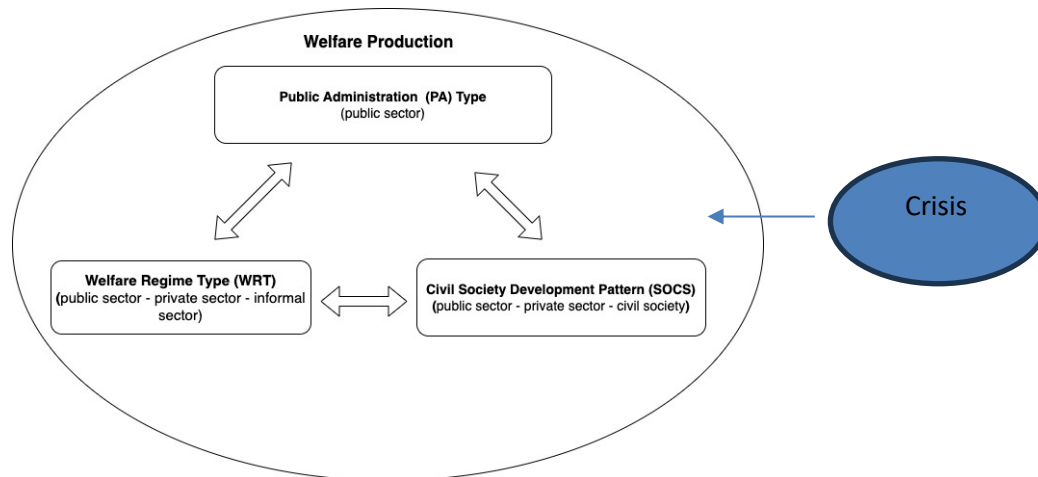
Complementing this, the social origins theory of civil society conceptualizes how nonprofit sectors emerge and are shaped by historical welfare arrangements and state strategies (Salamon and Anheier 1998). The theory posits that civil society constitutes a distinct organizational space, separate from the government and the market. It complements them, filling the gaps and working with them through collaborative governance models or welfare partnerships to achieve more effective and holistic solutions in public well-being (Anheier & Salamon, 2006; Salamon & Sokolowski, 2017). Together, these three perspectives allow for an integrated analysis of the welfare production space, revealing how enduring statist elements within PA condition both the development of welfare provision and the institutional environment for civil society actors.

The third theoretical strand is network theory. Networks offer the possibility of achieving relational, contextual, and systemic understanding of phenomena studied (Borgatti, 2003). Networks can be studied as explanatory goals (i.e., the research looks for causes of their formation or of their quality) and as explanatory mechanisms when the research studies the consequences of networks. The latter gets greater attention. Networks can be approached from the structuralist perspective and, in this sense, represent a contextual constraint or opportunity for an actor. On the other hand, the connectionist understanding of networks emphasizes the relational *embeddedness* of networks and the contents of ties and flows within them. (Borgatti, 2003). In line with this approach, the activities of civil society actors in Slovakia during the crises could be seen as an expression of the preceding relations among them. The approach of 'network institutionalism' (Ohanyan, 2012) views the realm of civil society organizations as a network of state and non-state actors that interact and influence one another, thereby increasing their effectiveness. They expand their engagement areas, enhance mobility, and improve overall performance (Ohanyan, 2012). The paper considers the network approach as a possible explanatory mechanism of the active social presence and significant agency of civil society in the statist welfare and traditional PA regime.

### **3. Research methodology**

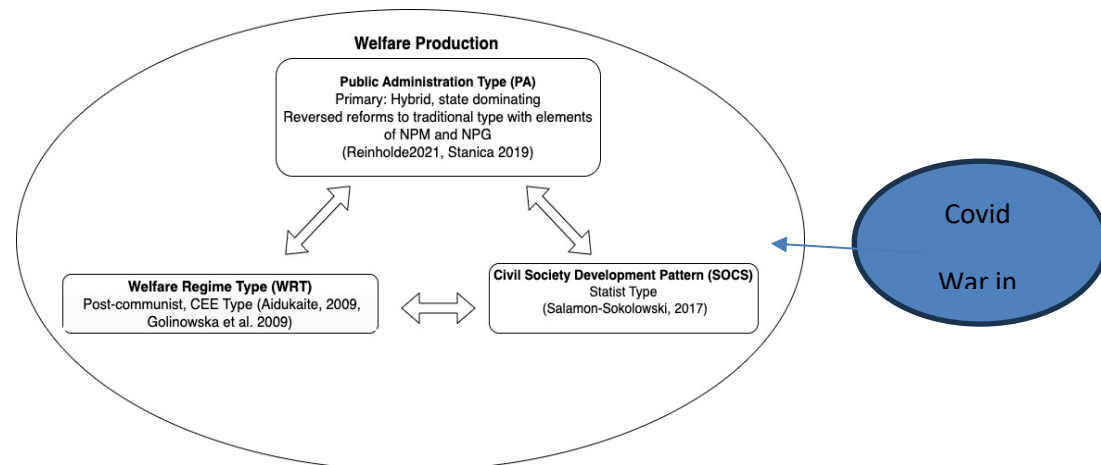
The framework for the analysis considers three elements that are in a mutual relationship: PA, civil society and welfare regime. See Figure 1.

Figure 1: Analytical Framework



All three elements are essential to the production of welfare and represent relational spaces connecting various sectors, actors, and their capacities. The crisis is an external factor that puts the system under duress, and provokes the system to respond. When the unexpected crisis occurs—such as war in a neighboring country or a pandemic—what happens to the above elements of welfare production? How does the system respond? This paper analyzes what occurred in Slovakia in the context of the crises outlined above.

Figure 2: Welfare production in Slovakia as an interrelationship of specific public administration, welfare regime, and civil society development pattern.



Slovakia was shaped in the 2010s into a hybrid form with a strong path dependency pattern. The SOCS literature identifies Slovakia as a statist case of civil society development. The PA has been reversed reformed, and the welfare regime is specifically post-communist CEE type. Hierarchical and centralized approaches in traditional public administration are the norm, although they are being blended with modernization efforts that emphasize transparency and the quality delivery of public services. The PA incorporates elements of the NPM and NPG paradigms, which emerge inconsistently and are driven through post-accession EU funding conditionalities.

Countries with a statist pattern of civil society development, like Slovakia, tend to adopt top-down approaches to modernization through power structures, as shown by the SOCS. In this kind of regime, civil society has limited space. The nonprofit sector is also small in size, with fewer workers and volunteers. The government offers minimal support for civil society. The welfare partnership model, exemplified by Germany, is marked by a large nonprofit workforce, substantial government funding, and a service-focused sector with strong involvement from church-based organizations. One key challenge with this classification is that it is based on a snapshot of data representing a specific stage in the country's development. The data used in the SOCS typology reflect Slovakia's situation in the early 2000s. Since then, not only Slovakia but the entire group of post-communist CEE countries has experienced significant changes.

Based on the above, having civil society as the third element in the production of welfare next to PA and welfare regime, the paper explores the effects of crises on the NPM elements in the statist context and proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: Slovakia's civil society has strengthened its hybrid features, combining statist approaches with welfare partnership patterns, a stronger service function, and heavy government support. This is due to the development trajectory of PA, with traditional PA mixed with elements of NPM, under post-accession conditionality and the welfare regime's statist tendency. This hypothesis is explored through three variables: the percentage of the economically active population (EAP) in the non-profit sector, the percentage of volunteer work in the EAP, and the share of government revenue from non-profit sector income.

H2: The crises led the PA to greater flexibility, using the NPM repertoire in its engagement with civil society. It addressed the new situation through higher levels of contracting, performance-based management, increased resource flows, and new mechanisms of coordination and governance.

The variables explored are:

- a) The presence of collaborative governance mechanisms in response to crises – emerging forms arising from crisis-induced situations.
- b) The contracting of NGOs by the PA, especially before and during the crises, the number of contracts and their volume.
- c) PA contracting of NGOs and mechanisms of governance and cooperation – through secondary quantitative and qualitative data in available studies and reports obtained through documents review of relevant actors (reports, websites, and academic studies)

Different types of quantitative and qualitative data are used. The data include national accounts statistics from the Statistical Office combined with quantitative and qualitative data from available studies and reports on PA contracting with NGOs. It also includes qualitative data on mechanisms of governance and cooperation obtained through document reviews of relevant actors (reports, websites, and academic studies).

The network approach is considered as a possible explanatory mechanism of the active social presence and agency of civil society in the hybrid and statist welfare and traditional PA regime.

#### **4. Analysis**

##### *4.1. Trajectory of Evolution of Public Administration in Slovakia since 1989 and NPM*

The development of PA in Slovakia since 1989 has gone through several phases. Randma-Liiv & Drechsler (2017) define four distinct periods of PA development in CEE. The period of post-communist transition (1989-1996), pre-accession or the conditionality period (1996-2004), post-accession period (2004-2017), and the period of public sector innovation (PSI) since 2017. This periodization can be applied to Slovakia with some variations.

In the early transition, a major step in PA reform was the re-establishment of local self-government. This enabled local elections at the municipal level and created a new set of authorities within a separate institutional framework, distinct from the state administration. The formation of self-government was a progressive step, but the communist legacy has marred the overall PA. Despite several failed attempts to restructure the territorial administration, the patronage and nepotism patterns and overstaffing continued (Staroňová, 2017). The PA has remained highly politicized. After the initial decentralization, it was further centralized, with a tendency to strengthen the state administration's powers relative to local authorities (Henderson, 1999). The PA reform followed an incremental and legalistic path until 2004. During this period, the NPM elements became more visible within the reform approach, especially towards the end of 2001 and after 2002. This was when the radical NPM changes, including decentralization and performance financing schemes, were implemented. (Nemec, 2010) These changes were driven by the reformist orientation of the two governments of Prime Minister Mikulas Dzurinda (1998-2002, 2002-2006), especially the second, which was inspired by NPM. In late 2001, Slovakia took the initiative to reform the civil service and adopt new decentralization policies. It also established the second layer of regional self-governments, composed of eight self-governing regions. In 2004, Slovakia took the decisive step of implementing fiscal decentralization, granting local governments and regional self-governments the power to generate revenue and strengthen their autonomy. (Nižňanský, 2010).

The post-accession period (2004-2014) in the CEE was characterized by diversification in PA reform trajectories, driven exclusively by domestic political constellations. (Meyer-Sahling, 2011). This is also true of Slovakia. Some countries maintained the reformed PA and continued with reforms. Others, including Slovakia, reversed some of the reforms adopted under conditionality. The period after 2006 in Slovakia can be characterized as a return to a state-dominated paradigm in the delivery of public functions. NPM elements in PA were not fully dismantled, but diluted. For instance, the program performance budgeting initiative introduced earlier was implemented in a hierarchical, bureaucratic manner that only increased costs. (Nemec, 2010) The progressive civil service reform was reversed, and the chance of building a professional civic service was halted. The politicization of the civil service

and the practice of politicians making discretionary decisions in HR have become the norm. (Staroňová, 2017).

After 2010, the elements of NPM remained integral to the reform ambition. These included pro-client orientation, cost-effectiveness, quality public service provision, and modernization. However, there was a greater emphasis on strengthening internal processes and systems. This led to strengthened institutional capacity and the implementation of transparent public procurement. (Ministry of the Interior, 2015). The influences from outside through the EU funds conditionality and some loci in the PA (Office of the Plenipotentiary of Government for the Development of Civil Society, Ministry of Finance) were encouraging participatory processes, including the involvement of various stakeholders, multilevel governance, and accountable ways of public management, including public value determinations (value for money)<sup>2</sup>. However, the PA reform in Slovakia has focused mainly on implementing ICT in administration and public service delivery, with less attention paid to participatory elements in service delivery.

A review of current Slovak PA systems reveals that they remain closed and that hierarchical, vertical approaches of traditional PA continue to prevail (Stānicā, 2019). Klimovsky and Nemec (2021) make a compelling argument that there is a lack of political will for real collaborative governance. This is mainly due to a lack of trust in other non-state actors, which is most evident at the national level. At the local level, municipalities are pursuing various innovative initiatives that include collaborative models with social economy actors and NGOs (Murray Svidroňová et al., 2022).

Hence, the Slovak PA incorporates a diverse range of approaches and practices which indicate the continuation of mixed models and hybridity. The reasons for these tendencies are structural and institutional. The analysis suggests that NPM elements are present in Slovak PA, yield some positive outcomes. These include formalized procedures for CEO selection in municipally owned enterprises, social entrepreneurship development, and public sector contracting out to the private sector and NGOs for public service provision. Furthermore, the elements of NPG are evident, particularly at the local and municipal levels (participatory budgeting, local-level partnerships) or in digital governance (e-procurement). However, these elements are not consistently applied. The underlying structure remains the traditional PA with a state-dominating paradigm. (Sloboda and Sičáková-Beblová 2020; Sloboda et al. 2023;

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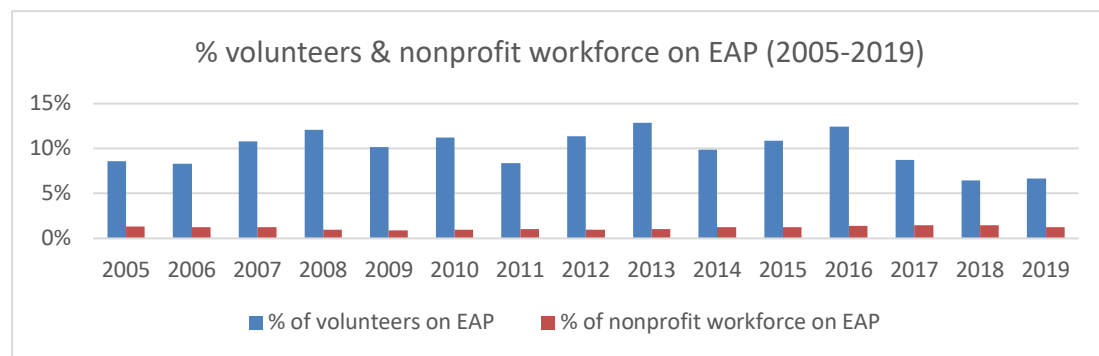
<sup>2</sup> These tendencies can be seen as elements of the New Public Governance (NPG) paradigm, which modernizes traditional PA while avoiding the pitfalls of the NPM. The NPG emphasizes pluralistic, communitarian, and participatory elements in a governance regime with interdependence and collaboration of actors. (Osborne, 2006). The principles of NPG prioritize openness, transparency, anti-corruption, social justice, and social responsibility. They also recognize the vital role of non-governmental organizations in providing public services (Reinholde et al., 2021). Similar is the Public Value Management (PVM) approach that emphasizes the network governance of deliberation and delivery as its main tool in achieving public value in a relational space of key stakeholders. (Stoker, 2006). PVM emphasizes the public value through outcomes of public services rather than outputs and also through the deliberation and consultation mechanism. The above elements subsumable under the NPG paradigm could be identified in Slovakia since 2014, however, they have not become embedded in the PA "DNA" and remained externally driven through the EU structural financing.

Murray Svidroňová, Nemeč, and Vaceková 2022; Placek et al. 2021; Staroňová 2017; Svidronova and Mikus 2015).

#### 4.2. Slovakia in SOCS: statism with NPM elements?

The Johns Hopkins Non-Profit Sector Comparative Research Project places Slovakia in the statist pattern of civil society development, which postulates less than or equal 4,5% non-profit workforce of EAP, less or equal than 38% volunteer share of workforce and less or equal to 36% of government share of revenues in the nonprofit sector (Salamon and Sokolowski, 2017). The data show that in the first decade of the 2000s, the non-profit sector workforce accounted for 1.0% of the EAP, with volunteers making up 27.7% of the workforce. The government's share of revenue from the nonprofit sector was 22.1%. More recent data (Figure 3) show that the Slovak non-profit sector workforce share on the EAP is stagnant and oscillates between 0,9 and 1,45%. The same applies for the volunteer share on EAP, which seems to be declining from 10-12% to 6-7%.

Figure 3: Percentage of volunteers and nonprofit workforce on economically active population (EAP) 2005-2019. Source: The Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (Questionnaire NSNO1-01)



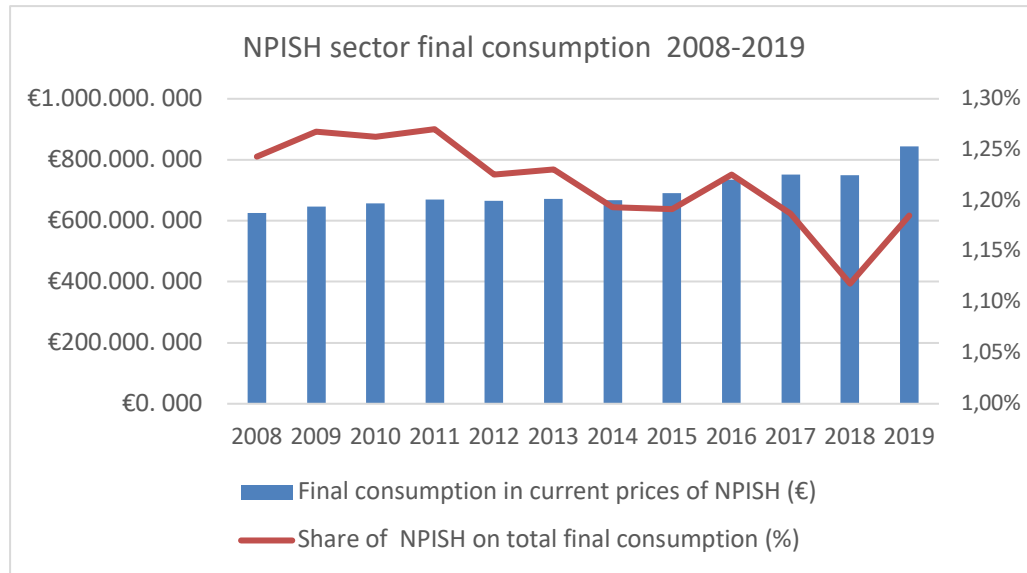
However, contrary to the statist cut-off level, the government's share of revenue from the nonprofit sector's income has increased from 22.1% in 2005 (Salamon, 2017). In 2013, the share equaled 38% (Strečanský et al., 2017), and in 2019, it reached almost 50%, (Svidroňová and Jakuš Muthová, 2022). This increase indicates a greater government-civil society partnership. The data are also indirectly supported by a study by Sloboda et al. (2023), who reviewed the service delivery in which non-governmental organizations (NGOs) replace, complement, or cooperate with PA. The average number of contracts signed per year nearly doubled, from 4,500 in 2012 to 8,800 in 2022. The volume of euros covered through these contracts ranged from €150 million (2014) to €400 million (2019), demonstrating an upward trajectory over time.

When this finding is contextualized by placing it in the context of the overall economic size of the non-profit sector—viewing it in terms of its share of final consumption—it relativizes government income growth. The share of nonprofit institutions serving households (NPISH) on final consumption has a declining trend at a nominal growth (Figure 4). The data suggest that, despite rising nominal income from public funds and philanthropy, the nonprofit



sector's share of the Slovak economy has been decreasing because economic growth outpaced the nonprofit sector's growth.

Figure 4: Final consumption of nonprofit institutions serving households as a share of total final consumption in current prices (€, %) (2008-2019) The Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic.



In the decade 2010-2020, Slovakian politics focused on social and economic development. The conditionality of the EU structural and cohesion funds replaced the pre-accession conditionality. It can be argued that the government was providing more funding to the nonprofit sector as a result of these pressures. However, the relationship between the state and civil society during this period was mixed and ambivalent with instances of adversarial behavior mixed with occasional elements of partnership. The relationship overall reflected a lack of belief in the role of civil society in the welfare development process. This characterization aligns with the public's sentiment. A representative public opinion survey in 2018 revealed that 56% of respondents support the statement that "private and NGO organizations are not able to provide social services in the same quality as state (public) providers and therefore they should work in addition to publicly provided social services" (Focus, 2018).

The ambivalence was demonstrated in a willingness to cooperate with non-state actors through policy engagement mechanisms, as, for example, evidenced by the government's involvement in the Open Government Partnership (Žuffová, 2019) or the Plan for Recovery and Resilience adopted in 2021 that included NGOs as possible recipients of support from the EU funds in community care or early child care (Ministerstvo práce, sociálnych vecí a rodiny Slovenskej republiky, 2024).

The ambivalent relationship is mutual. Civil society actors perceive the central government as having a strong and negative influence on civil society's development, compared to the local and regional levels, which are perceived as having a mixed (positive and

negative) influence and moderate strength (Strecansky, 2017). This view was supported by a case study that identified drivers and barriers to collaboration between CSO actors and municipal governments. Drivers conducive to collaboration were found in cases where solutions driven by CSOs did not require legal or regulatory changes or necessitate significant financial investments and could be implemented through the soft side of governance mechanisms, such as working groups. Another key driver was the commitment and dedication of civil society actors to their mission and beneficiaries. Among the barriers were the officials' competencies, mistrust, unwillingness, and a lack of resources. (Svidroňová, 2019).

There are differences between the levels of government. As Toepler (2019) observed, the government/nonprofit relations within a given country differ not only between government levels but also by field of activity. Indeed, there is substantial evidence of these differences (Svidroňová, 2019). There is sensitivity to the level of government that shapes perceptions of the quality of the state-civil society relationship. The lower the level of government interaction with civil society, the less negative influence the government is perceived to have over civil society (Sloboda et al., 2023; Vaceková and Murray Svidroňová, 2016).

Organizational and resource fragility limit the potential of civil society to play a bolder role in addressing government and market failures and offering viable alternatives to the country's problems. However, even in its modest profile, it has been supplementing the government in meeting demand for public goods that the government has ignored or addressed insufficiently, including education, care, culture, and anti-corruption efforts. (Strečanský et al., 2017). The neighboring Hungary and the Czech Republic were categorized in the 'delayed democratization' pattern by the SOCS theory. It was suggested that given the growing share of government revenue on their income, they evolve in an evolutionary path from the statist pattern informed by their communist legacy towards the welfare partnership model (Cook 2015; Salamon and Sokolowski 2017). Despite the Slovak state's mixed signals to civil society, the rising share of government revenue may suggest that Slovakia may be moving in the same direction<sup>3</sup>.

## 5. Case 1: COVID-19 pandemic in Slovakia

After the unexpected victory in the parliamentary elections in February 2020, the new government, led by pro-European anti-corruption populist Igor Matovič, entered office in mid-March 2020 with a clear mandate to normalize the situation and correct the previous government's wrongdoings, especially in the areas of the rule of law, judiciary, corruption, and abuse of state institutions. However, a coherent program of reforms was not prepared. In mid-April 2020, the new government adopted its manifesto for 2020-2024, which demonstrated civil society's support in several areas. ("Programové vyhlásenie Vlády SR," 2020). The government made a commitment to the principles of active citizenship, open

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<sup>3</sup> The welfare partnership model requires that the government allocate over 50% of its revenue to the nonprofit sector and that at least 4.5% of its workforce be employed in EAP.

government, and public participation in policymaking. It also expressed a clear intention to support mechanisms allowing access to information, volunteering, and private giving. Also, it committed to maintaining existing spaces for dialogue between civil society and the state. However, the pandemic coincided with the new cabinet taking office and posed a significant challenge. From the very beginning of the pandemic in Slovakia, a wave of solidarity has emerged among citizens, companies, and both organized and informal civil society groups. Slovakia has taken swift and decisive action to combat the spread of the virus. Thanks to its relatively slow uptake of infections, the country has been able to adopt stringent measures with minimal disruption. With some luck, Slovakia has navigated the first wave of the pandemic with a low incidence of cases and related fatalities.

### *5.1. Response of civil society*

The response from civil society and the corporate sector was significant (Batková et al., 2020; Hlas, 2020). There were hundreds of initiatives producing and distributing face masks, as well as crowdfunding and fundraising efforts (for protective equipment to support health and social care facilities), totaling over € 6 million. There were also volunteer coordination and organization of support for lonely and vulnerable people (helping with food supplies, etc.), information and awareness-raising in marginalized communities (in Roma settlements, homeless, drug users). Civil society's efforts were also evident in activities that went beyond direct assistance provision. These initiatives included organizing spaces to identify solutions, hosting hackathons, and developing apps for prevention. Additionally, efforts were made to inform the general public, prevent hoaxes, and combat disinformation.

Many individuals from diverse backgrounds stepped up to contribute to fundraising calls and to volunteer for activities organized by civil society, offering their time, expertise, and support through the distribution of material supplies or care. Online fundraising tools were widely used, and the response was overwhelming, totaling over €6 million. The private sector has joined forces with civil society to run fundraising and assistance distribution initiatives (Kto pomôže Slovensku, 2020). The response was not limited to charitable and humanitarian aspects. Civil society activists and leaders were also engaged in policy advocacy and promoting innovation by seeking solutions to specific situations (Batková et al. 2020). Grassroots volunteers did more than just provide direct assistance. They also produced knowledge, including organizing spaces for solutions, developing apps for disease prevention, and taking action against hoaxes and disinformation.

Some domestic philanthropic institutions, such as corporate foundations, with flexible resources, have made notable changes to standard practices. Some repurposed budgets, while others topped existing budgets, established crisis funds to support the core costs of civil society organizations impacted by the pandemic, and adjusted conditions of existing contractual grant relationships (Nadácia Orange, 2020). Other existing domestic philanthropic institutions, especially independent intermediary grant-making foundations (Ekopolis Foundation, Pontis Foundation, Carpathian Foundation, Children of Slovakia Foundation, and others) and community foundations (CF Healthy City Banská Bystrica, Nitra Community Foundation), took the initiative to utilize their experience in grant-making practice and

contacts with local-level partners to distribute financial resources to various non-profits whose activities were constrained by the pandemic, but whose beneficiaries' often urgent needs were left unaddressed.

### *5.2. Elements of collaborative governance*

The COVID-19 crisis demonstrated that while state institutions must provide coordinated and robust support to mitigate the spread of infection, this is not sufficient. The public's cooperative and pro-social attitude was instrumental in the almost immediate change in population behavior, with the adoption of face masks and compliance with social distancing. These factors were crucial in preventing the pandemic from spreading widely.

The new situation also created a new context for the relations between the state and civil society. The government announced several compensation packages to support small and large businesses, including the First Aid Assistance Package and the Second Aid Assistance Package. However, they deliberately excluded civil society organizations. The nonprofit sector viewed this as clear evidence that the state prioritizes the business sector over the nonprofit sector. Despite these signs of neglect, civil society played a crucial complementary role in organizing and delivering assistance at the municipal and community levels.

In the first half of 2020, several CSO platforms, which were members of the Chamber of Nonprofit Nongovernmental Organizations, established a Coordinating Crisis Committee of the Nonprofit Sector. The Crisis Committee had 23 members eager to participate in 3 working groups. The working groups addressed three key areas: (a) Effectiveness of humanitarian assistance, (b) Impact of the pandemic on the CSO sector and the needs of CSOs, and (c) Cooperation of foundations, subsidies, and European funds. These groups developed their agenda and took the initiative to act upon it. The work was organized as a voluntary engagement, with a commitment from the organizations themselves, based on or affiliated with them. In response to the public debate about the government's response to the crisis, the Chamber has published a Memorandum titled "We shall overcome (the crisis) only together." The Memorandum demanded that the public and the government accept the support of nonprofit organizations in areas where they can deliver effective solutions based on multi-year experience and fieldwork. It also demanded that the government improve its communication with civil society organizations and ensure a more efficient flow of information among government units. The Crisis Committee wrote letters to the Ministry of Economy, the Minister of Labor, Social Affairs, and Family, and the Ministry of Finance on specific matters of CSOs' concern due to the impact of COVID-19, including proposals related to the income tax law to extend the time window during which the tax designation percentage can be used. (Ministry of Finance of Slovak Republic, 2020).

### *5.3. Policy initiatives by civil society to address the COVID-19 crisis*

The Crisis Committee was drawing the government's attention to the contribution of nonprofit organizations. Based on input from dozens of contributors, a smaller team working with the Crisis Committee compiled a document called "The Contribution of Nonprofit Non-Governmental Organizations and Civic Initiatives to the Solution of Corona-Induced Crisis."

This document captured the nonprofit sector's response and contributions to the COVID-19 pandemic in Slovakia and organized them into 9 categories. a) Mobilization of private financial and in-kind resources, b) Mobilization and coordination of volunteers, c) Mental health counseling, d) Crisis intervention for battered women and children, e) Social services and support services for children and adults with health conditions, f) Community social work for endangered communities (low income groups, drug addicts, homeless), g) Humanitarian and social care support for marginalized Roma communities, h) Humanitarian and support services for marginalized migrant communities, i) Education, learning and leisure.

In each of these categories, the authors identified the specific contribution of nonprofit organizations, described the needs in each segment and/or group of beneficiaries, and pointed out areas of need that were neglected or inadequately addressed. They then proposed specific changes in practices and made a particular recommendation to government policy (Batková et al., 2020). However, the document focused only on specific, substantive thematic areas, and the cross-cutting issues relevant to civil society as a whole were not addressed. A second document was prepared with the title "Proposals for Measures Related to Non-Governmental, Nonprofit Organizations in the Context of the Coronavirus Crisis." This was a working document for comments. The document included dozens of proposals organized into two groups.

The first set of proposals addressed the immediate drop in income. They included ideas for repurposing and extending existing subsidies, as well as "first aid" measures that would benefit small businesses and employees. These measures should be made explicitly available to eligible nonprofits. They included the establishment of a fund to bridge the funding gaps caused by the lockdown and to compensate for the expected funding gap later in 2020 and 2021. The fund was proposed to be administered by independent Slovak foundations, not by a central government authority. This would allow for greater flexibility and access, and avoid the bureaucratic red tape that is typical of Slovak governmental agencies.

Regarding indirect support from public funds, it was proposed to postpone the mandatory payments for social insurance and qualify humanitarian assistance expenditures as tax-deductible from the corporate and individual income tax base. It was also proposed that the tax-exempt ceiling for unrelated earned income of nonprofit organizations be temporarily abolished to allow them to breathe and engage in other economic activities. Other sets of suggestions included proposals for long-term systemic measures to improve the resource environment for civil society.

The document also called for the immediate launch of a national volunteering scheme as the most effective way to further develop the nationwide network of volunteering centers and strengthen communities' resilience. Nonprofits were also proposing to modify various administrative regulations on the use of state subsidies to enable multi-year and core support funding from public funds, in contrast to the one-year and project-based funding that has been standardly used. The state responded to some of these proposals with some delay in the Action Plan for the Concept of Development of Civil Society for 2022-2026, adopted in September 2022, and maintained a passive and state-centered position overall.

## 6. Case 2: Russian aggression in Ukraine

Before the COVID-19 pandemic ended, another crisis emerged: the Russian War in Ukraine in February 2022. Since then approximately one million Ukrainians have crossed the Slovak-Ukrainian border, with the number of individuals remaining in Slovakia under temporary protection reaching 119,000 by April 2024 (Eurostat, 2024). In the initial weeks and months, this created a humanitarian crisis that prompted a response from the government, the private sector, and civil society. It included in-kind material support (food, urgent shelter, hygiene, medical support) and services (psycho-social, legal, transport, housing) that were needed primarily at the border and subsequently inside the country. Over time, the focus shifted to addressing the integration and inclusion needs of refugees, with a particular emphasis on women with children and the elderly.

### 6.1. Response of Slovak civil society

Immediately following the invasion, CSOs and the private sector played a crucial role in responding to the crisis. CSOs focused on providing assistance in three main areas: first, humanitarian support at the border with Ukraine, which was critical. Secondly, humanitarian aid was provided to refugees inside Slovakia. Thirdly, the inclusion of refugees and Ukrainians was facilitated through the provision of integration services, including social, educational, and employment services. The humanitarian support was financed through various public collections and crowdfunding drives (“Azylový dom pre Ukrajinu,” 2022; “Kto pomôže Ukrajine,” 2022; Človek v ohrození, n.d.) and private-sector contributions, as exemplified by Medvec (2022). A multitude of civic groups and initiatives were engaged in fundraising efforts to directly address the needs in Ukraine (Post Bellum SK, 2022). These efforts have been visible in the media and actively communicated. In addition to direct support, some civic initiatives offered know-how and ideas, which can also be considered a form of giving. They provided the government suggestions to improve and facilitate the integration of refugees into society (Teraz.sk, 2022).

By early April 2022, over 6,600 volunteers had been engaged, and over €11 million had been mobilized by various platforms and online giving systems for material, humanitarian, and health support to Ukraine through various collections and fundraising drives. By the end of February 2023, the total amount raised by non-governmental organizations from domestic sources (individuals and companies) had reached over €17 million, with over 7,000 volunteers participating in various forms of assistance. The material (in-kind) support exceeded 13,700 tons, while the monetary value of the volunteer work was estimated at €4.3 million (ÚSVROS, 2023). In addition, civil society engaged in advocacy for social change. Informal initiatives and CSOs organized demonstrations and marches in support of and solidarity with Ukraine, contributing to the public discourse and influencing public policies and government activities through communicative action. Another area of CSOs’ activity was combating disinformation of anti-systemic and extremist politicians and influencers.

These activities were important because, according to comparative indices, Slovakia is less open and welcoming to immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. The Migration Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) assessment of Slovakia indicates that policies that treat immigrants as

threats lead more people to perceive immigrants as threats in general and to treat them in ways that harm integration. The implementation of restrictive policies has been associated with elevated levels of xenophobia and Islamophobia among the general public, accompanied by a reduction in social trust. This has resulted in a reduction in contact and positive experiences with immigrants (MIPEX, 2020).<sup>4</sup>

## 6.2. *Response by the state*

In response, the state implemented policy and regulatory adjustments pertaining to the provision of assistance to refugees and the utilization of existing recovery instruments from the ongoing COVID-19 crisis to address a novel challenge. In response to the influx of individuals from Ukraine, the state initiated a project entitled "Assistance to Persons from Ukraine in Their Entry and Integration on the Territory of the Slovak Republic – Local Government." Nevertheless, the primary focus of state activity was directed towards local governments, which were the most vulnerable and overwhelmed. The program provided support to municipalities in the provision of housing, employment assistance, and social and health care services, with the objective of addressing the needs of refugees. The financial resources were not derived from the state budget, but rather from the European Social Fund and the European Regional Development Fund. (Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Family 2022)

The work of NGOs was of great importance for the immediate management of the crisis at the border with Ukraine and for later integration of refugees. However, there was no state mechanism in place to finance these organizations' activities. Consequently, both civil society organizations and local governments financed these activities from their own resources or from contributions from international development organizations (e.g., UNHCR, UNICEF).

In 2023, a new project was initiated with the title "Assistance to Persons from Ukraine in Their Entry and Integration on the Territory of the Slovak Republic - NGOs." This initiative was a collaborative effort between the Slovak state and the civil sector in response to the crisis. It was developed through a process of cooperation between various public authorities, including the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, the Office of the Plenipotentiary for the Development of Civil Society, the Ministry of the Interior, and representatives from the non-governmental sector<sup>5</sup>. The project funding was specifically allocated to NGOs to offset a portion of the costs they have incurred since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, which have continued to accrue in 2023 for work with refugees from Ukraine. A total of €9.5 million in funding was provided to 110 NGOs and church-established organizations, which employed

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<sup>4</sup> The period since February 2022 has been remarkable by the growing confrontation and polarization of narratives regarding the War, its causes, and the attribution of responsibility for it. The fragmentation of the public discourse due to the influence of social media becoming the news source contributed to shaping public opinion. 69% of Slovaks believe that Ukrainian refugees receive support at the expense of Slovak citizens from weaker and socially vulnerable, that need it more. 59% believe that Slovakia needs to continue supporting Ukrainian refugees because they are fleeing the war. (Globsec, 2023)

<sup>5</sup> The project was implemented by a consortium of six independent foundations. The leader of the consortium was the Open Society Foundation Bratislava and its members were the SOCIA Foundation, the Foundation for Children of Slovakia, the Ekopolis Foundation, the Pontis Foundation and the Foundation of the Centre for Philanthropy. The foundations redistributed funding money to other organisations that have helped refugees from Ukraine.

1,700 individuals and assisted 72,000 individuals on a monthly basis. (OSF, 2024). The project represented a singular opportunity to recover funds for past endeavors to assist Ukrainian refugees, while simultaneously expanding its scope and enhancing the quality of future integration activities.

### *6.3. Elements of collaborative governance*

In November 2022, the Minister of the Interior signed a MoU with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to provide assistance in addressing the emergency situation in Ukraine. The rationale for the Memorandum's enactment was the experience gained during the initial stages of the crisis in early 2022. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, several deficiencies became evident that the state was ill-prepared to address. The Memorandum delineated the respective roles and responsibilities of the Ministry of the Interior and NGOs, including the coordination and provision of humanitarian assistance, the recruitment, training, and coordination of volunteers, material and technical assistance from the Ministry, and the sharing of information on individual activities and plans that are aligned with the government contingency plan adopted in October 2022 (Ministry of Interior of Slovak Republic, 2022). The plan identified areas where the role, responsibility, and required capacity of NGOs are delineated and described in the context of a crisis situation at border crossings, points of initial contact, or the "last mile" (Vláda SR, 2022). The Memorandum was signed by humanitarian and developmental aid organizations, including five church-based organizations (ADRA, the Slovak Samaritans Association, People in Peril, n.o., Evangelical Diakonia ECAV in Slovakia, IPčko, Maltese Aid Slovakia, Mareena, Slovak Humanitarian Council, Slovak Catholic Charity and Slovak Scouting, o. z.).

## **7. Discussion**

Some studies have found convergence between Central and Eastern European countries and former Soviet Union countries, as both embrace government-NGO partnerships, despite their different post-communist development trajectories. While some countries move towards welfare partnerships with broadly defined frameworks and corporatist elements, other East European countries strengthen the role of government by defining the common good more strictly and limit the autonomy of civil society organizations in defining it. (Aasland et al., 2020; Cook, 2015). This is the case in Slovakia as well.

By reviewing hypothesis H1, it can be concluded that Slovakia's pattern of civil society development has indeed strengthened its hybrid features, combining statist approaches, but it is not moving towards welfare partnership patterns, a stronger service function, or heavy government support, as the analysis of the macro-level suggested. Even if the rising share of public income in nonprofit sector revenue over the last 10-15 years indicates a strengthening trend in government-NGO partnerships, the nonprofit employment growth between 2010 and 2019 was minimal and did not align with the increase in government funding. The stagnant, slightly declining levels of volunteering on EAP indicate that the propensity to volunteer has reached its peak. Low levels of volunteering and employment are typical of a statist pattern. Furthermore, even if the government's funding share in the nonprofit sector income was rising in both absolute and relative terms, the overall share of the nonprofit sector on the



country's total consumption remained limited and small (Strecansky, 2020). Slovakia is thus not moving towards the welfare partnership because other necessary components (a more robust employment share) are missing. Cook's insight may be correct by proposing that the accession process transposed the welfare partnership model of Salamon to new member states of CEE – including Slovakia, due to their overall Eurocentric nature. (Cook, 2015). However, in Slovakia, the underlying structures and patterns shape the overall outcome, which appears hybrid and mixed with strong statist patterns.

On the hypothesis H2 that the crises led the PA to greater flexibility in its engagement with civil society, using the NPM repertoire, it can be concluded that it is partially confirmed. It was shown that there are higher levels of contracting, performance-based management, increased resource flows, and new mechanisms of coordination and governance. However, the strength of each of these elements varies and has not been convincing. The levels of contracting and its volume have increased, but there is little data to suggest that it will grow further. New mechanisms of coordination and governance have been developed during the second crisis, but their continuation remains an open question. The analysis did not review the performance-based management in the contractual relations.

The review of the actions of civil society during both crises shows that civil society in Slovakia performed the following functions based on its own, bottom-up initiative:

- a) providing assistance and services to vulnerable populations (a variety of social services, call centers, distribution of material support, food, shelter, first contact, orientation)
- b) mobilizing resources (financial, material, in-kind, services, people, coordination of volunteers)
- c) raising awareness (cognitive landscape)
- d) promoting social cohesion (for example, by integration support, combating erosion of public trust, supporting self-help of refugees in communities)

Civil society plays a crucial role during crises, as evidenced by research across various contexts. The pandemic crisis stimulated government-nonprofit cooperation in all nonprofit regimes. (Benevolenski et al., 2023). In the refugee crisis, civil society actors and volunteers are essential in maintaining humanitarian standards and effective crisis management (Simsa, 2017).

In Slovakia, hundreds of CSOs and many private sector entities were engaged in these activities. Philanthropic and civil society responses had a distinct social presence and visibility in the media. This finding is not unique. Crises galvanize civil society to express its self-organizing potential and agility. The self-organizing potential of civil society expressed itself through establishment of temporary coordination bodies (The Crisis Committee of the Non-Profit Sector during the Covid crisis) allowing to formulate positions and demands towards other societal partners (PA, government officials) and to be engaged in policy advocacy in crisis related agendas (suggestions for improvements of existing policies, drawing attention to impacts on civil society).

Civil society organizations that self-organized in response to the COVID-19 crisis can be

viewed as nodes within a relatively horizontal network. The civil society network's past connections provided its actors with trust and social capital that enhance its performance, even if the network's structural characteristics (in its macro-level socioeconomic parameters) were not conducive to effective performance. The civil society network interacted with other networks – one being the public administration at national and local levels, others being communities in different areas who benefited from services and activities, and others being volunteers and other collaborators. Government institutions, as networks, have also interacted with civil society actors during the crisis, and these interactions have produced policy and development outcomes.

CSOs have called for a collaborative governance approach, but the government has not provided a clear response. CSOs also formed an inter-organizational coalition that acts as an institutional entrepreneur, through which new patterns of governance emerge (Ohanyan, 2012). Civil society's collaborative organizing and engagement in policy dialogue with the government have also strengthened its agency. The case study revealed that collaborative governance mechanisms emerged during the second crisis (Memorandum) rather than during the first. It is difficult to determine whether this shift can be attributed to institutional learning, personal preferences, political leadership (there was a change in the cabinet and the PM), or to some other underlying factor.

Reviewing the hypothesis H2 that crises catalyzed processes leading the PA to greater flexibility in using the NPM repertoire in its engagement with civil society, addressing the new situation, the findings are conclusive, although not strong.

The approach of 'network institutionalism' views the realm of CSOs as a network of state and non-state actors that interact and influence each other, thereby increasing their effectiveness. Borrowing from that suggestion, it can be applied to the case of Slovak civil society organizations in the context of this article, helping to view the increased self-organization of civil society despite being conducted in a social and political context marked by the residues of the statist pattern. The self-organization of civil society during the COVID-19 crisis can also be seen as an outcome of previous network relations that enhanced trust and facilitated information and resource flows, thereby improving the network's performance. As a result, the civil society agency was embedded in the institutional network environment (Ohanyan, 2012).

## **8. Conclusions**

Slovakia remains constrained by a statist approach to policymaking, implementation, and the dominance of the service delivery system. (Osborne, 2006). The relatively low levels of government funding in the nonprofit sector's income (given the nonprofit sector's small share of the economy) may have contributed to the state's neglect of civil society, but they may also have restrained welfare production. The relationship between the state and civil society in Slovakia can be described as one that has persistent elements of statism and weak elements of welfare partnership.

In a statist system, the state administration assumes a dominant role, maintaining control, centralizing power, and functioning as a hierarchical network. This is as much a problem of political leadership, political culture, and state formation in East Central Europe as it is a characteristic of public administration. The politicization and centralization of public administration in post-communist Central Europe increased rent-seeking (Grzymala-Busse, 2003) and hindered the advancement of innovative governance strategies for welfare provision, despite efforts by civil society organizations.

Interactions between organized civil society and the state suggest that the Slovak PA has been embedded in a hybrid NPM paradigm, which continues to employ centralized, top-down approaches to governance while promoting evidence-based decision-making and business-style management. (Salamon and Toepler, 2015). However, it is hesitant to move towards a more complementary relationship with the non-state actors. It struggles with the bottom-up, pluralistic approaches of the new version of the NPM and the new governance paradigm (Osborne, 2006). The new governance paradigm views public management (policymaking, service delivery) as a collaborative process within pluralistic networks (Brandsen et al., 2017), drawing on a flexible, holistic toolbox. Despite the EU's encouragement of a partnership approach to public sector management, these practices have only recently begun to emerge.

The statist tendencies in public governance are in an asynchronous relationship with the self-organizing capacity and agility of civil society, which emerged especially during crises. The case presented above can be understood as the interaction of the structural pattern (hybrid statism) in interaction with the autopoietic and social-relational characteristics (Granovetter, 2017) of the networked civil society, both of which, in combination, generate civil society sector agency. The crisis created opportunities that the networked civil society could have embraced; however, it was unable to fully develop them due to structural constraints.

Further investigation is needed to understand why increased government funding does not result in higher employment levels and why volunteering levels are declining. A deeper analysis of the EU funding conditionality may also provide some clues. Another issue is the quality of the data from the national accounts.

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