

FINAL PROGRAMME REPORT FM14-21

Slovenia

Civil Society

Programme short name	SI-ACTIVECITIZENS
Fund Operator	CNVOS – Centre for Information Service, Co-operation and Development of NGOs (CNVOS SI)
Host Programme Area	PA15 Civil Society
Financial Mechanisms	EEA Grants, Norway Grants
Programme grant in EUR	€ 3,800,000.00
Programme co-financing in EUR	€ 0.00
Final incurred amount in EUR	€ 3,782,695.18
Final incurred rate %	99.54 %

PROGRAMME RESULTS

Programme Objective: Civil society and active citizenship strengthened and vulnerable groups empowered

Eligible expenditure: € 3,800,000.00 Amount incurred: € 3,782,695.18

Issues the programme aimed to address

The Active Citizens Fund in Slovenia has been implemented through the years in which society has a whole underwent turbulent times with Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, three different Governments ruled in Slovenia during this period. Each of them with different approach and attitude towards human rights, democracy and civil society. Therefore, while the programme kept its strong focus on a long-term development and resilience of civil society (e.g. through organisational grants, new approaches supported by projects), with its flexibility it also enabled responsiveness to the new challenges.

The programme was designed to address issues, such as lack of long-term investment in organizational development of NGOs, especially advocacy, fundraising and communications, low civic engagement and weak ties with constituencies, gaps between established and well-functioning NGOs in the capital and small grass-roots elsewhere. Thus, more focus was given to “internal” issues of civil society. At the time of programming Slovenia was democratically stable country with positive trends of civil society development (Law on NGOs with its national NGO fund was just passed, Government Strategy for NGO development identified several measures for further development). In comparison to some other ACF beneficiary countries, human rights and democracy in general were in a good condition. However, some areas (especially Roma) were still lagging behind (e.g. Roma in Southeast Slovenia still don't have access to clear water).

With Covid pandemic and the new Government in the office, Slovenia witnessed backsliding in democratic values, as reported by several EU institutions and reports of different organisations, as well as Constitutional court. For example, during the pandemic the Government passed several decrees which were later deemed unconstitutional by the Constitutional court (e.g. narrowing the right to protest). Civicus's Civic space monitor marked Slovenia's civic space “narrowed” in 2020^[1]. Consequently, the focus of the programme turned more towards rise of populism, including smear campaigns towards CSOs and human rights defenders, democratic backsliding and protection of human rights.

[1] <https://findings2020.monitor.civicus.org/rating-changes.html#slovenia>

Programme contribution to overall objectives

The past implementation period serves as extremely good evidence of importance and good result-based set-up of Active citizens fund. Striving to strengthen civil society and active citizenship and empower vulnerable groups ACF was for almost the whole implementation period the only funding source to address these issues in Slovenia. With programme's support CSOs were able to defend human rights and the rule of law, democratic values and vulnerable groups. Civic engagement and mobilisation increased significantly, as well as evidence-based advocacy. CSOs together with schools and other institutions developed several different educational tools for human rights, number of CSOs monitoring human rights violations increased, increasing also the number of reported human rights violations. Self-advocacy of vulnerable groups has become significantly stronger. Projects and activities were implemented all over the country, with a strong emphasis in supporting grass-roots and smaller organisations that could share the burden of defending human rights and democracy with bigger CSOs in Ljubljana. Through several campaigns (e.g referendum on water, Get out and vote) grassroots organisations worked together with bigger CSOs, mutually benefitting from each other. Bigger CSOs got on-the-ground support with volunteers, while grassroots organisations got new expert and advocacy knowledge. Such cooperation continued even without top-down coordination, as smaller local NGOs recognised the need to seek support from bigger NGOs (e.g. grassroot EkoAnhovo needed help of several national NGOs for conducting advocacy campaign to change the legislation criteria for granting environmental permits for co-incineration). ACF was thus very successful in finally bridging the gap between bigger and smaller NGOs.

Being one of the smallest programmes and in the scope of its primary target group (NGOs), ACF Slovenia significantly contributed to the overall objectives of the Grants. Through supporting CSOs in under-served geographic areas and target groups (people with mental health issues, Roma, migrants, refugees, LGBTQI+) programme contributed to reducing social and economic disparities, providing a solid base for further development in these areas. For example, some organisations (such as Museum of madness based in Trate, rural area near Austrian border) developed sustainable programmes, broadened their constituencies and increased their advocacy efforts. With better outreach they have increased the number of their supporters, which resulted in bigger donor base. In a long run, these organisations will continue to reduce social disparities.

ACF Slovenia continued good bilateral cooperation with donor states, especially Norway. Some of the project partnerships that started in the previous EEA NGO programme, continued also in ACF or started with the first ACF call for proposals and continued through other opportunities. Those partnerships are not only project-based, but they have developed long-term cooperation. ACF Slovenia was involved in all Active Citizens Days, sending its project promoters to learn from other organisations. Programme also supported Arendal week 2023, providing speakers and increasing close connections when it comes to democracy concerns. Throughout the implementation period ACF Slovenia kept close communication and cooperation with the Norwegian embassy. The programme thus contributed to strengthening bilateral cooperation on strategic, programme and project level.

Sustainability

Experience and approach of ACF as the whole programme and ACF Slovenia specifically informed and supported development of the EU CERV re-granting projects. ACF SI fund

operator secured two consequent re-granting projects for Slovenia and Croatia that enable continuation of programmes developed by NGOs in the scope of ACF. On the programme level ACF Slovenia also contributed to the programming of the next period of ACF (or Civil society fund).

Unfortunately, ACF and CERV still remain the only funding sources directly supporting human rights and democracy in Slovenia. Realising the importance of such support, the Ministry of public administration in 2023 prepared a call for proposal for NGOs that was significantly influenced by the ACF approach (e.g. same purpose, similar result framework). Unfortunately, the call was later completely abolished due to several legislation breaches by the former minister and ministry's staff. However, the ministry continues to support employments in NGOs also in the "ACF priority areas" and has also announced in 2025 that they will publish a new call supporting democracy action.

Thus, NGOs in Slovenia can continue with achieving further progress, having learned how important civic engagement, campaigning and advocacy are for achieving concrete results and changes in society. Another important sustainability impact of the ACF Programme is results-based approach that has helped the supported NGOs to better understand and define their goals and targets and had an impact in their overall modus operandi.

In the aspect of sustainability, we should also mention close ties that were built through different Regional civil society initiatives, especially the Community for Action, election initiative and anti-burnout initiative. Through these initiatives, organisations connected with other similar-minded organisations from other countries, sharing their experience and approaches, and are now continuing to work together.

Outcome 1: Strengthened civil society watchdog/advocacy role

Amount incurred: € 1,308,352.72

Results

Outcome 1 aimed to strengthen civil society watchdog and advocacy role. This outcome addressed challenges including lack of evidence-based advocacy campaign, lack of CSOs' professionals represented in the media and low mobilization of public. Addressing these challenges is important for successful advocacy campaigns that foster democracy and give people a feeling of being part of democratic society.

To address these challenges, the programme supported CSOs through 5 different types of projects - large, medium, small, micro (or quick response) and, organizational/institutional support. Over 1,3 million euros were granted to 50 projects, ranging from 118,500 to 1.149 euros. 6 different calls for proposals were launched between October 2019 and January 2023. Two of those calls were a result of additional funds received by consortium at the end of 2022. Those funds were distributed through call for proposals for medium projects and quick response fund. The calls for proposals used different modalities - from classical project funding to organizational support using lump-sums, and open-end calls for quick response focused on the need of CSOs to respond quickly to current developments, e.g. the [Law for Nature – HEP Mokrice](#), advocating for the respect of environmental protection standards while planning for hydroelectric power plants or the [Prevention of reduction of reproductive and other health rights in the process of abolition of supplementary health insurance](#). Each of those calls was focused

on different type of organizations to make sure all CSOs has an opportunity to participate in the Programme, making sure the call guidelines and application processes were adjusted to the experience and knowledge of CSOs. Additional support was provided to organizations in less developed areas with group and individual consulting on the project idea and its compatibility with the Programme's aims. Organizations got concrete advice on how to further develop their project idea to have more chance in getting support. This opportunity was given to all CSOs in less developed areas. In the distribution of the funds, a geographical component was also taken into consideration making sure that supported CSOs came from all parts of Slovenia.

Several outputs were set to help us to reach our goals. We were following Citizens' participation in civic activities; Policy input submitted by CSOs and Innovative (new or improved) methods for advocacy and campaigning applied. We've managed to achieve most of our goals set on outputs level, except for Number of evidence-based policy submissions by CSOs where we were little behind.

[Let Anhovo breath](#) is a great example of how a little bit of support (they got less than 5,000 euro from the ACF Slovenia) can make a big difference. They successfully campaigned for the legislative change of environmental regulations demanding that the co-incinerate plants respect the same standards for environmental protection as incinerate plants. This will have a huge impact on the quality of living in Anhovo and all its residents.

Another good example are two projects implemented by Raum AU, [Carinthian Democratic Station](#) and [Carinthian Democratic Station 2](#). They were promoting citizens' participation in public affairs, mostly on local level, by providing guidance, information and advocacy support. They've become one of the key points in this part of Slovenia for CSOs and individuals who want to get engaged. They mobilized 190 people to get more involved in democratic society.

The key indicator for the Outcome 1 was the number of national policies and laws influenced by the CSOs. The supported projects collectively influenced 27 national policies and laws – meaning they had provided concrete policy recommendations that were then included in the policy/law proposal by the government or that they would help to shape the policies/laws directly with the government through some working groups etc., exceeding the target set at 18. Very successful here was a quick response fund as the projects needed to be focused on a concrete law/policy that was currently being prepared/debated. The difference between classic advocacy work and these quick response projects is that the government often plans to work on some policies/laws but then doesn't really get to it, while the quick response focused mostly on policies/laws that were already in the process. It is also important to stress out that there are practically no other sources of financing advocacy projects of CSOs in Slovenia (now we also have some from CERV programme). Projects supported through this mechanism contributed almost half of the result – 13. The areas this policies/laws covered were really diverse – environmental protection, free schools, decent work, housing, voting rights etc.

Under this outcome one of the key indicators was Number of media appearances where CSOs provide expertise on specific issues. The supported projects cumulatively had 632 media appearances, which was much higher than the target (250). One of the most successful project in this regard was [My municipality: a transparent and open local government](#) (implemented in consortium of different organization with Today is a new day, Institute for different studies as a lead partner and Åpenhet as a donor country partner), appearing in 106 media outlets.

Another key indicator for this Outcome was Number of CSOs using evidence/research to support their advocacy and policy work. We wanted to encourage CSOs to use more evidence and research when preparing advocacy actions and we've managed to stimulate 9 organizations to start doing so and thus reaching the target.

Overall, the programme successfully contributed to achieving Outcome 1 Strengthened civil society watchdog/advocacy role. This is evidenced by the high quality of completed projects, which together achieved most of the planned results for this outcome. Most of the supported organizations have a high potential to continue with their advocacy activities thus contributing to better living conditions for all.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

One of the biggest challenges for this Outcome was the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences – between 1st and 2nd stage of the first call for large and medium projects, the life as we know it changed completely. Therefore, the applicants had to redesign their project in the middle of the application period, taken into the account the possible restrictions due to Covid-19. We also needed to redesign our capacity-building activities with online sessions (also some on- site visits needed to be done online). The possibility of extension of projects was crucial for project promoters to successfully complete their projects. But Covid-19 also had a positive impact – as a lot of activities were done online, higher number of people were able to participate. That is reflected in our overall outreach – over 37,000 people were involved in activities supported by ACF Slovenia, including online seminars and conferences and mostly, online petitions. But still, it is important to stress that the initial targets would be overachieve even without all these on-line events, also due to some very successful exhibitions (like [Guardians of the River](#)).

Another challenge was also programme management capacities. We managed to timely publish all our calls but there were delays in conducting monitoring and on- site visits as we had foreseen that each supported project (except quick response) will have at least one visit. Consequently, some project reports were approved with a delay. Also, because we were providing project promoters support and mentorship, not just pure revision of project reports. This takes time and sometimes the projects reports were of lower quality than what we've expected in the beginning – therefore their monitoring was more time consuming. We would still keep this mentoring component of the monitoring role, but we would dedicate more people and lower the number of on-the-site visits. The fact that we were able to receive some additional funds and therefore support even more projects didn't help in this regard. But we did some shifting inside the consortium at that time to make sure all programme partners have sufficient capacities to carry out their tasks – the project monitoring of the last projects was distributed among two partners while the third partner was delegated with other tasks. In total we supported 96 projects which is a lot for a 3 million budget. We could say that we would change the modality in the future and design our calls differently, but we really believe that the design of our programme was the best for our situation. What would be helpful is more flexibility on the management fee that would take into account also the complexity of the programme design and the number of projects supported. Looking back – quick response funds were really time consuming (open calls, regular applications assessments and selection committees) but the results they gave were above expectations.

The above-mentioned challenges are common to all Outcomes so we will not repeat them. Under Outcome 2-4 we will only list the challenges specific to that Outcome, if any.

Outcome 2: Increased support for civic education and human rights

Amount incurred: € 731,998.89

Results

Outcome 2 aimed to increase support for civic education and human rights. This outcome addressed the lack of structured human rights education in schools and the lack of CSOs' interest in fighting for human rights through existing channels, especially official reports to Ombudsman and advocate of the principle of equality as well as the use of strategic litigations. Addressing these challenges is important for the higher protection of human rights in Slovenia and for creating a better society for all.

To address these challenges the programme supported CSOs through 5 different types of projects - large, medium, small, micro (or quick response) and, organizational/institutional support. Almost 732,000 euros were granted to 26 projects, ranging from 120,000 to 1,818 euros. The way of distributing these funds was the same as for Outcome 1.

Several outputs were set to help us to reach our goals. We were promoting civic and human rights education by tracking the number of public and educational institutions partnering with CSOs on civic and human rights education as well as number of educational tools for civic and human rights education developed and/or disseminated by CSOs.

The project with the best results in this regard is the organizational support for [Humanitas](#) – as the organization is focused on human rights education in schools for over 20 year they had the knowledge and experience to use the money wisely. They solely contributed 46 out of 152 or partnerships with educational institutions and 36 out of 71 educational tools. Needless to say, our targets on these outputs were extremely overachieved (16 partnerships and 6 tools). Not far back were also two projects carried out by Amnesty International Slovenia – [Amnesty Academy: Education of young people on active citizenship and human rights](#) and [Learn with Amnesty: Building a Better World by Spreading Knowledge about Human Rights](#). They prepared special curriculum on human rights for students of different faculties and a [portal for e-learning](#) on different human rights topics.

The second output was connected to implementation of international human rights standards. We set four indicators here – number of strategic litigation cases supported, number of CSOs registering and reporting human rights violation and number of cases of human rights violations and discrimination filed/lodged, and number of awareness raising campaigns carried out.

The project that absolutely excelled in this section was [Legal network for the protection of democracy](#). They supported 135 cases of human rights violations, mostly connected to Covid-19 measures and some absurd penalties that were given out to people at that time, by providing free legal support and defending the cases at different courts – even in front of Constitutional Court. Again, the project received less than 5,000 euros but the impact it had was immense.

Another good example are two projects from the Museum of Madness - [From institutions to people](#) and [From institutions to people 2](#). They carried out innovative campaigns promoting

deinstitutionalization by establishing exhibition in an old facility for mentally ill that was closed down in 2004. Over 3,000 people visited the exhibition since 2021, mostly students and young professionals working with people with mental health challenges. Keep in mind there was a Covid-19 pandemic in between so their doors were closed for a large period in between. The exhibition includes personal stories of people living or working in the facility while it was still operating. This has an enormous impact on all visitors and they needed to incorporate additional activity into the guided tour where people have the possibility to reflect on what they've seen and how they feel and regain their strengths.

Another great example of innovative campaign to promote the right to healthy environment is a project called [Guardians of the river](#). They united 19 acclaimed photographers and 29 women who were represented as guardians of the river. They prepared an exhibition that served as an opportunity to address and advocated for the protection of rivers (and environment). The exhibition was a huge success with over 10,000 attendees and is still traveling around Slovenia.

Regarding the Outcome indicators “share of target group disapproving of public statements that express negative views or hatred against minorities” and “share of target group showing concern for human rights” we had some difficulties with collection of results. There were only a few projects that were working directly with end users or were carrying out projects where we could measure the difference in the attitude before/after. For the first indicator there was only one project where the survey was taken but it was focused on pupils in elementary schools, so the questionnaire had to be adopted. For the second – the baseline was already set so high that it was impossible to reach 10% increase as it was already over 90%.

Overall, the programme successfully contributed to achieving of Outcome 2 Increased support for civic education and human rights. We can support this by the fact that the majority of the supported projects/activities are continuing even after the end of the support received through the Active Citizens Fund, including our stars – Legal network and Museum of Madness, mostly by the support of CERV Programme.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

The biggest challenge here was definitely collecting data for the outcome indicators. We didn't know what kind of projects we will support when the indicators were set so we had trouble finding projects that would fit the frame. The culture of measuring results (not just outputs) is quite low so the organizations don't have a lot of practice. The lesson learnt is that we would have to invest more effort to work with project promoters on good questionnaires as well as to adopt the indicators after the projects are contracted.

Outcome 3: Vulnerable groups are empowered

Amount incurred: € 367,836.81

Results

Outcome 3 aimed to empower vulnerable groups regardless of their vulnerability. This outcome addressed challenges of some vulnerable groups whose needs are still unaddressed as well as the need to empower members of vulnerable groups to become more involved in advocating for their rights. Addressing those issues is needed to make sure nobody is left out or forgotten

and to secure that the measures to empower vulnerable groups are consistent with their needs and requirements. Only then the measures taken can be effective and efficient.

To address these challenges the programme supported CSOs through 5 different types of projects - large, medium, small, micro (or quick response) and, organizational/institutional support. About 368,000 euros were dedicated to achieving this Outcome and 15 projects were supported, ranging from 78.067 to 1.413 euros. 5 different calls for proposals were launched between October 2019 and January 2023. One of those calls resulted from additional funds received by consortium at the end of 2022. Those funds were distributed through the call for proposals for quick response fund. The call modalities were the same as for calls under Outcome 1. The only difference was that the additional call for medium projects didn't include Outcome 3 but was combined with Outcome 1 or Outcome 2.

In line with country-specific concerns, special attention was given to Roma and migrants under this Outcome to make sure they're not left behind.

Several outputs were set to help us to empower vulnerable groups. We were seeking innovative methods and approaches to address their needs and mobilise members of vulnerable groups to advocate for their needs. We've gone beyond all of our targets set for Outputs and Outcome 3. In total, 1882 members of vulnerable groups were reached by supported projects, 645 trained in advocacy and/or mobilized. 22 innovative methods were applied to enable better inclusion of vulnerable groups and 24 CSOs adopted participatory methods to work with vulnerable groups.

The supported projects addressed variety of vulnerabilities – from Roma to migrants, people suffering from mental issues to different disabilities. [Mek pe dolestar! Prevention of Drug Abuse Among Young Roma in Dolenjska Region](#) prepared a protocol for including Roma drug abusers into drug prevention programmes of CSOs. Drug abuse is quite high in Roma communities but none of the Slovenian CSOs who are working with drug abusers didn't have a programme for Roma people; they were left out of the prevention and rehabilitation programs and no attention was given to them. They trained several people who can now work as a connection between the rehabilitation centres and Roma communities.

[Migrants Giving Voice to Migrants](#) was a collaboration between Slovenian Philanthropy and Student Radio. They also collaborated with a donor partner organization from Norway, Radio Nova. They empowered 190 migrants by giving them skills and knowledge for independent journalistic work and enabled them to put on their own show on the Student Radio. Some of them have become regular coworkers of Radio Student others joined Slovenian Philanthropy as volunteers and become more active in its advocacy work.

A whole different target group was addressed by Paz!Park organization in the project Joined in the park. They addressed 192 children and invited them to participate in the planning of the public spaces in the Celje municipality. They designed participatory models to make sure the children's voices were heard and recognized by the local authorities. With their support 2 public spaces were re-designed to be more suitable for children.

The key indicator for the Outcome 3 was the number of individuals reached by empowerment measures. The supported projects collectively reached 1,882 individuals, surpassing the target set at 500.

Overall, the programme successfully contributed to achieving Outcome 3 Vulnerable groups are empowered. This is evident by the continuation of some projects by members of the vulnerable groups (like association [Intercultural Dialogue](#), run by a migrant from Turkey) and by continuation of some activities that are addressing their needs. Most of the supported organizations have a high potential to continue with their activities thus contributing to empowering vulnerable groups.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

There were no specific challenges regarding this outcome. For the general ones see Outcome 1.

A lesson learned was that no matter how small Slovenia is, a lot of organizations that are working on the same or similar issues still don't know each other, even less so what the organizations in other countries are doing. It would be beneficial to organize more events where they can share their work and build closer relationships.

Outcome 4: Enhanced capacity and sustainability of civil society organisations and sector

Amount incurred: € 639,787.32

Results

The last Outcome aimed to enhance capacities and sustainability of CSOs in Slovenia. It addressed the lack of CSOs capacities to work directly with their constituents, lack of transparency and weak management processes. This is important as it affects the quality of the work of CSOs and reflects directly their capacity to attract and retain members, volunteers, staff, and donors. It has an impact on the sustainability of the sector as a whole and on its public reputation (transparency).

To address these challenges the programme supported CSOs capacity building through different mechanisms. First, several capacity building activities were organised by the Fund Operator. Second, individual mentoring and support was provided to some project promoters – based on their needs. Second, all large and medium projects from the first call needed to dedicate at least 10 (large) or 15 (medium) percent of their budget to the capacity building of their organizations (including partners). And last but not least – a special call was published to provide organizational (institutional) support to 5 organizations. In total, 634.000 euros were distributed to project promoters – 25 from large and medium call and 5 for the organizational one.

Several outputs were set to help us to reach our goals. Some were focused on the work of the Fund Operator while others targeted CSOs directly. The capacity building was provided to 99 CSOs and 129 people were trained by the activities organized by Fund Operator. We went beyond all targets also due to some on-line implementation where the participation of more people was enabled than it would be if the event was live. We always encourage CSOs to participate in organized activities and always get a good response. We believe this is also due to the high quality of the trainings. As a result of this actions, 41 organizations updated their methods to develop and improve transparency, accountability and efficiency (target set at 30). We also track the number of CSOs who updated their plans to engage with their constituencies

and got 36 new or updated plans (target was set at 10). For all organizational grantees we developed a comprehensive tailor-made capacity building plans and help them to realised it.

The organization that has shown great growth in this period is [Today is a new day](#). When they received organizational support, they were organization with loose structure and management policies. In a couple of years they have updated and developed their management, accountability and transparency policies as well as established a strong internal structure and have a more stable structure of employees. Their budget has also grown significantly and become more stable.

Regarding the Outcome indicators the programme met our goals. It contributed to 9 additional organizations having transparent and accountable governance procedures and increased the efficiency of 8 CSOs. 5 organizations increased their donations by at least 30 %. All organizations, except one, used at least 10 or 15 % of their project money for capacity building – some invested in different trainings, others in additional staff, some even took the opportunity to organize a teambuilding for their employees. A good example of the organization that instantly adopted gained knowledge is [DOPPS – BirdLife Slovenia](#) who were implementing [Caretakers of Natural Forests](#) project under ACF Programme. Part of it was also a fundraising campaign that was planned from the beginning but after they attended the communication workshop organized by Fund Operator, they realized that they need a professional support for preparation of campaign. They hired an agency to help them with slogans and communication material and they successfully raised over 45,000 euros to buy land.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

There were some challenges with some organizations receiving organizational grants. Some were going through internal re-structuring and investing time to enhancing organizational capacities and improving their internal policies and working methods has proved more difficult than foreseen. Fund Operator provided more individual support in such cases and had meetings with different members of staff to have a better understanding of what was going on and how the project goals could still be achieved. In some cases, some modifications were made.

Lesson learnt is to put more emphasis on the stability of the organization and readiness of their leaders for change. Including previous changes or upgrades of their policies, methodologies, procedures into application form might be helpful.

Bilateral Outcome: Enhanced collaboration between beneficiary and donor state entities involved in the programme

Amount incurred: € 47,850.83

Results

The bilateral Outcome aimed to enhance collaboration between beneficiary and donor state entities involved in the programme. Strengthening bilateral relations is one of the two high-level goals of the EEA and Norway Grants. Engaging in partnerships can also contribute to achieving better results and employ best practices.

ACF Slovenia programme supported 14 projects involving a partner from a donor country. Which is more than originally planned (10). The majority of the partners came from Norway and only a few from Iceland. The programme didn't have any partner from Liechtenstein. Partnerships were mostly focused on exchange of knowledge and good practice, providing some capacity training or help to disseminate results. Some additional partnerships were created later with the support of the bilateral fund. Through the call for bilateral cooperation the Programme supported 4 initiatives. One was supporting a study tour to an existing partner while others were implementing additional activities with new bilateral partners.

We are happy to report that some partnerships already proved long-lasting. We had 2 partners from donor countries – Citizens Foundation Iceland and Radio Nova from Norway – that were already working with the same Slovenian organizations as in the previous EEA and Norway Grants financial period. They were involved in 3 different projects supported by ACF Slovenia - [My School, My Vote!](#), [Learning for Participatory Democracy](#), and [Migrants Giving Voice to Migrants](#).

The level of satisfaction with the partnerships and trust between partners was already really high at the beginning of projects, reaching 6,8 score out of 7 but has decreased to 5.87 during the project implementation - mostly due to many difficulties with reporting, especially providing proofs for salary expenses. This also had a negative impact on the level of trust among beneficiary states and donor states that has dropped to 6.14 (it's still quite high but lower than it was at the beginning). All projects applied the knowledge acquired from bilateral partnerships. All people who attended bilateral initiatives funded by the ACF bilateral fund reported to have improved their knowledge and/or methods and/or approaches.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

The biggest challenge for bilateral outcome was definitely financial reporting from partners from donor countries. A lot of donor country partners included their salaries in the budgets, and we had a huge difficulty getting all the documentation needed to approve the costs. In one case, the partners rather decline their share than to go through all the troubles with getting information. It was also an issue with legal restrictions and what they are even allowed to give so there was a lot of issues there. We had a special meeting on this topic with FMO at one point, but no great solutions were found. At the end, we were encouraging donor country partners to include external costs into the budget proposals rather than salaries, just to make things easier for all involved. Lesson learnt is to provide detailed instructions on reporting to donor state partners and make sure they understand their obligations. But these instructions should be prepared by the FMO in cooperation with donor states as the FOs can not know in detail what is possible and in line with the legislation in each of the donor countries.

Regional civil society initiatives: Strengthened regional (cross-border) cooperation in the civil society sector

Amount incurred: € 106,434.94

Results

The aim of Regional Civil Society Initiatives was to strengthen regional and cross-border cooperation in the civil society sector.

ACF Slovenia was involved in several initiatives. Below is just a selection of the most important ones where we participated as a co-organisers, while there were many others where we've sent projects promoters and other NGOs to participate in initiatives of other Fund Operators.

One of the biggest positive results of this implementation period is establishment of Community for Action, community of Fund operators, run by Fund operators from Poland, Romania, Croatia and Slovenia. Community for Action provided a platform for Fund operators to come together every month to discuss most pressing issues in respective country, support each other with ideas and learning about different challenges, as each monthly meeting focused on specific topic, from strategic issues important for civil society throughout EU to operational ACF issues. Community for Action closely cooperated with other institutions and organisations, such as Fundamental Rights Agency, European Civic Forum, etc. Slovenian Fund Operator was part of the organising team, setting the topics of meetings, while also providing facilitation and expertise on different topics (such as EU important developments for civil society, Rule of law mechanism, etc.).

Based on the civil society experience with activation before parliamentary elections in 2022, election initiative strived to foster mutual learning through conferences and study visits. Slovenia's experience was broadly and in detail shared among participants from Poland, Slovakia, Romania and Croatia due to its success. NGOs especially from Poland took a lot of lessons learnt and organise themselves similarly before their parliamentary elections.

Anti-burnout camp was another initiative that focused on pressing issue of civil society, increasing pressures of civic activism and the toll it takes on mental health. Organisations that implemented programmes during the camp in Croatia, continued to work together and provide support to other CSOs.

ACF Slovenia was also heavily involved in developing advocacy conference in Lithuania, where we tried to present different methods and tools for advocacy, while presenting practical cases. Methods used there, such as Pecha Kucha and Failure Night, were also used later by the Slovenian Found Operator in different formats and programmes. Together with Croatian Fund Operator we've organized also a special exchange of knowledge on violence against women and the right to abortion.

A part from organising different initiatives, we enabled participation of Slovenian CSOs in different activities organized in cooperation with fund operators across Europe. In total 67 individuals from 44 different CSOs participated in the programme. All have reported to have improved knowledge from regional cooperation. In all indicators we had exceeded our targets also due to many activities taking place on-line thus enabling wider participation.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

No particular challenges arose under Regional Civil Society Initiatives, except Covid-19 that has altered our original plans. Many activities were replaced by on-line versions, and many were postponed until the last years of the programme implementation. This too was quite a burden to our management team because there were many activities taking place at once. What we had learnt is that the on-line activities can have a great value to reach wider public and are great for exchange of good practices and knowledge, but for more in-depth knowledge and cooperation live meetings are crucial.