



BRINGING GOVERNMENT DATA INTO THE LIGHT: SLOVAKIA'S OPEN DATA INITIATIVE, 2011–2015

SYNOPSIS

In 2010, Slovakia's new prime minister, Iveta Radičová, mandated that every government contract be published online in a central registry before companies or individuals received any payments. The success of that transparency initiative and pressure from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) persuaded Radičová to join the Open Government Partnership in 2011 and prioritize open data as a tool for improving governance. After the 2012 elections brought the opposing political party back into power, the small government office charged with implementing the open data initiative lost the active support of the prime minister's office. In response, the office worked with a dozen committed NGO activists to press for political support, coordinate with various ministries, and ensure that Slovakia's nascent open data portal would survive. During the next three years, the office was able to preserve and build on the gains made during the Radičová era, creating a portal that featured more than 600 data sets—of admittedly varying quality—of information ranging from crime statistics to agricultural data. By mid 2015, Slovakia's ministries were preparing to release before the year's end an additional 15 open-format data sets that the NGO community considered highest priority.

Jordan Schneider drafted this case study based on interviews conducted in Bratislava in July 2015. This case study was funded by the Open Government Partnership. Case published in October 2015.

INTRODUCTION

In 2010, many citizens of Slovakia were primed for change. People were weary of the “numerous corruption scandals on virtually all government levels,” wrote Andreas Pawelke, a consultant at the NGO Governance International.¹

Campaigning on a platform of good governance, a coalition led by sociologist and NGO leader Iveta Radičová won a narrow majority of seats in parliament under the banner of the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union—Democratic Party.

During her less than two years as prime minister, Radičová put governance reforms at the center of her agenda. One of the first pieces of legislation her government passed created a Central Registry of Contracts. Before the creation of the central registry, neither ministries nor municipalities had been required to disclose government contracts to the public; and bidding processes often favored well-connected companies and individuals. Under the central-registry system, federal public bodies had to publish all receipts and contracts. Implemented in January 2011, the registry captured the public's

attention, and in the first year, more than 100,000 users flocked to the registry's website. Inspection by the public, NGOs, and the media exposed a raft of questionable government contracts.

Zuzana Wienk, head of Slovakia's leading data activist NGO, the Fair Play Alliance, had closely followed the launch of the registry and recognized that its success opened a window for broader reforms in the handling of government data. Wienk and her colleagues envisioned an online portal like Data.gov, the central site for US government data. They pressed the government to publish information like cadastral maps for recording landownership, crime data, election results, transportation routes, and census statistics in formats that were easy to use. Proponents hoped a centralized site that linked to data sets from many agencies across the government would encourage citizens to create transparency tools and even start businesses.

Building an open data system would not be easy. Slovakia's public sector was technologically weak. Wienk said that even though Slovakia "had one of the most modern freedom-of-information-act laws" in Europe, releases of information "were all done in paperwork or Excel sheets."

Wienk was involved with the Open Government Partnership (OGP). A multilateral initiative launched in 2011, the OGP sought to support both government and civil society reformers by elevating open government to the highest levels of political discourse, providing "cover" for difficult reforms, and creating a supportive community of like-minded reformers in countries around the world. Member governments had to engage with civil society and develop one-year action plans through an inclusive, participatory process.

In early 2011, Wienk met with Rado Bat'o—a personal friend and top aide of Prime Minister Radičová—to pitch the idea of Slovakia's joining the OGP. At the time, the administration of President Barack Obama was leading the launch,

which would take place that September. Bat'ó came away from the conversation convinced that the government should build on the success of the contract registry and thereby signal to the world that Slovakia was committed to fair and transparent governance. He said the OGP was a "natural continuation from the policy, politics, and public relations perspective" of the government.

Radičová supported the move, and that summer she assigned Filip Vagač—cabinet-level plenipotentiary for the development of civil society—the task of formulating and administering the OGP's action plan commitments. Vagač, then a consultant and staffer for social entrepreneurship hub Ashoka, had been a student leader during the Velvet Revolution that brought down Czechoslovakia's communist regime. As plenipotentiary, he was head of the advisory body that coordinated relations between civil society and the government. Vagač turned to the NGO community for ideas and support, and Wienk and others urged him to prioritize open data.

THE CHALLENGE

The open data initiative quickly ran into trouble. Soon after Radičová formally joined the Open Government Partnership, her government all but collapsed when parliament rejected her endorsement of a eurozone plan to bail out troubled Greece. The vote left Slovakia as the lone holdout and effectively blocked the effort to avert a possible default by Greece. European Central Bank chief Jean-Claude Trichet said the vote threatened "financial stability in the [European Union] as a whole."²

Radičová soon succeeded in getting parliament to ratify the Greek deal, but she paid a high political price. To enlist much-needed support by longtime political rival Fico and his Smer party, she agreed to early elections.³ From October 2011 to early March 2012, Radičová led

a caretaker government. She retired from politics after Fico and his rejuvenated Smer party won an outright majority in the March 2012 elections.

After Radičová's departure, top-level political will in support of Vagač's open data efforts declined. The new prime minister surprised Vagač by asking him to remain as head of the Office of the Plenipotentiary for the Development of Civil Society. But Fico and his party did not accord transparency and open government the same priority Radičová had. Fico downgraded Vagač's job from a cabinet-level position to a subordinate role under the Ministry of the Interior, provided little office space, and allowed Vagač just five employees. Former Transparency International program coordinator Matej Kurian said the Fico government's attitude toward the plenipotentiary was "let it fade into insignificance."

Because his office had nearly no funds for technical support or training, Vagač had to persuade ministry officials to draw on their own budgets in order to create data sets the public could use.

Civil servants and activists also had to contend with institutional barriers to implementation of an open data portal. Officials in the more than 30 national ministries that controlled the data were reluctant to share with other government agencies, let alone the public. From the Ministry of Agriculture, which controlled the cadasters and land-use data, to the Ministry of the Interior, which handled police data, the plenipotentiary found no enthusiastic partners.

Jan Gondol, a contract employee at the Office of the Plenipotentiary in charge of implementing open data reforms, described the situation as somewhat understandable. "Often, people [in ministries] feel ownership and feel like you're stealing information from them," he said. "It's a hard mind-set to overcome."

Open data activists said Slovakia's government also suffered from a broader

bureaucratic torpor that discouraged individual initiative. Government information technology (IT) workers who would have to implement the data reforms had comfortable job security, and breaking the mold held more uncertainty than it did opportunity. Gondol said, "People get punished for making mistakes but not for doing nothing in government."

Compounding the problem was the relatively low skill level of government IT workers. Jan Suchal, who is a software developer, professor at the University of Bratislava and a data activist, said talented coders could earn 10 times as much salary in the private sector as in government.

Further, many government offices had already created internal data-management systems that they could not easily convert to open data formats. Peter Hanečák, a software engineer at Slovak tech firm EEA and cofounder of lobbying group Opendata.sk, said developers and government contractors optimized their data systems for speedy search rather than open publication of data. Because the data sets were not built with open data in mind, installing the capability was no simple task. "The later you introduce a new feature, the costlier it gets," Hanečák said.

FRAMING A RESPONSE

Prior legislation had laid the groundwork for the open data initiative. In 2000, parliament had passed a remarkably broad Freedom of Information Act that allowed individuals and organizations to request information from any level of government. Journalists and NGOs regularly used the law to uncover questionable government activity.⁴ Further, accession to the European Union [EU] in 2004 had compelled Slovakia to adhere to transparency standards set by the EU parliament.⁵

When Radičová became prime minister in 2010, she pushed for an amendment to the Freedom of Information Act to create a central registry for government contracts. Her adviser

Bat’o said, “The new government wanted to show that ‘this time is different.’” The amendment squeaked through parliament with 77 of 150 votes cast.

Implementation of the Central Registry of Contracts in January 2011 produced results. Journalists, NGOs, and citizens eventually uncovered numerous instances of wasteful spending. For instance, in late 2012, a teachers union gained leverage in negotiating for a wage increase when a geography instructor uncovered Education Ministry contracts to buy cognac and an Audi automobile.⁶ A national in-person survey conducted by Transparency International found that by 2015, 11% of adult Slovaks claimed to have looked up a receipt or contract.⁷ Journalist Konštantín Čikovský surmised that after the registry was created, “maybe you do not over-price the contract by 40% but only by 25%.”⁸

Slovaks’ enthusiastic response to the contracts registry had helped persuade Bat’o and Radičová that their country should join the OGP. In September 2011, Radičová visited New York and met with US President Barack Obama at the launch of the OGP. There she laid out her rationale for joining the initiative: “For me, the OGP is an absolutely natural and welcomed initiative. It is in full accordance . . . with the steps we have taken in this area—for example, the creation of the Central Registry of Contracts. The initiative will allow us to compare our system with those of others, and what is even more important, we can inspire each other and increase the quality of life of our citizens.”⁹ Slovakia’s media responded positively, with a headline in the leading Slovak daily *SME*: Obama to Radičová: ‘We are proud of you.’¹⁰

In preparation for that meeting, during the summer of 2011, Vagač began developing an OGP action plan, even though at the time, neither the prime minister nor anyone else in government “had a clue” about what should be in the commitments. To generate ideas, Vagač informally consulted his former colleagues in the

NGO community for suggestions, and he organized meetings with civil society leaders. He aimed to find topics that could be tackled in a short time frame and that aligned with the government’s larger priorities.

A tight-knit group of about a dozen activists from academia, the private sector, and the NGO community began to lobby to include open data commitments in the OGP plan. Transparency watchdog NGO Fair Play Alliance, funded in part by the Open Society Foundations, and the less-formal Opendata.sk community were the two most active.

During that period, Fair Play Alliance director Wienk persuaded Vagač that open data should be the top priority for the action plan. “It was a new field to him and to the whole administration as well,” she said. “We had to show him it was easy to kick off and explain the benefits.”

Wienk said she believed open data belonged at the top of the list for two reasons: first, because open data activists had brought the OGP to Slovakia in the first place, and second, of all of the NGO communities Vagač solicited, the open data proponents “had the clearest idea” for affordable implementation.

The final version of the action plan included a government pledge to create an open data portal and publish at least two data sets from each national ministry by June 2013.

Importantly, the action plan’s open data pledges provided activists and proponents the leverage they needed to press their agenda. Gondol said: “In Slovakia, when there’s a public international commitment, it’s taken seriously. Governments don’t want to lose face, and they need to take at least small steps forward.” For instance, even though open data activists had no funding to train civil servants in best practices or to recode data set architectures, they could lobby employees in other ministries to comply with the Radičová-era commitment that Fico had left in place.

Last, the EU provided funding and legislative nudges to push Slovakia toward more-effective data policy and implementation. Slovakia had unused funds from the 2007–13 cycle of EU structural spending, and partway through the process, the EU added open data as a priority. Vagač had the opportunity in 2012 to apply for tens of millions of euros in funding to help improve the portal and create tools for streamlining the creation of open data.

In June 2013, the EU parliament gave an unexpected boost to the open data cause by validating the public’s right to reuse most government information and by requiring member governments to provide almost all data at marginal cost. The EU ruling prevented almost all ministries from selling their data. The directive also forced EU countries to recognize some form of public-use licensing, which allowed software programmers to reuse government data without fear of prosecution. In November 2013, the Slovak parliament passed legislation to make Slovak copyright law compatible with public licensing. Public licenses like Creative Commons provided a simple, standard way to give others the ability to use the data and to set forth the conditions on which they could do so. First developed in the United States by NGO Creative Commons, the licenses were in use in more than 50 countries by 2015. Gondol said the changes gave open data advocates another “hook” to use in discussions with ministry officials on the public provision of government data.

GETTING DOWN TO WORK

In February 2012, Radičová’s government officially adopted the OGP Action Plan that Vagač and the NGO community had developed. The plan’s first and most demanding commitment called on the government to create an open data portal. “Building on the Central Registry of Contracts,” the document stated, Slovakia should “publish remotely accessible data available for machine processing,” “develop

common technical standards,” and “publish at least two data sets from each ministry” during the succeeding 12 months.¹¹ But with new elections scheduled for just a month later and polls showing Fico’s Smer party in the lead, Vagač and the open data activists knew their top-level political support was about to diminish. They decided to work quickly to assemble a master list of available data sets and then to create a portal that would help maintain momentum through what seemed likely to be a rocky government transition.

Identifying content

The action plan commitment required the government to “develop a list of all data sets, including technical specifications and a plan of their progressive publication on the open data portal.” Vagač chose to prioritize that task in the waning weeks of the Radičová government before the March election. “This was the most important point in the whole thing . . . to get this list,” he stressed.

In February, shortly after adoption of the action plan, momentum was still sufficient to move the project forward. The cabinet had approved the OGP. Vagač used his clout as a cabinet-level appointee to lobby ministers for action and prod staff to comply with requests to identify the data they collected. “Some ministries had good systems” to oversee their data sets, he said, but in “other cases they had to put in a strong effort, and some couldn’t do it.” But within a few months, Vagač’s office had a list containing hundreds of data sets.

By creating the master list of available data first, the Office of the Plenipotentiary gained important leverage that would be useful later in dealings with the new government’s ministries. “Nobody recognized what this meant,” Vagač said. “We knew we had treasure in our hands.” With the master list in hand, he said, he could counter any claims that the requested data sets did not exist—a ploy commonly used by

ministries that either wanted to keep information to themselves or had no desire to invest the time and energy required to cooperate.

At the same time, however, Vagač realized his task would be more difficult than he'd initially thought. A useful open data portal required fairly complete and digitized data sets with consistent formats. Open Knowledge (formerly, the Open Knowledge Foundation), a UK-based, data-focused NGO, had developed a definition of open data that activists in Slovakia accepted as their lodestar. The organization defined open data as information or content that could “be freely used, modified, and shared by anyone for any purpose.”¹² In 2007, a worldwide group of open-government activists formed another commonly accepted international standard for open data. The group classified open data as complete, primary, accessible, machine readable, nondiscriminatory, nonproprietary, and license free.¹³ In early 2012, as Vagač began to implement the action plan, none of the government’s data sets met such international standards. Slovakia’s ministries did not publish any data in formats designed for easy computer processing. Furthermore, the reuse of government data was on slippery legal footing because Slovakia’s copyright laws at the time did not explicitly relinquish licensing requirements.

“The level of the quality of data was really different,” Vagač recalled. “Some [data sets] were disastrous. . . . I understood why they didn’t want to give it out [to the public], because people would kill them on that.”

When Vagač realized that cabinet-level support for open data was unlikely under the Fico government, he began to contact IT staff in ministries directly. At the start, Vagač said: “I was going from top down, asking ministers. But we ended up with the technical people because it was the easiest way” to make progress. The technical

people understood the data requirements for the portal and could more easily locate relevant data sets. Once midlevel civil servants decided to put in the effort, they produced results.

Creating the portal

In February, with elections just weeks away, Vagač decided his office had to launch the data portal quickly and on its own. He figured it would be harder for the Smer government—which was expected to win the parliamentary election—to take down a live website than to bury the project before the portal launched. “Shutting it down is much harder than not finishing it,” he said. And once launched, he thought, an empty portal would embarrass the new government and prod ministries to upload. However, with few employees and little money to hire programmers, Vagač and his office had neither the technical expertise nor the capacity to execute major IT projects.

The situation worried Vagač’s supporters outside government as well. Wienk said, “We knew that the plenipotentiary was not an expert in IT or technical solutions.” Open-data activists worried that if the Office of the Plenipotentiary did not adopt off-the-shelf, open-source technology, Vagač would be pushed to use conventional routes—like applying for an EU grant to fund a government procurement contract for IT services with an external vendor. In practice, such a process would have taken years and cost millions of euros.

Wienk and her staff led the effort to persuade Vagač to use the Comprehensive Knowledge Archive Network, an open-source data portal platform developed by Open Knowledge. Because the platform was free and would require only minor changes, using it would save time and money. Wienk’s Fair Play Alliance put Vagač in touch with Open Knowledge, which

offered both technical assistance and server space. The plenipotentiary funded translation of the platform from English into Slovak, and in May 2012 the website was online at a cost of only a few thousand euros.

“It was an NGO-style approach,” Vagač recalled. “There was no way the government would have been on board with open-source code.” The new government likely would have preferred to slow the process and contract the work to a favored business, he said.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

The creation of the open data portal in Slovakia proved more challenging than any of its supporters had anticipated. Although the portal platform itself was online in a matter of months—and at relatively low cost—the collection, collation, and systematization of the government data itself required coordination across multiple government ministries and agencies. The plenipotentiary encountered significant resistance when it pushed ministries to publish.

Prying loose the data

As soon as the portal launched in May, the plenipotentiary began to press ministries to publish data sets and link them to the portal. Although the OGP Action Plan called on each ministry to link at least two data sets, it failed to specify the kind of data or the quality. Vagač said the specifications in the action plan were deliberately vague. The goal, he said, “was to make some data available publicly and [show that] nothing will break down, no one will die.” To validate the concept and generate support, Vagač said, he “wanted to show the whole idea of its becoming visible and touchable to see the potential.”

As expected, the new government’s ministries were slow to respond to Vagač’s requests. Without any top-level pressure to comply, the staff in ministries had little incentive

to do the work necessary to clean up and publish important data sets.

In mid-2013, Vagač sensed an opportunity to take advantage of the government’s desire for a favorable image on the international stage. The vice chairman of Fico’s cabinet was scheduled to attend a conference to make a presentation regarding Slovakia’s participation in the OGP. Vagač called on cabinet members to improve their respective ministries’ contributions to the open data portal. He told them the vice chairman was preparing his presentation and that it would help if he could point to the cooperation that ministries had provided. “It’s not a problem if you aren’t able” to publish the data, he recalled telling them; but, he said, he would have to let the vice chairman know.

Most ministers took the hint. Within two weeks, ministries had submitted 100 new data sets to the portal. The information was generally of low importance or appeared one small segment at a time. Gondol said ministries “chose nonsensical stuff” to upload—like “the phone list of a subset of ministry employees, in two columns, the name and the phone number . . . The first data set may be for statistics from January 2013, the second from February 2013 . . . then they would stop publishing and say they published two data sets. They just wanted to take this off their table and check it as done. And they could get away with it.”

Even though the data sets were of dubious quality and limited interest, they represented a start. After the vice chairman’s presentation at the conference, Vagač tried to establish an interministerial working group that would follow up on the recent burst of uploads. However, attendance was sparse: at one particular meeting after a few months, only two midlevel officials showed up.

America’s waning support

Strong US involvement in the OGP had contributed to Slovakia’s joining the project in

2011, but Slovaks' perceptions of America's waning interest in the reforms surprised and disappointed open data activists. Activists and plenipotentiary staff had relied on top-level American involvement to sustain the OGP agenda, given the lack of political will in the upper echelons of their own government.

Vagač said he felt the frustration acutely in late 2012 and into 2013. "The Obama administration lost that interest," he claimed. "I was at the US embassy discussing it over and over again: 'Can you at least send somebody on the political level to our politicians to show that you're interested?'"

Only low-level officials came to check up on the Slovak politicians, however. "If they see you're sending just [official] number 45, it sends a message that you don't care," Vagač lamented. "Suddenly, our politicians said, 'Ah, the initiative has completely lost US interest.' This happened quite quickly, even in year two."

Wienk echoed Vagač's complaint. For instance, during the Brazil OGP summit in April 2012, the US government was unable to confirm the level of its representative to the meeting (Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton ended up cochairing). As a result, the Fico government opted to send only Vagač. Wienk said, "Their political egos said, 'If we went as too high a representation, we won't have counterparts.'"

Had the government been firmly committed to the OGP plan, the lack of US support would have been less consequential. But without the fear of potential embarrassment in front of America—a key NATO ally—open data activists both within and outside government lost a critical lever.

Losing ownership of the portal

In late 2013, the Ministry of the Interior transferred ownership of the data portal from the plenipotentiary and the Open Knowledge servers to the internal Slovak government's IT service: the National Agency for Network and Electronic

Services (NASES). According to the government's OGP self-assessment, the Interior Ministry "expressed doubts about the safety of data stored at the server in part because of its location abroad."¹⁴ Activists were skeptical and noted that the express goals of open data were accessibility and availability rather than safety.

For the plenipotentiary, loss of control over the open data portal further weakened momentum. "Once they said we are no longer the owner of the database, the whole agenda lost ownership," Vagač said. The Ministry of the Interior said, "It has to be run professionally, by IT people," he said, but he considered it a "political decision." Vagač added, "NASES people are technical and aren't advocates for the agenda. . . . Basically, they didn't care. For them it was another issue they had to run."

ASSESSING RESULTS

The creation of an open data portal in Slovakia represented a step toward increased government transparency. As of mid 2015, the portal had published more than 600 data sets from 26 government organizations.

Prior to creation of the Central Registry of Contracts in January 2011, Slovakia had had no public data repository to capture citizens' imaginations, and public awareness about data management was low. The open data push in 2012, said Ministry of Finance staffer Ronald Strehar, "started like the universe"—from nothing.

Wienk said, "Before OGP, [open data] wasn't on the table at all; no one was proactively publishing anything."

Many Slovaks had expected the country's open data efforts to die with the end of the Radičová government. But despite the reduced political support under the Fico government, the project sustained momentum through the OGP action plan commitment and through the support of activists both inside and outside the public sector. According to one study by Alberto Abella,

the head of Spain's Open Knowledge chapter, Slovakia's action plan was the world's second most-ambitious and achieved the most out of all OGP governments' plans.¹⁵

In the first years after the portal's launch, Vagač's plenipotentiary struggled to persuade ministries to create more usable data sets. But many of the ministries did not have clean, digitized data that could easily be fed through a portal to the public. Data collection procedures within ministries were not systematized; staff to digitize and clean data were few; and only a handful of ministries published usable data on their own websites.

Part of the problem, said Peter Kunder of Fair Play Alliance, lay in the fact that "there was no such thing" as lines of responsibility for publishing data in ministries.

Without political support at the cabinet level, without sufficient funding, and without any clearly defined procedures for publishing data within ministries, the plenipotentiary had to struggle to get its hands on clean and complete data sets. Of the 15 most desirable data sets identified during the second action plan, none had been published by the June 30, 2015 deadline. A spurt of new data sets came later that year, but experts judged that the information was mainly of poor quality.

In evaluating the success of open data initiatives, researchers around the world had struggled to develop distinct measures for quantifying impact. Neither the number of available data sets nor the number of downloads were clear indicators that the data had been put to good use. The Slovak government tracked neither reuse nor application of the data for larger purposes and projects.

Very few, if any, of the data sets on the portal adhered to internationally accepted principles for presentation of information. Plenipotentiary officials could not point to a particularly useful data set released through the portal after its launch. Fair Play Alliance staffer

Eva Vozárová described the data sets as partial and unsystematic.

Without any system to monitor how the data sets were being downloaded and used by the public, it was difficult to measure impact. As Wienk explained, "there is no way to find out how the data sets were reused," and no records indicated that anyone produced a transparency application or started a business based on data released on the portal. Overall, said plenipotentiary staffer Skarlet Ondrejčáková, "open data efforts in Slovakia are like when a parent pays for lessons for a kid but never helps the kid practice or takes the kid to a tournament." She elaborated, "It isn't enough just to 'publish some data'; there is still a lot of work to be done to explain to all parties how to do it right and make the best use of it."

Strehar said Slovakia's progress in the provision of open data could be measured by the fact that "five years ago, no one cared about data sets and standardization." Wienk agreed that initial steps, though tentative, showed that "the ball has started to roll."

Slovak activists' dedication since 2010 underscored the changing national mind-set regarding citizens' need for government-held information. Entrepreneurs and NGOs were able to create several applications and businesses based on the government-released data sets, though most of those entrepreneurs and NGOs used data sets released prior to the OGP commitment.

In 2010, Suchal, PhD in software engineering from Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava, started to investigate links between businesses in Slovakia. He created usable searches across Slovakia's official company register, a database run by the Ministry of Justice that contained extensive information, including partner names and financial backers. Foaf.sk (Friend of a Friend) launched in 2011. "It was quite a public celebration," Suchal said, "because at that point, the government was very restrictive

about data. I wasn't asking for data; I just scraped." During the next three years, the site added more functionality by integrating tax records and procurement data.

In 2011, Suchal partnered with Vozárová and Kunder of Fair Play Alliance, as well as Transparency International Slovakia to dramatically improve the usability of the Central Registry of Contracts. They created a new web application, *OtvoreneZmluvy.sk*, or Open Contracts, using the same data.

Though the NGO community applauded Open Contracts and though journalists used it to uncover suspicious activity, as of mid 2015, the site had attracted only limited use in the public sector. For instance, Maria Zuffova, a researcher at the Slovak Governance Institute, learned that even in the office of Bratislava's Financial Control Administration that audited the city's spending, staff still used the original registry.

Another example came in the summer of 2011, when Pavol Zbell and Samuel Molnár, both of them students of Suchal, decided to create *otvorenésúdy.sk* (Open Courts). Their application improved the Ministry of Justice's closed database of court decisions. Building on their professor's code base, they cut the search speed from six minutes to just a few seconds while adding advanced search functionality. The two then received funding from Restart Slovakia and partnered with Transparency International to link data on judges' property declarations and generate individual productivity metrics for each of Slovakia's judges.

Though the chief justice of the Supreme Court of the Slovak Republic issued a press release claiming some of the Open Courts information was faulty, lawyers, judicial watchdog groups, and even judges started to use the site in their work. As of mid 2015, Open Courts was averaging 2,000 unique visits per day.

By 2015, at least one Slovak company had built its business around a major data set released since the OGP commitments. Filip Glasa, Jakub Mažgut, and Jana Exelová founded Finstat in 2012 to use data to understand companies' credit risks. In 2014, the Finance Ministry was preparing to publish Slovakia's Registry of Financial Statements, a data set containing profit-and-loss statements, balance sheets, and, for some, even annual reports. Glasa, among others, convinced the contractor to make the application's programming interface public so that outsiders could easily put the data to use. Thanks to applications relying on data sets, Finstat was able to grow to more than 10 employees and earn revenues of up to US\$17,000 per month. However, publication of the registry had come out of an independent ministry initiative and was not explicitly among the country's OGP commitments.

REFLECTIONS

In mid 2015, officials of the Slovak government's information technology (IT) service, the National Agency for Network and Electronic Services (NASES), and of the Office of the Plenipotentiary for the Development of Civil Society contended that open data in Slovakia had a bright future.

NASES expected to install in late 2015 a new portal with an improved interface as well as better searching and tagging features. COMSODE, a European Union-funded consortium consisting of representatives from Slovakia, Italy, the Czech Republic, and the Netherlands, planned to streamline the conversion of data into machine-readable formats and to assist with the review and clearance of data from internal Slovak ministry databases for publication in 2016. Although the ministries had missed the Open Government Partnership's tight deadline for publishing the

data sets most requested by activists and civil society, Jan Gondol, a contract employee at the plenipotentiary in charge of implementing open data reforms, was confident that many would be released in the near future.

With the growing use of IT throughout Slovak society, Zuzana Wienk, head of Slovakia’s leading data activist NGO Fair Play Alliance, predicted that the government would face more public pressure to improve data provision. “In the private sector when you deal with your banks and even your pizza order, you can see how good and fast online services can be,” Wienk said. “People do compare this with government services and get upset. This will push [us] toward more technology.” But without strong support at the top of government, open data remained a political sideshow.

When top-level political will diminished in March 2012, the Slovak public still had not embraced the need for open data, and midlevel reformers had to play an outsized role in struggling to generate and sustain action. Filip Vagač, plenipotentiary for the development of civil society, opted to lean on NGO support, and outside activists lobbied the government to persuade public sector administrators to release their data. Slovakia’s close-knit network of IT workers in the capital city of Bratislava helped the strategy make some progress. However, lack of political will remained a significant impediment for government transparency and open data in 2015. “Still today the public administration doesn’t see the benefits for itself,” Bat’o said.

SHADOW CASE: ITALY AND OPEN DATA

Like Slovakia, Italy’s government also aimed to promote government-wide open data policies through a commitment in its Open Government Partnership (OGP) action plans. Though both countries are members of the European Union (EU), the contexts in which their reformers operated differed widely. Italian magazines employed full-time data journalists, and Italy’s largest open data community, Spaghetti Open Data, counted thousands of members and hosted annual three-day conferences. By contrast, Bratislava’s open data gatherings mustered dozens at most. Italy’s government bodies at both the federal and municipal levels had more-detailed and cleaner data sets in their files than did Slovakia’s, and they employed more-sophisticated IT professionals. Data.gov.it, Italy’s open data portal, as of mid 2015 featured more than 10,000 data sets from 76 different government bodies compared with Slovakia’s 600. Yet despite those differences, lessons could be drawn from comparing both nations’ experiences with open data policy. First, senior executive commitment to transparency proved the main driver of success in Italy. For two years after the fall of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi’s government, Prime Minister Mario Monti led a cabinet of technocrats. In line with his anti-corruption agenda, the so-called Monti decree (transparency law 33/2013) removed the requirement that citizens justify their requests for government data and established a legal requirement that the government disclose data. Although, as in Slovakia, the Italian prime ministers who held office from 2010 to 2015 had varying levels of commitment to the goals of transparency and open data, the benchmark Monti decree helped sustain momentum.

Italy made little progress on the open data commitment under its first 2012 OGP Action Plan because the prime minister did not put the creation of a portal high on the government’s agenda, even though broad orientation toward citizens’ rights to information had shifted. Marco Bani, head of director general office of the Agency for Digital Italy, explained that on the first attempt, open data was not considered a national policy priority, and efforts to create a portal floundered. “Now they are working to improve that,” Bani said. “With the second Action Plan, these policies were also in the national strategy.”

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SHADOW CASE: ITALY AND OPEN DATA, continued

The drafting of Italy's second action plan was marked by greater involvement of civil society and senior elected officials. The open data initiative became a policy priority as part of Prime Minister Matteo Renzi's national strategy, which mandated that ministries and local governments publish data. Along with the national strategy came financial support. With clear political will and linkages to a funded national strategy, the Agency for Digital Italy successfully launched the government's open data portal in June 2015.

At the local level, executive support also proved crucial as local mayors and councils implemented measures to increase local transparency and accountability. In Slovakia in 2007, it was an enterprising mayor in a small town of 25,000 who first pushed his city to publish contracts; and that initiative later attracted the attention of national-level politicians. Likewise, in Italy the cities with the most-advanced open data initiatives—like Trento and Florence—had mayors who took a personal interest in the topic.

The relatively greater success of Italy's open data initiative compared with Slovakia also stemmed from explicit efforts to build public interest in the subject. Monti's government created Open Coesione (opencoesione.gov.it), a flagship website that published a family of data sets on EU grants to Italy and showed how the grant money had been spent. Like the Open Contracts reform in Slovakia, this website was relatively straightforward to implement and generated broader public awareness about the power of government data disclosures.

In both countries, commitment to the OGP played a role in the creation of open data portals, but it served as a more important tool for driving change in Slovakia than in Italy. In Italy, civil society took an active part in drafting the second action plan and in providing input on the portal's design. But once open data became part of national strategy, the administration took charge of implementation. The Agency for Digital Italy had both a broad mandate outside the context of the OGP and more than a hundred employees to carry out its agenda. By contrast, Slovakia's implementing agency, the Office of the Plenipotentiary, had less public and administrative support. Slovakia's plenipotentiary had to rely on both the action plan and civil society in order to build the portal itself and to bring additional pressure to bear on ministries holding data.

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