STRONGER ROOTS

**ANTÉNA:**
REVITALISING A CULTURAL NETWORK FROM THE BOTTOM UP

# How a network of cultural centres in Slovakia mobilised regional members and strengthened internal cohesion

Nadace OSF · Nadácia otvorenej spoločnosti · NIOK alapítvány · glopolis · Batory Foundation

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Photo: Ján Viazanička – Anténa network members' meeting

## Anténa – the Network for Independent Culture

is a national umbrella organisation that has been bringing together cultural centres across Slovakia since 2008. Currently, it has 33 members from all self-governing regions. Six people are involved in managing the organisation, with only the coordinator position being paid; the other roles are honorary and voluntary. Anténa primarily connects independent cultural and residency centres of various sizes, many of which also offer space to other actors who lack premises of their own. In this way, it also supports local civic activities and the fight for democratic principles.


Photo: William Gevorg Urban

## A shift from the original plan

Anténa originally aimed to create a strategy, gradually professionalise, and strengthen constructive advocacy work. However, shifting circumstances required a change in the original direction. In response to the changing political situation in Slovakia, Anténa adopted a more defensive position in the field of advocacy and began focusing more on internal matters.

This shift revealed a core problem: Anténa lacked a clear strategy and defined priorities – its work was based only on four broad areas of activity. The leadership realised it needed a deeper understanding of its members, whose numbers had grown significantly in recent years. The organisation therefore prioritised joint participatory planning with all members – many of whom had never met the network's leadership in person.

## Discovering the imbalance

Initial contact with smaller members outside Bratislava uncovered a deeper issue. While representatives of the largest organisations held leadership positions, they made up only a minority of the network's membership. The remaining 27 smaller organisations were effectively excluded from key decision-making processes and operated in a very different reality from that of the capital-based and other large centres.
This realisation transformed the project's entire focus. The new goal became activating these smaller members – but in a way that wouldn't burden them.

The solution was simple but effective. Anténa organised three in-person meetings across different regions: one in each western, central, and eastern Slovakia. Each meeting was deliberately kept small, with no more than 10 participants. Crucially, large centres were intentionally excluded to avoid their past dominance in discussions. An external facilitator was engaged to moderate, allowing Anténa's coordinator to observe and listen neutrally.

This approach created a more open and intimate environment. For the first time, smaller member organisations had the space to express themselves without being overshadowed or interrupted. These gatherings were followed by smaller online meetings of a newly formed working group representing the small centres.

The discussions revealed valuable insights into organisational management, decision-making processes, and internal communication. Members spoke openly about persistent challenges in how the network functioned and shared the obstacles they faced. One major outcome of the process was a change in the network's leadership, which in turn significantly impacted internal operations and the future direction of the network.

## New leadership, new culture

As a result, there was a significant change in the structure of the organisation. Today, the network is led by a woman representing a small cultural centre not based in the capital – symbolically recognising the voices of the regions. The broader leadership board now includes a representative of the small centres. The change was not only personnel-related but also cultural. The quality of discussions improved, space was created for constructive criticism, and decisions increasingly emerged through broad consensus.

In addition to the existing joint email list, which was rather formal in nature, there was a need to strengthen informalcommunication among members. A grassroots solution emerged.

*“We were all friends, we knew each other, but we were missing informal communication. After some discussion, we created a chat group with different subgroups, but the general thread includes the most people. At first, it was mostly the leadership who participated – but now it runs on its own, daily. Members share photos when visiting each other’s festivals, for instance.”*

***Laco Oravec***

Photo: Ľubomír Šurina – Meeting of members of the Antén network and BBSK representative Mikuláš Pál in Brezno


Photo: Ľudovít Nápoký – Meeting of the Anténa network with partner umbrella organizations

This simple change had an unexpectedly large impact. The chat group became a living channel for sharing experience, support, and peer connection. Current political pressure also played a role, paradoxically strengthening the internal cohesion of the network despite the heavy workload of all members. The change in communication and network structure revealed previously untapped potential.

*“What really mattered was creating space for smaller organizations. Until then, we hadn’t had the opportunity to truly leverage our interconnectedness and talk about communication with local governments, our internal processes, share know-how and inspiration. And to define our key needs.”*

***Zuzana Novotová Godálová***

# Working with local and regional governments

A newly formed working group of smaller centres has become actively involved in advocacy work. When it became clear that effective cooperation at the national level was almost impossible, the organisation chose an alternative approach – cooperation with local and regional governments. These also play an important role in supporting independent culture, even though they operate with smaller budgets.

Relationships were successfully established at the grassroots level. Local member centres were invited to meetings with representatives of local and regional authorities, which strengthened their position within their own communities. However, a sensitive approach was needed, since local governments must also negotiate other priorities with the national level, beyond culture.

An ongoing challenge is that independent cultural centres are often perceived by local governments as competition to municipal cultural institutions or seen as unprofessional. What Anténa lacks, but urgently needs, is data to support its arguments in negotiations with local authorities, such as impact on employment, tourism, audience numbers, and impact on various target groups, including disadvantaged people.

Photo: Boris Meluš – Anténa network members' meeting

# Political context and challenges

The current political context remains the biggest challenge. At present, all available capacity is focused on defending basic democratic principles and the transparency of public grant schemes, which are vital for funding cultural spaces. In this, the network has the full support of its members, who themselves represent the foundational infrastructure for the functioning of non-institutionalised culture, as well as a civic infrastructure for community engagement, protest organising, and social cohesion.

However, Anténa must constantly find the right balance and consider how far it can go in this struggle without threatening its members or other organisations. It is a delicate balance between civic engagement and protecting the network's integrity.


Photo: Andrea Kalinová – Let's Stand Up for the FPU

Photo: Peter Bednár – Let's Stand Up for the FPU

# KEY FINDINGS

- **The dominance of the large organisations can suppress the small ones**
  Even democratic networks can unintentionally marginalise smaller members.

- **Regional meetings create safe spaces**
  Small, geographically dispersed meetings create a more intimate environment for open discussion.

- **Informal communication builds stronger ties**
  Official channels are not enough – real connections are made through informal tools.

- **Crisis situations can bring people together**
  Political pressure has paradoxically strengthened the internal cohesion of the network.

# PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

**01**

## Don‘t give up in difficult times

Fight and stay united – unity is key in moments of crisis.

**02**

## Invest in regional meetings

They create new opportunities for communication, open new topics and support connection.

**03**

## Build meaningful relationships

*“You need to build human relationships and invest in their quality. That is a good foundation for helping regional members. You must truly get to know them, listen to them and lower the threshold so that even those with limited resources can participate,”* advises Ľudovít Nápoký.

**04**

## Use external facilitators

A neutral moderator can help open the discussion and help the management to better understand the situation.

**05**

## Collect data to support your arguments

Specific figures on the impact of your work are key when negotiating with public authorities.

# STRONGER ROOTS

This case study was developed within the Stronger Roots program.

The aim of the Stronger Roots program is to increase the resilience of civil society organisations and their networks, strengthen their social capital, and integrate them into the communities and societies in which they operate. The program is implemented by the Open Society Fund Prague, the NIOK Foundation, the Open Society Foundation Bratislava, and Glopolis.