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Public Administration

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Suggested Citation: Plaček, Michal et al. (2025) : Cross-sectoral collaboration in times of crisis: Comparing the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland, Public Administration, ISSN 1467-9299, Wiley, Hoboken, NJ, Vol. 103, Iss. 3, pp. 828-854, https://doi.org/10.1111/padm.13016 , https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/padm.13016

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Check for updates

Received: 12 February 2024 | Revised: 24 June 2024 | Accepted: 27 June 2024

DOI: 10.1111/padm.13016

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

public administration WILEY

Cross-sectoral collaboration in times of crisis: Comparing the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland

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Funding information
Grantová Agentura České Republiky, Grant/Award Number: 22-04324L

Abstract

The Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland, with their shared political histories, have confronted the compounded challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war. These difficulties spurred the emergence of public–nonprofit collaboration in all three countries, each taking distinct paths. Our study aims to unravel these divergent trajectories of public–nonprofit collaboration through the lens of historical institutionalism. Using this lens, we attribute this divergence to the influence of the broader institutional environment, whose evolution has followed distinct trajectories in the examined countries. To achieve our objectives, we employed single-country case study methods, leveraging desk research and structured interviews with management informants from nonprofit organizations in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland (37 respondents in total). Our study demonstrates that the

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perceptions of the institutional environment by nonprofit actors directly shape the effectiveness of collaborations between the public sector and nonprofit organizations. Contrary to Western expectations, our findings challenge the seemingly prevailing optimism regarding the outcomes of public–nonprofit collaboration and emphasize the influence of factors such as path dependency, mutual distrust, and prior negative experiences.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of COVID-19 and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine have proven to be highly disruptive events, exerting significant impacts on the public sector across Europe and beyond. Governments are confronted with a myriad of challenges, ranging from managing public health crises and safeguarding vulnerable populations to addressing energy dependency, managing refugee influxes, and mitigating secondary economic repercussions like inflation and government deficits. The responses of individual governments to these multifaceted challenges carry profound implications for public trust in governance structures and can influence the trajectory of populist movements.

In the public administration literature, prevailing guidance for governments navigating such challenges finds expression in Eg, Edgers & Kettle's (2023) seminal work "Bridgebuilders." Kettle advocates for the establishment of governments comprised of bridgebuilders—individuals adept at fostering collaboration both within and outside government—to effectively tackle major crises like the COVID-19 pandemic and the conflict in Ukraine. This call to action resonates with a broader scholarly discourse emphasizing the imperative of collaboration among diverse stakeholders, including governments, civil society, corporations, and the international community, to effectively address contemporary societal challenges (Andersen & Breidahl, 2025; Harari, 2018; Røiseland & Trætteberg, 2024; Schwab & Vanham, 2021).

Building upon this discourse, public administration scholars Bentzen and Torfing (2023) investigate whether crises, such as COVID-19, can instigate positive administrative changes, focusing specifically on cross-sectoral collaboration within Danish municipal settings. Their research highlights how the exigency of addressing crises compels various public sector departments and agencies to collaborate, propelling them beyond bureaucratic inertia and entrenched paradigms of New Public Management that prioritize autonomy and focus on key performance indicators.

In this paper, we extend the examination of the potential for public–nonprofit collaboration to address contemporary crises and contextualize the findings of Bentzen and Torfing (2023) within a broader historical institutionalist framework. While Bentzen and Torfing's (2023) work builds upon extensive research on public–nonprofit collaboration (cf. Ansell & Gash, 2008; Bryson et al., 2006; Fyall, 2016; Marwell & Brown, 2020), a notable gap persists in understanding how organizational mechanisms within such collaborations are shaped by their broader institutional environments, which may vary significantly in terms of their friendliness, stability, and susceptibility to corruption. If the role of these environments is not well accounted for, this may hinder our comprehension of why collaboration thrives in certain contexts while encountering obstacles in others. We contend that the nature of this gap in the current understanding of public–nonprofit collaborations within the public administration literature can be characterized by a lack of an equivalent to Anheier and Salamon's (2006, p. 106) "social origins theory" of the nonprofit sector, which emphasizes the embeddedness of the nonprofit sector in the cultural, religious, political, and economic realities of different countries. Analogously, just as Anheier and Salamon explored how the actions of nonprofit stakeholders are constrained by historical patterns of development and the relative power of various social groupings, we

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see a pressing need for historical institutional analysis of how the evolving institutional environment uniquely shapes the trajectories of public–nonprofit collaboration arising in response to crises and emergency situations. We contribute to filling this gap by complementing Bentzen and Torfing's (2023) study of public–nonprofit collaboration in the Western European context with an investigation of how far this collaboration is catalyzed by the salient crises in Central and Eastern Europe.

More specifically, our research focuses on public–nonprofit collaboration within the contexts of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland. These countries share several commonalities, including a shared communist past, transition toward democratic market economies, and current membership in the European Union. Additionally, each has been significantly impacted by recent economic crises, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the conflict in Ukraine. Drawing on the insights gleaned from Bentzen and Torfing's (2023) findings, alongside perspectives from Edgers & Kettle (2023), one might reasonably expect a surge in public–nonprofit collaboration in response to the external shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war. This expectation is grounded in an economic rationale emphasizing the transfer of knowledge and efficient resource utilization, particularly in line with policies advocated at the European Union level. However, contrary to this expectation, such a surge in collaboration has not materialized in practice, despite the potential of these dramatic external shocks to disrupt existing path dependencies (cf. Saxonberg et al., 2024).

In the present paper, we seek to unravel this puzzle. Our primary objective is to investigate why public–nonprofit collaboration in Eastern Europe thrives in some contexts while encountering challenges in others. To achieve this objective, we employ a historical institutionalist analysis framework, focusing on the following research questions: Can we identify discernible shifts in the practices of nonprofit-public sector cooperation amid the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war? Does the situation across these countries exhibit homogeneity or heterogeneity? Leveraging case studies in the selected countries, we utilize a combination of structured interviews, desk research, and process tracing to elucidate how the divergent dynamics between nonprofit organizations and public sector authorities contrast with the optimistic expectations prevalent in Western European contexts (Bentzen & Torfing, 2023; Edgers & Kettle, 2023). Our exploration traces this divergence to factors such as path dependency, mutual distrust, and prior negative experiences. Taking an exploratory approach, our article focuses on the perspectives of representatives from the nonprofit sector.

Our study contributes to the existing historical institutionalist analysis of public–nonprofit collaboration by emphasizing the profound influence of external shocks. In addition, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland have historically received less attention in the global public administration and nonprofit literature. Thus, our study fills a gap in the literature by shedding light on these underexplored contexts. However, the implications of our findings extend beyond the borders of these countries. They offer valuable insights into the broader public policy challenge of understanding how institutional factors shape public–nonprofit collaboration during periods of crises and external shocks.

2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this section, we explore the contemporary landscape of cross-sectoral collaboration within public administration scholarship. While we acknowledge the potential benefits of cross-sectoral and public–nonprofit collaboration in addressing societal challenges, we also highlight the substantial challenges they pose, underscoring the need for further research and adaptation in times of crisis. We advocate for the adoption of historical institutionalism as a theoretical framework for such research, particularly in the examined countries.

2.1 | Cross-sectoral collaboration and its challenges

Public administration scholars have long known that overarching societal challenges require concerted responses enabled by cross-sectoral collaboration. Emerson et al. (2012, p. 2) expansively defined cross-sectoral collaboration

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as "the processes and structures of public policy decision making and management that engage people constructively across the boundaries of public agencies, levels of government, and/or the public, private and civic spheres in order to perform a public purpose that could not otherwise be accomplished." Ansell and Gash (2008, p. 543) add that "collaboration tends to develop when focus on small wins that deepen trust, commitment, and shared understanding." Cabral's (2017) work supplements this list by emphasizing the role of the capabilities needed by the collaborating parties for reconciling conflicting objectives.

The concept of cross-sectoral collaboration has been dissected in the public administration literature in numerous ways. Bryson et al. (2006) propositions about cross-sectoral collaboration highlight several conceptual dimensions, such as initial conditions, process, structural and governance components, constraints, contingencies, outcomes, and accountability. Initial conditions encompass broader environmental factors, sector failures, and direct challenges (Bryson et al., 2006). Processes, whether formal or informal, involve building agreements, demonstrating leadership, establishing legitimacy, fostering trust, managing conflict, and planning activities (Bryson & Crosby, 2006). The facets of structures and governance refer to institutional environments, values, and legacies (Bryson et al., 2006). Contingencies and constraints reflect the diversity of collaboration forms, power imbalances, and conflicting institutional logics (Bryson et al 2006). Outcomes and accountability highlight the importance of public value, first-, second-, and third-order effects, resilience, and reassurance. In this context, accountability centers on inputs, processes, and outputs, encompassing results management systems and relationships with political and professional constituencies (Bryson et al, 2006). Emerson et al. (2012) expand Bryson et al. (2006) set of propositions by analyzing cross-sectoral collaboration in terms of its dimensions, components, system context, drivers, principled engagement, shared motivation, capacity for joint action, and outputs for collaborative action.

According to Andrews and Entwistle (2010), cross-sectoral collaboration occurs in the context of various types of cross-sectoral partnerships, including public–public, public–private, and public–nonprofit, each with distinct efficiency implications. Our focus lies on public–nonprofit partnerships, which we examine in more detail. Marwell and Brown (2020, p. 231) trace the conceptual origins of these partnerships to the foundations of economic theorizing about the nonprofit sector in the latter half of the 20th century (cf. Young, 2000). Weisbrod (1975) conceptualized nonprofits as providers of public goods not supplied by the government, while Hansmann's (1987) contract failure theory elucidates how the superior trustworthiness of nonprofits protects vulnerable customers unable to assess the quality of products and services offered. According to Hansmann, this trustworthiness emanates from the nondistribution constraint enforced by public authorities, which impacts the behavior of various nonprofit stakeholders in distinct ways. For nonprofit managers, this constraint acts as a direct deterrent to their opportunistic behavior while encouraging them to concentrate on various nonpecuniary goals, such as the maximization of output quality or quantity (Hansmann, 1987, p. 29). For customers, the nondistribution constraint provides a highly needed safeguard, which is particularly helpful if suppliers of crucial social services, such as complex and long-term healthcare, are difficult to switch.

While the economic theories of the nonprofit sector explore market failures that lead to the mutually advantageous nature of the collaboration between the public sector and nonprofits, Salamon's (1987) voluntary failure theory pinpoints specific failures within the nonprofit sector that can be effectively addressed through public–nonprofit collaboration. The recognition of the complementary roles played by nonprofits and public sector organizations has been further solidified in the concepts of network and collaborative governance, as expounded by Fyall (2016) and Ansell and Gash (2008).

Hansmann's (1987) contract failure theory has particularly enriched the public–nonprofit collaboration literature by emphasizing the importance of nonprofits in the public procurement process. Building on Hansmann's work, Witesman and Fernandez (2013) have shown the potential comparative advantage of nonprofit organizations over for-profits in the contracting process and contract performance. Public sector managers, according to their findings, exhibit a higher level of trust in nonprofits than in for-profit entities, granting nonprofits greater discretion. Nonprofits also demonstrate success in securing more complex contracts—those with extended durations, increased uncertainty, and heightened monitoring difficulty. However, Witesman and Fernandez (2013) did not discern statistically significant differences between nonprofits and for-profits in terms of cost, work quality, responsiveness to

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government, adherence to legal requirements, and customer satisfaction. Brunjes (2022) also examined the comparative performance of nonprofits and other contractor types in public procurement. The results indicated that nonprofit contracts exhibit greater stability, a higher likelihood of contract renewal, and a lower likelihood of contract termination. Nevertheless, nonprofits are associated with higher costs, which are attributed to the inherent complexity of the contracts they obtain (Brunjes, 2022).

The literature on cross-sectoral collaboration devotes considerable attention to the challenges inherent in this process (Dimand & Neshkova, 2024). A particularly dramatic illustration of these challenges is revealed in Koliba et al.'s (2011) examination of the performance of cross-sectoral partnerships in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, which they aptly deemed the most significant breakdown of governance in modern history. These authors scrutinized the accountability of individual policy actors and how they came to challenge one another. The governance network's failure in Hurricane Katrina has thus been attributed to a breakdown in collective accountability, encompassing a lack of coordination, communication failures, information gaps, and initiative failures (Koliba et al., 2011). Having reviewed the major theoretical frameworks and empirical studies of cross-sectoral partnerships, the authors concluded that the complexity and dynamism inherent in these collaborations, operating within diverse contexts, render the formulation of research-based recipes highly unlikely (Bryson et al., 2015, p. 658).

Public–nonprofit collaborations have been revealed to be no less challenging. Of particular relevance in the present context is the finding by Cairns and Harris (2011) that nonprofit sector actors often encounter frustration due to insufficient time for partnership formation and, at times, unclear partnership goals. The authors have shown that the alignment of the partnership with the mission and strategy of local governments may not always be guaranteed, posing challenges in terms of governance, representation, and overall accountability—a critical factor for partnership success. Operational challenges within the partnership, especially in communication, where actors grapple with attending multiple confusing meetings, further exacerbate the difficulties in governance and trust-building (Cairns & Harris, 2011). More recently, drawing from a diverse array of scholarly literature, AbouAssi et al. (2024, p. 1) acknowledged that "collaborative relationships involve substantial complexity and are influenced by unique conditions that include institutional norms and expectations."

Today, scholars exploring cross-sectoral and public–nonprofit collaboration are particularly called upon to examine its potential and prospects during external shocks, exemplified by events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war. There is room to argue that these and similar shocks are subsumed within a broader phenomenon of turbulence, which is recognized as the next emerging challenge for public administration (Ansell et al., 2023). Ansell et al. (2023, p. 1) contend that "social conflicts, economic recession, war, and political leadership contests create turmoil and chaos to which government aims to respond with a mixture of repression, concession, reform, and regime change." Thus, we see a pressing need for further research to determine whether cross-sectoral and public–nonprofit collaboration can serve as a viable strategy for the public sector in navigating turbulence and the multiple crises it encompasses.

Of particular significance in this context is the recent work by Bentzen and Torfing (2023, p. 1), who, drawing on extensive data from Danish public sector organizations, posit that external shocks, such as COVID-19, may unexpectedly "spur cross-organizational collaboration and trust-based management." The authors acknowledge the mounting criticism of public sector performance management over time, emphasizing its tendency to foster fragmentation and diminish the intrinsic and public service motivation of public employees. Despite the otherwise disruptive and tragic implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, Bentzen and Torfing (2023) contend that it paradoxically compelled administrative agencies to collaborate and trust the skills and motivation of their employees.

2.2 | Implications for public–nonprofit collaboration in the examined countries: A historical institutionalist perspective

While Bentzen and Torfing's (2023, p. 1) findings exude optimism, these authors cautiously admit the possibility that the improved collaboration within the public sector "may amount to little more than a temporary departure from

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normalcy," an idea likewise affirmed by Saxonberg et al.'s (2024) analysis of the effects of the recent crises on social policy in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia. Nevertheless, Bentzen and Torfing's (2023) overall optimistic perspective aligns with the emphasis of the Western public administration literature on the mutually advantageous nature of public–nonprofit collaboration. However, as highlighted by AbouAssi et al. (2024), Western conceptual frameworks of cross-sectoral collaboration, or even the sectoral identity of the nonprofit sector, may have limited applicability in non-Western regions (cf. Vacekova et al., 2017). Against this backdrop, our paper explores how external shocks, such as COVID-19 and the Ukraine war, have influenced public–nonprofit collaboration in a specific non-Western context, namely post-socialist countries such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland. We adopt historical institutionalism as a theoretical framework for this analysis.

The lens of historical institutionalism assumes a paramount role within our research context due to its ability to elucidate the entrenched nature of existing institutional frameworks, sculpted by preceding choices, which may prove overly rigid in confronting the rapid exigencies posed by the prevailing crises. This lens underscores the imperative for collaborative efforts aimed at consolidating resources and expertise, with public entities providing legitimacy and financial backing, while nonprofits contribute specialized skills and community networks. Moreover, historical institutionalism acknowledges that crises have the potential to disrupt entrenched collaboration patterns, serving as critical junctures that may catalyze novel forms of collaborative engagement. In such exigencies, shifting priorities may compel public and nonprofit actors to forge innovative collaborative strategies. No less important, the ascendancy of informal practices and discretionary decision-making among sectoral actors might be a corollary of the struggle of established procedures to adapt to the swiftly evolving landscape.

We see these potential contributions of historical institutionalism to achieving our research objectives to be grounded in the fundamental tenet of this literature, that is, the recognition that history plays a pivotal role (Kickert & van der Meer, 2011). Historical institutionalism scrutinizes social phenomena in terms of their historical conditioning and the influence of specific social contexts (Peters & Fontaine, 2020). As articulated by Kickert and van der Meer (2011), historical institutionalists delve into temporal processes, meticulously analyzing sequences of events leading to significant institutional transformations. This analytical approach hinges on identifying critical junctures—pivotal moments triggering subsequent sequences of events culminating in major institutional shifts. According to (Kickert & van der Meer, 2011) prominent historical institutionalists, including Pierson (2004), Pierson and Skocpol (2002), Sanders (2006), Thelen (1999), Streeck and Thelen (2005), and Thelen (2003), have focused extensively on understanding how institutional behavior evolves over time. They elucidate how institutional change can occur gradually, as a result of cumulative historical events eroding the status quo until a tipping point is reached, resulting in regime changes or administrative reforms. Simultaneously, long periods of incremental change can be disrupted by critical junctures—disruptive events such as external shocks or crises that upend the prevailing equilibrium, ushering in radical transformations (Kickert & van der Meer, 2011). This theoretical interface is particularly relevant to the examination of cross-sectoral collaboration dynamics. It prompts us to explore whether external shocks have the potential to surmount barriers to cross-sectoral collaboration, thereby catalyzing a paradigm shift and establishing a new equilibrium. Alternatively, it encourages us to consider the extent to which the propensity for cross-sectoral cooperation represents the cumulative result of historical events, such as legislative changes, accumulated over time.

In the context of the countries under scrutiny, adopting a historical institutionalist perspective on the evolution of public–nonprofit collaboration prompts an exploration of the longitudinal trajectory delineating the development of the nonprofit sector and its interplay with the public sector (Nałęcz et al., 2015; Plaček et al., 2021, 2023; Vaceková et al., 2017; Valentinov et al., 2017, Jelínková et al., 2023). Predominantly, these countries share a landscape where the state serves as the primary provider of social and other essential services. The nonprofit sector, in turn, assumes a crucial role in meeting the demand for services beyond the capacity of the public sector. Funding for the nonprofit sector remains substantially reliant on the state, predominantly in the form of subsidies. However, this funding does not prevent the nonprofit sector from encountering considerable constraints in terms of accessing public procurement opportunities.

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Furthermore, the lens of historical institutionalism invites us to consider key external shocks that have significantly influenced the trajectory of the nonprofit sector in the countries under scrutiny (Plaček et al., 2022). Foremost among these events is the fall of communism in 1989, a pivotal moment that catalyzed the inception of the nonprofit sector (Nałęcz et al., 2015; Plaček et al., 2021). Subsequently, the accession of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland to the European Union in 2004 marked another landmark, ushering in further development of the nonprofit sector and instigating shifts in the structure of nonprofit sector revenues. This transformative event compelled the national governments to progressively align with standard EU policies governing nonprofit sector development. The economic crisis of 2008–2011, and the ensuing loss of state funding emerged as another external shock, intensifying the push toward commercialization within the nonprofit sector (Nałęcz et al., 2015; Plaček et al., 2021). A critical juncture in the relationship between the nonprofit and public sectors materialized during the 2015 migration crisis. According to Valentinov et al. (2017), this crisis substantially eroded trust between the public and nonprofit sectors. The surge in funding for NGOs operating in the field, coupled with an increase in discretionary power for NGO managers, introduced elements of opportunistic behavior and a drive to augment organizational budgets, problems exacerbated by the limited accountability of the nonprofit sector.

The existing comparative studies suggest that public–nonprofit relations in Central European countries can be characterized in terms of what Bentzen and Torfing (2023) call the "zero error tolerance culture" (cf. Plaček, Nemec, et al., 2020; Plaček, Ochrana, et al., 2020). This culture is defined by a reluctance to experiment with new approaches, driven by the fear of failure and potential negative consequences (Bentzen & Torfing, 2023, p. 1302). As evidenced by Plaček et al.'s (2021) comparative analysis of Czech and British public procurement systems, the prevalence of this culture in the Czech Republic is likely to lead to a constrained perception of public value, with the Czech public procurement system prioritizing compliance (legal adherence and anti-corruption measures) and input minimization (lowest price), rather than outcomes. This means that, in crisis situations, the public sector adheres strictly to its logic, while the divergence between the nonprofit and public sectors is widening.

In sum, the lens of historical institutionalism underscores the profound influence of historical trajectories, institutional settings, and past policy decisions on the current landscape of public–nonprofit collaboration in the examined countries. Central to a historical institutionalist view is the recognition of the state as a pivotal actor shaping the dynamics of public–nonprofit collaboration. Legal frameworks within the institutional environment likewise serve as crucial mechanisms that can either facilitate or impede collaboration between public and nonprofit entities. Furthermore, the institutional environment encompasses both formal collaboration structures and informal practices, both of which contribute to shaping social interactions within it. Understanding these dynamics is essential, as institutions are not solely defined by formal rules but also by the informal norms and practices that govern social behavior. Against this backdrop, there is a need to understand how critical junctures emerging from the recent crises, such as the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, can act as catalysts for new forms of collaboration, potentially leading to lasting changes. The historical institutionalist view suggests the possibility that these junctures can disrupt existing forms of collaboration and pave the way for new ones, particularly when the existing ones are found to be inadequate.

3 | METHODS AND DATA

Our research framework is grounded in the historical institutionalist perspective, which scrutinizes how external shocks can disrupt established norms within organizations (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Peters & Fontaine, 2020). At its core, historical institutionalism posits the notion of external shocks as catalysts for challenging the organizational status quo. Operating within this perspective, we conducted three individual country studies on the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland. The rationale behind selecting these countries stems from their shared history of over 40 years under communism and the subsequent collective process of democratic rejuvenation post-1989, culminating in their accession to the European Union in 2004. Additionally, these nations grappled with the economic crisis of 2009–2011. More recently, they have confronted the external shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic and an influx of migrants

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due to the war in Ukraine. The geographical proximity of these countries enhanced the efficiency of our data collection. In pursuit of explanatory depth, our case studies seek to delineate the underlying mechanisms and factors at play within each specific context (cf. Grossi & Thomasson, 2015) by conducting structured interviews with nonprofit managers.

For the purposes of our case studies, we characterize the institutional environment in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland by discussing some of the key indicators of the quality of governance, the state of democracy, and the condition of the nonprofit sector. Table 1 these indicators offer a consolidated overview of the institutional landscape in the specified countries.

The examination of governance quality in the scrutinized countries must start with a consideration of their shared communist history, spanning over 40 years, until the watershed year of 1989. This collective history marks the start of their journey toward democracy and the transition to a market economy. However, beyond this common starting point, divergences become evident, as illustrated by the data presented in Table 1. Contrary to the

TABLE 1 Comparison of selected indicators (2022).

Indicator	Czech Republic	Slovakia	Poland
GDP per capita (USD)	27,638.4	21,258.1	18,321.3
Control of corruption (percentile rank)	74.5	60.4	68.4
Government effectiveness (percentile rank)	81.1	63.7	61.8
Political stability and absence of violence/terrorism (percentile rank)	75.0	59.9	61.8
Regulatory quality (percentile rank)	88.7	76.9	74.5
Rule of Law (percentile rank)	83.7	70.3	64.2
Voice and accountability (percentile rank)	80.7	75.4	65.2
Democracy index	7.97 (democracy with shortcomings)	7.07 (democracy with shortcomings)	7.04 (democracy with shortcomings)
Civil Society Organization (CSO) Sustainability 2021	2.5 (sustainability enhanced)	3.0 (sustainability enhanced)	2.9 (sustainability enhanced)
CSO Legal Environment 2021	2.7 (sustainability enhanced)	2.9 (sustainability enhanced)	3.3 (sustainability evolving)
CSO Organizational Capacity 2021	2.6 (sustainability enhanced)	3.3 (sustainability evolving)	3.0 (sustainability evolving)
CSO financial viability	3.0 (sustainability enhanced)	3.6 (sustainability evolving)	3.3 (sustainability evolving)
CSO Advocacy 2021	1.8 (sustainability enhanced)	2.7 (sustainability enhanced)	3.2 (sustainability evolving)
CSO Service Provision 2021	2.3 (sustainability enhanced)	2.7 (sustainability enhanced)	2.4 (sustainability enhanced)
CSO Sectoral Infrastructure 2021	2.7 (sustainability enhanced)	2.9 (sustainability enhanced)	2.2 (sustainability enhanced)
CSO Public Image 2021	2.5 (sustainability enhanced)	3.0 (sustainability enhanced)	2.8 (sustainability enhanced)
Number of Ukrainian refugees per 1000 inhabitants	>30	>10	>20
Deaths/1M population	4002	3877	3172

Source: World Bank (2022a, 2022b, 2023a, 2023b), Economist Intelligence (2022), USAID (2022), and Wordometer (2023).

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assumption of a uniform trajectory, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland exhibit notable differences. The Czech Republic, boasting a higher GDP and superior governance indicators compared with Slovakia and Poland, particularly stands out in terms of government effectiveness and political stability. In terms of governance quality indicators, Poland and Slovakia exhibit remarkable similarities. A compelling facet emerges when considering democracy index indicators—while all countries are categorized as flawed democracies, the Czech Republic attains the label of a full democracy, positioning it distinctly above Poland and Slovakia, both situated at the lower end of the flawed democracy spectrum.

Disparities also surface in the sustainability of civil society organizations, even though it is problematic for all examined countries. At the same time, the Czech Republic exhibited better performance than Slovakia and Poland across various indicators, with Poland notably lagging in areas such as the legal environment, organizational capacity, and advocacy. The indicators on the number of deaths from COVID per million inhabitants and the number of Ukrainian refugees per 1000 inhabitants underscore the formidable tests encountered by these nations in a relatively short span. However, although the number of deaths per cohort surpassed the average, these countries emerged as first movers in providing assistance to Ukraine.

4 | DESIGN OF STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

We employed a purposive sampling method to select our respondents, drawing information from public databases of nonprofit organizations and social enterprises. Additionally, in Poland, insights from voivodeship offices and other experts in the nonprofit sector guided our selection process.

When reaching out, we focused on top management because of their assumed experience in establishing partnerships with the public sphere. Selected respondents were approached via email with a formal request to participate in a structured interview. In total, we reached out to the management of 37 organizations: 20 from the Czech Republic, 7 from Slovakia, and 10 from Poland. In the Czech Republic sample, respondents included 11 organizations providing social services, 2 organizations dealing with environmental protection, 1 organization supporting migrants, 4 service organizations for the nonprofit sector, and 2 organizations focused on cultural heritage protection. In Slovakia, the sample comprised four social service organizations and three organizations engaged in environmental and social activities. In Poland, the sample included four organizations providing social services, two organizations serving nonprofit organizations, three organizations in the education sector, and one organization focused on heritage protection. We used the websites and annual reports of the organizations surveyed as additional sources of information. Table A1 presents fundamental information about the respondents who participated in the structured interviews.

To accommodate various preferences, respondents were provided with multiple options for interview formats, including face-to-face, online, and email interactions. Before each interview, a comprehensive presentation elucidating the research's purpose and the significance of each question was shared with the respondents. The interviews transpired between May and October 2023, a deliberate time frame allowing for reflection in light of the more than 1-year gap since the occurrence of the last external shock.

The structured interviews that we have undertaken have been strategically organized into two parts. The initial set of questions delved into the broader institutional environment and its impact on collaborative activities. Subsequently, the second set of questions revisited these themes within the specific context of crises that have affected the organizations under scrutiny. The questions of the structured interview are listed in the following Table 2.

Each interview session, lasting approximately 2 h, was recorded for detailed analysis. The recorded interviews underwent a systematic coding process that combined both deductive and inductive approaches. In the deductive phase, an initial set of codes was applied based on the predefined research questions and the established research framework. Subsequently, we employed an inductive coding approach, which provided the flexibility to explore novel phenomena and mechanisms not originally encompassed by the research framework.

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Despite being generally robust, our methodology is not without its limitations. We remain cognizant of the potential sources of bias inherent in our study. First, there is the inherent risk of social desirability bias, where individual respondents may have provided statements influenced by subjective perceptions. Notably, our sample predominantly comprises representatives from the nonprofit sector and social entrepreneurs, potentially introducing a specific bias related to the nature of the organizations surveyed. Second, we acknowledge the potential for selection bias due to our purposive sampling approach, which carries the inherent risk of omitting important respondents.

Additionally, bias on the part of the researcher could affect the processing and interpretation of the interview results. To mitigate this bias, we implemented the following strategy. The analysis of the interviews was conducted by a team member distinct from the one responsible for conducting the interviews. This segregation of roles aimed to enhance objectivity and rigor in interpreting the gathered data. Subsequently, we compared the responses of each respondent within a given country to identify any significant differences that might indicate issues in the interview processing. In the final phase, the compiled interviews were presented in the form of summary texts for each country, which were then thoroughly discussed by the entire research team. This collaborative discussion aimed to identify and address potential mismatches in the coding process. Any discrepancies were deliberated within the context of the researchers' previous experience studying NGOs in the respective countries and the existing literature. The outcomes of each case study were synthesized to develop comprehensive responses to the research questions.

However, it is important to note that the generalizability of our results is constrained. Our chosen exploratory strategy describes the functioning of factors and mechanisms within specific temporal and contextual frameworks. Consequently, the assumptions derived from our research require validation through alternative empirical methods to determine their broader applicability beyond the specific time and context under consideration.

5 | RESULTS

This section unveils the outcomes of our case studies, segmented into three subsections. We start by presenting the findings about the general institutional environment and collaboration activities. In the second subsection, attention shifts to the examination of outcomes amidst crises, scrutinizing the impact of the institutional environment on collaboration dynamics during turbulent periods. Finally, we discuss cross-country comparisons, offering insights into the divergent trajectories of public–nonprofit collaboration across the studied nations.

TABLE 2 Design of structured interviews.

Institutional environment and cooperation activities, in general	Institutional environment and cooperation activities, during the crises
1. Do you assess the environment in which the organization operates as friendly? What determines the friendliness? What factors are necessary to build it? Please name them (e.g., public procurement law). 2. Let's go back to the topic of the organization's partners. Which partner contributed to the sustainability of the organization? 3. Which partner provides the biggest support for the organization? To what extent?	1. Please tell us more about the institutional environment of your organization during the recent crises. 2. Has any innovation in the management of the organization been developed during this period? 3. Which institutional partner was the most important in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic? What was it especially helpful for? 4. Has any good practice been developed in the field of cooperation with this institution/institutions during the pandemic? What was it about? 5. Was there a partner missing during the pandemic? Who was it and how was this lack felt?

Source: Authors.

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5.1 | General institutional environment and cooperation activities: Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland

5.1.1 | The case of Czech Republic

The majority of respondents consistently highlighted that the institutional environment for nonprofits was perceived as unwelcoming (CZR1, CZR2, CZR3, CZR4, CZR7, CZR15, and CZR16). One respondent pointed to the instability within the political and leadership structure as a notable challenge faced by nonprofits (CZR1). Moreover, respondents underscored the significant role played by particular individuals within the sector, emphasizing that the overall nature of the environment may heavily depend on specific individuals with whom nonprofits engage (CZR4, CZR5, CZR6, CZR7, CZR8, CZR9, and CZR11).

> I think that unfortunately the majority opinion is that "we can do without you."
>
> (CZR4)

> When something is asked of us, it must be immediately, but when we want something, there is time for it.
>
> (CZR7)

There seems to be a consensus among most respondents that the state assumes a predominant role in shaping the nonprofit sector. Cooperation occurs mainly through subsidy programs or public procurement processes, in which nonprofits either receive funding for specific activities or compete with commercial entities for public contracts. The primary sources of funds for their operations are grants, rendering nonprofits reliant on state support. Respondents highlighted the prevalent challenge of facing mistrust from the public sector, which often forces nonprofits to defend their activities. Some organizations reported instances where officials failed to comprehend the nonprofit sector's need for financial resources, particularly salaries, expecting them to operate on a voluntary basis. Grant applications, according to respondents, are characterized by extensive formalization and administrative demands. A notable issue identified by respondents is the complexity arising from multiple subsidy titles at different government levels, each with varying conditions. Compounding this, nonprofits find themselves subject to scrutiny from multiple authorities (CZR3, CZR4, CZR7, CZR8, CZR9, CZR10, CZR12, CZR14, and CZR24).

> They selected our project and gave it money, as if what we have to prove sometimes seems completely pointless and purposeless, as I understand that the state has to be the good steward and that some higher level of control is necessary and essential, but I think that the current setup in the Czech Republic is actually like pointlessly bureaucratic and it brings a lot of burden to the whole system and ultimately it makes it more expensive to provide these grants because if they control something they have to employ people to control it. I think that what it costs the ministry to check our project is more than the entire budget of that project.
>
> (CZR3)

The prevailing sentiment among most respondents has been one of significant skepticism toward public procurement processes. Some respondents candidly admitted feeling disadvantaged in competing with private companies due to the burdensome administrative requirements (CZR1). Despite the state having legal tools designed to support nonprofits, respondents observed a lack of their use in tenders (CZR1, CZR9, CZR13, CZR14, CZR15, CZR16, CZR17, CZR18, CZR19, CZR21, CZR22, and CZR23). A recurring observation is that the predominant criterion for selecting a contractor in the public sector remains the lowest price. There exists a perception that the nonprofit sector should offer services at a lower cost than companies. However, this perception does not align with the reality

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described by the respondents. They emphasize that social enterprises employing individuals with disabilities require distinct work organization, workplace ergonomics, and other conditions, making them less productive than companies. An additional challenge highlighted by respondents is the absence of legislation specifically addressing social enterprises (CZR1, CZR9, CZR18, CZR19, CZR20, CZR22, CZR23, and CZR24).

> We tried to participate in public tenders, but we failed. We don't even want to try anymore. The only criterion here is price, and we have no chance of competing with the companies.
>
> (CZR1)

A notable challenge highlighted by numerous respondents is the issue of communication, where nonprofits often feel overlooked by the state. One respondent suggested that enhancing outreach requires cultivating personal relationships, particularly through meetings with various committees or advisory bodies. Organizations further lamented the lack of proactive collaboration initiatives from the state (CZR2, CZR4, CZR8, CZR12, and CZR13).

5.1.2 | The case of Slovakia

Respondents described the institutional environment as being strongly influenced by populism, which they understood as an attempt to present appealing solutions that lack practical efficacy (SVKR1). They also voiced concerns about the prevalent mistrust of the public sector and communication challenges. Another critical issue identified is the public sector's limited capacity to effectively implement public policies, coupled with a highly bureaucratized decision-making process (SVKR2, SVKR3, SVKR4, SVKR5, SVKR6, and SVKR7).

> The state often creates problems for us. The state cannot react flexibly in a crisis, it cannot use its potential.
>
> (SVKR6)

In terms of the relationship with the nonprofit sector, the prevailing view among most respondents is that the public sector assumes a dominant role, organizing cooperation through key instruments such as the Social Enterprise Act, subsidies, and public procurement. Among these instruments, respondents particularly emphasized the significance of the Social Entrepreneurship Act, which includes the use of several instruments, such as a 10% VAT discount for purchases from social enterprises, service vouchers enabling individuals to access social services at social enterprises, employment allowances for entrepreneurs hiring disabled individuals, and investment allowances and investment aid. Despite the seemingly beneficial rationales behind these instruments, respondents consistently noted that they often fall short in practice or have limited effectiveness. Additionally, there is a perceived lack of implementation of these instruments, which seem to have been used primarily for the benefit of the private for-profit rather than nonprofit sector (SVKR1, SVKR2, SVKR4, and SVKR6).

> 10% VAT instrument, which could be an excellent tool for the operation of a sustainable SP without countervailing contributions from the state. When you buy from the SP, you pay 10% less price, but the tax administration threw away all such invoices and gave us back the fact that we had a competitive advantage over others for selling goods in this way.
> Service vouchers: an excellent idea for people who need household services to be able to purchase valuables from the government and thus pay at SP. In practice, this is working in about 10 shops where it has been rolled out.

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> The tools are good to listen to, it looks good, but in practice it's miserable.
>
> (SVKR1)

Respondents expressed heightened criticism of the Public Procurement Act, emphasizing that the prevailing lowest price criterion places nonprofits and social enterprises at a significant disadvantage when competing with private companies. Corruption and a lack of transparency further compound the challenges, with respondents citing instances where they received no reaction to their tender or witnessed irregularities such as companies engaging in deceptive practices to secure contracts. Additionally, respondents noted that the tendering procedure is excessively bureaucratic, and contracting authorities approach it with a considerable degree of distrust (SVKR3, SVKR4, SVKR5, SVKR6, and SVKR7).

> They look at me like I'm some kind of corrupt criminal. Yet I employ socially disadvantaged people, it is a demanding business and the state should explain to the statutory bodies that through us, a social service to society is also provided. It is common in construction services to pay employees the minimum wage and give them the rest in the black. However, as an SP, I am controlled by more than one ministry, and I could not afford to pay out a euro in this way. That's why we depend on public administration contracts, and we are unable to function in normal competition.
>
> (SVKR5)

> Although there is an obligation in the law to give preference to SP for public procurement, this is mostly given to big companies from Bratislava. Even when we bid for a public contract, we did not even get an answer that we were not selected, or a reason, nothing. It is a problem to even get a presentation. We don't even have the opportunity to present ourselves. There is no way we can get in. If you don't have the connections, you can't even get to present the products.
>
> (SVKR7)

Regarding communication, respondents perceived the public sector as passive. They indicated that it often took several months to receive responses from the public sector, and at times, no response was received at all. Inconsistency in information provided by the public sector has emerged as a significant challenge, with frequent changes causing confusion. Additionally, respondents highlighted that the public sector does not actively seek opportunities to collaborate, which contributes to a sense of disengagement and limited proactive efforts on its part (SVKR4, SVKR5, SVKR6, and SVKR7).

> But the worst is when the rules of the game change frequently. We have been running for a year and a half now, and the contribution system is already going through major changes. We should be serious partners in the legislative process. They should be interested in hearing what the consequences and impacts of their changes will be in reality.
>
> (SVKR6)

5.1.3 | The case of Poland

The nonprofit sector in Poland is widely perceived as having a positive and cooperative environment, with various stakeholders showing a willingness to engage in collaborative efforts. Public sector organizations express genuine openness to providing financial support and grants (PLR1, PLR4, PLR5, PLR6, PLR7, PLR9, and PLR10). Similarly, businesses are increasingly acknowledging their social responsibility, and other nonprofits display a declared readiness to cooperate (PLR2 and PLR8). However, despite these positive sentiments, challenges arise in translating this

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goodwill into tangible outcomes. Public sector organizations face complexities due to several regulations, leading to increased bureaucratization in their interactions with the nonprofit sector (PLR1–10).

> It certainly cannot be said of officials in Poland that they are unfriendly toward the third sector. However, they lack the tools to gently and effectively implement regulations. A lot of our relations are based on trust developed over years—even if we have not delivered something [e.g., in terms of reporting], they know that we will fulfill our obligations sooner or later and they give us credit here. […] truth is that we need each other and we are aware of that.
>
> (PLR7).

There is currently a lack of a supportive culture for nonprofits among business organizations, underscoring the need for enhanced efforts to garner support from businesses in the nonprofit sector.

> There are companies that successfully run their own foundations or associations. However, in most cases, it is still grassroots work to explain potential donors why our cooperation is so important. For organizations, it is an effort—a job to be done—to explain the mutual benefits of a potential collaboration from scratch.
>
> (PLR8)

> Business has to have a visible benefit from the support, and there is still a long way to go from that to a deep awareness of CSR.
>
> (PLR2)

Nonprofits achieve economic sustainability predominantly through public funding and grants, often secured through competitive bidding for fulfilling specific tasks (PLR1, PLR4, and PLR6). Nevertheless, this funding is time-bound, necessitating organizations to reapply for funds, even for recurring grant initiatives (PLR1 and PLR9). In contrast, other sources of income, vital for organizational stability, exhibit a more transient, sporadic, and uncertain nature (PLR1, PLR2, PLR3, PLR5, PLR8, and PLR10).

> We regularly participate in cyclical grant competitions organized by public authorities. In Poland, it is a method for implementing social policy tasks to support people with disabilities and others at risk of social exclusion. In fact, we perform public tasks in partnership with the local government.
>
> (PLR1)

> In Poland, we have learned to play the game of survival. Funded activities are most often provided for in grant competitions for a year. The money for the next year arrives with a delay, and although this is abnormal and incorrect, we know that we must ensure a way to survive in January and February next year. In other words, we are sure that we will receive the funds; we also know that they will arrive with a delay, which we have to manage.
>
> (PLR7)

The primary partner for nonprofits in Poland is the public sector, which organizes the flow of funds supporting the nonprofit sector. In addition, supranational organizations, including the European Union and its agencies, play a significant role in collaboration.

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> Of course, the public sector, but above all, funds from EU competitions and grants. We cannot limit ourselves to national funds or count on the private sector, because it is too risky.
>
> (PLR2)

> The goals of our organization were created from the bottom up, and we try to regulate them according to the needs we notice. However, we know that we have to adapt our activities to competitions, of which, fortunately, there are many.
>
> (PLR10)

Numerous respondents shared insights into how their organizations have adapted to function on the basis of diverse principles of cooperation (PLR1, PLR2, PLR3, PLR5-7, and PLR10). This flexibility and readiness to change emerge as distinctive features, albeit at the cost of occasional professional burnout among nonprofit leaders and members (PLR1, PLR3, PLR5-6, and PLR10).

> Working for social organizations is probably the most precarious employment in Poland. No self-respecting manager from the public sector would do everything I do for my salary.
>
> (PLR3)

> If it weren't for volunteers, we would have to limit our statutory activities.
>
> (PLR10)

Determining the precise extent to which nonprofit organizations in Poland aspire to distance themselves from the public sector in terms of their independence, including financial independence, and the extent to which the public sector is considered an imperfect partner remains difficult (PLR1-10).

> On the one hand, I believe that the state should finance us because we carry out tasks to improve the situation of citizens. On the other hand, our activities are not attractive enough for companies to look for partners. Poles are also not so rich to finance our activities from their private pockets month after month, although there are people on whom we can constantly count on.
>
> (PLR5)

> Our activities are closely related to public goals. It is hard to imagine a situation where we do not know each other. They count on us, we count on them, and that's how it works.
>
> (PLR6)

5.2 | Institutional environment and cooperation during the crisis

5.2.1 | The case of Czech Republic

Regarding the comparison of nonprofit-state collaboration with nonprofit-business collaboration, most nonprofit organizations conveyed that, during emergencies, the private sector becomes their primary and crucial partner. Businesses actively initiate contact with nonprofits, offering collaboration during times of crisis. Respondents particularly valued the private sector's proactivity, swift negotiations, and minimal administrative burden (CZR2, CZR4, and CZR5). Concurrently, nonprofits reported that business entities often approach them due to regulatory requirements, where companies are obligated to either employ individuals with disabilities or source part of their production from entities that employ disabled individuals (CZR2, CZR9, and CZR10).

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> We have a lot of support from the private Foundation, which is a major contributor to the home sharing project, and without their support, we certainly wouldn't be able to do and sustain this thing. Cooperation with this foundation is not at all comparable when we are drawing money from public funds.
>
> (CZR8)

> Companies want to brag that they are supporting social enterprises and we want to get the word out.
>
> (CZR10)

Creativity and proactivity have emerged as pivotal factors during emergency periods, stepping in to compensate for the less-than-optimal collaboration with the public sector. In addition to the widespread shift to the online domain during the COVID-19 pandemic, most respondents reported dynamic changes and expansions in their product portfolios to substitute for offerings that faced challenges during emergencies. This adaptive approach was noted consistently across responses from CZR1, CZR2, CZR3, CZR4, CZR5, CZR7, CZR9, CZR11, CZR13, and CZR23.

5.2.2 | The case of Slovakia

Respondents underscored that, in a crisis environment, their key partners are the EU and private companies. Notably, they place particular emphasis on collaboration with EU institutions (SVKR 5, SVKR 6, and SVKR 7).

> Fortunately, the EU has saved us in this, otherwise the changes could have been even more drastic.
>
> (SVKR6)

In terms of crisis management, the predominant response has been redundancies, spending cuts, and service reductions. The adoption of creative solutions represented a smaller proportion of the activities undertaken in response to crises.

> Sustainability is key. I would consider it a failure to have to make redundancies. I am aware of the fate of these people and I am not indifferent to them. A person with a severe psychiatric diagnosis who has been released from prison is unemployable. Now he is among the people, and I see that it makes a big difference. We create values; people are at work and have money. I got a guy out of detention, I gave him a job, and today he has decent money, goes to work, and doesn't drink. We can't fire people like that. We don't need to make profits. (SVKR6)

5.2.3 | The case of Poland

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact not only on the operations of the nonprofit sector but also on business entities (PLR4-7 and PLR10). Following the initial shock of the pandemic-related restrictions, which were widespread in Poland, a phase of heightened activity ensued amid the conditions of partial online operation for many organizations. Nonprofits in Poland found support for their initiatives as long as they were geared toward addressing the challenges posed by COVID-19 for citizens. Consequently, many nonprofits have redirected their efforts toward services such as catering, online educational services, and the establishment of virtual work environments (PLR1-5, PLR7, PLR9, and PLR10).

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> During COVID, we were looking for a way to support our beneficiaries, and public programs responded to this need. Of course, we would like these changes to be less chaotic and sudden, but what happened during the pandemic was our common problem.
>
> (PLR5)

> No one wanted this pandemic, that's obvious, but when it came, it taught us a lot—not only humility, but also cooperation between us in various difficult conditions. Various stakeholders began to contact us with material or financial help, but it was rather of a one-off or short-term nature.
>
> (PLR6)

During the pandemic, nonprofits in Poland demonstrated considerable resilience in responding to the challenges posed by the ongoing conditions (PLR1–10). Notably, some functions, similar to those in other economic sectors, transitioned to the online realm. Nonprofits have adapted by refining their practices in internet-mediated communication, a trend that persists to date (PLR1, PLR3–7, and PLR9–10). The pandemic period served as a "school of life" for numerous organizations, especially considering the complex financial dependencies in which nonprofits in Poland operate. With multiple projects concurrently managed by nonprofits with limited staff, the pandemic intensified survival efforts. As the cadres of Polish nonprofits approach a generational transition, there may be a lower propensity among current staff to embrace new technologies, thereby necessitating increased organizational effort for implementation. While this shift is beneficial in the long run, it likely imposes significant stress on organizations in the short term (PLR4 and PLR7).

> The ability to work under even greater pressure and deal with conflicts certainly remains with us. We had to answer the question of whether we wanted to survive, and this was an essential lesson for the organization. We keep returning to this, especially in crises.
>
> (PLR4)

Nonprofits in Poland primarily collaborate with public sector entities that fund and oversee their activities across various domains. During the pandemic, the public sector exhibited heightened support for nonprofits (PLR1, PLR4, and PLR7). Special initiatives, including "fast-track" competitions and ad hoc solutions, were introduced for their benefit.

> Our local government consists of decent people. The possibilities are limited, but pandemic or not, we can count on each other. It's hard at times, but then we pick up the phone and solve the problems.
>
> (PLR7)

Nonprofits focused on social policy and education emerged as the "winners" during the pandemic. These organizations demonstrated greater adaptability and successfully aligned their profit-making activities with the evolving needs of the market (PLR4–7 and PLR9–10).

> Thanks to solutions such as online education during the pandemic, we are thinking about further projects based on modern educational technologies. This certainly wouldn't have happened so quickly if not for the crisis.
>
> (PLR9)

While some business organizations contributed as partial donors to certain activities in some nonprofits, they were not deemed essential for the nonprofits' survival (PLR3, PLR7, and PLR9).

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> During the pandemic, the best cooperation was between non-governmental organizations and public institutions, various ones. Business was rather reaching this stage. It was visible that it had become more active—people simply wanted to help, and therefore their companies, but it wasn't like they knew what to do, with whom, and how. They were there and that should be appreciated.
>
> (PLR3)

Respondents highlighted the importance of increased institutional and operational trust between nonprofits and local government as one of the most crucial lessons from the emergency (PLR8). Another significant good practice linked to trust was the flexible adaptation of operations by both nonprofits and public sector organizations (PLR10).

5.3 | Cross-country comparison

Our empirical investigation into public–nonprofit collaborations in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland has yielded insights that we see to be framed by the interplay of key categories, such as institutional environment, collaboration regime, and collaborative actions. The institutional environment, which serves as the overarching context, plays a crucial role in shaping public–nonprofit collaboration. This context encompasses political, legal, economic, and social dimensions that influence the behavior and expectations of both government and nonprofit actors. The institutional environment can vary in terms of its friendliness, stability, transparency, and support for public–nonprofit collaboration. The collaboration regime, which we understand as the set of rules, norms, and practices governing interactions between government and nonprofit actors, includes instruments such as grants, contracts, subsidies, and vouchers, as well as communication channels such as meetings, committees, and platforms. This regime may vary in formality, flexibility, responsiveness, and participatory nature. Collaborative actions encompass specific processes and outcomes resulting from interactions between government and nonprofit actors. These actions involve strategies such as innovation, adaptation, and proactivity, along with impacts such as trust and learning effects.

Within this conceptual framework, the success of public–nonprofit collaborations hinges on these collaborative actions, with the likelihood of success contingent on how the broader institutional environment shapes the collaboration regime. In the case of Poland, our observations reveal a more friendly institutional environment that fosters a flexible collaboration regime, consequently facilitating creative collaborative actions. However, it should be borne in mind that successful cooperation in Poland has been based mainly on 'friendly' cooperation between staff of public institutions and the third sector, based on trust and flexibility. Conversely, in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, an essentially unfriendly institutional environment impedes a responsive collaboration regime, leading to constraints on collaborative actions (Table 3).

Viewed through the lens of historical institutionalism, the divergent pathways of public–nonprofit collaborations are deeply entrenched in the distinct traditions of civil society activism and participation observed in the analyzed

TABLE 3 Institutional environment, collaborative regime, and collaborative actions in public–nonprofit collaborations in the examined countries.

	Czech Republic	Slovakia	Poland
Institutional environment	Unfriendly, unstable, and mistrustful	Unfriendly, unstable, and corrupt	Rather friendly, based on the social capital of cooperation
Collaboration regime	Formal, rigid, and bureaucratic	Formal, rigid, and non-transparent	Flexible, responsive, and participatory
Collaborative actions	Constrained, ineffective, and dependent	Constrained, ineffective, and dependent	Creative, effective, and based on common values

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nations. In Poland, these traditions have historically been more extensive and resilient than those in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The civil society landscape in the latter nations began to take shape in the late 1980s against the backdrop of the Velvet Revolution, marking the peaceful transition from communist rule to democracy in Czechoslovakia. However, this progress was tempered by the subsequent dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993, which led to the emergence of two independent states grappling with disparate political, economic, and social landscapes. As a result, civil society in both countries encountered considerable challenges.

A historical institutionalist lens likewise draws attention to the contrasting political landscapes in the Czech Republic and Slovakia on the one hand and Poland on the other hand. The Czech Republic and Slovakia are marked by a more fragmented and polarized political system than Poland. Consequently, it is not surprising that the crises stemming from the pandemic and the Ukraine war exacerbated the existing challenges in collaboration between the nonprofit and public sectors in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, while catalyzing a new wave of collaboration in Poland. Throughout the crisis, Poland developed novel mechanisms that incentivize enhanced cooperation and sustainability among nonprofits, albeit with the caveat that such cooperation may primarily address short-term needs. Whether this heightened collaboration will have a lasting impact on the relations between the nonprofit sector and the public sector in Poland remains to be seen.

A common theme across all three countries is the enduring influence of the state as a central player in shaping collaborative dynamics. Moreover, there is a discernible trend toward heightened cooperation between nonprofits and the private for-profit sector, although the driving forces behind this trend exhibit nuances. In the Czech Republic, this inclination toward collaboration is bolstered by legislative support. Conversely, in Poland, it appears to be primarily catalyzed by temporary laws enacted in response to the Ukraine war. Meanwhile, in Slovakia, the impetus for collaboration with the private sector seems more reactive, stemming from emergencies and the imperative of survival. In all of these countries, the trend toward intersectoral collaboration reflects how nonprofits increasingly regard collaboration with the private sector as more adaptable and advantageous than engagements with the public sector. Divergences in intersectoral collaboration among the studied countries are also influenced by varying legal frameworks. Slovakia and Poland have taken more proactive steps in this regard, enacting laws specifically addressing social entrepreneurship. Notably, in Poland, codified legislation mandating public sector cooperation with nonprofits exists, potentially accounting for the prevalence of collaboration during emergencies witnessed in the country.

We wish to close this section with a broader reflection on how the collaboration regime in the three examined countries serves as a mediator between the institutional environment and specific actions within public–nonprofit collaboration. If this collaboration is prompted by emergency situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war, it is likely to render existing formal institutional frameworks of both the public and nonprofit sectors inadequate for the complexity of the challenges at hand. We contend that the inadequacy of formal institutional frameworks necessitates the application of informal discretionary judgments by managers in both the public sector and nonprofits. However, discretion in this context does not imply randomness or unpredictability. Instead, we argue that discretionary judgments are significantly shaped by the broader institutional environment. If the institutional environment prioritizes bureaucracy, compliance, and formalism, specific collaborative actions are likely to be less effective.

6 | DISCUSSION

Our findings on public–nonprofit collaboration in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland resonate deeply with the historical institutionalist perspective. They demonstrate the concept of path dependence by showing how the legacies of civil society activism in each country continue to influence present-day collaboration patterns. This understanding of path dependence places the institutional environment—encompassing political, legal, economic, and social factors—at the forefront. It reveals how an "unfriendly" environment, characterized by instability and mistrust

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(e.g., Czech Republic/Slovakia), serves as a significant barrier to collaboration, while a "friendly" environment, typified by social capital and a tradition of cooperation (Poland), facilitates more productive partnerships. Our findings also highlight the interplay between formal collaboration regimes, such as grants and contracts, and the informal practices within these regimes. The state clearly emerges as a central actor shaping collaboration dynamics. Furthermore, our research confirms that recent crises, such as the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, indeed serve as critical junctures where historical events can lead to significant institutional shifts. However, the permanence of these shifts turns out to critically depend on the broader institutional environment.

Our historical institutionalist analysis makes several contributions to the existing theoretical framework of public–nonprofit collaboration. Drawing on Bryson and Crosby's (2006) concept of "initial conditions," we emphasize the pivotal role of a nation's historical trajectory, particularly the legacy of civil society activism, in shaping collaboration patterns during crises. Additionally, we elaborate on the notion of the institutional environment's influence on these patterns (cf. AbouAssi et al., 2024; Bryson & Crosby, 2006). By illustrating how this environment varies in terms of friendliness, stability, and susceptibility to corruption, we provide context to the understanding of "structures and governance" within cross-sectoral collaboration (Bryson & Crosby, 2006). While acknowledging the challenges in cross-sectoral collaboration (Cains & Harris, 2011; Koliba et al., 2011), we show how crises can serve as critical junctures (Ansell & Gash, 2008), fostering innovative forms of collaboration. For instance, we point to Poland's more flexible and responsive collaboration during the Ukraine war as an illustrative example. Moreover, we underscore that the sustainability of these changes hinges heavily on the broader historical context, aligning with Bentzen and Torfing's (2023) cautious optimism. Overall, our analysis concurs with the literature that acknowledges the limitations of Western models in non-Western contexts (AbouAssi et al., 2024; Vacekova et al., 2017). By emphasizing the specificity of post-socialist countries like the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland, we contribute to a more robust understanding of public–nonprofit collaboration dynamics.

As suggested in the introductory section, the existing public administration scholarship lacks an equivalent of Anheier and Salamon's (2006) "social origins of the nonprofit sector" theory, which would recognize the embeddedness of public–nonprofit collaboration within the broader institutional realities of specific countries. This theoretical framework would find particular relevance in post-socialist countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. We view our findings as an initial step toward developing such an application, particularly as they underscore the influence of civil society activism legacies on contemporary collaboration patterns. While the traditional social origins theory typically emphasizes the size and nature of the state as pivotal factors, our research illustrates how the "friendliness" of the institutional environment (including factors like stability, legal frameworks, and trust) significantly shapes the impact of historical legacies on collaboration dynamics. Additionally, whereas the traditional theory implies relatively stable relationships between historical paths and nonprofit sector development, our study reveals that crises can serve as pivotal junctures, catalyzing new forms of collaboration (e.g., Poland's adoption of a more flexible regime), thus suggesting a more dynamic interplay between historical legacies, institutional environments, and collaboration patterns during periods of upheaval.

In practical terms, our examination of the three case studies offers insights into the factors influencing the cooperative dynamics of the public sector. One significant factor is institutional settings, wherein the establishment of purpose-driven cross-sectoral partnerships aimed at producing common goods is pivotal. For such partnerships to thrive, the government must embrace cooperation as a core mission and undertake concrete actions, including legislative measures and institutional support (Mazzucato, 2024; Taylor & Ball, 2023). Poland's approach exemplifies the success of this strategy, as evidenced by our findings. At the same time, a number of studies have shown the relationships between the nonprofit sector and the governments during the COVID period to be highly variable (Garcia et al., 2023; Kövér, 2021). Kövér (2021) outlines a spectrum of interactions ranging from mutual cooperation to ignorance and even conflict. Our findings suggest that the institutional settings described above also impose constraints on key mechanisms essential for effective cross-sectoral partnerships, such as trust-building, communication, information sharing, capacity building, and accountability, operating at both organizational and individual levels (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Bryson & Crosby, 2006).

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What becomes evident in the context of the examined countries is the widespread lack of understanding among many public officials regarding the practical implications of the nondistribution constraint within the nonprofit sector, which stands somewhat contrary to Hansmann's (1987) contract failure theory. Contrary to prevalent beliefs, this constraint does not inherently lead to lower costs within nonprofits. Instead, it mandates that any surplus generated must be reinvested into fulfilling the organization's mission. Consequently, nonprofits may incur higher costs, especially when accommodating special needs, such as employing individuals with disabilities. These mission-driven expenditures can and do significantly impact the final price of services. However, public officials often misinterpret these higher costs as attempts by nonprofits to enrich themselves. Another notable factor is the entrenched zero error tolerance culture within the public sector (cf. Bentzen & Torfing, 2023). This culture places a premium on minimizing inputs and strictly adhering to legal regulations, often resulting in a narrow focus on collaboration and communication. With an emphasis on input minimization and legal compliance over outcomes, the public sector views cooperation as synonymous with increased risk of higher costs and regulatory breaches. As a result, there is little motivation for the public sector to engage in collaborative efforts. This phenomenon may offer insight into the comparatively poorer crisis management performance of the Czech Republic and Slovakia, as the zero error tolerance culture hampered adaptive responses and effective communication channels. In fact, our analysis indicates that while the Czech Republic and Slovakia managed to swiftly respond to crises by taking straightforward measures such as lockdowns and emergency accommodations, their effectiveness diminished over time due to limitations in executing more complex collaborative efforts. In contrast, Poland's proactive legislative approach, which institutionalizes cooperation as a standard practice, facilitated more effective collaboration during crises. By acknowledging cooperation as a resource-intensive and long-term endeavor, Poland's strategy yielded significantly improved outcomes in public–nonprofit collaboration, setting a positive precedent for crisis management.

7 | CONCLUSION

Recent crises, encompassing economic and political upheavals, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the conflict in Ukraine, have spurred public administration scholars to scrutinize their implications for inter-organizational and cross-sectoral collaboration (cf. Bentzen & Torfing, 2023). While prior research has generally portrayed these implications as positive, our examination of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland presents a more nuanced perspective. Despite sharing political histories and confronting similar challenges stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, these countries have experienced divergent trajectories in public–nonprofit collaboration. In this paper, we aim to disentangle these varied paths through the lens of historical institutionalism, with a particular focus on the evolution of the broader institutional environment in each country. Within this framework, we underscore Poland's longer and more robust tradition of civil society activism and participation compared with the Czech Republic and Slovakia, alongside the latter two countries' relatively fragmented and polarized political systems. We see these findings to align with the arguments of Streeck and Thelen (2005) and Thelen (2003) suggesting that changes in collaboration dynamics often occur gradually and cumulatively, stemming from a multitude of past events rather than abrupt external shocks, and potentially overshadowing the immediate impacts of these shocks.

We contend that understanding this historical context sheds significant light on the varying perceptions of the institutional environment among nonprofit organizations in these countries, which subsequently influence the outcomes of public–nonprofit collaboration. In the Czech Republic, a predominant sentiment among interviewed nonprofit actors is the perception of an unwelcoming institutional environment marked by political instability, leadership challenges, bureaucratic controls, and a heavy reliance on state funding. Slovakian nonprofit actors echoed these concerns, citing issues such as populism, legal deficiencies, and procurement challenges. In contrast, Polish nonprofits appear to operate within a generally favorable environment characterized by ample opportunities for public funding. Importantly, these perceptions of the institutional environment directly impact the efficacy of collaborations between the public sector and nonprofit organizations. The variations in the perceptions of the institutional

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environment by nonprofit actors echo the insights of Kickert and van der Meer (2011) into a variety of possible strategies of adaptation to shocks, ranging from full to partial adaptation or outright refusal, each associated with distinct temporal dynamics.

In contrast to Western presumptions, our findings challenge the prevailing optimism surrounding the outcomes of public–nonprofit collaboration. We illuminate how factors such as path dependency, mutual distrust, and adverse experiences can result in unexpected dynamics between nonprofit organizations and public sector authorities. Our findings indicate that the obvious advantages of collaboration do not guarantee automatic success. Concurrently, our argument elucidates crucial factors shaping collaboration from the nonprofit sector's perspective. This insight holds promise for policymakers in crafting more effective strategies for fostering collaboration, particularly during crises, and underscores the significance of considering the distinct institutional contexts within these Central European countries. Most importantly, we suggest that policymakers should deliberately focus on creating a "friendly" institutional environment that fosters collaboration between the public and nonprofit sectors. This could involve measures like simplifying regulations, promoting trust-building initiatives, and providing resources for collaboration. At the same time, policymakers need to be aware of historical contexts when designing collaboration strategies. Initiatives that build on existing traditions of collaboration are likely to be more successful. Also, our findings underscore the importance for policymakers of engaging with nonprofits to understand their concerns and tailor collaboration strategies accordingly.

Our study also acknowledges the limitations inherent in historical institutionalist analysis. While it offers valuable insights into the evolution of cross-sectoral partnerships in the examined countries, it grapples with the complexities of identifying clear causal links between external shocks and systemic changes. This complexity underscores the need for further longitudinal studies that track the evolution of cross-sectoral partnerships over time, elucidating their response mechanisms to external shocks. Comparative research across diverse institutional contexts holds particular promise in unraveling the multifaceted dynamics of public–nonprofit collaboration. In this regard, our research opens avenues for future inquiry, suggesting the potential for longitudinal and comparative studies to deepen our understanding of collaboration dynamics amidst shifting institutional landscapes and external perturbations. Such endeavors promise to enrich our comprehension of the intricate interplay between historical legacies, institutional contexts, and adaptive responses within the realm of public–nonprofit collaboration.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Open access publishing facilitated by Univerzita Karlova, as part of the Wiley - CzechELib agreement.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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How to cite this article: Plaček, M., Valentinov, V., Daniel, G., Ochrana, F., Mikołajczak, P., & Waligóra, A. (2025). Cross-sectoral collaboration in times of crisis: Comparing the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland. *Public Administration*, *103*(3), 828–854. https://doi.org/10.1111/padm.13016

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APPENDIX A

TABLE A1 Structure of the sample of respondents.

Code of the respondent	Country	Description of respondents' activities
CZR1	Czech Republic	Organization employing florists, as well as those with epilepsy. It also offers opportunities for mothers who care for disabled children.
CZR2	Czech Republic	Organization bringing together other organizations focused on achieving sustainability.
CZR3	Czech Republic	Organization dedicated to providing services to nonprofit organizations in ways that maximize their social impact. It primarily uses modern technology.
CZR4	Czech Republic	Organization dealing with environmental education and nature conservation mainly in kindergartens and primary schools.
CZR5	Czech Republic	Organization dedicated to preserving history for future generations. It focuses particularly on the period of anti-communist resistance.
CZR6	Czech Republic	Organization dedicated to providing support to children with disabilities and their parents. Among other things, the organization provides new technologies that make life easier for children with disabilities.
CZR7	Czech Republic	Organization providing shelter to mothers in need. It also provides counseling and psychosocial support.
CZR8	Czech Republic	Social enterprise with three operations: (1) florist services, (2) ceramics workshop, and (3) administration of the ground of a historic building.
CZR9	Czech Republic	Organization supporting companies in the field of sustainability, for example, by providing educational services for companies and the public and by facilitating the sharing of best practices and professional support.
CZR10	Czech Republic	Organization providing services to other nonprofit organizations in the areas of PR activities, training, and deadline monitoring. These services are currently provided to 111 nonprofits.
CZR11	Czech Republic	Organization employing people disadvantaged in the labor market (mainly mothers with children under 15 and the disabled). It also cooperates with other local businesses and nonbusiness entities to promote beekeeping and ecological attitudes.
CZR12	Czech Republic	Organization employing the disabled and producing injection thermoplastics, stabilization systems for gravel and grass surfaces, and HOLAR construction fittings made of plastic, stainless steel, and glass.
CZR13	Czech Republic	Coworking cooperatives employing people with disabilities and providing services in digital and information technology, and artificial intelligence.
CZR14	Czech Republic	Social enterprise employing people with disabilities. The enterprise is engaged in the production of clothing from biomaterials.
CZR15	Czech Republic	Organization providing language education to foreigners and helping them to better integrate into the Czech Republic.
CZR16	Czech Republic	Ceramic workshop employing people with physical disabilities. It produces ceramic products and helps the disabled return to the labor market, while also providing psychosocial support.
CZR17	Czech Republic	Social enterprise employing people with disabilities. It provides services to other businesses, such as painting small parts and making toy models.
CZR18	Czech Republic	Association offering services and consultancy in the field of heritage restoration. It also organizes conferences and educational events.

(Continues)

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TABLE A1 (Continued)

Code of the respondent	Country	Description of respondents' activities
CZR19	Czech Republic	Association repairing monuments in Neratov as a place of pilgrimage. Some of the main activities also include operating a sheltered housing and special school. It also organizes sheltered workshops focused on the following areas: kitchen, hopspoda, gardening, maintenance, shop, ceramic and sewing workshop, assembly work, bistro, accommodation operation, and brewery.
CZR20	Czech Republic	Canteen, also engaged in gardening. The crops grown are used in the canteen.
SVKR1	Slovakia	Organizations promoting employment, also of disadvantaged persons. It also engages in aging management and preparation, and counseling the long-term unemployed.
SVKR2	Slovakia	Organization engaged in agricultural primary production and construction activities.
SVKR3	Slovakia	Social enterprise whose primary goal is to employ people with disabilities
SVKR4	Slovakia	Social enterprise employing people who are disadvantaged in the labor market, such as the long-term unemployed, ethnic minorities, and those returning from prison.
SVKR5	Slovakia	Social enterprise dedicated to sustainability and waste management.
SVKR6	Slovakia	Social enterprises engaged in road maintenance, thermal energy, green maintenance, building maintenance, recycling yard, waste removal and waste management, operation of trucks and tractors, housing management, construction work for other municipalities (from excavation to building completion), demolition, sewer cleaning, mowing, iron construction, sewage treatment plant, repair and reconstruction of lighting, solar panels, municipal lookouts, cleaning work, providing accommodation, operation of heating plant, and upholstery work.
SVKR7	Slovakia	Sheltered workshop dedicated to the production of spa wafers and substitute filling.
PLR1	Republic of Poland	Organization offering social and vocational rehabilitation for people with disabilities.
PLR2	Republic of Poland	Organization promoting the goals of modern education (in terms of didactic approaches and teaching technologies).
PLR3	Republic of Poland	Organization focused on the protection and promotion of children's rights.
PLR4	Republic of Poland	Umbrella organization promoting social entrepreneurship by offering education and funding
PLR5	Republic of Poland	Organization providing support for people in crisis of homelessness and returning from failed economic migration.
PLR6	Republic of Poland	Organization promoting social revitalization and integration through education and the arts.
PLR7	Republic of Poland	Organization supporting seniors and economically disadvantaged people.
PLR8	Republic of Poland	Organization raising environmental awareness and promoting the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals.
PLR9	Republic of Poland	Organization promoting social entrepreneurship, especially by providing education services.
PLR10	Republic of Poland	Local organizations engaged in heritage promotion and cultural integration.

Source: Authors.

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