

ANNUAL REPORT | VÝROČNÁ SPRÁVA
2024



ENVIRONMENT

SMART CITIES



CIVIL SOCIETY

BY BICYCLE!

For the Ekopolis Foundation, 2024 was a significant year, particularly in the field of regenerative agriculture, which we have been focusing on for the past five years. In partnership with the Slovak Academy of Sciences, we established an agroforestry system at the Arboretum Mlyňany, based on the principles of regenerative agriculture—the first of its kind in Slovakia. This system will be used for both demonstration and research purposes. Additionally, in collaboration with the University Agricultural Enterprise of the Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra, we introduced a no-till seeder, which is now available for farmers interested in gradually adopting regenerative farming practices on their lands.

Our largest tree-planting program, Planting the Future, has continued to grow successfully, transforming 93 locations across the country. In 2024 alone, 41 new planting projects were carried out, where 1,600 volunteers planted 2,300 native trees, carefully selected to suit the regions and sites where they were introduced.

Slovakia, as a country, stands at a crossroads. A part of society and the political elites is inclined toward authoritarian regimes, which offer an illusion of "strong leadership." However, there is also a significant part of society that firmly believes our future lies in upholding democratic principles and actively participating in the European community. This situation not only creates political and social tensions but also raises fundamental questions about the values we wish to uphold as a nation. Democracy, the rule of law, environmental protection, and an active civil society are not to be taken for granted—they are the result of continuous effort and responsible decision-making. This is why it is essential not to remain passive observers but to actively contribute to shaping a just, sustainable, and resilient society that can withstand both external and internal challenges.

Throughout the past year, the Ekopolis Foundation has remained committed to this goal—by supporting civic initiatives, protecting the environment, and strengthening community life. In this annual report, we present an overview of our activities and achievements, demonstrating that even in uncertain times, the engagement of individuals and communities can bring about meaningful positive change.

Peter Medved', director

March 2025

TOGETHER FOR PEOPLE, NATURE AND FUTURE.

"Our vision is a country where people are aware of their responsibility for the state and development of the environment. They are citizens who participate in the improvement of civil society, who have the courage to take a critical stance and act in such a way that the future generation also has a quality life."

EKOPOLIS FOUNDATION

For more than three decades, we have been providing space and support to those who want to contribute to the protection and improvement of the environment and civil society in Slovakia. We connect people who want to change their surroundings for the better, and we help them turn good ideas into concrete actions. Thanks to this, since our inception, we have supported more than 3,968 projects of non-governmental organizations, municipalities and civic initiatives with an amount exceeding 27.1 million euros.

Through our grant programs, we bring new solutions, innovative approaches to society and encourage the emergence of activities that respond to current environmental challenges where it makes the most sense – in cities, towns and communities throughout Slovakia. Their true contribution cannot be quantified, but we see it in a healthier country and stronger communities united by the pursuit of a better future.

- In 2024, we supported 101 projects with grants, total in 235,685 euros.
- Together with the foundations in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Romania, we are members of an international consortium Environmental Partnership Association, also we are a member of the European Cyclists Federation, the most influential cycling associations in Europe, as well as European Greenways Association, an association that is dedicated to the creation, promotion and propagation paths for non-motorized transport in Europe. We belong to Civilscape, an international network to support the implementation of the European Land Convention, and we are partners in the Fair Trade initiative, which promotes fair trade ideas.

OUR PROGRAMMES AND PROJECTS

ENVIRONMENT

PLANTING THE FUTURE

The main idea of the Planting The Future initiative is to support the return of functional greenery to settlements and open landscapes, wherever it is needed, especially in locations where green infrastructure is missing or disrupted. An important part of the program's approach is to support initiatives and activities of local communities. The Planting our Future grant program has been implemented by the Ekopolis Foundation since October 2021.

In 2024, we supported 41 projects worth 99.505 euros in 2 grant calls.

To date, the Planting our Future initiative has supported a total of 93 locations, where more than 4 thousand volunteers planted 6,431 trees in the landscape outside the forest.

> The international project "Planting our Future" is implemented by the Ekopolis Foundation together with the Partnership Foundation, the Partnerstwa Fund, and the Gaja Club, thanks to the Visegrad Fund. The project included visits to planting events in three countries, online workshops and a final meeting in Brno. The aim of the project is to create a strategy and transfer experience and know-how from tree planting programs in individual countries to the whole of Central Europe.

> We commemorated Environment Day with a symbolic planting together with Canadian Ambassador Cheryl Cruz at the J.G. Tajovského High School in Banská Bystrica.

> In 2024, we also launched a new five-part miniseries about tree planting.

GREEN BELT

The Green Belt grant program supports active citizens and the ongoing care of environmentally valuable local sites that serve the general public, support nature conservation and sustainability. The grant program is organized by the Ekopolis Foundation in partnership with SLOVNAFT, a.s.

In 2024, 24 projects were supported with an amount of 59 thousand euros.

The urban orchards in Lučenec is the Top Project 2024

„The title of TOP project of the Green Oases is awarded annually to an implementation that has a significant societal benefit. The urban orchard in Lučenec is an example of effective linking of the public and civil sectors. Many people have been involved in it, who have volunteered to participate in its implementation or are developing it further. The result is a place that serves not only the city and its residents, but schools from the surrounding area of Lučenec also come here to learn and gardeners are educated here. Such a TOP project can also be an inspiration for others,“ adds Anton Molnár, spokesman and Director of Communications of SLOVNAFT, a.s.

The new call for the Green Oases program was announced on November 13, 2024 and bears the theme "Young people can do a lot together".

TREE OF THE YEAR

WILD PEAR FROM BOŠÁČA IS THE TREE OF THE YEAR 2024

More than 14 thousand tree lovers voted in the 22nd annual Tree of the Year 2024 poll. The winner was the Pear from Bošáčka. Its narrow victory was decided by 2298 votes from the public and in the spring it will represent Slovakia in the European Tree of the Year competition.

Thanks to cooperation with ISA Slovakia, every year, trees that were nominated for the survey but did not make it to the final are also treated as part of the survey. A traditional part of the survey is also a public tree planting. This time it is planned in the village of Vištuk, where local volunteers took care of the restoration of the historic linden alley. The contribution from the survey will be a supplement to maintaining the legacy for future generations.

A STRAY SEED

A stray seed carried by the wind or a bird from under a nearby pear tree, took root at the sunny foot of Lysica Hill, which towers above Bošáca. Bošáca Valley is an exceptional place with a rich fruit-growing tradition, where mighty pear seedlings are an integral part of the White Carpathian landscape and form its characteristic image. Tested for years, weathered by the wind and caressed by the sun's rays, it grows like a queen here. The area around the tree is a popular place for paragliding enthusiasts because of its weather conditions, and every year there is a competition here in flying historical model airplanes - the pear is an important landmark and a flag is placed on its top.

LIVING TRAILS

The aim of the programme is to support the sensitive restoration of the Slovak landscape and enhance its recreational and educational functions. Since 2008, financial support has been focused on the restoration and improvement of marked tourist trails and public spaces used by tourists.

In 2024, thanks to the support of the Horalky brand and the Tesco Foundation, tourist infrastructure was restored in 11 locations, for a total of 19.200 euros.

„As every year, this year too, the Living Trails program supports very useful projects for the restoration of tourist and cycling routes with high added value. High-quality marking and good routes are an inconspicuous but very important element of sustainable local development, and we are pleased to help signposters and local communities not only in attractive and well-known tourist destinations, but also in little-known locations. This year, our support is all the more important because it helps, at least to a small extent, to cope with the shortfall in this year's state support for the restoration of markings,“ says Ján Roháč, program manager of the Living Trails program at the Ekopolis Foundation.

PROGRAM FOR SOIL

The Soil Program focuses on a new concept of so-called regenerative agriculture, which offers methods for improving the structure and fertility of the soil, and thus the resilience of the country to climate instability. The long-term goal is to support the discussion on sustainable land use and measures to increase its resilience to the negative consequences of climate change. The context of the entire program is the goal of decarbonizing Europe and Slovakia by 2050

In cooperation with Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra and with the support of Nestlé Slovakia, the Sustainable Agriculture Field Day was held on June 19, 2024 at the University Agricultural Enterprise of the Slovak University of Agriculture, s.r.o. in Kolíňany. The event was attended by representatives of the university, the professional public and representatives from among farmers, and also included an excursion with expert commentary

A UNIQUE LIVING LAB WILL BE CREATED IN SLOVAKIA

Thanks to the project, a unique center, the so-called Living Lab, will be created in the Arboretum Mlyňany. Living Lab will be one of the first demonstration centers of its kind in Slovakia, where the principles of regenerative agriculture and agroforestry will be applied comprehensively in one place. In the next 2 years, we will implement the project in cooperation with the Slovak Academy of Sciences - Mlyňany Arboretum and with the support of DBU (Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt).

Day for Soil

On October 17, 2024, Day for Soil took place in the Arboretum Mlyňany. Representatives of ministries, state institutions, professional public, academia, farmers from Slovakia and abroad attended the event. The event included expert lectures and the launch of the Platform „For Soil“, and we presented the unique no-till seeder, which farmers can borrow to try out on their own fields. In this way, we want to make modern technologies for regenerative agriculture accessible to smaller farmers as well.

The Platform “For Soil” offers a space for bringing together, sharing professional information and experiences of researchers, experts and farmers who are already working with these principles or are trying to introduce them into their working procedures.

Exchange of experience between Slovakia and Norway

In cooperation with the Slovak University of Agriculture and the Arboretum Mlyňany - Slovak Academy of Sciences, we undertook a working trip to Norway on November 11-14, 2024. The main goal was to exchange knowledge and experience in the field of regenerative agriculture. This trip followed up on the October visit of Norwegian experts to Slovakia, during which the Soil Day professional seminar was held. The working trip was part of the project Regenerative Agriculture – the path to healthy soil and healthy food supported by the Fund for Bilateral Relations under the EEA Financial Mechanism and the Norwegian Financial Mechanism for the years 2014-2021.

We again participated in the Agrokomplex exhibition center in Nitra with the topics of regenerative agriculture. In addition to the many interviews, education and advice that we provided at our stand, we also organized a discussion panel on the topic „How and why to plant trees in agricultural landscapes?“.

PILSNER URQUELL ENDOWMENT FUND "FOR THE FUTURE!"

Since 2022, we have been implementing the FOR BARLEY project within the framework of the foundation fund. It serves to support sustainable barley cultivation in Slovakia and helps local farmers, as well as the surrounding nature. It is built on the principles of agroforestry.

It specifically supports the planting of trees in locations where they will have the greatest impact on strengthening the soil's ability to retain water, prevent soil erosion and the removal of the most fertile soil particles and humus, and at the same time contribute to strengthening biodiversity.

BIODIVERSITY ACTION IN TESCO AREALS

The project aims to improve biodiversity conditions in four selected TESCO stores. These include measures such as planting suitable trees and shrubs, supporting pollinators, installing birdhouses, creating areas with flowering herbs, retaining water, and the like. The selected biodiversity areas are located in Trnava, Partizánske, Humenné and Prešov.

OUR OTHERS PROJECTS AND ACTIVITIES

NEW CVERNOVKA FOR PEOPLE AND NATURE

As part of the Naprší & Spláchne project, which the Cvernovka team has been working on for several months, the first 4 retention tanks were placed on campus. During the first heavy rains, they filled with 11 thousand liters of rainwater. What is the point of this? In addition to relieving the public sewer system during peak times, they create a water supply that can be used later - whether for flushing the toilets of the Cultural Center, sprinkling the crushed stone paths in the park or watering the community garden. It currently looks like they will have over 45 thousand liters of water ready in the tanks, which will be enough for approximately 10 thousand flushes, which will save drinking water.

THE REVÚCA RIVER IS A LITTLE CLEANER

In 2024, we met again for a good cause, this time near the village of Liptovské Revúce, together with volunteers from our partner L'Oréal and the Garnier brand. Without hesitation, everyone put on their boots, gloves and got to work with great determination. And the result? Approximately 1,200 kilos of various waste collected from the Revúca River in the Veľká Fatra.

Run for the Future - for the 3rd time, there was a run for trees
At the 3rd annual Festival Run for the Future, organized by the Jozef Gregor Tajovský Theater (DJGT) as part of the Zvolen Castle Games festival, there was a run for trees again! This time, as many as 61 friends of sport, culture and nature, who were not deterred even by the morning downpour, came to support the charity run in Zvolen. For the third time, the proceeds from the entry fee were used to plant trees in our Planting the Future program, the Ekopolis Foundation, whose general partner is GLS Slovakia.

CIVIL SOCIETY

ACTIVE CITIZENS FUND - SLOVAKIA

The Active Citizens Fund – Slovakia programme supported Slovak civil society organisations in engaging citizens in decision-making and public policy-making, in efforts to create better conditions for good governance, in protecting human rights and providing civic education, and in improving the position of vulnerable groups in society. Special attention was paid to young people and their participation in public events. The cross-cutting priorities of the programme were the support of bilateral cooperation between Slovak organisations and partners from donor countries and the development of capacities or improving the position of civil society organisations in society.

„Left their mark. Active Citizens Fund – Slovakia has challenged the notion that individuals or small groups of people have no possibility to influence society and its direction. The programme has become a powerful tool for creating a better and fairer society. By supporting

active citizens, real changes have been made that have improved the quality of life of people in different communities.“

The Active Citizens Fund – Slovakia programme was part of the financial assistance of Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway to 15 Member States of the European Union. The programme in Slovakia was managed by the Ekopolis Foundation in partnership with the Open Society Foundation and the Carpathian Foundation. The selection of these organisations covered the programme’s scope across the entire territory of Slovakia, including less developed regions, and made it accessible to smaller organisations that had less experience with similar grant calls.

In the period 2018-2023, the Active Citizens Fund distributed a total of 8.5 million EUR in 20 grant calls for 188 projects of Slovak civil society organizations and provided other support activities, such as training in project management, organizational development and self-financing.

International conference on combating disinformation

On April 17-18, 2024, the international conference DATA BASED DISINFO DEFENSE took place in Bratislava, packed with great speakers, information and data.

FINAL EVENT OF THOSE WHO LEFT A MARK

The final event "Those who left a mark - Civil Society Organizations in Slovakia: Challenges and Perspectives" took place on June 19 at the Záhrady - Center for Independent Culture in Banská Bystrica.

All information at www.acfslovakia.sk

SMART CITIES

GOOD NEIGHBOR

The Good Neighbor grant program is a practical and targeted assistance in implementing the ideas of residents from the vicinity of the Slovnaft refinery in the following districts of Bratislava: Ružinov, Vrakuňa, Podunajské Biskupice, Rovinka, and from 2023 Petržalka, Dunajská Lužná and Most pri Bratislave will also be added.

The Good Neighbor grant program supported up to 22 community projects in 2024 and distributed the amount of 44,980 euros among them. In the 6th year, support went to various areas - sports and leisure, but we also find community and social projects, as well as environmental and cultural projects.

For six years, the Good Neighbor grant program has been supporting and developing good neighborly relations through small community projects in the districts of Bratislava around the Slovnaft refinery and in adjacent municipalities. Over the course of six years, 173,368 euros were distributed to 91 communities.

„These projects are a great example of how community initiatives can have a positive impact on the local environment and residents. It is wonderful to see how various organizations and groups are engaged in activities aimed at supporting education, sports, environmental protection and the social sphere. These projects not only improve the quality of life in their communities, but also promote the values of cooperation, mutual assistance and respect for nature,“ says Ľubica Štúberová, program manager of the Ekopolis Foundation.

BY BICYCLE!

ICTR-CE

The Iron Curtain Trail, included in the EuroVelo route network under number 13, is a long-distance cycling route that runs along the former border between the democratic West and the totalitarian East. It is 10,500km long and runs from the Barents Sea in the north to the Black Sea in the south. Given that this area was closed to the public for decades, most of its length is an area that is rare in terms of natural and cultural heritage, but in many sections it is an area that is less developed, sparsely populated and with less availability of services for tourists.

In Slovakia, EuroVelo 13 The Iron Curtain Trail runs from the border bridge between Hohenau and Moravský Sv. Ján to the Austrian border in the village of Kittsee, adjacent to Bratislava. The length is approximately 90 kilometers and, with the exception of the Bratislava area, it mainly leads through less populated, but all the more interesting areas along the Morava River. The cycle route is currently used mainly by recreational cyclists, but it has great potential for cycle tourism and therefore for service providers in adjacent villages and towns. The ICTr-CE project (Innovative Participatory and Sustainable Business Model for Cycle Tourism on the Iron Curtain Road) is aimed at better utilizing this potential.

We participated in the meeting in Valtice, as well as in the two-day working meeting of the ICTr project partners in Koprivnica, Croatia. The project is preparing an innovative cycle tourism product along the EuroVelo 13 Iron Curtain Road route, in Slovakia in the section along

the Slovak-Austrian border. This is an innovative approach, where the tourist product will have a very low impact on the environment, and on the contrary, in the medium term it will contribute to its protection. At the meeting, we also prepared an educational course on cycling tourism, which we will implement in Slovakia in the winter and spring of 2025. The meeting also included a cycling trip to the Amazon of Europe Bike Trail and EuroVelo 13, where we learned about the state of cycling routes in this little-known but very beautiful region on the Drava River.

The project partners are 11 organizations from 8 countries. The project is implemented thanks to the support of Interreg Central Europe.

PROJECT IBC

We participated in the opening meeting of the IBC – Inclusive Border Cycling project in Győr. The project combines two components – cycling tourism and local heritage interpretation. The aim of the project is to attract seniors and youth to cycling tourism along border cycling routes in 8 countries, while using the so-called storytelling, i.e. the presentation of local stories, which will increase the attractiveness of the route. In Slovakia, this is the EuroVelo 6 Danube Cycle Route from Bratislava to Štúrovo. We are pleased that the Ekopolis Foundation is a participant in the project, because we can capitalize on our 20-year experience in cycling tourism and help local communities gain new benefits from tourism

WELCOME CYCLIST!

The Welcome Cyclists! certification scheme was launched in Slovakia in May 2008. It is inspired by certification schemes in Germany (Bett&Bike), Austria and Switzerland and is directly based on the Cyclists Welcome

certification. The aim of the certification is to increase the number of tourist facilities and services that are adapted to the needs of cyclists and thus support bicycle transport and cycle tourism in Slovakia.

After a break caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, we renewed the Welcome, Cyclists! certification in 2023 with significant changes. We simplified the criteria, because the original ones from 2008 did not reflect phenomena such as the development of mobile information technologies or the boom of electric bicycles. We simplified the certification process, completely abolished the evaluators and introduced exclusively self-certification, simplified the certification contract, communication is now exclusively electronic. In 2024, we focused mainly on innovating the certification, moving to an online environment and eliminating paper documents.



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