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BARRIERS TO OBTAINING PUBLIC GRANTS BY NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS IN POLAND AND LITHUANIA

| Abstract

- ▶ *Goal* – The objective of this publication is to analyse the barriers faced by non-governmental organisations in Poland and Lithuania in the process of applying for public grants. The study focuses on identifying factors that hinder the application for public funds.
- ▶ *Research methodology* – A comparative approach was used, including an analysis of national legislation, a review of literature, and empirical and statistical data on the functioning of the NGO sector in both countries. Particular attention was paid to the analysis of institutional, procedural, and competence barriers to access to funding.
- ▶ *Score/results* – The study showed that NGOs in Poland and Lithuania face similar difficulties in accessing public funds. The most important barriers include: lack of stable funding, lack of competence in applying for funds, complexity of grant procedures, and limited access to free educational support. These problems result in limited effectiveness and sustainability of social activities undertaken by NGOs.
- ▶ *Originality/value* – The publication adds value by comparing two national systems and identifying common challenges faced by NGOs in the context of public funding. The conclusions can serve as a basis for formulating policy and institutional recommendations aimed at increasing the availability of public funds and strengthening the potential of non-governmental organisations in Poland and Lithuania.

| **Keywords:** non-governmental organisation, foundation, association, public funds, public institution, charitable and support foundation, grants, barriers

1. Introduction

In Poland and Lithuania, the non-governmental organisation (NGO) sector has been developing dynamically since the 1990s [Žuromskaitė, Zakrzewska, 2015: 303, 308–309]. Despite the growing importance of its role in both countries, its entities still face difficulties in obtaining funds to carry out their activities. External financing, including public grants, is the primary source of income for many of them and enables them to achieve their statutory objectives. However, the process of applying for these funds and their subsequent use is associated with barriers that significantly limit the potential of NGOs, negatively affecting their stability and ability to operate effectively. The aim of this article is to identify the barriers faced by NGOs in Poland and Lithuania in the process of obtaining grants from public funds and to determine their impact on the ability to achieve their objectives. The authors hypothesise that NGOs in Poland and Lithuania encounter similar difficulties in accessing public funds, which negatively affects the effectiveness and sustainability of their social activities.

2. Organisational forms and legal conditions for NGO activities in Poland and Lithuania

In the Polish legal system, the definition of a non-governmental organisation is set out in Article 2 of the Act of April 24, 2003, on public benefit activities and volunteering. According to this definition, an NGO is an entity that does not belong to the public finance sector (in accordance with the Public Finance Act) and it does not operate for profit. This definition covers both legal persons (e.g., foundations and associations) and organisational units without legal personality that have been granted legal capacity under separate acts [Dąbrowska, 2019: 98].

NGOs in Poland are distinguished by their formal status, voluntary establishment and operation, independence from state and economic structures, focus on achieving social goals, and voluntary nature [Wojtowicz-Dawid, 2011: 337]. Their activities are neither political nor commercial, and their main motivation is to work for the common good. Although they do not seek to exercise public authority, they may cooperate with public administration in the implementation of public policies, guided by the principles of solidarity, self-help, and civic responsibility [Swora, 2000: 457–458].

According to Article 2 of the Act of April 7, 1989, on Associations, an association is a voluntary, self-governing, and permanent form of association of persons, the essential feature of which is that it acts for non-profit purposes. The basis for its functioning is autonomy in setting goals, developing action programs, shaping its internal organisational structure, and adopting internal acts concerning its activities. Associations undertake activities mainly based on the social activity of their members, but in order to ensure the efficient conduct of their affairs, they may also employ staff from among their own members. Associations are divided into two basic forms: registered associations and ordinary associations [Hejbudzki, 2015: 5].

A foundation is based on assets donated by a founder for the pursuit of socially or economically useful goals. Although The Act of April 6, 1984, on foundations does not contain a legal definition of a foundation, it is assumed that its essential elements are: the existence of legal personality, the existence of assets strictly related to the designated purpose, a public benefit purpose, and permanence in the pursuit of its objectives [Cioch, 1995: 22].

Both foundations and associations may employ staff, cooperate with volunteers, and apply for public funds, including grants. Organisations with public benefit status are additionally entitled to receive 1.5% of personal income tax. However, the two forms differ in their organisational structure, sources of funding, objectives, and manner of establishment, which affects their practical functioning and ability to implement public projects (see Table 1).

According to Article 2(3) of the Lithuanian Law on the Development of Non-Governmental Organisations of 2013, an NGO is a public law entity, established on a voluntary basis, independent of the management of state or municipal institutions or bodies, acting for the benefit of society or a group thereof, whose purpose is not to seek political power or pursue exclusively religious objectives. NGOs in Lithuania are entities that do not engage in profit-making activities or pursue the private interests of individuals or groups. Their functioning is based on acting for the common good or for specific communities [Žuromskaitė, Zakrzewska, 2015: 304]. These organisations are also eligible for annual financial support in the form of a 1.2% deduction from personal income tax [Valstybinė Mokesčių Inspekcija, 1.07.2025]. There are three basic forms of NGOs in the Lithuanian legal system, differentiated according to their organisational basis. These are: associations (Lithuanian: *Asociacija*), public institutions (Lithuanian: *Viešoji įstaiga*) and charitable and support foundations (Lithuanian: *Labdaros ir paramos fondas*). Under the Lithuanian law, religious communities and associations are not recognized as NGOs if they operate exclusively in the religious sphere [Žuromskaitė, Zakrzewska, 2015: 304] (See Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison of NGO organisational forms in Poland and Lithuania according to the selected criteria

Country	POLAND			LITHUANIA		
Criterion	Ordinary association	Registered association	Foundation	Association	Public institution (PSU)	Charitable and support foundation (L-PF)
Legal basis	Act of 7 April 1989 – Law on Associations	Act of 7.4.1989 – Law on Associations	Act of 6.4.1984 on foundations	Act on Associations of January 22, 2004	Act on Public Institutions of July 3, 1996	Act on Charitable and Supportive Foundations of 14 March 1996
Number of founders	Minimum 3 natural persons	Minimum 7 natural persons	Minimum 1 natural or legal person	Minimum 3 natural or legal persons	1 or more natural/legal persons	Minimum 1 natural or legal person
Method of establishment	Drawing up of regulations, notification to the district administrator, appointment of a representative or management board	Founding meeting, adoption of statutes, election of bodies, notification to the National Court Register	Declaration of intent by the founder, drafting of statutes, notification to the National Court Register	Founding meeting, statutes, minutes, agreement, registration, address of the registered office	Statutes, agreement/founding decision, registered office address, minutes (if there are multiple founders), registration, registered office address	Statutes, foundation agreement, compliance with the classification of objectives, registration, registered office address
Registration	Register of ordinary associations kept by the district administrator	Entry in the National Court Register	Entry in the National Court Register	Entry in the Register of Legal Entities	Entry in the Register of Legal Entities	Entry in the Register of Legal Entities
Basis for operation	Regulations	Statute	Statutes and foundation deed – a notarised declaration of intent by the founder, specifying the purpose of the foundation and the assets allocated for its implementation.	Statute	Statute, agreement or founding decision	Statutes, foundation agreement

Country		POLAND			LITHUANIA		
Criterion		Ordinary association	Registered association	Foundation	Association	Public institution (PSU)	Charitable and support foundation (LPF)
Bodies		One representative or management board – optional	Management board, general meeting, supervisory body, e.g. audit committee	Management board, supervisory body – optional, e.g. foundation council	General meeting of members, executive body, e.g. director	Shareholders' meeting, management body, e.g. director, optional board	Shareholders' meeting, management body, e.g. director, optional board
Legal personality	None	None	It has been entered in the National Court Register	Has after entry in the National Court Register	Has after entry in the Register of Legal Entities	Has after entry in the Register of Legal Entities	Possesses after entry in the Register of Legal Entities
Legal capacity	Limited		Full after obtaining legal personality	Full after obtaining legal personality	Full after obtaining legal personality	Full after obtaining legal personality	Full after obtaining legal personality
Initial assets	Not required	Not required	Not required	Required to be provided by the founder. Without economic activity – any amount With economic activity – min. PLN 1 000	Not required	Not required	Contribution of assets or services required
Membership fees	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Optional	Not applicable – organisation not based on membership	Not applicable – non-membership-based organisation
Conducting business activity	Not permitted	Permitted, profits allocated to statutory purposes	Permitted, profits allocated to statutory purposes	Permitted, with profits allocated to statutory purposes	Permitted, if consistent with statutory purposes	Permitted, profits allocated to statutory purposes	Permitted, profit allocated to statutory purposes
Employment of employees and volunteers	Limited	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Source: the authors' own work. Financial situation of NGOs in Poland and Lithuania.

A Lithuanian association is a public legal entity with limited civil liability, having its own name and established for the purpose of coordinating the activities of its members, representing and protecting their interests, or satisfying other public interests. [Art. 2(1), Lietuvos Respublikos Asociacijų Įstatymas, 2004]. A public institution, on the other hand, is a special type of legal entity of a public-law nature, operating on a non-profit basis, with limited civil liability. Its main purpose is to satisfy the public interest by providing public services or conducting other activities that bring social benefits. This institution has civil law capacity, which means that it may acquire rights and incur obligations, but only through its governing bodies. The scope of its activities must be consistent with the provisions of its statutes and the objectives set out in its founding documents [Art. 2, Art. 3, Lietuvos Respublikos Viešųjų Įstaigų Įstatymas, 1996].

A charitable and support foundation is a legal entity under public law with limited civil liability, the activities of which are based on the principles of selflessness and public benefit. It has its own name and separate property, which it may freely manage, use, and dispose of in accordance with the objectives set out in the relevant legal acts. Its main purpose is to provide charitable assistance and support to both natural and legal persons, as well as other types of assistance in cases provided for by law. The scope of this activity covers many socially important areas, including, among others: science and education, culture and art, religion, sport, health care and social welfare, environmental protection, and other socially useful areas [Art. 2 Lietuvos Respublikos Labdaros ir Paramos Fondų Įstatymas, 1996]

The NGO sector in Poland is characterised by a large number of formally registered entities, but its actual scale is much smaller. According to data from the REGON and KRS registers, in December 2024 there were approximately 161 000 registered NGOs, including 117 000 associations and 44 000 foundations, but only about 50% of them are actually active. The key barrier to the effective functioning of NGOs remains the issue of financing. As many as 72% of organisations report difficulties in obtaining funds to carry out their statutory activities. In 2023, approximately 27% of organisations had an annual budget of less than €2 500 000. The average annual budget of an NGO in Poland is €12 500, and 65% of organisations have no financial reserves [Charycka, Bednarek, Belina, Gumkowska, 2025: 73–86]. This state of affairs not only limits the development potential of many organisations, but also hinders their professionalisation, stable functioning, recruitment of staff, and effective application for larger public grants. As a result, a significant part of the civil sector operates in conditions of chronic

underfunding, which negatively affects its ability to achieve long-term social goals and exert systemic influence on public policy.

Although most NGOs in Poland still base their budgets on a few main sources of income, with public funds playing a dominant role, we can observe a gradual change in the sector's financing structure. In 2023, 55% of organisations declared that they used local government grants, 24% used government and central administration funds, and only 13% used European Union funds. Importantly, the share of these sources in the total budget of the sector was 23%, 13%, and 7%, respectively. Although public money remains the main source of NGO funding, its relative share in the budgets of organisations is steadily declining. Compared to 2014–2020, when public funds accounted for more than half of the sector's budget, their share fell by nearly 10% in 2023 [Charycka, Bednarek, Belina, Gumkowska, 2025: 79]. In Lithuania, the NGO sector shows a relatively high level of activity and transparency. According to data, at the end of 2024, there were 6 759 NGOs registered in the Lithuanian Register Center. Of these, as many as 6 619 submitted the required financial and operational reports for 2023, which means that approximately 98% of them remain active. Only 197 organisations, or less than 3%, failed to comply with their reporting obligations [Nacionalinė NVO Koalicija 2024, 1.07.2025]. Lithuanian NGOs also face challenges in terms of financial stability. According to the Ministry of Social Security and Labor of the Republic of Lithuania, most NGOs do not have sufficient financial resources that could be used to strengthen their institutional capacity. Limited resources not only hamper the day-to-day functioning of organisations, but also significantly complicate medium- and long-term development planning [Kurk Lietuvai, 1.07.2025].

In the 2024 Sustainable Governance Indicators report, experts emphasise that financing remains one of the biggest problems limiting the sustainability of the NGO sector. The lack of systemic, long-term financial support continues to be a barrier to the professionalisation and stabilisation of many NGO activities [Vilpišauskas, Kalanta, Auers, 2024: 15–16]. Unfortunately, neither national nor international sources provide comprehensive data on the full structure of NGO funding sources in Lithuania and the share of different forms of income in NGO budgets. However, according to an analysis presented by Brigita Žuromskaitė and Małgorzata Zakrzewska in 2015, the main sources of NGO income remain EU funds, sponsors' grants, and tax deductions made by citizens. Some organisations, especially those of a charitable nature, also finance their activities through social campaigns and public collections [Žuromskaitė, Zakrzewska, 2015: 307]. The financing system for the Lithuanian NGOs was supported by the establishment of

the Non-Governmental Organisations Fund on March 1, 2020, introduced together with the new version of the Law on the Development of Non-Governmental Organisations. Its aim is to strengthen the institutional capacity of NGOs, invest in the development of the sector, and support the sustainable functioning of reliable partners of the state. The Fund's resources are allocated on a competitive basis, including for strengthening the potential of organisations and implementing statutory activities. The Fund thus acts as a national mechanism for financing civil society. In practice, however, public support for NGOs remains scattered and insufficient – the Fund's annual budget was planned at a maximum of €2 million, while the real needs are estimated at around €19 million, which would provide adequate support for nearly 700 organisations [Creation of NGO Fund, 1.07.2025].

3. Barriers to NGOs applying for public grants

Polish and Lithuanian NGOs encounter barriers when applying for grants from the EU, national, and local government funds. These limitations significantly weaken their ability to effectively apply for funding and compete with other applicants.

The shortage of qualified staff with the skills to effectively obtain grants is one of the key difficulties that is becoming increasingly apparent. An analysis of job offers in NGOs in Poland indicates that the most sought-after skills are: the ability to write grant applications, raise funds, and coordinate projects, which have been the most pressing issue for non-governmental organisations for at least a decade [Nyziak, Wiśliński, 2021: 7, 10, 14]. NGOs do not have the financial resources to develop the skills of their members, and the grant competitions aimed at strengthening human resources are few and far between and require skills to obtain. Data indicate that 38% of NGOs still do not take any measures to improve the skills of their members and employees, e.g. through training, courses or conferences [Charycka, Bednarek, Belina, Gumkowska, 2025: 71, 116–117].

Similar problems affect Lithuanian NGOs. Despite gradual improvements in the sector, as noted in the Civil Society Sustainability Index, organisations continue to face staffing and institutional constraints. The lack of professional staff remains a key problem, as their role is becoming increasingly important in the face of growing social expectations and donor requirements [Kurk Lietuvai, 1.07.2025]. As many as 79% of NGOs do not have staff dedicated to fundraising, which translates into limited effectiveness in applying for grants [Aukok, 4.07.2025]. The lack of practical knowledge in project implementation also remains a challenge

[Žuromskaitė, Zakrzewska, 2015: 307]. At the same time, the availability of financial resources to strengthen the institutional capacity of NGOs remains limited, which prevents the building of competent teams and investment in their professional development [Kurk Lietuvai, 1.07.2025].

This barrier is compounded by insufficient free support for NGOs in the areas of training, advice, and consultation [Centrum Obywatelskie, 2021: 19]. In a study conducted by KraFOS, as many as 71.8% of the NGOs in Małopolska declared training as one of the most important forms of support. Among the indicated thematic areas, issues related to fundraising and project management dominated. As many as 79.5% of the respondents expressed a desire to improve their skills in writing applications and fundraising [Training for non-governmental organisations, 6.07.2025]. It turns out that local NGOs need real help in raising funds for public tasks from various sources, not only from the local government grants but also from EU funds and private funds [Centrum Obywatelskie, 2021: 26]. In Poland, access to this type of training is uneven and largely dependent on the local potential of the civil sector and the activity of regional support centers. Although there are public and non-public educational initiatives, there is no coherent, nationwide education system in this area [OWOP, 6.07.2025]. The available training is often ad hoc, short-term, and limited in scope, and therefore, it does not meet the long-term needs of organisations, especially those operating outside large urban centers. The problem is not a complete lack of educational opportunities, but their limited reach, low visibility, and insufficient promotion. What is more, many training courses are limited to presenting the rules of a specific grant competition, without teaching participants a comprehensive approach to designing activities or writing applications from scratch. Commercial training courses are sometimes an alternative, but their cost is an insurmountable barrier. As a result, a kind of systemic paradox arises: competitions are announced, including so-called microgrants, which aim to build or develop the institutional capacity of NGOs, including in the area of project preparation and applying for public funds, but at the same time, in order to apply for these funds, organisations must already have a certain level of project design competence to meet the requirements of grantors.

In Lithuania, the local NGOs in particular face significant difficulties in accessing free and systematic educational support in the areas of grant writing, fundraising, and project management. Although initiatives such as *the NGO Leaders Academy* and *Fundraising.lt* exist, their reach is limited and participation is only possible for a selected number of organisations [Open Lithuania Foundation,

8.07.2025]. There is no nationwide, coherent training system, which means that many NGOs do not have access to long-term development support [EEA Grants Lithuania, 8.07.2025]. The organisations that need help the most are unable to apply for funding effectively because they lack the necessary skills. Commercial training that could fill this gap is too expensive. Reports on the use of the NGO Fund's institutional capacity-building grant show a high demand for this type of support. In 2023, EUR 2.57 million (97%) of the planned amount of EUR 2.655 million was used, and in 2024, EUR 2.617 million of the planned EUR 2.9 million [Nevyriausybinių Organizacijų Fondo, 2023: 6; Nevyriausybinių Organizacijų Fondo, 2024: 3].

A study on the needs, barriers, and expectations of Krakow-based NGOs shows that one of the most frequently mentioned problems regards “the extensive formal requirements for applying for funding in competitions” [Centrum Obywatelskie, 2021: 16]. This phenomenon is part of a broader picture of the systemic complexity of grant procedures, which is a significant factor discouraging many organisations, especially smaller and less experienced ones, from attempting to apply for public funds [Identification of support directions: 2023: 82]. As Magda Krasowska-Igras notes: “procedures in grant competitions vary depending on the whims and, above all, the individual bureaucracy of a given institution.” The specific formal obstacles include: overly bureaucratic procedures – each institution announcing competitions applies its own, often complex and inconsistent rules; unfriendly application generators – the systems are perceived as complicated, un-intuitive, and discouraging; unclear and difficult to interpret rules and regulations; imprecise descriptions of competition objectives and unclear evaluation criteria result in uncertainty as for the grantor's expectations – and extensive application forms, which require a lot of work and time, disproportionate to the available resources or chances of success [Krasowska-Igras, 4.07.2025]. In Lithuania, it is also noted that bureaucratic barriers make cooperation between NGOs and state or local government institutions difficult [Vorevičienė, Butkevičienė, 2017: 1–17].

In Poland and Lithuania, most NGOs do not have funds for their day-to-day operations, let alone financial reserves. This is a serious barrier to applying for grants, as one of the key requirements of competitions is often the obligation to make a financial contribution to the project. This requirement is intended to demonstrate the organisation's commitment and increase the likelihood of successful project implementation. In practice, it takes the form of a specific percentage of the project value, which must come from the organisation's own resources and is not refundable. In the case of EU-funded grants, the own contribution in Poland

usually ranges from 2 to 20% of the project value, in Lithuania from 5–15%, while in national competitions it is most often between 5 and 15% [the own contribution to an EU project, 9.07.2025]. The own contribution requirement is a condition which, if not met, disqualifies the organisation and excludes it from access to the public funds [EU funds for all organisations, 9.07.2025]. In the literature on NGOs in Lithuania, it is difficult to find scientific studies that directly analyse their problems in applying for EU funds. An analysis of the available sources identified only one master's thesis devoted to this issue. Its conclusions indicate that NGOs find it difficult to compete with the public and private sectors for support from the EU structural funds. The main barriers are limited financial resources, small staff numbers, and limited material infrastructure. The results of the study showed that organisations that operate on a larger scale, covering several regions, have an extensive network of contacts and connections, and employ active, proactive, and competent staff to have a better chance of obtaining support. The collected data indicate that the problem of co-financing affects everyone. When selecting programs financed from the EU structural funds, NGOs prefer projects that are 100% financed by the EU funds, but such projects are small in scale or very rare. As a result, when applying for structural funds, organisations are forced to seek additional funds for their own contribution. Respondents indicated funds from other projects, sponsors, partners, local governments, and their own social initiatives as the main sources of financing. These results confirm that the effective implementation of NGO objectives requires additional financial resources. Importantly, at the project preparation stage, limitations in human and financial resources result in a low percentage of successful applications, and sometimes in complete failure. This sometimes leads to often unjustified disappointment among organisation members with the work of the project evaluation committees [Savukynienė, 2015].

One solution to this problem could be to take out a bank loan to cover the own contribution. In practice, however, NGOs face further constraints here, as financial institutions often perceive them as entities with low creditworthiness, which makes it difficult or even impossible to obtain a loan. Even if a loan is obtained, the costs associated with its servicing are not considered eligible under the project budget. Another barrier is the non-recognition of in-kind contributions and volunteer work as an equivalent to own contribution. In both countries, the recognition of non-financial contributions remains limited, which effectively narrows the application possibilities of organisations that do not have sufficient financial resources but do have human or material resources (equipment, premises).

NGOs also have to deal with project cost reductions by evaluation committees. In Poland, there are known cases where project budgets have been cut by up to half. This practice can lead to serious difficulties in implementing planned activities, especially when the cuts affect costs that are crucial to the success of the project. Although in both countries the procedures allow for the possibility of negotiating the terms of funding or partial consultation with the applicant, in practice organisations are rarely able to negotiate terms favorable enough to save the full scope of activities; more often than not, the choice is between implementing the project in a reduced form or abandoning it altogether.

4. Conclusions

A comparative analysis of the legal systems regulating the activities of the third sector in Poland and Lithuania has revealed significant similarities in the basic principles of their functioning. In both countries, organisations are characterised by independence, non-commercial nature of their activities, voluntary association, and focus on the common good. Despite these similarities, there are noticeable differences in organisational forms, registration procedures, initial capital requirements, and internal structures, which affect the operational capacity of NGOs.

In both countries, the financial situation of NGOs remains a problem. The vast majority of the third sector entities do not have sufficient financial resources for their day-to-day operations, let alone for investments in institutional development. Organisations often lack financial reserves, which makes it difficult for them to plan long-term activities and limits their ability to apply for public funds, especially where own contribution is required. This requirement, common in both Poland and Lithuania, often constitutes an insurmountable barrier, especially for smaller and local organisations.

Although public funds, both national and EU, remain one of the main sources of financing for NGOs in both countries, their availability is limited due to a number of barriers. The most frequently mentioned include: complex and non-transparent competition procedures, lack of professional staff involved in fundraising, low availability of free and long-term training, and insufficient institutional support. NGOs also face the problem of project budget cuts by grantors, which often prevents projects from being implemented as planned.

The analysis clearly confirms the research hypothesis adopted by the authors of the publication. Non-governmental organisations in Poland and Lithuania face similar difficulties in accessing public funds, which negatively affects their effectiveness, sustainability, and ability to exert systemic influence on public policies. The lack of adequate support, procedural difficulties, and limited internal resources mean that the potential of the NGO sector in both countries is not fully exploited.

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