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VOLUNTEERING IN SLOVAKIA

Facts and Figures Report



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Introduction

Despite the long historical tradition of volunteerism in Slovakia, it is still not sufficiently developed, especially in comparison with other European countries. There are legal gaps regarding the status of volunteers. Also, the visibility and acknowledgement of the results of volunteering is not adequate. In comparison with other central European countries, the non-profit sector in Slovakia is less developed in economic terms than in its neighbours Hungary or the Czech Republic.¹ Finally, research on volunteering is limited and thus recognition of volunteers in the society remains low. Why volunteering in Slovakia is lacking proper appreciation and management? What are the reasons behind the figures? To produce a clear answer, one has to take a closer look at Slovakian history; its society and its politics. These factors have heavily influenced the situation of today's Slovakian volunteers.

This document forms part of the Facts and Figures research conducted by the European Volunteer Centre (CEV) office in Brussels. So far thirteen reports have been written describing realities in the European countries. There are available online on the CEV official website.²

This country report focuses on volunteering in Slovakia. Its main purpose is to give an overview of volunteering in this country. The report also tries to analyse the reasons behind the figures and proposes recommendations of what should be done in the future. It consists of two main chapters. The first chapter gives an overview of volunteering in Slovakia. It provides basic information regarding the definition, statistics and the profile of volunteers. The second chapter analyses the reasons behind these figures from three different perspectives – historical, infrastructural and socio-political. Under the infrastructural context three main problems are being analysed – the absence of a legal basis for volunteering, the absence of a reliable and systematic financial system and a problematic non-governmental organisation (NGO) network. The final chapter sums up the main findings, draws conclusions and proposes several recommendations for the future development of volunteering in Slovakia.

The research on the topic is limited. One of the institutions providing research in this area is the Social Policy Analysis Center Foundation (S.P.A.C.E.). Also, there are other publications, mostly in the Slovakian language, however they are not available online. This report is therefore based mainly on resources provided by S.P.A.C.E. Foundation, C.A.R.D.O. civic association (the CEV member organisation in Slovakia) and research done by the Centre for Civil Society Studies at the Johns Hopkins University Institute for Policy Studies, which unfortunately, does not provide much specific data on Slovakia.

Regarding terminology clarification, terms such as NGO sector, non-profit and third sector are used as synonymous for the purpose of this report. This whole sector in Slovakia consists of four types of organisations: civic associations, not for profit organisations, foundations and non-investment funds. Voluntary organisations also form part of the NGO sector and are defined later in the body text of the report.

¹ Woleková, Petrášová, Toepler and Salamon 1999, 355.

² The country reports available as of January 2009 cover: Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and United Kingdom.

Basic facts on volunteering

Searching for definition

The terms “volunteering”, “volunteerism”³ or “volunteer” do not have a clear and definite meaning since it is not defined in any official Slovakian document, such as legislation or code. Until now, there has not been any extensive research regarding the public's perception of voluntary activities conducted in Slovakia.⁴ Thus this report can only rely on small studies, opinions and definitions gathered from interviews, public surveys and opinion polls organised by different NGOs. One of them is research project carried out in Slovakia in 2004 and 2006 by YMCA and Iuventa organisations.⁵

Many of the Slovak volunteering experts interviewed for the above-mentioned research on volunteering referred to at least one of the characteristics of volunteering summed up in a definition given in the General Declaration on Volunteering accepted by International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE) in 1990. This defines volunteering as an activity that:

- is based on personal motivation and free decision;
- is a way to support active civic participation and interest in community development;
- has the form of a group activity implemented usually within specific organisation;
- increases human potential, the quality of everyday life, and strengthens human solidarity;
- provides answers to important challenges of present day society and contributes to the creation of a better and more peaceful world; and
- contributes to the vitality of the economy, but also to the creation of job opportunities and new professions”.⁶

The same Slovak experts further added two new characteristics to this definition. Volunteering is above all “a quite creative and engaging activity” and “a flexible activity based on the actual needs of a community”.⁷ According to some answers in the interview, volunteering also represents a “system, which covers areas that state institutions or municipalities are unable to cover” and it is also “spontaneous activity that meets the needs of a changing society”.⁸

Searching for figures

Searching for the real figures regarding volunteering in Slovakia is as difficult as seeking for the official definition of volunteering. Nowadays, the Slovak Official Statistical Office (last data on volunteering published by the Statistic Office of the Slovak Republic in 2005) does not provide any data on volunteering and the surveys available are interim. Consequently, the research and knowledge on volunteering is limited what also complicates the development of volunteering itself.

According to conference contribution in 2004 of Alžbeta Brozmanová Gregorová and Alžbeta Mračková, between 13 and 46 percent of the population is involved in volunteering in

³ Regarding English terminology, there is a slight difference in the meaning of “volunteering” and “volunteerism”. While “volunteerism” refers more to the general idea of contributing time and energy to some worthwhile purpose for free, the term “volunteering” refers more to an activity.

⁴ Mračková and Vlašicová 2008, 90.

⁵ Compare with: Mračková and Vlašicová 2008, 91.

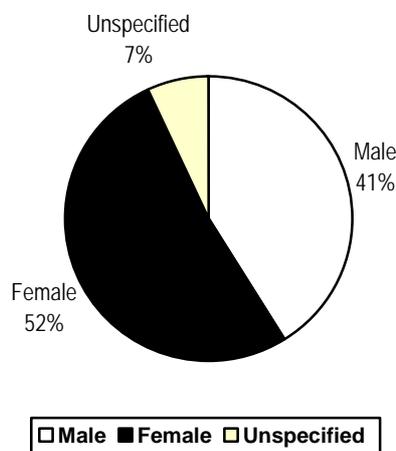
⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 97.

Slovakia.⁹ Figure 1 shows the results of the survey with regards to the profile of volunteers. Men and women are almost equally represented, with a slight dominance of women (52 percent) over men (41 percent).¹⁰

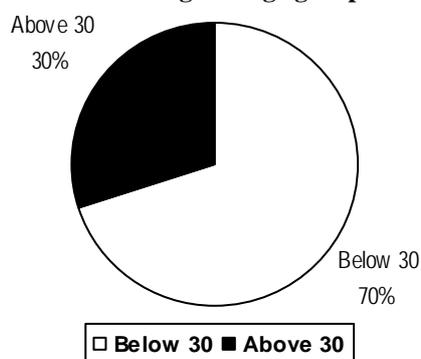
Figure 1: Volunteering and gender distribution



Source: Author, based on information quoted in: Brozmanová Gregorová and Mračková 2008.

According to the survey results conducted by 29 voluntary organisations, young people are predominantly represented in volunteer activities in Slovakia. Figure 2 shows that young people below the age of 30 represent about 70 percent of volunteers in Slovakia, whilst 30 percent is comprised of middle aged or older people.¹¹

Figure 2: Volunteering and age groups



Source: Author, based on information quoted in: SME 2008b.

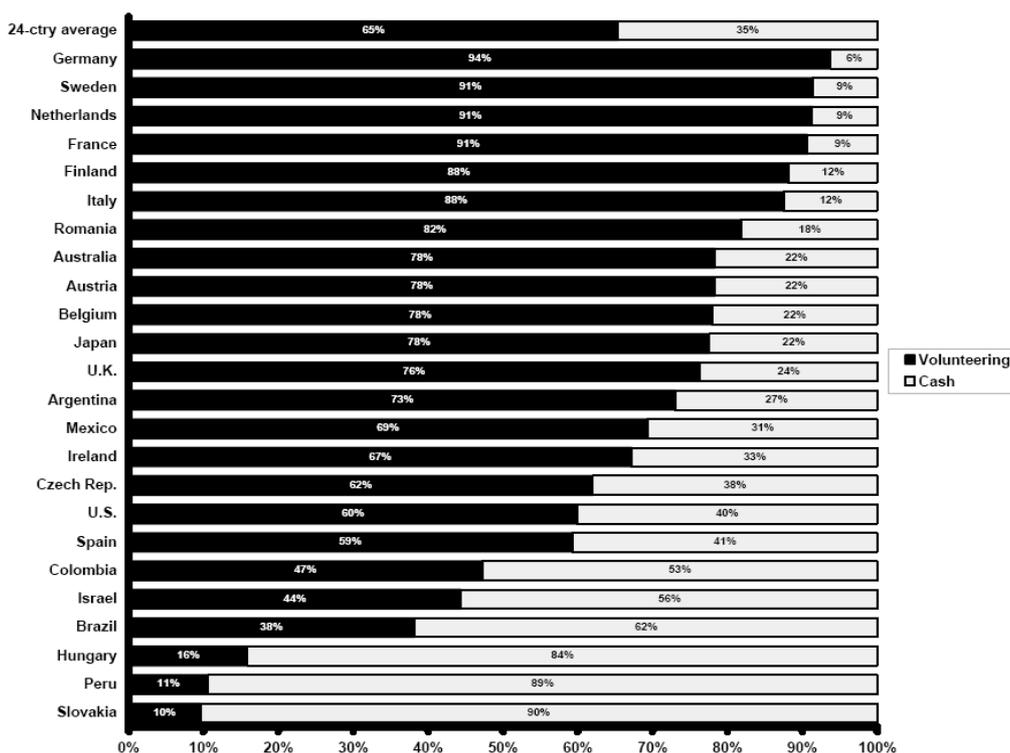
Compared to other (not only European) countries the number of people committed to volunteering in Slovakia is very low. According to the Salamon and Sokolowski research paper, which compares volunteering in 24 different countries, Slovakia is at the very bottom when comparing volunteering contribution to non-profit income. Overwhelmingly Slovakian people prefer to support third sector activities through financial contributions rather than direct involvement in voluntary activities. Figure 3 demonstrates that volunteering in Slovakia is below average compared with other countries researched.

⁹ The range of 13–46 percent is wide as a result of lack of precise data and research on involvement of people into voluntary activities in Slovakia. Brozmanová Gregorová and Mračková 2008.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ SME 2008b.

Figure 3: Volunteering and cash giving as shares of total non-profit philanthropic income



Source: Salamon and Sokolowski 2001, 4.

To determine the economic value of volunteering in Slovakia, a basic calculation can be used for this purpose. Based on the results from a small survey done by the civic association C.A.R.D.O. among organisations registered at the web-page www.dobrovolnictvo.sk (Slovak virtual voluntary centre), in 2007 there were 25 133 volunteers actively involved into regular or temporary activities of these organisations. They all together volunteered for 2 115 572 hours. If we multiply this amount of hours by the average salary in Slovakia which is 124,26 Slovak crowns (4,12 Euros) per hour, we reach 262 880 977 Slovak crowns (8 726 049, 82 Euros).¹² This number represents a contribution of so called formal voluntaring (exercised through the NGOs) to the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP). It does not, however, include the value of informal volunteering exercised outside the non-governmental organisations. Moreover, it does not take into account the contributions that volunteering makes to personal development of volunteers. This pure mathematic calculation of the hours that volunteers devote to the society does not and can not reflect value of knowledge, skills and competences learnt by volunteers, of the social capital built and finally, of simply good feelings that people gain thanks to volunteering.¹³

Regarding the fields of voluntary activities and involvement, according to the study conducted in 2004 by S.P.A.C.E., most of the activities focus on education and training, followed by social care and services and leisure time activities. More concrete information on these activities gives the Table 1. The same study also gathered information regarding the target group of activities of NGOs.

Table 1: Volunteering and areas of activity

¹² Mračková and Vlašicová 2007.

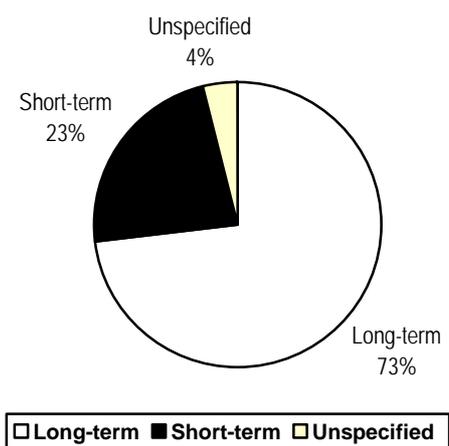
¹³ For more information on economic value and economic measurement of volunteering, compare with: Czerwińska and Held 2008.

Sectors of Activity	Total score in %
Education, training	39,3
Social care and service	32,3
Leisure time activities	29,6
Art and culture	18,9
Advocacy of civil rights	17,2
Environment	13,3
Charity	11,7
Health care and services	9,5
Regional development and housing	9,0
Foundations and funds	9,0
Sports	7,4
Research, analysis, expertise	7,3
Exchange of volunteers	6,4
Recreation	5,6
Other sectors of activity	6,9

Source: Mračková and Vlašicová 2008, 101.

Based on the results of a survey undertaken in 2007 regarding the type of activities from a time perspective, volunteers in Slovakia prefer long-term, repeating volunteer activities (73 percent) rather than short-term, one-off, activities (23 percent).¹⁴

Figure 4: Volunteer activities from the time perspective



Source: Author, based on information quoted in: C.A.R.D.O. 2007.

Among institutions, which provide volunteering opportunities in 2003, the most active were non-governmental organisations consisting of civic associations, not for profit organisations, foundations and non-investment funds (25 percent of volunteers). Followed by state and municipalities administration offices (17 percent) and finally churches and other religious institutions (14 percent).¹⁵

¹⁴ C.A.R.D.O. 2007.

¹⁵ Brozmanová Gregorová and Mračková 2008.

Reasons behind the figures

Historical context

Regarding the development of the third sector in Slovakia, there are the following five main historical phases: 1) middle ages and feudalism, 2) 18th century enlightenment, 3) period from 1918 to 1945, 4) period 1945–1989 and 5) the post 1989 phase.¹⁶ Out of these periods, the fourth one is crucial for understanding the current situation and development of volunteering in Slovakia.

The roots of volunteering in the Slovak Republic go back to the Middle Ages.¹⁷ The first NGOs, providing social welfare, health care and education, were closely connected to the activities of the Catholic Church. Volunteerism further progressed into the 18th and 19th century during the period of enlightenment together with the spread of culture, knowledge and capitalism.

The period lasting from 1918 to 1945 is marked by both the rise of development in the NGO sector and its decline. The third sector was on the rise right after the Czechoslovak Republic was established in 1918.¹⁸ Voluntary organisations and foundations gained an “important standing at the time and were a pillar of support for the pre-war Czechoslovak democracy”.¹⁹ Unfortunately, the Second World War disturbed this promising development in the civil society sector. Between 1939 and 1945 Slovakia became a quasi-independent, client state of Nazi Germany. During this time period, it abandoned the democratic traditions. As a result, the activities of the third sector were restricted.

A crucial time for understanding the current situation of volunteerism in Slovakia is the period between 1945 and 1989. The activities of existing associations and foundations were interrupted by a coup in 1947. Czechoslovakia was reunited under the communist rule and for more than 40 years found itself under the authoritarian control of the Soviet Union. This had devastating impact on the development of the NGO sector. The communist government restricted “all democratic freedoms, including the pursuit of voluntary activities that did not suit the governing ideology”.²⁰ Moreover, Law no. 68 from 1951 determined the development of the third sector over the next 35 years. Under this legislation, all existing organisations had to “change into voluntary organisations, merge into existing State organisations or cease to exist”.²¹ Since 1951, all charity and religious associations in Czechoslovakia were systematically dissolved as part of the campaign against the Church.²² Gradually, the whole NGO sector was incorporated into state structures and placed under the control of the leading Communist Party of Czechoslovakia.

Under the Slovakian socialist regime, the role of the communist party was central and dominant. Everything was structured according to the “principle of democratic centralism” and people in opposition to the system were persecuted and imprisoned.²³ There was absolutely none tolerance for any individualism in the society. People were deprived of any initiative, or individual responsibility. All socio-political activities were consolidated within the ruling party and its structures. The membership in state controlled organisations served

¹⁶ Compare with: Mračková and Vlašicová 2008, 93–97.

¹⁷ Ibid, 93.

¹⁸ For more information on development of non-profit sector in Czech Republic, compare with: Frič, Deverová, Pajas and Šilhánová 1998.

¹⁹ Frič, Deverová, Pajas and Šilhánová 1998, 3.

²⁰ Ibid, 4.

²¹ Mračková and Vlašicová 2008, 95.

²² Frič, Deverová, Pajas and Šilhánová 1998, 4.

²³ Ibid, 3–4.

above all as an “instrument of state control over social and private life” and was considered an “expression of loyalty to the state and positively influenced admissions to higher education as well as career prospects”.²⁴

During this period, volunteering was deprived of its real meaning because people were often forced to participate in common projects. Under this system people could be involved only in state structures. The participation was officially voluntary, but in fact it was enforced by the state. The non-participation in state managed organisations was considered as resistance to the regime, which was unacceptable. Volunteering itself gained a rather negative connotation. In one anonymous interview it was stated: *“I think volunteering is seen as something negative because the socialist brigades implemented it in the past: everybody was obliged to attend these brigades... The middle-aged generation remember brigades where they spent eight hours doing nothing. It seems that brigades and volunteering have become synonyms for some people. I think this is the reason why more young people volunteer in Slovakia, because the older generations were forced to work, supposedly voluntary.”*²⁵

The civil society was given a chance to develop independently from the state in 1989, when the communist era came to an end. Law no. 83 on Organisation of Citizens, restored the right to associate freely without the need of approval from a state body, came into force in 1990.²⁶ The number of NGOs started to rise rapidly. In 1993 there were 6 000 NGOs registered in Slovakia and the number doubled in next three years with about 12 000 registered NGOs in 1996 and over 26 000 in 2002.²⁷ In 1993 after the separation of Czechoslovakia, the federal NGOs split into Slovak and Czech. Since then they developed independently of each other. Not only does the number of these non-governmental organisations grow, but also the quality of the work undertaken by them improves. They focus and work on wide scope of areas.

Volunteering infrastructure

Vague legal status

The proper legal framework is an important part of the social and institutional system that shapes volunteering in every country.²⁸ Current Slovak legislation does not clearly define volunteering. And the fact that basic legislation on volunteering is missing creates mixed message and complicates the development of volunteerism.²⁹ Based on the interviews conducted among non-governmental organisations, the request for legislations is rather unanimous *“until the volunteering is not specified by a legal frame... it will be difficult to enforce it”*.³⁰

With regard to adult volunteering, there is only one law which mentions it, the Law on Services (Law no. 5/2004). Under this Act, volunteering is defined as an activity for unemployed people, including them in the civil sector under so-called activation work.³¹ It is a way for unemployed people to receive some extra income in addition to their unemployment financial support. However, a question arises here: can such activity still be considered as volunteering? Is volunteering not supposed to be based on personal motivation,

²⁴ Frič, Deverová, Pajas and Šilhánová 1998, 4.

²⁵ Mračková and Vlašicová 2008, 98.

²⁶ Ibid, 95.

²⁷ Ibid, 95 and 99.

²⁸ For more information on European Legal Systems and Practices Regarding Volunteering compare with: Hadzi-Miceva 2007, 37–58.

²⁹ For the list of 36 Slovak laws, which contain a word volunteer or volunteering, compare with: Marček (ed.) 2008, 83–95 or website www.zakon.sk.

³⁰ Mračková and Vlašicová 2008, 126.

³¹ Brozmanová Gregorová and Mračková 2008.

free decision and without the demand of any payment or financial compensation? According to a commonly held definition and belief, volunteer can only be reimbursed for any expenses that arise while volunteering.

In 2002 NGOs attempted to pass a Code of Non-Profit Law in an effort to unite all legislation related to the NGO sector. However, due to criticism from environmental organisations, this law was abandoned. Since 2007 Slovak voluntary organisations debate the legal issue of volunteering, but until today an agreement amongst them has not been reached.³²

Meanwhile, in 2008, a new law (Law no. 282/2008) on the support for working with youths was adopted in Slovak Parliament (National Council of the Slovak Republic). Amongst other things it defined youth volunteering. The law was approved and is in force as of 1 September 2008.³³ While the Ministry of Education considers it a success, the youth civic associations and voluntary organisations raised strong criticism due to the fact their comments and recommendations were not incorporated in this statutory text. They claim that the law makes volunteering more complicated, bureaucratic and regulatory. Furthermore, they argue that the law, imposing rules on voluntary organisations such as an obligation to sign an agreement with volunteers, provide them with pocket money, reimburse all travel expenses and pay insurance limit them in their work as many voluntary organisations are unable to fulfil these obligations. The youth voluntary organisations also claim that the law “does not define basic conceptions and does not deal with the real problems of volunteering sector”.³⁴ They also claim that the law limits involvement in volunteering by excluding citizens under the age of 30, who are from other than European Union (EU) member state and are either employed or carry on their own business.

At the same time, it is not clear how much regulation on volunteering is necessary. From one hand, there is a huge diversity in the form of voluntary engagements so the law should be comprehensible and clear enough to set clear boundaries of what volunteering is and what is not. From the other hand a law should not be too restrictive. Each country, depending on its political, historical, cultural, economic and social contexts, should adapt a legislation to the needs of its voluntary sector.³⁵ Regarding Slovak legislation, Ján Svák recommends it focuses on three areas: 1) the definition of volunteering and volunteer, 2) the conditions for executing volunteering and 3) clarification of state support for volunteering.³⁶

Absence of targeted and reliable financial support

Financing is one of the biggest challenges to voluntary organisations in general and especially in Slovakia. Since there is not a systematic and targeted financial support, the NGO sector must rely on other forms of financing such as competing for limited grants or searching for donors. “*We face financial threat every year. We are never certain of what financial sources or amount we can count on – for example, when the government changes, we do not know what it could mean for us*”, an NGO expert states in an interview.³⁷

Since 1989, the most active financial supporters of NGO sector in Slovakia were the United States (US), Canada and other western European countries. These included foreign financial

³² List of relevant laws and regulations: Law no. 34/2002 on Foundations, Law no. 213/1997 on No-for-profit Organisations providing Publicly Beneficial Services, Law no. 147/1997 on Non-investment Funds, Law no. 83/1990 on Civic Organisations. Compare with: Mračková and Vlašicová 2008, 130.

³³ Compare with: Law no. 282/2008.

³⁴ Compare with: SME 2008a.

³⁵ For more information on existing legal frameworks and scopes on regulations in different European countries, compare with: Hadzi-Miceva 2007, 42–44.

³⁶ Marček (ed.) 2008, 102.

³⁷ Mračková and Vlašicová 2008, 113.

aid programmes and institutes as well as British and Dutch Embassies or the activities of EU Delegation in Slovakia. Their principal motivation was to support democratic development in Slovakia. However, towards the end of the 1990s, their attention shifted towards the Balkan and other former Soviet Union countries.³⁸ The NGOs in Slovakia had begun to look for and compete for different forms of financial aid.

The other forms of foreign financial support were provided by the following three institutions. The World Bank has been active in this area of support in Slovakia. The Visegrad Fund (established in 2000) aimed to support cooperation amongst the Visegrad countries, which provided support for different programmes. Finally, between 2002 and 2005, the US Trust Programme was implemented in order to support the Slovakian NGO sector.³⁹ Additionally, the European Union funds represent a very important source of financial support. Between 1993 and 2003, the PHARE programme provided more than 11 million Euros in the NGO field.⁴⁰ As Slovakia became an EU member state in May 2004, it has been able to apply for structural funds ever since.

Except for the external resources, the funding is also provided by the state through mechanisms implemented by individual ministries. The activities of most voluntary organisations fall under grants offered by the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family. NGOs are directly supported by the state via “grants, allocation of funds, contracts, agreements through which the State requests services from NGOs, distribution of revenue from lotteries, public collections, or through co-financing by structural funds”.⁴¹ The indirect support from the state could be in the form of tax cuts, duty remissions, tax reductions or allocation of 2% of paid taxes to an NGO of free choice.⁴² The situation in the area of state funding is, however, rather unsteady and dependent on the political situation and the priorities of each government.

Voluntary organisations network

The term “voluntary organisation” is not “a legal term in Slovakia, nor is it defined in any Slovak publication or study”.⁴³ Instead it is often referred to as a not for profit organisation, civic association, an NGO or third sector. Officially, the Slovakian NGO sector includes four types of organisations: civic associations, not for profit organisations, foundations and non-investment funds.⁴⁴ All together they form the NGO or so-called third sector. Among the experts, the voluntary organisation is considered to be “an organisation with legal personality, thus a kind of organisation belonging to the NGO sector that works directly with volunteers, or an organisation in which members work as volunteers”.⁴⁵

Despite a lack of legal definition, there is a variety of voluntary organisations in Slovakia. As of January 2009, there are 143 voluntary organisations registered at the virtual volunteer centre in Slovakia.⁴⁶ They can be divided into several groups according to their goals and missions. Most of them focus on their work with children and youth under different fields of

³⁸ Ibid, 111.

³⁹ The World Bank provided more than 180.000 USD between 2000 and 2004. The Visegrad Fund distributed more than 1,6 million Euros since 2003. And under the Trust Programme, more than 1,2 million USD was distributed in support of NGOs in Slovakia. Mračková and Vlašicová 2008, 111.

⁴⁰ Mračková and Vlašicová 2008, 111.

⁴¹ Ibid, 111.

⁴² The changes in the income taxes law were introduced in 1999. At the beginning, the citizens could assign 1% of their paid taxes in favour of an NGO of their choice. Later in 2003 and 2004 the law was amended and now both private and legal entities' employees can assign already 2% of their taxes to an NGO of their choice. Mračková and Vlašicová 2008, 109, 111.

⁴³ Mračková and Vlašicová 2008, 91.

⁴⁴ Compare with: Mračková and Vlašicová 2008, 105–110.

⁴⁵ Mračková and Vlašicová 2008, 91–92.

⁴⁶ Compare with: www.dobrovolnictvo.sk.

activities such as scouting, religious or sport. There is a series of organisations focusing their activities on disabled, elderly or terminally ill people. Another large group of voluntary organisations focus on environmental activities and actions. The number of voluntary organisations also focuses on civil society community development by promoting active citizenship, the protection of human rights or combating forms of discrimination.

Thus, there are many organisations working in this area of volunteering. The problem is that they focus more on their purpose and aims rather than on work, development and the education of the actual volunteers. If there are any volunteer centres managing volunteer work, they are mostly established at a regional level. It was admitted by an NGO representative in a survey, *“our creativity is limited. The NGO sector is so absorbed by its own activities, that volunteering – even though it is a key part of it – is not developed. Our activities absorb us in a way that we do not have time to focus on volunteering as such”*.⁴⁷ Until today there is not official national volunteer centre.⁴⁸

Nevertheless, there have been several attempts to create a national volunteer centre, which deserve remark in this report. Firstly on 5 December 1998, the International Volunteer Day, the national volunteer centre, entitled Service Centre for the Third Sector (SCTC) was established under Slovak Academic and Information Agency (SAIA). It served as an umbrella organisation for a network of voluntary organisations all over Slovakia and initiated many activities, which supported and promoted volunteering. However, the project of SCTC–SAIA ended in September 2002 due to insufficient financial support. Between 2002 and 2004, there was a gap as only several regional organisations continued to be active in the field of volunteering. There was no organisation at the national level that would provide service, information and consultancy in the area of volunteering or recruit volunteers for voluntary organisations, their initiatives and projects.

A second attempt was undertaken in 2004. A civic association C.A.R.D.O. was established with the support of the Ministry of Education and started operating at the national level. The main goal of the C.A.R.D.O. is to “strengthen international co-operation in three areas of the NGO sector in Slovakia: promoting volunteering; caring for the elderly, sick, and terminally ill; and co-operation of churches in the area of ecology”.⁴⁹ In 2007, C.A.R.D.O. launched a project of virtual national volunteer centre (www.dobrovolnictvo.sk). The form of the virtual national volunteer centre was passed due to economic reasons. It would be very difficult to find donors for a project that has already collapsed once (the above mentioned SCTC–SAIA) and a virtual volunteer centre is easier to finance and run.⁵⁰ Its main objective is to provide a service and information to volunteers and voluntary organisations at local, national as well as an international level. It is an important source of contacts, volunteer opportunities and a tool for search for cooperation partners. Among other activities, C.A.R.D.O. continues with promotion of volunteering in Slovakia. Leading projects, developing international cooperation in order to involve Slovak volunteers in international projects and in trying to improve the general situation of volunteers.

Socio-economic context

Research indicates that in Slovakia, the NGO sector has to struggle with a lack of attention, support and appreciation in its day-to-day work. Over the last two decades of democratic

⁴⁷ Mračková and Vlašicová 2008, 105.

⁴⁸ It is not clear what makes a volunteer centre a national volunteer centre. Should it be number of volunteers it represents? Should it be a proper name that would contain a word “national”? Although not officially recognized as a national volunteer centre, the civic association C.A.R.D.O. perceives itself as a national volunteer centre in Slovakia.

⁴⁹ Mračková and Vlašicová 2008, 85. Compare with: <http://www.cardo-eu.net/>.

⁵⁰ Mračková and Vlašicová 2007.

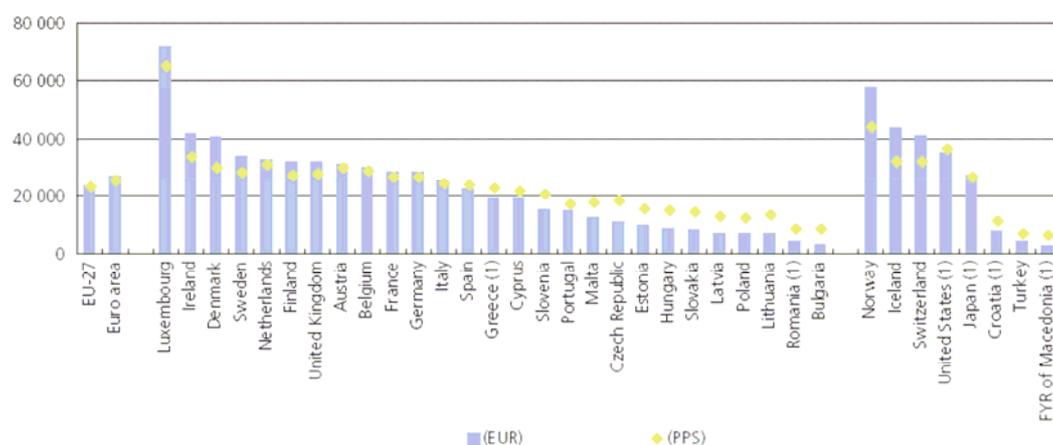
development the situation has not improved and “the status of volunteers remains low, with neither the general public nor the state showing them much respect”.⁵¹ The voluntary organisations are left to deal with their problems on their own. Slovakian society and its public authorities are reluctant in relation to volunteerism and their support for voluntary organisations and their activities is mostly only moral.

Regarding the social status of volunteering, there are three main problems. Firstly, the general public does not understand what volunteering means and moreover why it is important. Secondly, volunteerism has no prestige in the society. Thirdly, there is a lack of information on voluntary activities.⁵² They are all interconnected into a vicious circle. If there is lack of information and knowledge available on volunteering, the society does not know what volunteering involves and how important it is in the society. Thus it is not appreciated and in turn has to face low prestige. Where are the roots of this society’s approach towards volunteering?

From the historical point of view, many prejudices about volunteering from the communist period still persist, but this cannot continue to be an excuse. In 2009, it will be 20 years since communism fell down and democracy was renewed in Slovakia. There are, therefore, also other reasons behind the negative attitudes towards volunteering in Slovakia.

Factors such as the situation in the labour market and the political landscape also affect the state of volunteering in every country. They influence the development of the third sector and civil society and the general culture of volunteering.⁵³ Undoubtedly in Slovakia another reason for the underdevelopment of volunteering is the social and economic situation. Data from Figure 5 indicates that the economic situation in Slovakia is worse comparing to other EU member states. Even if the Slovakian political and economic situation are stable, the Slovakian people often see volunteering as something which they really cannot afford because they need to work for money. According to Benaková, the main reasons for not volunteering in Slovakia are: “the bad economic situation which forces people to paid work only, lack of leisure time and lack of motivation”.⁵⁴ On the other hand, one may question whether this argument is a justifiable excuse for not volunteering.

Figure 5: GDP per capita at current market prices, 2006



Source: Eurostat 2008, 98.

⁵¹ Liptáková 2008.

⁵² Compare with: Mračková and Vlašicová 2008, 97–98.

⁵³ Hadzi-Miceva 2007, 38.

⁵⁴ Benaková 1999.

At the same time, corporate volunteering is lately becoming a new phenomenon in Slovakia. According to Pavel Hrica (programme director for corporate philanthropy and corporate social responsibility of the Pontis Foundation) “compared to the other post-communist countries, Slovakia is the most active in corporate volunteering and it has not only caught up, but even overtaken, western countries in some fields”.⁵⁵ Although, there are different opinions on this issue⁵⁶, undoubtedly the corporate social responsibility system is an alternative way of promoting volunteering even in a less favourable economic environment.

The idea of a company’s engagement in employees in volunteering is becoming more popular in Slovakia. There is shared opinion that everybody involved in volunteering activities can profit from it, also in corporate volunteering. “Apart from giving their employees the feeling that they are helping the community, they also give them a better feeling about their employer. And volunteer activities are a good opportunity for new recruits to get to know their colleagues. During such events employees can build team spirit as well as develop new working skills, which can later prove useful in their jobs.”⁵⁷ However, in this area one has to be careful that the whole idea does not slip into marketing and PR activities. Again another question arises: could this still be considered volunteering if the employees receive a salary for time they spend on the voluntary work?

Political context

In general, volunteering in the NGO sector is not considered a priority either socially, or politically. In the early 1990s, large number of civic initiatives and associations became active. At this time, the state was not supportive to them, especially when there were governments with “tendencies to continue some practices of the previous regime”.⁵⁸ During the Mečiar government (from 1994 to 1998), there were negative attitudes towards the activities of the NGO sector. Between 1998 and 2006, the Dzurinda government directed Slovakia more towards democratisation and international integration processes (in 2004 Slovakia became a member of the EU and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation – NATO). Since 1998 the atmosphere towards the NGO sector became more favourable. In 2006 Slovak Social democrats (led by current Prime Minister Robert Fico) won the parliamentary elections in Slovakia and replaced the right wing coalition government of the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union with the Christian Democratic Movement, the Alliance of the New Citizen and the Party of the Hungarian Coalition (Dzurinda government).

With the shift from right wing to a central-left cabinet, one would have expected the situation and support for the NGO sector to improve. Left wing, Christian democrat and social democratic political parties stand out in their ideology for values such as social justice and security, social solidarity, and equality in human rights. Based on these values and their declarations in the political programmes, such political parties should, in theory, be supportive for the NGO sector.⁵⁹ However, this assumption does not seem to be completely valid in Slovakia. Even though the Social Democrats claim all the values in their programme, in practice their support for the NGO sector is not outstanding compared to the right wing parties. On the contrary, under the new cabinet, efforts were launched to cancel the 2% allocation mechanism.⁶⁰ Only thanks to the enormous civic pressure and campaign “People to

⁵⁵ Liptáková 2008.

⁵⁶ Another research provides contradicting conclusions. According to research of Katarína Svitková, the concept of corporate social responsibility remains low in both Slovakia and Czech Republic. Compare with: Svitková 2006, 1–38.

⁵⁷ Liptáková 2008.

⁵⁸ Woleková, Petrášová, Toepler and Salamon 1999, 363.

⁵⁹ For more information on priorities of Slovak Social Democratic Party defined in the programme, compare with: SMER 2005.

⁶⁰ There were similar attempts already during previous government, but not successful. The main point is not to keep the 2% allocation mechanisms under all circumstances. There is perhaps a need for improvement of its transparency, for example, or the whole system can be replaced by a completely new mechanism of state support, but such a reform should represent advancement not aggravation compared to the current system.

People” launched by several NGOs, the mechanism was finally preserved.⁶¹ This has been mentioned above in the subchapter on the vague legal status of volunteering in Slovakia. In 2008 a new law was approved on youth volunteering designed by the Slovak Ministry of Education without taking into account concerns of NGOs focusing on children and youth and results to be too restrictive.

Volunteering in Slovakia is not an issue in the political debate. Political parties do not consider it a priority; they do not mention it in any of their election programmes. Moreover, there is no specific ministry in charge of volunteerism. Consequently, state policies are not in favour of the activities of volunteers and in general the NGO sector. Yet, the support from the state is crucial and volunteerism will not develop properly if it is not appreciated and cultivated through both state policies and local governments.

⁶¹ The campaign involved demonstrations, contacting parliament members, organising conferences, preparing a booklet to inform politicians and the public on how the support provided by 2% mechanism is used. Mračková and Vlačicová 2008, 113.

Conclusion and recommendations

After analysing the situation of volunteering in Slovakia and the reasons behind it, this chapter sums up the main findings of this country report and proposes several recommendations for its future development. Despite the long tradition of volunteerism in Slovakia, there are a lot of challenges ahead. The involvement of the Slovakian people in volunteering remains low and volunteering has to struggle with low prestige and a lack of attention. What are the main lessons learnt and what can be done about it?

In respect of the historical context, regrettably there were times in history when the NGO sector was repressed and could not develop freely - namely during the Slovak Republic times during World War Two and during communist rule between 1947 and 1989. Nothing can be done about history, but one can learn from its lessons. It is not justified anymore to use this historical argument as an excuse for the current situation. As new generations are coming, the society should finally recover and move on with the new challenges of today's reality.

With regard to Slovak volunteering infrastructure there are several areas which can be improved. Firstly, precise legislation defining volunteerism is needed in Slovakia. The voluntary organisations should unite and together with experts in the field agree on what law is required and what would be acceptable in parliament. It is in their own interests to cooperate with the political representatives in order to ensure that volunteering becomes better managed and more efficient. There are many issues, which a law on volunteering should take into account such as status of volunteers, reimbursement methods, and social benefits covering both health and accident insurance, retirement benefits etc. Volunteers' responsibilities should be compensated by equality in rights. Providing them with good conditions and benefits is one of the easiest ways to recognise their efforts, promote volunteerism and increase the participation of people in it. However, this should not be an obligation imposed on volunteering organisations, but rather shared with other actors such as public authorities or stakeholders. Thus, the law should also empower voluntary organisations in their work and it should not impose on such organisations unnecessary regulatory constraints, which could hinder people's volunteer engagement.

Further, the financial mechanism should be improved in order to eliminate any financial uncertainty in the NGO sector. Lack of targeted financial assistance is considered as one of the largest difficulties because under this system voluntary organisations "cannot do strategic planning and cannot implement their visions without knowing the real amount of financial support".⁶² There is a need for better planning, scheduling and clear rules of grant awards in this area. With regard to the state system of financing the NGO sector, it should become not only stable and independent from political programmes of each governments.

Also, a better cooperation and networking among NGOs is required. The voluntary organisations should be clearer and transparent in their structure and work. The organisations themselves should cooperate effectively, place effort into common strategies, campaigns and unite their power for the common good of the whole NGO sector. An improved volunteer infrastructure with one umbrella organisation or united coordination could be helpful in Slovakia.⁶³ Further, the voluntary organisations should set (national and international) cooperation with other public sectors of society and all relevant stakeholders such as business, public authorities, local administration representatives and academia etc. Under unfavourable

⁶² Mračková and Vlašicová 2008, 126.

⁶³ There is not general agreement on this need and especially on the will to make it real. Mrs. Jana Vlašicová from C.A.R.D.O. thinks that there is no will for such an umbrella organisation in Slovakia. It would be accepted by other voluntary organisations only if it represented a source of systematic funding, but this is not realistic at the moment. It is therefore improbable that the NGO sector, which is in general very fragmented, would unit on this idea and would accept such hierarchical structure.

(economic) conditions, the NGOs should develop innovative ideas for their activities - one example of such an innovative action is the project of virtual national volunteer centre. The network of NGOs needs to look for solutions and ways how to 'achieve the impossible'.

Finally, in relation to the social and political context of volunteering in Slovakia, there are many challenges ahead. There is a need to raise public awareness on volunteerism, promote volunteering and recover its status in the society. Involve more people, make it a priority, research it and spread the knowledge about it among the general public. Furthermore, volunteerism should be put on the political agenda of governments. This needs to be done for and on behalf of the general public. Politicians themselves are unlikely going to put such an issue on the agenda unless there is a strong demand from the public.

Slovakia has many similarities with other central-Eastern European countries as with regard to its historical, economic, social and political contexts. It is a young democracy which has had to overcome many unfavourable historical circumstances. However, its civic participation in public life and the level of volunteering is lower than among its neighbours. Despite this fact, one can hope that thanks to work of thousands of Slovak volunteers and voluntary organisations, the future of volunteering in Slovakia is bright.

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Abbreviations

CEV	European Volunteer Centre
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IAVE	International Association for Volunteer Effort
IUVENTA	Slovak Institute of Youth
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Association
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
PHARE	Poland and Hungary: Assistance for Restructuring their Economies
PR	Public Relations
SAIA	Slovak Academic and Information Agency
SCTC	Service Centre for the Third Sector
S.P.A.C.E.	Slovak Centre for Social Policy Analysis
US	United States
USD	US Dollar
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association

Useful links

Research on Slovakia

Civic association C.A.R.D.O.	http://www.cardo-eu.net/
Virtual National Volunteer Centre	http://dobrovolnictvo.sk
Third Sector in Slovakia	http://www.changenet.sk/
Youth Council of Slovakia	http://www.mladez.sk
Youth in Action	http://www.mladezvakcii.sk/
Slovak Institute of Youth	http://www.iuventa.sk/
Campaign People to People	http://www.ludia-ludom.sk/
Cabinet Office of Slovak Republic	http://www.government.gov.sk/
Ministry of Education	http://www.minedu.sk/
Slovak Legislation Online	http://www.zakon.sk
Slovak Statistical Office	http://portal.statistics.sk

Research on volunteering in general

CEV – European Volunteer Centre	http://www.cev.be/ http://www.cev.be/22-research_and_publications_EN.html
Volunteerism Worldwide	http://www.worldvolunteerweb.org/
Centre for Civil Society Studies at The Johns Hopkins University Institute for Policy Studies	http://www.jhu.edu/~ccss/

Credit for the picture on cover page: <http://www.roja-sk.com/> [cited 15 January 2009].