

Volunteering in Slovakia - Basic Information

Government Regulations

Law on Volunteering number 406 / 2011 - valid from 1st of December, 2011.

Before 2011, there was no legislation in Slovakia on volunteering. The current law's birth was a long and difficult process that took years - the first drafts were completed in 2007.

The law primarily focuses on the official volunteer services. It places great emphasis on the safety of the volunteers: the sending or the receiving organization must prepare them, provide them with the necessary tools, take out insurance on accidents, damages etc.

The law does not strictly regulate the system, but for example, does not recognize the voluntary work carried out by the members - which is unfortunate for clubs/associations, where survey showed the very members are the most active volunteers.

The law permits oral contracts (except for volunteering abroad), which is positive. However, it definitively prohibits remuneration - paying fees. Only the additional costs may be covered - accommodation, supplies, travel, equipment, etc. This is a problem for example if you want to give spending money to a volunteer working far away from his home.

Unfortunately employers are not bound to support the volunteer work - the employer can give a day off according to the contract, but is not obliged to tolerate it and do not have to pay any fees for that period to the employee.

Research, analyzes

Unfortunately, there are no recent results from this area. The topic is not too trendy/popular, so the most recent material dates back to 2011, on the occasion of the European Year of Volunteering - since then no serious study has been carried out. Or if so, the results are not public. The analyzes tend to work with the same statistics - the surveys are not regular and the samples are random. The data are thus quite ambiguous and vague, indeterminate.

The analysis of volunteering in Slovakia - a general overview

PDCS, Panet - 2009 - before the birth of the Act.

So far the most comprehensive independent analysis. It analyzes the phenomenon of volunteering on the basis of the most important aspects - economic, social, human. In addition also examines the social and legal support. As there was no law on volunteering yet, the analysis of its effects is unfortunately missing from the results. The analysis begins with the history of volunteering, then continues with the situation after 1989 - it summarizes the results of surveys available at that time. The main curiosity of this research is that it also discusses the economic aspects of volunteering about which most resources keep silent. It shows that volunteers are a major economic force and their "production" measured in monetary terms is significant.

Furthermore, it explores the public's attitude to the topic, the financial support of the volunteer program, the professionalisation of the organizations and the most important challenges.

The research material is available on the internet:

http://www.panet.sk/download/text_analyza_dobrovolnictva_sk.pdf

VALUE: Národná správa - Slovensko - National Report

Cardo

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An overview of the higher education system and not a superb one. It investigates only the relationship of volunteering and higher educational institutes, and observes that there is not enough motivation, knowledge and support from the state to initiate more efficient and organized cooperation. What may be of interest in the study are the four positive examples of faculties cooperating with non-governmental organizations in a planned and organized manner. This provides the students with the opportunity to gain practice (those preparing social space) and credits for doing voluntary work.

The conclusions are also correct:

- Co-operation is always dependent on people - as long as those working in higher education have no clue about the topic, they won't bother with it,
- Higher education does not recognize volunteering as informal learning - although highly appreciated at civilized places,
- the current attitudes of the government sector does not support volunteering as a social trend – it is often unable even to interpret it.

The research material is available on the internet:

<http://www.dobrovolnictvo.sk/menu/5/28/vyskumy-a-publikacie>

POLICY BRIEF 3

Dobrovoľníctvo v dlhodobej starostlivosti o starších ľudí – čo o ňom ne/vieme a čo potrebujeme riešiť - Volunteering in the long term care of the elderly

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(in cooperation with the research team of the project INTERNATIONAL LINKS NEP Slovakia)

Discusses very shortly and briefly the issues of eldercare within social work. It contains some data, but does not provide in-depth analysis or conclusion - it also states that there are no such studies and little useful material for any kind of work.

The individual components are discussed in brief:

- definition of the concept and principles of volunteering,
- data from the area of voluntary eldercare from years 2009-2010,
- a few thoughts on volunteer management,
- current problems of the eldercare,
- the most pressing needs of volunteering.

It comes to the same conclusion as the other professionals:

- the development of nationwide volunteer strategy would be needed,
- voluntary work should be supported by the state (financially, too)
- information, preparation, and training materials have to be improved,

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- the public sector should respect the diversity of volunteering (to broaden the formal definition of volunteering).

The research material is available on the internet:

<http://www.ceit.sk/IVPR/images/IVPR/Interlinks/pb3.pdf>

<http://www.sspr.gov.sk/IVPR/images/IVPR/Interlinks/25-05-2011/Mrackova.pdf>

Dobrovoľníctvo - keď pomoc baví the zábava pomáha - Volunteering - when helping is fun and fun is helping

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Úrad vlády Slovenskej Republiky - Government Office of the Slovak Republic

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The most useful research material, unfortunately only focusing on one target group - youth. However, it presents basic statistics and breakdowns, which give you a good starting point. The next parts follow the structure of this research and uses mainly its data.

The research material is available on the internet:

<http://mladez.sk/2012/02/08/dobrovolnictvo-ked-pomoc-bavi-a-zabava-pomaha/>

Volunteering – basic information

Volunteering in Slovakia in comparison with other European countries shows very low numbers - at least based on the official 10-19% rate. Studies, however, show much better results - 33% of the respondents do voluntary work. The real problem is that the statistics are not regular or accurate, and they follow only the formal volunteering. There is, however, significant amount of non-formal work (in the style "Who's coming to clean up the playground this weekend?"), which, however, almost no one can measure. Almost half of the respondents uses to work for a good cause as a non-formal volunteer.

In addition, the numbers change greatly with age – it is encouraging that surveys conducted among young people show the twice of the average. They care more about this issue. It's true, that high schoolers volunteer seldom, but there's a big jump in numbers between 20 and 29 years of age. On the other hand older people(older than 50 years) - though they are fewer - spend individually more time volunteering. The gender ratio is balanced - roughly half of the volunteers are men and half women.

The motivation is directly proportional to the degree - so the more educated volunteer more.

There are also differences concerning the environment: rural residents are more active in non-formal volunteering than those living in large urban areas.

There are differences between each region: the rate of volunteering is the lowest in Žilina county, and the highest in Košice and Prešov counties. This is interesting because the latter two regions are socially and economically the weakest in the country, having problems with high unemployment, the Roma population, insufficiently low education, poverty etc. The will to help others could be the consequence of this poverty - people living here face problems daily, so they have more developed

social sense.

The willingness to volunteer is also affected by the individual's economic situation – a few people with very high or very low income (below 300 and above 900 Euros) are involved, while the majority of the volunteers have average wage.

Loneliness is an additional factor – most of the volunteers are still widows.

Religious people understandably work more often as volunteers, except for the formal volunteering, where the ratio is balanced.

It's interesting that organization members are more likely to volunteer - and not just in the programs of their own organization. The law failed to recognize this when it excluded the the members along with the employees from the volunteer programs.

Volunteer support

Under the Act, the sending or the receiving organization is responsible for the volunteer and its safety, training, etc. But there is no institution which could intervene if problems arise. Lacking a better solution, volunteering is treated as a form of employment, so the labor inspection offices and the courts can redress grievances. This, however, is a difficult and complicated process.

There is no well functioning institutions or networks to assist volunteers. Functional institutions and centers exist only at a regional level. The CARDO association which should function as a nation-wide center is mostly useless. They offer no legal aid, do not have a database, forums or other means to contact them.

Volunteering in practice

Operators, helpers

The operators are very variable. There is no centralized institution or network – the possibilities differ by region.

The most active is "Platform MVRO" - operating since 2003, its founders are the PDCS Slovakia (Partnership for Democratic Changes), the Pontis Foundation and other major NGOs. Unfortunately, they focus on developing countries, managing programs that operate in underdeveloped regions of Africa and Asia.

How is volunteering interpreted in Slovakia?

There are two definitions – one by the authorities and one by the third sector. The formal approach is that volunteering is voluntary work done without any compensation - ruling out any connection with the person or the institution for whom/which the volunteer works.

From the third sector's point of view volunteering is any unpaid activity that is performed to help and which others benefit from. Of course, the volunteers also benefit from the work but these are secondary benefits not related to livelihood.

The legislation allows the remuneration of incidental expenses - traveling, dining, accommodation etc. Giving pocket money is more problematic as it can be taken as honorarium. In addition, work clothes, equipment, safety devices may be paid for.

Databases

There is no unified, central database. Most of the service centers has its own, but they are not open to the public - the Privacy Act does not allow making personal information available to the public. The only bigger one is the Youth program's international database.

Trainings

Each sending or receiving organization has its own courses. Most of them organize trainings for both parties: for volunteers and also for organizations.

Financial support

No concrete fund or program that would support volunteering as such. The "support" from the operators is mainly assistance: help with the project development and advice for working with volunteers. The last resources were available in the year of volunteering (2011), but even these projects gave secondary support – for research, services, consulting, etc.

References

The Act regulates this issue - thus, if the volunteer asks for references, the organization must provide him with a confirm/certify his work, experiences and internship. There is no standard form yet, but Slovakia is involved in the development of a unified system based on the Youth Pass used in Grundtvig and Youth programs.

International volunteer programs possible to join in Slovakia*Program Dobrovoľníctvo - Volunteering Program*

The Ecumenical Council of Churches in Slovakia (Ekumenická rada cirkví v Slovenskej republike) launched their ERCSR program on the 1st of December, 2004. The program is connected to the International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE).

AIESEC

International youth organization that offers internship for foreign students and young graduates. Primarily active in Third World countries.

www.aiesec.sk

Global Education Network of Young Europeans - GLEN

The joint project of the Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Hungary, Latvia, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.

Their purpose is the development of European youth - global trainings.

www.glen-slovakia.org.

Youth in Action

www.erasmusplus.sk

UN Volunteers program

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The United Nations Volunteers (UNV)

www.unv.org/en.html.

UN Volunteers Online

www.onlinevolunteering.org.

UNV Internship Programme

Longterm internships for fresh graduates in third world countries.

Service Civil International - SCI

INEX Slovakia (INternational EXchanges)

1. Short-term volunteering - international volunteer camps
2. Medium and long-term volunteer services within the EDS boundaries.

www.inex.sk , www.workcamps.info

Voluntary Service Overseas - VSO (Dobrovoľnícka služba v zahraničí)

International charity organization. Offers volunteer work to all ages – up to 75 years of age. The service time is longer - two years.

www.vso.org.uk/volunteer/.

What to expect from Slovakia?

Geography and weather

The country is small, but geographically very diverse: the southern areas are predominantly plains, while the central and northern areas consist of mountains and forests. The flatter areas are rich in rivers, these parts are definitely for the water-lovers. The weather is warmer - winters a lot milder, summers hotter and dry. The mountain areas covered with dense forests are great for hiking, from light trips to mountaineering. The weather here is also harsher and more fickle - hard winters with lot of snow, heavy storms. Warm clothes and rain jackets are a must even in the summer because of the weather's rapid changes and cold nights. These areas have rich wildlife as well - deer, wild boars, foxes and other small animals are abundant, there are more and more wolves, but at many places (especially in and near protected areas) bears have become a problem. When traveling to such places it's better to hire an experienced guide.

Slovakia is exceptionally rich in cave world - especially the area of the Slovak Karst. One of these dripstone caves hides the world's biggest officially measured stalagmite. In addition there are rare ice caves and a unique aragonite cave, which is the only one in Europe.

Culture & History

The country can be divided into a number of major cultural and historical units, which are very different from each other. The north-western areas have always been isolated from world. The culture here remained archaic, small villages and sheepfolds are typical here. The weather here is the harshest, with long winters.

The central part of the country was the center of mining and industry, trading was strong here as

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well. Since the Middle Ages it was constantly populated by German settlers (Zipser Germans or Saxons), it typically has small towns. The remaining cities show the medieval architecture and are very atmospheric. The culture here shows the effect of the mixing of peoples and languages.

The eastern and south-western plains regions were mainly agricultural land, and the majority of the country's largest minority (Hungarians) lives here.

Traditional cuisine is very healthy - usually characterized by less meat. The processing of sheep milk also has strong traditions (sheep cheese, cottage cheese), along with the making of other dairy products (steamed and smoked cheese). You should taste them.

Potatoes are a typical material, which is prepared in many different ways and it is worth to taste the pastry made from it.

Language

In Slovakia it is not always worth trying to communicate in English. A significant proportion of the adult population does not speak foreign languages. Unfortunately, this also applies to the offices, so you should bring an interpreter with you.

The situation is better among students and young people, but you'll find the ones speaking English at a level where they are able to respond or hold a conversation mainly in the major cities. For those learning Slovak dialects can pose problems - some dialects are hard to understand even for native speakers. In the southern regions live many Hungarians so there Hungarian comes in handy.

Mentality, people

It's hard to talk in generalities since it all depends on the cultural background. The areas where different cultures mixed for a long time people accept strangers more easily and they are more patient and helpful. In general, there is no xenophobia or hostility. Unfortunately, in Slovakia there are extremist parties and groups, so it's better to be informed by the receiving organization - the color of the skin and sometimes the spoken language can be a problem - whether these phenomena occur and how to avoid them.

Prices and wages

Prices and wages are very different in the regions. Generally the the closer you are to Bratislava, the more you pay for everything. Salaries are also higher here, but its evened out by more expensive housing, food, services, etc. This means that the prices of basic food items are app. 30% higher, but in the case of services they might be doubled.

Food is rather expensive, so it is worth searching through smaller retailers because the large department stores aren't necessarily the cheapest. Buying ready meals is definitely not worth it, you should rather learn to cook. In the cities you can find cheap canteens that target mainly working people and provide daily meals – if you want something better than microwave food, you should try them.

Because of poverty there are a lot of second hands, where you can buy clothing and shoes really cheaply, if you have the patience and time to search.

Toiletries and perfumes are also expensive – careful searching and wise spending again.

Transport

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Transport is not cheap and the international student cards (ISIC) are generally not accepted – you should be able to ride Eurobus buses cheaper, but drivers are not too helpful and you often have to argue with them. If you fail to persuade the driver and have a valid ISIC, you can file a complaint at the nearest Eurobus office presenting your ticket and card and they will pay the money back. Student Agency buses and Regiojet trains might be exceptions.

Public transport in the cities is woeful compared to the neighboring countries, but there are no really big cities. Therefore, this only makes miserable the lives of people living in Bratislava and Košice.

The transport network varies by region - the northern areas have more developed railways and these are also faster than the buses. In the south the train is better for longer distances and buses are more practical in smaller villages. The southernmost areas has no railways – be prepared for multiple transfers and waiting. Caution! In the poorer regions there are no buses between the smaller villages at the weekend - you'll need to walk or hitchhike to the nearest major road to reach long-distance connections.

Offices, administration

The bureaucracy is quite hefty in Slovakia, but the officials are also human. In other words, there is a lot of paperwork, but the personnel are generally helpful and always willing to look for a loophole, if a problem occurs. The golden rule is that you always need an interpreter who is familiar with the local conditions and can be nice in such situations.

Entertainment, recreation, tourism

Cinemas can only be found in larger cities, their program is mostly the same as anywhere in Europe. Theaters are in all the major towns in the county, the plays are usually in Slovak. The international festivals and events are exceptions (Bratislava, Košice, Nitra), but there is only a couple of them a year.

The palette of museums and exhibition halls is wider. Interesting establishments can be found in smaller communities, mainly showing folk art and architecture - outdoor museums, craft centers, but also industrial museums.

There is a huge amount of castles, ruins and monuments, which offer many programs - castle games, fairs, horse riding, archery, falconry demonstrations, etc. These are especially great weekend programs during the summer season.

The country has many spa locations, usually open throughout the year, but should look carefully at the prices, because the newer spot, the more expensive.

Hiking is one of the cheapest choices for recreation and it provides program for years. Only the fitter should choose cycling as almost every road leads uphill. The hikers should always check the routes' condition as the state does not have enough money to maintain them (some tourists' routes can be literally overgrown and non-existing). If there are enthusiasts in the region, the paths are well marked and you can find information boards, resting places and spots for setting fire. Otherwise you can easily get lost in the vast forests because of the shabby tourist signs.

Hikers should be aware of the local regulations as well - the most beautiful trails lead through national parks and protected areas where increased safety standards apply. Furthermore there are places which are off limits to the public - ie. protected bird nesting sites - and if you run into a local supervisor here, you have a lot to explain to avoid being fined. It's only cold comfort that nature

conservation receives almost no money from the state, so there are very few "rangers" to harass the tourists.

Prepared by Forum Information Center /SLOVAKIA
2015