

EWSI Analysis on Voluntary and Citizens' Initiative: Slovakia

1 INTRODUCTION

Are considered as citizens' initiatives all activities mobilising large numbers of volunteers (e.g. in workplaces, schools, local communities, etc.) to support immigrants' long-term integration and/or open up the public to integration matters and diversity. **These initiatives most notably involve people-to-people or mutual learning activities** matching migrants with mentors, peers or people volunteering their time or space. These initiatives may concern housing, mentoring, child or university-level education, extracurricular activities for children, lifelong learning, language learning, information provision, assistance with public services, translation, job preparation, awareness-raising/advocacy, etc.

Given EWSI's thematic focus, the emphasis is placed on citizens' initiatives focusing on long-term reception (e.g. during the asylum procedure) and integration (of beneficiaries of international protection and/or other categories of migrants), and not on the **initial front-line humanitarian reception for asylum-seekers** (e.g. food, clothing, shelter before entering the reception phase).

2 LONG-ESTABLISHED VOLUNTEERS/CITIZENS' INITIATIVES

Description of initiatives that have been running for several years.

The migration and integration of migrants has long been a neglected field in Slovakia, which is reflected in the quite narrow volunteer or citizens' initiatives portfolio. However, the situation has changed since the 2015 'migration crisis'. Activities to support integration, strengthen social cohesion have arisen in 2015.

In previous years, activities involving citizens were organised as part of structural support to migrants' integration in Slovakia. The most common pattern was that NGOs providing support and services to migrants also initiated activities including the wider public, aka volunteers. Individuals, typically, school teachers also initiated small local activities or cultural events. Other citizens' initiatives implied personal commitment in helping migrants – for instance, voluntary mentoring or conversations tables to learn the Slovak language. Such activities are usually implemented in cooperation with non-governmental organisations.

Citizens' initiatives of well-established professional NGOs

[Slovakia for Everyone!](#) is civic initiative by the Centre for the Research of Ethnicity and Culture set up in 2014. The initiative aims to strengthen social cohesion and the integration of minorities into the Slovak society. Supporters of the initiative are NGOs and individual volunteers. The main idea is to influence public policy and public discourse within the concept of citizens' state for all, where all minorities are included. Under this initiative, NGOs organise events, publish reports and campaigns, but also formulate proposals for public policies. The specific focus is given to the migrants' integration.

Activities of Migrant NGOs

Longer established volunteering initiatives in Slovakia were establishment of the NGOs. Such NGOs were established by migrants themselves (Vietnamese community in Slovakia, Africans in Slovakia, Russians and Ukrainians in Slovakia, Afghan community in Slovakia, etc.). All those activities were mainly based on the volunteer work with the key purpose of supporting integration and bridging the majority society with the migrant communities. The [Tibetan association](#) for example aims to support Tibetans and other migrants and their integration into the Slovak society, as well as to contribute to removing stereotypes and prejudices towards migrants in Slovakia. Other initiatives also include activities such as those organised by longer-established NGO such as fairs where money can be collected for migrant families, 'live library', discussion sessions on the local level¹. Another typical type of activity is lecture on integration with during public events such as movie festivals², food festivals³, etc.

Activities of the religious groups

Religious groups were also already engaged in volunteering activities for migrants and refugees, before 'migrant crisis'. For instance, Catholic charities collected donations for those in need. However, their activities covered mainly humanitarian. Muslims living in Slovakia, formally organised around the [Islamic foundation](#), which regularly provides material support to migrants and organises public events with aim to support integration and to strengthen tolerance in the society. The NGO also implemented several EIF projects.

All mentioned initiatives are small-scale, with a rather local impact.

¹ [Trnavský rínek](#) in Trnava, covering issues of cultural diversity or integration.

² [Festival of Tibetan movies](#) – public discussion with refugees and experts.

³ Presentation of national migrant and [refugee cuisines](#) in Bratislava

3 NEW VOLUNTEERS/CITIZENS' INITIATIVES

Description of major initiatives started only recently, particularly since the large numbers of refugee arrivals in 2015.

The critical situation in the Europe and near Slovak borders led to increasing numbers of volunteer material and financial collections which were mostly organised from July 2015 to October 2015. Different NGOs but also individuals, in cooperation with foreign non-governmental organisations (Hungarian or Austrian), offered their help providing social workers, doctors, etc. The organisation of such activities mainly happened via social networks.

For instance, People in Need collected more than 46 000 € during August – October 2015. Citizens also donated large number of [clothes and other material](#) during the peak of the crisis, in the autumn: 1300 kg of clothes to Austrian organisation Samariter Hilfe. An interesting innovative initiative was [“Home on the Mother”](#). The initiative challenged volunteers tailor ergonomic carriers to help refugee parents carry small children on their body during walking. The activity was initiated by NGO Slovak Fashion Council.

In addition, initiatives covering integration related issues emerged:

1. [Plea for Humanity](#)

This is the most important recent initiative. Plea for Humanity started as a reaction to the death of 71 asylum seekers in a truck near the Austrian and Slovak border. Its main goal is to widespread ideas of tolerance and acceptance of refugees coming to Slovakia among the public and to challenge the government's reaction. As of 31 August 2015, 8,600 people, including President Andrej Kiska and ombudsman Jana Dubovcová, signed the pledge. Authors of the plea called on the government to immediately draft an action plan for the support of refugees. The main activities consisted of mobilising citizens on social networks and media. In the September 2015, a concert support for tolerance was organised. Plea for Humanity, together with different stakeholders, individuals and non-governmental organisations, formulated legislative measures and proposals for refugee public policies.

2. [The Mediterranean Sea is also Our Sea](#)

38 non-governmental organisations and respected individuals established *The Mediterranean Sea is also Our Sea* in June 2016, as the reaction to “refugee crisis”. The Main goal was to legally support refugees entering the European Union and to challenge government to appropriate reaction. The initiative sent a join letter to a prime minister and organised press release and other activities for media, politicians, journalists and other actors. The pillars of the initiative consisted of explaining, with rational arguments, the specifics of asylum and forced migration, as well as measures proposed by the European Union, particularly, the European Migration Agenda. They also proposed legal and policy instruments for the Slovak government.

3. [Who will help?](#)

The Catholic Youth from The Ladislav Hanus Fellowship launched national campaign *Who will help?* A wide range of stakeholders and individuals, regardless of their religion, joined the initiative. The main idea is to persuade the government to resettle 100 families from Syria and Iraq and at the same time to find 1,000 persons, families or communities who would personally help refugees from Syria and Iraq with their integration, by providing mentoring, material, financial help or housing. By the end of February 2016, more than 2,000 persons or families expressed their willingness to help.

4. Initiatives by the Catholic Church

The Catholic Church in Slovakia has been playing an increasingly important role in refugee integration. Currently, [Slovak Catholic Charity](#) is the only NGO implementing national integration programme for recognised refugees in Slovakia. The [Catholic Church is also prepared](#) to play an even more important role and help the government with the EU relocation/resettlement plans, by integrating 100 relocated and 100 resettled Syrian Christian asylum seekers. In general, the Catholic Church promotes the idea to help refugees, challenges believers to be more open towards them and to provide real help.

The Slovak Roman Catholic Church [started an educational campaign in August 2015](#) to raise awareness among its followers by distributing information leaflets on refugees. In the leaflets, the Church presents the life stories of three women. The leaflet also myth-busts common fears, such the cost of integration, the link between terrorism and immigrants, and diseases brought by asylum seekers. Slovak Catholic Charity is continuously working with refugees and [systematically collects voluntary and financial donations](#) from citizens for refugees.

5. One-shot initiatives

After the “crisis”, requests for more public discussions about cultural diversity, migration and integration emerged. Schools, bars and clubs, for example, organised public debates and presentations with experts on the topic in different cities. Usually these events are co-organised by NGOs.

Marches and public manifestations are also typical of this post-crisis period. Marches were organised both in favour and against migration. Those in favour (Bratislava, Košice) aim to express moral obligation to support human rights and solidarity with refugees.

4 PROFILE OF VOLUNTEERS

Description and comparison of the profile of volunteers active in old versus new initiatives.

New initiatives include much bigger numbers of volunteer than previous ones and the extent of engagement of individuals in volunteering work with refugees is still increasing. Within the new initiatives, the scope of activities is large: some volunteers only contributed with material donations or finances while others invested more time in directly supporting refugees, also in the Hungary, Slovenia, etc. [Volunteers organised a merry-go-round for refugee children](#) in Gabčíkovo.

Immigrants themselves are usually under-represented in the initiatives – both old and new. This might be the reflection of the very small share of migrants and refugees on the society in general. However, their involvement is increasing – for instance, refugees are present in the public discussions and in the media (interviews with in print media and TV, short documentary movies, interviews for TV, etc.)

5 INNOVATION ASPECT

Description and comparison of innovative or entrepreneurial aspects of the old versus new initiatives.

New initiatives were much more innovative than previous ones. Former initiatives concentrated on collecting donations and support to immigrants while the new initiatives have much more diversified activities. Long-standing citizens' initiatives were predominantly initiated by NGOs, whereas a much wider range of actors – youth, churches, individuals - is mobilised in new initiatives. The refugee crisis led to the commitment of citizens and organisations which never were involved in (volunteering) work with migrants or refugees and therefore, innovate with new concepts and activities, with a stronger direct support.

In addition, Social media played important role in spreading messages such as tolerance, respect and solidarity with refugees, through initiatives such as Plea for Humanity or Refugees Welcome.

6 ADDED VALUE

Description of the added value of such initiatives (both long-established and new), including the uniqueness of their activities compared to the existing practices of the (1) state and (2) NGOs.

In general, Slovakia is strict country, refusing quota proposal and open to accept only Christians with Syrian nationality. New initiatives were much more flexible. The uniqueness of new initiatives is that they persuaded many inhabitants of Slovakia to be open and engage - *Who will help*, by young Christians, persuaded more than 2000 persons to help with integration of refugees them -, while state activities give rather symbolically negative message - refugees and migrants are dangerous and therefore, the population should be careful.

7 IMPACT

Description and comparison of the impact of old versus new initiatives.

No real long-term impact on the integration of either migrants or refugees can be communicated as no measurable results are registered. The state structures remained reluctant towards migrants and refugees, and do not accept the EU migration agenda, solidarity among EU countries in that matter nor the system of quotas. However, following the Plea for Humanity, the state increased finances for integration and a funding scheme for supporting humanitarian or integration projects targeting refugees was created.

Plea for Humanity reallocated the [500.000,00 € donated by TIPOS](#) – the national lottery company - to humanitarian projects of organisations both providing practical assistance abroad and in Slovakia (during the period November 2015 – March 2016).

In addition, new initiatives positively impacted public debates about migration and integration and made migrants visible to ordinary people in Slovakia.

Slovakia is preparing its first ever integration programme for recognised refugees.