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Zuzana is a leadership and resilience development expert at Forvis Mazars, focusing on strengthening organizational culture, ethical leadership, and long term people and team development. With 15+ years of experience in teaching, coaching, and facilitation, she specializes in company culture, leadership development, self management, resilience, and soft skills training. She holds a PhD in Human Management from Matej Bel University and completed internships in Belgium and the USA. Zuzana is an internationally certified persolog<sup>®</sup> coach and earned a certification in Positive Psychology and Resilience from the University of Pennsylvania. In 2024, she was named Lecturer of the Year at the Learning & Development Awards. She co authored a preventive resilience building program for high school students developed with VÚDPaP.

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## IN THE CURRENT GEOPOLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CLIMATE, WHAT SHOULD SLOVAKIA PRIORITIZE TO REMAIN COMPETITIVE WITH THE EU AND GLOBALLY?

In today's rapidly changing geopolitical and economic environment, Slovakia faces an important moment. As global competition intensifies, we must rethink how we prepare people, not only with technical knowledge, but with the character, adaptability, and resilience needed to thrive amid uncertainty. Cooperation with organizations that help individuals and businesses strengthen adaptability and long-term readiness can support a more future-proof society.

From my perspective as a leadership and resilience development professional, Slovakia should prioritize education reform that focuses more intentionally on character development. While our education system has traditionally emphasized cognitive performance, qualities such as perseverance, responsibility, ethical reasoning, and the ability to navigate ambiguity must now be equally valued.

Resilience has become a defining competence. Recent disruptions, from the pandemic to geopolitical tensions and rapid technological change, have shown that individuals and organizations must adapt quickly and continue to grow despite uncertainty. Embedding resilience in education means encouraging students to face challenges, learn from failure, and develop psychological strength, while supporting educators in fostering emotional and social development.

Character education should be integrated across all levels of schooling, fostering self-awareness, empathy, integrity, and a sense of purpose. These qualities help young people make responsible decisions, collaborate effectively, and support innovation and entrepreneurship, which are essential for EU and global competitiveness.

This belief is also why we at Forvis Mazars contributed to the preventive program Become More Resilient, focused on strengthening resilience among secondary school students. The program is now being implemented, helping to build a stronger future generation and contributing to a more resilient Slovakia through education.

## WHAT LEADERSHIP QUALITY DO YOU BELIEVE IS MOST ESSENTIAL IN TODAY'S COMPLEX ENVIRONMENT?

In leadership, the complexity of today's environment demands a redefinition of what it means to lead effectively. Among many important qualities, I believe ethical leadership stands out as the most essential. In uncertain times, people look

to leaders not only for direction, but for moral clarity and trustworthiness.

Drawing on the work of Joanne B. Ciulla and Heidi Von Weltzien Høivik, moral leadership is not a static trait but an ongoing action. It is reflected in the everyday decisions leaders make, the behaviors they model, and the standards they uphold. Ethical leadership isn't about declaring values; it is about consistently translating those values into practice, especially when choices are difficult. In many organizations, this includes collaborating with trusted external partners who help strengthen decision-making processes, reinforce transparency, and cultivate cultures grounded in integrity.

Ethical leadership also requires courage. Leaders must be willing to take responsibility, act transparently, and prioritize long-term integrity over short-term gain, particularly in environments where pressures for performance may conflict with ethical considerations. Real leadership lies in navigating these tensions with clarity and conviction.

Another essential dimension is accountability. Leaders set the tone for organizational culture, and their actions signal what is truly valued. When leaders demonstrate fairness, respect, and honesty, they create environments where trust can flourish. This trust enables collaboration, innovation, and resilience. Conversely, when ethical standards are compromised, the impact is far-reaching, undermining performance as well as reputation.

Ethical leadership is also closely linked to self-awareness. Leaders must understand their own values, biases, and motivations to act authentically. In my work at Forvis Mazars, I see that this requires ongoing reflection and dedication to personal growth. Professional partners can play a valuable role in supporting leaders through this process, helping them navigate complexity, broaden perspective, and strengthen resilience.

Ultimately, both education reform and ethical leadership are deeply interconnected. By fostering character and resilience from an early stage, we prepare a new generation of leaders who are not only capable, but principled. These leaders can navigate complexity with confidence, act with integrity, and contribute to sustainable success, both for their organizations and for Slovakia as a whole.

**In a time defined by uncertainty, our greatest competitive advantage lies not only in what we know, but in who we are and how we choose to act.**