

Challenges for women entrepreneurs

Women make up only 29% of the entrepreneurs in Slovakia, which comes to only 100,000 people in absolute terms. The U.S. Embassy in Bratislava led an effort to learn why so few Slovak women go into business on their own.

The Embassy's initial research showed that Slovakia is positioned among the bottom of the 28 EU countries in relation to amount of female entrepreneurship. Moreover, analysis indicates that Slovak civil society organizations dealing with women's issues have not effectively cooperated together in the past. To address both issues, the U.S. Embassy, together with a women's organization from central Slovakia, launched a mentoring program for female entrepreneurs in Bratislava, Banská Bystrica, and Košice – The Women Entrepreneurship Forum (WEF). A Steering Committee representing 17 stakeholder organizations was formed to better coordinate the work on women's issues.

In addition, the embassy conducted a survey of 550 people (500 women and 50 men) to learn what those already doing business see as the biggest challenges to increasing female entrepreneurship in the country. The primary challenge the survey identified is that Slovak women do not sufficiently advocate on their own behalf to ensure that their rights are respected. Respondents saw non-governmental organizations as the institutions that most effectively advocated for women's interests, although they also stressed the important role played by European institutions and the private sector. However, survey responses resoundingly showed that female entrepreneurs do not feel supported by Slovak government institutions.

Excessive administrative burden and lack of support

The WEF survey, together with a number of international surveys including the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor 2012, conclude that Slovak female entrepreneurs face a number of difficulties related to the business environment, institutional support, and self-confidence. Lack of information and resources including entrepreneurial one-stop shops, access to capital, corruption, and excessive administrative burden, prove insurmountable obstacles for women thinking about going into business in Slovakia. These findings are also supported by a number of international rankings such as the World Economic Forum and the Doing Business survey by the World Bank. Slovakia also provides little fundamental support of entrepreneurship in its educational system, where young people lack entrepreneurial education both at the high school and university levels.

Data on working women

Recent trends show that employers worldwide have begun to appreciate the benefits of work-life balance. In Slovakia, however, this trend is visible primarily in international companies, while most smaller Slovak-owned businesses might not focus on this issue at all. Women in Slovakia often struggle in making the transition from maternity leave to the workplace. They lose track of their companies' development and often return to a different position from the one

they left, even though, by law, they are entitled to return to the same job. According to the latest EU statistics, job-sharing and part-time work solutions are used by only 5.6% of Slovak women, which is far behind the EU 28 average of 30.4%.

Women are underrepresented in European business, both in number and status. Although they account for more than 55% of university graduates, they are employed at rates 21% lower than men. A very similar trend exists in Slovakia, where, in addition, the wage gap between men and women is nearly 20%. Women are also underrepresented in leadership positions in Slovakia – only one woman currently serves in the Cabinet and only 28 in Parliament (out of 150). This lack of women in senior positions reverberates down to lower levels, where respondents of the WEF survey said that interactions with government institutions can be difficult as these employers are less open to female managers. Slovaks are, in general, relatively conservative, and a significant proportion of the population supports traditionalist views, especially when it comes to the role of woman in society. Equality between men and women in the workplace and in society remains uneven, and examples of such inequality can be found all over Slovakia.

Launch of the Slovak Women Platform

In response to these challenges, the U.S. Embassy, together with all involved stakeholders, drafted

a White Paper initiative that both identifies problems in the current environment and makes recommendations for executive and legislative bodies. After 14 months of operating as a Steering Committee, the stakeholder group will be represented by a new entity - the Slovak Women Platform. This platform will constitute a unified voice for women's problems in dealing with the Slovak government and parliament. The full list of partners represented in the Slovak Women Platform can be found at www.platformazien.sk. This initiative will have the continuous support of the U.S. Embassy, the American Chamber of Commerce, and the Representation of the European Commission in Slovakia, all serving in the role of supervisors.

The culmination of the 14-month long program was a day-long conference, held on December 3, 2013, was opened by Prime Minister Robert Fico. Marjorie Maginn, Executive Director of Women In Government based in Washington, DC, delivered the key-note speech. The program will continue thanks to Slovak Women Platform, consisting of more than 16 organizations representing government, business and NGOs, which was launched at the conference. The platform will continue to combine its efforts to promote goals set in the White Paper and enhance the position of women in Slovakia.



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