



Looking back at 2011 - the European Year of Volunteering

Volunteering is an active expression of civic participation that strengthens common European values such as solidarity and social cohesion. At this time of economic crisis, volunteering also provides important learning opportunities because it can provide people with new skills and competencies.

In the European Union, almost 100 million citizens of all ages invest their time, talent, and money to make a positive contribution to their community by volunteering in civil society organizations, youth clubs, hospitals, schools, sport clubs, etc. In order to highlight the importance of volunteering and to facilitate its further development, the European Commission declared 2011 the European Year of Volunteering (EYV 2011).

By means of announcing The European Year, the European Commission aimed to raise awareness of certain topics, encourage debate, and change attitudes in society towards socially important issues. This notion has been around since 1983 and helps to send a strong commitment and political signal from EU institutions and member governments that the subject will be taken into consideration in future policy-making.

Volunteering deserved this attention to emphasize charitable, helpful work without the expectation of a financial reward in today's busy world. In Slovakia, the European Commission had an excellent partner for coordination of volunteering activities. IUVENTA, the Slovak Youth Institute, was assigned the task and swiftly established a working group consisting of representatives from all volunteering organizations in the country. Their main goal was to define the missing aspects of volunteering in Slovakia and to

create the National Plan for EYV 2011 defining the local priorities for the year.

In Slovakia the following were identified as main priorities: research for missing information about the current situation in this field, and a media campaign to raise the visibility of volunteering by presenting specific volunteer experiences. Bringing the topic closer to people and emphasizing the values of volunteering was crucial in the campaign. It was also important to empower the third sector and reward volunteers by appreciating their work.

The working group also mapped the many volunteer organizations, activities, and projects in the country in order to gain an, until now, non-existent complete picture of the state of volunteering in Slovakia. A survey was conducted throughout the whole year. The target groups were working adults, workers from volunteer organizations, and experts from the field. The research was both quantitative through questionnaires, and qualitative, trying to conduct strategies for the future prognosis of volunteering.

The campaign ran throughout the year 2011. A special EYV webpage was created and well-known personalities, like Eva Siracká of Liga proti rakovine (League Against Cancer), entrepreneur and philanthropist Andrej Kiska, and model Lucia Hablovičová became

ambassadors of the project. They further highlighted this issue through their participation in various related events. Regional units were very active in personal contact via various local communication channels. Lively discussions, experience swaps, and meetings between volunteering organizations took place. All of these had the same goal in sight: to honor those who care about what's happening around them and who give a hand, not the cold shoulder.

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Universities, NGOs, and public institutions were involved in all the activities. During the European Youth Week, IUVENTA organized a weeklong campaign "Karavána" (Caravan), which involved a touring bus visiting five Slovak cities and promoting volunteering in the regions.

Another partner of the Representation of the European

Commission in Slovakia, the civic association C.A.R.D.O., coordinated events such as Volunteering Days and Volunteer Awards. The Volunteering days took place in September 2011 and involved 156 organizations in 65 cities and 6741 volunteers who worked 24,137 hours painting fences, cleaning public spaces, or looking after seniors. The event was supported by celebrities ranging from actors to politicians as well as by corporate sponsors.

C.A.R.D.O. also came up with the initiative to introduce a legislative guarantee for volunteering activities. For this purpose they joined forces with politicians Daniel Lipšic and Lucia Žitňanská who proposed a law about volunteering. This removed many legislative barriers and also enabled volunteer organizations to receive 3% from taxes or become exempt from paying VAT when providing services.

Overall the European Commission was extremely satisfied with the results of EYV 2011 in Slovakia. All the activities have clearly contributed to a shift in the perception of volunteering in the country. The campaign had an educational and informational role and helped to give visibility to how much has been done. The biggest gains are the new legal framework for volunteering and the media attention that this issue has received. Thanks to all the activities and the media outreach, many learned about the importance of helping others and some even became inspired to follow the millions of Europeans who are regularly engaged in volunteering.



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