

WRITTEN BY



**IVANA VAGASKÁ**  
Executive Director of Business Leaders Forum  
Senior Program Manager for CSR in Pontis Foundation



# DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION: WHERE DO WE STAND?

At the Pontis Foundation, we have been running the Slovak Diversity Charter since 2017, giving local employers the opportunity to acquire practical inspiration in specific D&I topics. In August 2022, thanks to the Erasmus+ programme, I had a chance to exchange best practices, experiences and ideas with the Diversity Charters in Estonia and Finland. In what aspects does the situation in Slovakia differ from these countries, and what do they have in common?

### DIVERSITY MEANS MORE THAN JUST NO DISCRIMINATION

*"Laws and regulations present just the minimum levels of the work of the bank and its subsidiaries in the field of gender equality and diversity. The standard is set to do more,"* states the D&I policy document of the Swedbank Estonia. In Slovakia, it often happens that a company or an organization asks to become a signatory to the Diversity Charter, but after filling in the compulsory initial questionnaire, it quickly becomes apparent that it does not do anything more than obey the Anti-Discrimination Law.

*"It is quite common also in Estonia. Employers often do just the obligatory minimum,"* says Helen Talalae from the Estonian Human Rights Centre, which administers the national Diversity Charter. The Charter in Estonia was established in 2012, and now has more than 170 signatories. This relatively high number for a country with only 1.3 million inhabitants results from the fact that the benefits associated with becoming a signatory are provided free of charge, thanks to the funding by the Ministry of Social Affairs.

*"There are companies with headquarters in the Nordic countries and they are trendsetters in D&I in Estonia. We have to keep in mind that things which*

*may be automatic for the Swedish are still new for the Estonians,"* says Iiti-Christella Mägi from Swedbank Estonia. The bank is one of a very few companies in Estonia which have established an independent position of a Diversity Manager within their organizational structure. In this regard, Slovakia is very similar to Estonia as D&I agendas are mostly led by passionate HR managers, often on top of their regular workload.

### PRIORITY TOPICS AND CHALLENGES

Similarly, D&I belong among relatively new topics in Finland, with this agenda still not institutionalized in companies. The country has two strict laws on anti-discrimination and equality in place. However, it was not until recently when the Black Lives Matter and Me Too movements showed weak spots in Finnish society, that a larger number of employers started to pay attention to D&I. *"We got so used to our great education system and women being present in public life that we have somehow stopped paying enough attention to the inclusion and new challenges,"* explains Veera Iija from the FIBS organization which administers Finnish Diversity Charter.

The Finnish Charter belongs among the services provided by the FIBS, which is, with its 400+ members,

the largest corporate responsibility network in the Nordic countries. So far, the Charter has been signed by 90 companies.



## When comparing the overall situation of D&I in the workplace, Estonia, Finland and Slovakia are surprisingly very much alike.

When comparing the overall situation of D&I in the workplace, Estonia, Finland and Slovakia are surprisingly very much alike. Gender diversity seems to be the most visible issue, as it is one of the very few D&I aspects that can be easily measured. The labor markets are highly segregated, with women dominating the low-paid sectors of social and health care. Thus, the gender pay gap in all three countries is higher than the EU average of 14.1% (21.7% in Estonia, 18.4% in Slovakia, and 16.6% in Finland. As the data refer to 2019, we can assume an

increase in numbers due to the pandemic).

Other challenges are the insufficient employment of people with disabilities, missing practices of age management, and a very high percentage of LGBTQ+ people who do not feel safe to come out in the workplace.

### SELF-ASSESSMENT AS A STARTING POINT

In 2018, the Estonian Centre for Human Rights launched an initiative entitled the Diversity Workplace Label. Companies and organizations were asked to prepare D&I action plans and include specific objectives. For the newcomers, the center provides the label based on future commitments rather than past achievements. However, when the companies reapply for the label after two years, they have to prove that they have met their objectives.

In Slovakia, we have recently provided employers with a self-assessment tool which measures their current level of D&I. Filling in the Diversity Index ([www.indexdiverzity.sk](http://www.indexdiverzity.sk)) should serve as a starting point for any employer that wants to improve their practices and embrace D&I in their complexity.

A tool based on self-assessment has been recently created also in Finland. *"It helps employers*

*identify what they should pay attention to, for instance, when drawing up a job advertisement, and how to ensure equal pay and career progress. It also maps out different practices that are essential for building an inclusive work culture,"* explains Jonna Louvrier from Includia Leadership, a leading Finnish provider of D&I services, who co-created the tool together with Veera Iija from the FIBS.

### IMPACT OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE

During my meetings in Estonia and Finland, both border countries with Russia and with tense history of mutual relations, our small talks were not only about the weather. We always came to the subject of the current Russian aggression in Ukraine. What effect has it had on the workplaces and relationships between colleagues, especially in Estonia, where a quarter of the population are people with Russian as their mother tongue? *"Internal communication has been crucial in this regard,"* says Helen Talalae. In the very beginning, the management of companies sent a very clear message saying that the companies strictly condemned the war, but at the same time, they would not tolerate any discrimination against Russian colleagues. As a result, no major tensions or conflicts have been reported.