

U.S. extends work visas for Slovak citizens

Starting from January 2016, a reciprocal extension of work visas between The United States of America and Slovakia came into effect. We talked to Selena Nelson-Salcedo, Consular Chief at the Embassy of the United States of America in Bratislava, who was directly involved in the discussions of this agreement with partners from the Ministry of Labor of the Slovak Republic.

Could you explain what has changed in terms of obtaining a U.S. visa for Slovak residents from January 2016?

Since January 2016, certain classes of employment visas that the U.S. issues to the citizens of Slovakia, that used to be limited to two years maximum validity, can now be issued for five year validity. It will depend on the period of employment in the U.S., which is to say the period of the approved petition from immigration that says how long that person can work in the U.S. in that particular position.

What led to this change?

This was a reciprocal change that happened between the U.S. and Slovakia so it's the result of a very productive dialogue on this issue and cooperation in talking about something that would benefit both of our countries and the citizens of both of our countries.

What changes are coming to effect on the Slovak side?

On the side of Slovakia, as of January 1, 2016, residency permits for the purpose of employment, which we use as an equivalent to a U.S. employment visa when we're looking at reciprocity from the U.S. side, can also now be issued for up to five years. The Slovak policy for those residency permits is that the maximum will now be five years depending on the period of employment, while it used to be two years. It is also based on reciprocity for what citizens of Slovakia would get in the other country. The reason the U.S. citizens in particular can benefit from this change in Slovak legislation is

because we are reciprocating with the employment visas being also issued for a period of five years.

The residence permits represent an issue often addressed by AmCham member companies, many of which will certainly welcome this change as an improvement. Who else can benefit from these changes on both sides?

First and foremost this definitely benefits the employees themselves. Slovak citizens who are working in the U.S. and American citizens who are working in Slovakia. Also their employers because the time and the expense that is spent on either applying for a U.S. visa or applying for a residency permit in Slovakia is going to be saved because they wouldn't need to go through that process quite as often.

For example, in the U.S., if you had a Slovak intra-company transferee who worked for an international company that had an office in Slovakia and an office in the U.S. and they wanted that employee to be able to work in the U.S. office, they would get for them what is called an L visa and they could have a petition that's valid for five years, sometimes maybe even longer. Previously, even if that employee still had a valid petition, they would have to apply for a visa every two years if they wanted to travel in and out of the U.S. The other side would be the same thing. You could have an American citizen that's working here in Slovakia and maybe their employment contract is still valid but they have to spend time to renew their permit every two years.

In both situations there's a savings when it comes to the time and resources that go into applying for these documents. On a larger scale, both of our countries benefit because these workers on either side may be filling a temporary gap for their specialized skills in that country and it also supports the exchange of ideas and expertise.

Can you give us an estimate of how many U.S. citizens currently working in Slovakia, and Slovak citizens working in the U.S., might benefit from this reciprocity agreement?

There are likely around 250-300 U.S. citizens employed in Slovakia in the category benefiting from increased validity of residency permits.



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As for Slovak citizens, my best estimate is that since 2012 (when the visa validity was limited based on reciprocity) there have been about 800 Slovak employees (plus their families) in the U.S. employment visa categories benefiting from increased validity. Some or most of them may be still in these categories. This does not include students and crewmembers whose visa validity was also extended, separately from the reciprocity agreement.

How would you describe the cooperation that resulted in this agreement?

These changes that have happened on both ends are something that both of our countries saw as beneficial to our citizens and to an exchange of people and ideas. We cooperate very well with the Slovak government on these issues and I think this is a really good example of that.

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