

# Discovering the potential in Slovakia's talent pool abroad

If you approach a group of talented Slovak high-schoolers with a question about their further education, it is very likely that universities abroad will get mentioned quite often. More and more Slovaks decide to take advantage of the available opportunity and seek quality education at top universities in other countries. But do they return to Slovakia later or apply their skills somewhere else? And why should we care? Michal Kovács of LEAF offers his perspective on this issue in the following interview.



**MICHAL KOVÁCS**  
Member of the Founding Team, LEAF

**With the number of Slovak students studying at foreign universities growing year by year, how do you perceive the risk of a Slovak brain drain?**

Well, the risk is there. That is obvious. What is less obvious is that no-one really knows how big the risk is. We have quite extensive official data when it comes to the number of outgoing students, but there are no statistics that would tell us how many are coming back after studying or after professional experience.

**What is your estimate of how many plan to come back?**

According to the surveys we conducted with the applicants for our scholarships, roughly a quarter intend to return shortly after they finish their studies, one half are undecided or plan on returning after a couple of years abroad and a quarter stated they weren't thinking about coming back. Although the scholarships have no strings attached (e.g. they don't require a student to return home), I have to admit this estimate is probably slightly biased for Slovakia because of the character of our organization, which connects people with Slovakia. On the other hand, it is probably not that far from the reality as it corresponds with estimates from other organizations, e.g. Slovensko Calling and SAV.

**How does the situation in Slovakia compare with other countries in the region?**

All the Central European countries face a similar situation,

but it's true that of EU countries, Slovakia has one of the highest shares of university students abroad. Generally speaking, I am convinced that the rising number of Slovak students with international experience is a good thing. Both for them as individuals as well as for the institutions for which they will work. I know it may sound clichéd, but I honestly think we should invest more of our energy in figuring out how to use this opportunity, rather than thinking about how to fight the risk. The Hungarian example, i.e. penalizing Hungarian graduates for leaving the country, is definitely not worth following.

**What is the alternative?**

A positive mindset, which requires thinking about how to leverage the diaspora potential is the alternative. And we shouldn't focus only on physical return. There are many ways for talented Slovaks abroad how to benefit the country and its people without coming home, or before they do so. They can open doors for Slovak businesses, facilitate FDI, provide high-level advice for decision makers in business, NGOs and government, tap into academic cooperation, offer access to unique networks, mentor rising stars in their home country, etc. This is what academics call Brain Circulation, in contrast to Brain Gain. When talking about the actual return, we need to figure out how to make the return a relevant life and career alternative. Relying on the nation-building narrative alone won't work.

**From talking to young people studying or working abroad, how do they feel about the possibility of returning home and what are the main factors that encourage them to do so?**

Beside the positive sentiments for the country, family and friends, talented people are most often motivated by two major incentives. First, the opportunity to leave a mark, improve the status quo and potentially become part of a greater national story. And second, an opportunity for personal development. This naturally includes challenging professional assignments, inspiring colleagues, and economic advancement. There is no reason why this shouldn't work for the Slovak diaspora too. Research and our experience also confirms this.

**What kind of companies and institutions do you cooperate with when offering internships and full-time positions?**

We look to cooperate with companies, NGOs and public institutions that are ready to acknowledge and respond to the above mentioned two-fold motivation. At the same time, we search for partners who can provide a supportive environment in line with our values.

**What does this mean in practice?**

It means providing more than just a challenging job. We seek partners who value strong moral character and are ready to discuss moral dilemmas in their day-to-day businesses, partners

## BIOGRAPHY

### WORKING EXPERIENCE

- LEAF, Member of the Founding Team (2012 – Present)
- Center for North American Studies - University of Economics in Bratislava, Founder and Executive Director (2008 – 2012)
- Euro-Atlantic Center, Founder of the Regional Representation and Regional Director, later Vice-President (2006 – 2009)
- Slovak Atlantic Commission National Program Director (2007 – 2008)

### EDUCATION

- Matej Bel University - Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.), International Relations and Affairs (2009 – 2014)
- University of Economics in Bratislava - MSc, International Relations (2004 – 2009)



who appreciate entrepreneurial drive and leadership and are ready to entrust new people with responsibility for their own projects and partners who expose their staff to volunteering opportunities and support civic engagement.

**The program is in its third year, is it possible to summarize the results so far?**

We are far from discovering the full potential, as there are many more talented people with amazing stories and a desire to reconnect with Slovakia than we are able to help right now (smile). We are still at the very beginning and it is too early to say.

**What do you mean by that?**

As an organization, we would like to assist people who may one day contribute to positive trends in our society. Only time will show whether we were successful and contributed to their journey. We have organized and helped to organize networking events abroad and in Slovakia. Since we launched the program, we have found and selected candidates for 29 internships and full-time opportunities for students and young graduates from abroad. This year, another 32 candidates have been confirmed by the partnering institutions. In the last two years, we also found ten amazing Slovak students studying abroad who we were able to help with a modest scholarship. However, some of the most fascinating stories come from the people who didn't come back, but helped from abroad. More than 30 people have joined our volunteering programs from abroad. They donated their time over several months as mentors for talented high-school students, or as expert volunteers for Slovak NGOs.

**What are your hopes and plans for this program in the future?**

We want to offer more opportunities for senior Slovak professionals who work abroad.

We have helped some senior experts to make a meaningful impact through the Skill-based Volunteering Program, facilitated some ad-hoc connections and piloted an executive search project for a professional who worked on Wall Street and came back last summer to found a new investment fund in Slovakia. However, much more can be done. We aim to extend the portfolio of executive search projects and other projects for experienced professionals to help more people who are thinking about returning home.

There are many ways for talented Slovaks abroad how to benefit the country and its people without coming home, or before they do so. They can open doors for Slovak businesses, facilitate FDIs, provide high-level advice for decision makers in business, NGOs and government, tap into academic cooperation, offer access to unique networks, mentor rising stars in their home country, etc.

**And your most immediate plans?**

Well, we need to hire a colleague with experience in executive search to join the

team really soon. That is the priority now.

**What other programs does LEAF run?**

Our flagship project is the LEAF Academy, an international boarding high-school for Central European students, which aims to help students find and develop entrepreneurial spirit and leadership potential. The Academy design is in the preparatory phase and we hope we will be able to announce the timeline for the opening in the upcoming months. We also run a series of other initiatives for high school students. They include summer leadership camps, a mentoring initiative – TalentGuide, – and select scholarship for programs in Japan, South Africa, USA and other countries. In June, we aim to launch the LEAF Award to identify and support the most talented and inspiring high-school students in Slovakia. We also offer mentoring programs for high-school teachers across Slovakia. For young professionals with university degrees, we run the Skill-based Volunteering Program that has already enabled more than 100 volunteers to contribute their expertise to NGO projects.

**How does that come together? What is the unifying element across all these programs?**

The Individual. A person who is able to unfold his or her talent and wishes to use this talent to

contribute to the development of Slovakia, whether he or she chooses a path in business, NGO, or the government sector. We would like to help be a part of these people's stories. We believe that Slovakia could develop faster thanks to its talented people. However, some fail to fully develop their potential; others do not find the right conditions, and burn out or leave the country as a result, and others conform to the society they live in. Through our activities and projects, we would like to build a supportive loop that helps the individual in his personal development throughout his life.

**ABOUT LEAF**

LEAF is a non-profit organization focused on developing young individuals with the potential to grow into leaders in Slovakia. Michal leads a program that seeks to connect Slovak professionals and students living abroad with Slovakia and help those who are considering returning home. They are building a community, facilitating job offers in Slovakia and seeking voluntary assistance from abroad for non-profit initiatives at home.

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