

Taking responsibility for our work...

Almost everyone has a story related to his or her experience with the civil service in Slovakia. Unfortunately, in most cases it's not a story expressing satisfaction and appreciation. A few years ago Monika Filipová decided to take matters in her own hands and has been on a courageous path towards changing this situation ever since.



MONIKA FILIPOVÁ
Chairman & Founder,
Dobry úradník



BIOGRAPHY

WORK EXPERIENCE

- Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic; Director of Local State Administration, Self-Government and Foreign; Affairs Department Public Administration Section (May 2016 -)
- Dobý úradník, Chairman & Founder (January 2018 -)
- Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic; Head of Local Self-Government and Foreign Affairs (May 2013 - May 2016)
- Taipei Representative Office, Commercial Secretary (October 2012 - May 2013)
- Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic, Chief State Counselor (April 2012 - October 2013)
- Fleming Europe; Conference Producer (November 2011 - March 2012)

EDUCATION

- PhD in East Asian Studies/ International Relations; University of Comenius, Faculty of Arts, Department of East Asian Studies (2012 - 2018)
- Master of Arts, Major in Law; University of Comenius, Faculty of Law (2004 - 2011)
- Master of Arts, Major in Diplomacy; National Chengchi University, Faculty of International Relations (2009 - 2011)

Could you describe your experience working in the civil service and the reasons that led you to start the initiative Good Civil Servant (Dobry úradník)? I have worked in the Civil Service for six years which I believe has provided me with a solid basis of experience within the office itself and in connection to other institutions and civil servants. As for my work, my reason for prevailing at the Ministry of Interior has been, and still is, the agenda I am responsible for, and the team which I work with. At the department which I manage we have a very versatile agenda including the coordination of local governments, state administration bodies but also foreign affairs. To translate it into practical language, besides managing the work of people, I have worked on the preparation of laws, analysis, strategic documents, organization of events, represented at conferences, worked in different working groups, etc. We work a lot with citizens, other public administration bodies at the local and regional level, NGOs but we also intensively cooperate with some European and international organizations. For me, it has been very important that I can actually utilize my education within my profession and gain practical experience. Another highlight of my experience is the team that surrounds me and the people I work with. Regardless their age, profession and views, we form a good team where freedom of different perspectives is welcome and solutions are achieved via open discussions.

Now that I described all the motivational factors that have kept me in the state

administration, it is time to point out some of the drawbacks, which have led me and a dozen of other colleagues and enthusiasts to initiate the Good Civil Servant. Most people are convinced that being a civil servant means having a very comfortable job with little work and many advantages. My experience so far has been quite the opposite. We have always had sufficient workload and as an enthusiast of initiative work, I try to promote going beyond our regular duties and engaging in extra work, which gives us a broader understanding. However, I experienced times when even regular work was way beyond our capacities. The working environment and conditions were far from ideal and whatever we asked for, even the most basic things such as clean offices, printer or access to legal acts and comments, has been ignored. In addition, I often had to face the criticism of my friends and acquaintances who would not understand how I was able to work in such a corrupt environment under such a leadership. All these elements escalated and I decided not to be silent anymore and say out loud what I think: that there are some very qualified, ethical and good civil servants who work in the state and public administration because they believe that their job is important, but also that the system itself is bureaucratic, rigid and totally outdated, that we face criticism and often loath from the public but also complete disregard from our superiors.

In 2016 you published an open letter expressing the frustration you've experienced after four

years in civil service, but also describing why you still find your work meaningful and why you admire and support your colleagues who don't give up. How was it received by your colleagues and the public? To a great degree the letter originated in my frustration working in a very rigid environment with little focus on quality, progress and tangible results. However, its purpose was to support other colleagues, civil servants, who feel the same and often find it difficult to keep themselves motivated. In general, the reaction of the public was diverse — comments or feedback which I received included both positive messages and skepticism. Concerning my colleagues, there was very little reaction to my first letter and people were divided into two groups — those who said they completely understand the state of mind I created the letter in and those who stopped greeting me. It is not something that you dare to do publicly when you are a civil servant, so I understood both reactions, nevertheless I was sorry for those who did not understand that we are all responsible for what the public administration looks like today and such behavior only validates their lack of integrity.

Why is the current public image of civil servants in Slovakia not very positive?

I believe it is due to a number of reasons. First of all, the so-called professionalization of our civil service has never been introduced and carried out following the change of the regime. In order to ensure non-partisan, ethical and professional fulfilling of obligations, civil



servants must feel secure and must have the confidence and also the responsibility to stand up for their work and views.

In addition, taking into account the population of our country, we have a vast number of civil and public employees in a huge number of various state and public institutions, which unfortunately does not ensure their quality and fair evaluation.

I encounter two extremes: civil servants who have a hardly bearable amount of responsibilities and work to carry out and civil servants who have very little work and meaningful contribution. Due to the rigidly set-up system, it is very difficult to move people from one position to help out another unit or department, even temporarily. There is no real human resources management within the system. People do not receive training on basic managerial or communication skills. Formally we do have educational courses, however, they are very unpractical and do not reflect the requirements of the 21st century. Last but not least, I see little commitment from the management when it comes to personal management. An organization should have a well-defined culture: from dress code to ethical standards, sharing of information, delegation of tasks, communication among people, etc. If you have no idea what the basic vision of your institution is you simply carry out ad hoc tasks which are not even in your responsibility.

Certainly, due to the financial evaluation offered in the state administration, becoming a civil servant is not attractive for everyone who is well-qualified and skilled. You have to be deeply interested in the area and be persistent in order to stay motivated.

Is this situation specific for Slovakia or is it similar in other countries of the region?

I have no professional experience from other countries in the

region in this area. However, I believe that each country has its country-specific shortcomings, especially in our region. Based on some analytical documents, the problem of professionalization of civil service is very alike in the V4 countries and it is undoubtedly a great obstacle when it comes to changing the perception of the public on the added value and importance of civil servants.

What are the most pressing problems that civil servants in Slovakia face?

From my perspective what we lack most in Slovakia in this area is a certain level of culture and working environment. Not many people realize it, but it is to a great extent us, who form the external opinion on civil servants. The way we treat each other, the way we communicate among each other and with the public, the degree of responsibility we take, the depth of our interest in our area — these are all important factors for being a good civil servant. We must create a working culture focusing on these little details. Another issue is our working environment — it is very sad to complain about the equipment or lack of tools in the 21st century, however, in many offices this is the case. Certainly, when you do not get pens, you bring yours, that is not such a big deal, but if you are restricted to sources on the internet that you have been using for your work or even worse, when you as a lawyer do not have access to law journals, commentaries etc., it is a real obstacle to completing your tasks. Other problems include the training of people. How do you expect to motivate people to bring their best to the table if you do not provide them with proper education?

There are many more problems that we face on a daily basis which are being marginalized. Nevertheless, one that I would like to emphasize is the lack of well-selected, qualified management. Nepotism has been one of the flaws of the public administration regardless the government. But

having people in managerial positions in the civil service who do not have interest in the area, who have no managerial skills and create chaos is the worst that can happen to people who are expecting clear guidance and well-argued decisions.

All in all, I will refer back to the beginning of my answers - civil service must be professionalized in reality, not only on paper and with many exceptions.

come out from our comfort zone and take responsibility for our work. Certainly, the whole system requires changes - number of offices, number of people working in the public administration - but all changes will be carried out by civil servants themselves. The most important element of a successful reform of the civil service are the people working in the system.

How would you describe the younger generation of civil servants? Is it different in any specific way?

I will start with the positive for a change. The younger generation, in my opinion, is able to bring new ideas and working methods into the civil service. Those who want to learn and are curious will keep asking questions and questioning the system, which is very important to show what works and what does not. What is also important is their connection with the more experienced generation. One has the drive and the other has the knowledge. If there is good chemistry between the two, it can help get things done efficiently but also with accent on the content and quality. Unfortunately, in many cases the younger generation looks at their job and place in the civil service with fear. Often they are instructed to carry out tasks that they are given without questioning and they get used to this method of work or get tired of questioning because they do not receive any back-up. Even if they see that something is wrong or irrational, many times they rather keep quiet because they are not encouraged to stand out. Young people should get more attention when it comes to training, taking responsibility, expressing views, trust, etc.

What would provide the right motivation for young bright people to pursue a career in public administration?

One of our goals is to "educate" young people about the benefits of public administration work for them and the country. One of the biggest advantages, in



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One of the main pillars of the Good Civil Servant initiative states that you aim to reform the system from within. Do you believe that most of these problems can be solved in this way or would they require more radical changes of the system coming from the outside?

I believe that the reform itself shall be done from inside. You can pass any law or regulation, but unless civil servants themselves do not understand the need for change, these acts will stay formal. It is important to bring this issue to the public but also to civil servants and make them understand that times have changed and our working methods should change as well. We have to



my opinion, is the fact that this work enables you to utilize what you actually studied. No matter whether you studied IT, law, economics, or environmental studies, the public sector offers an extremely big pool of various positions. You do not have to give up your field of study and interest and work in a corporation. You can gain first-hand experience, learn and after some time be useful in forming policies. Certainly, one has to have an authentic interest to learn and be persistent because working in the public administration is often not about immediate results but step-by-step work and patience.

Working in the public administration differs in some ways from working in the private sector. It has the character of service to people where your motivation and utmost goal is to satisfy people's needs, assist them when they have problems and work on a better functioning of the state. Other motivational factors which I would mention include for example the chance to travel abroad, learn from the best practices of other countries and represent your country in various institutions.

What are the next steps the Good Civil Servant plans to take and what are your main goals for the near future?

Our initiative would, in the first place, like to keep this topic alive and demonstrate the importance of our profession. We are here to support all good civil servants and would like to create a virtual community of them — people working in the same profession, where we understand our problems and can discuss them, get support and motivation. Besides broadening our community we would like to put more stress on "educating" the young generation on the importance of this profession. We are planning discussions with university students to offer a practical look into what we do and how we use our education at work. We will certainly keep writing blogs on important issues, cooperate with other

organizations and participate in discussions, seminars, etc. In addition, we work on concrete topics concerning civil servants and are preparing proposals for enhancement — currently we are working on the evaluation of civil servants. Also, it is important for us to make any kind of discussion in this area more evidence-based, therefore we are collecting various data. We would also like to initiate a prize for the "best" civil servant of the year to motivate people. It might not be the most attractive profession from the outside, but we, who work in the civil service and feel real commitment, can talk about the meaning of our jobs without hesitation.

The business community has repeatedly voiced its concerns regarding excessive bureaucracy or the effectiveness

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of public administration. It would surely welcome and support any initiative trying to deal with these issues. Do you see any potential for cooperation with the business sphere?

Surely, bureaucracy was identified in our early internal questionnaire as the most

pressing issue for civil servants as well. We also struggle, on a daily basis, with our internal norms, processes, paperwork, which often presents an obstacle to our work. It seems that we can easily complicate a simple procedure, but it takes a real effort to simplify. One important element of our work, which I try to emphasize, is cooperation. Cooperation with citizens, NGOs, the academic sector, the private sector — be open to all ideas and listen carefully. The problems they voice are often very subjective and individual, but the only way a civil servant can learn about the deficiencies of the system is through concrete motions from people. As for the business sector and cooperation, we are open to everyone and as I mentioned we already have open cooperation with a number of institutions and NGOs.

10 PRINCIPLES OF A GOOD CIVIL SERVANT

These ten principles should serve as a "guide" for all civil servants while carrying out their profession.

1. **SERVES THE CITIZENS**
Public service is primarily service provided to citizens. You carry out this service helpfully within your daily working routine as well as throughout the process of public policy-making.
2. **ACTS PROACTIVELY**
You are open to new ideas and procedures. You bring in new notions and support those who strive to work better.
3. **IS CAPABLE OF SELF-REFLECTION**
You accept responsibility. You are able to indicate problems, admit your own mistakes and consider them as an opportunity to improve your work as an individual and as part of public administration as a whole.
4. **WORKS EFFICIENTLY**
You strive for creating the most qualitative outputs by meaningful use of resources and knowledge. While creating public policies and delivering public services, you rely on quality analysis and support the principle of "value for money".
5. **FOCUSSES ON THE NEEDS OF THE SOCIETY**
You perform your tasks rigorously, professionally and with an emphasis on the positive impact on citizens, the private as well as the third sector.
6. **ACTS ETHICALLY**
You consider transparency as a fundamental principle of state and public culture, not just a mere legal obligation.
7. **COOPERATES**
You willingly cooperate, help, support and exchange information with your colleagues within your workplace as well as other institutions.
8. **ENGAGES THE PUBLIC**
You apply a participatory approach, which truly involves relevant partners, experts and citizens in the decision-making process.
9. **MOTIVATES**
You are proud of your work. You act as an example and spread the good name of our profession to make it attractive for high-quality people.
10. **IS A VISIONARY**
You face challenges and co-create the best possible functioning of the state.