

The Rural Parliament of Slovakia



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PARLAMENT
NA
SLOVENSKU

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THE RURAL PARLIAMENT OF SLOVAKIA

Introduction

This report on the Rural Parliament of Slovakia comprises one of four national case studies. The case studies are part of a wider report on the Rural Movements of Europe. The case study of Slovakia was compiled from a study visit, which took place in October 2003. It documents the situation at this time, and much has taken place since then. It does, however, provide a useful insight into the origins, development, structure and activities of the movement. The report was produced, not as an academic analysis, but to provide useful information to those who have a practical interest in the process of rural development and the role and structure of the European rural movements. It is hoped that the report will provide useful information, inspiration and connections.

The report comprises two sections:

The National Context – provides essential information to set the rural movement within the context of the structure and administration of Slovakia and its rural areas.

The Rural Parliament of Slovakia – gives a detailed account of the main features of the movement, comprising a factual account of its history, structure, activities, achievements and problems, and a full commentary providing an insight into the character of the movement and the issues raised by it.

The itinerary for the research visit can be found at the end of the report.

Acknowledgements

The visit to Slovakia was combined with attendance at the international meeting of the PREPARE Network, in Banska Stiavnica, Slovakia. This involved an initial study tour of rural Poland, organised by the Polish Rural Forum. This enabling an insight into the huge challenges faced by the rural communities, and some highly successful examples of local development approaches. The research visit to Slovakia followed the PREPARE meeting, and I would like to thank the following people for their support and hospitality in organising the visit at a very busy time:

- Jela Tvrdonova, Head of the Slovak Rural Development Agency, and Board member of the Slovak Rural Parliament, Janka Mediarova – Director of VOKA and board member of the Slovak Rural Parliament, and Vlasta Kornorova, Director of *A-Projekt* and former President of the Slovak Rural Parliament, for organising and hosting the visit and for providing information, connections and study visits.
- Peter Rusnak, President of the Slovak Rural Parliament for providing information and insight into the work and plans of the Rural Parliament and of the Banska Bystrica Regional Association. Peter Broncek, Regional Co-ordinator of the Zilina Regional Association, for information on the work of the Regional Association.
- Staff of the Ministries of Agriculture and Regional Affairs for enabling an understanding of the rural policy context.
- Staff of the Regional Councils of Zilina and Banska Bystrica for information on the regional policy context and the role of the regional authorities. The Mayor of Kvacany Municipality for a detailed insight into the work of the rural Municipalities.
- Dr. Lubomir Faltan Head of the Institute of Sociology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, for providing a contextual understanding of the development of the rural areas in Slovakia.

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Comment

On behalf of the Rural Parliament of the Slovak Republic, I would like to express my greatest appreciation to Vanessa Halhead for the work she has completed in her study on national rural networks and movements. I believe that she brought a very comprehensive look at the Slovak contextual situation and the necessity to turn the attention of national policies towards rural development. She also described very well important issues of local rural development and the mobilisation of local NGO's in their effort to influence these policies.

I also appreciate that she focused on national movement, as such, and so provided for anybody acting in the European rural development matters a very useful tool for broad orientation and learning.

Thank you Vanessa!

Jela Tvrdonova
The Rural Parliament of Slovakia

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SLOVAKIA - National Context

History

Slovakia became an independent country on January 1, 1993, after the break up of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic. The history of Slovakia was one of almost constant occupation, mostly under the Hungarian (Magyar) and Austro-Hungarian Empires, since it emerged in identity from Moravia in the 7th century. Slovakian nationalism and cultural identity has emerged at different times during its history, but was never allowed to develop. After World War I, in October 1918, the joint Czech / Slovak Republic was formed, and had a shaky history until the Communist take-over in 1948. The fall of Communism in 1989 led to a resurgence of nationalism, and eventually to the declaration of Slovak sovereignty on January 1, 1993. Slovakia is a member of the "Vysehrad" network of: Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic and Poland. In May 2004, Slovakia enters the EU.

Structure

Slovakia has a total land area of 49,035 square kilometres. The geography is varied, with fertile agricultural plains in the south and forested mountains in the North. Bratislava, the capital, (pop. 428,672) is on the banks of the Danube close to Vienna and Budapest, in a focal position in the new EU. The population is 5,379,455, with a density of 109/km², 43% is classified as rural (settlements under 5000), and rural areas 87% of the total land area. Only two Slovak regions are significantly urban: Bratislava and Kosice (12,9% of the population). The population comprises Slovak (85.8%) Hungarian (9.7%) Romany (1.7%) Czech (0.8%).

Economically, the country suffered from the transition from the communist to market system. The GDP¹ is 3.6 bill Euro². The

¹ Worldbank 2002 figures

² At the time of writing 1 Euro = 40 Slovak Koruna (SKK)

former markets were lost along with the focus on the armaments industry. This has led to instability, high unemployment and low income levels. Crime has increased along with negative changes in the social structure of the country. There are many uncertainties about the financial implications of EU entry. *"The country is experiencing a difficult period of economic and political transition, resulting in the disintegration of the entire socio-economic system."*³

Administration

President	Elected every 5 years by the National Council
Parliament Národná Rada	The National Council with 150 members and Prime Minister
Ministries ⁴	19
Regional Government	8 regional local authorities <i>Somospraúne Kraje</i> State regional authorities <i>Kraje</i> - many levels,
District Authorities	79 Districts <i>Okresy</i>
Micro-regions	150 non-statutory partnerships at local level
Local Government	2878 Municipalities <i>Obec</i> - 138 = towns 2241 (78%) = rural

Slovak administration is composed of State administration at national, regional and district levels, and of regional and local self-government (local authorities). The whole administrative structure is in the midst of reform. The 8 regions were established in 2002, each with a regional local authority. There will also be a reform of the State regional bodies both to rationalise the old

³ Jela Tvrdonova, Head of the Slovak Rural Development Agency, unpublished paper

⁴ Administration and Property, Construction and Public Works, Culture, Defence, Economy, Education, Environment, Agriculture, Regional Affairs, Finance, Foreign Affairs, Health, Interior, Civil Protection, Justice, Labour, Social Affairs and Family, Transport Post and Telecommunications

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districts and to reduce the number of offices and public officials. This is a period of major change and it is difficult to predict the outcome, or to be clear about the functioning of the present system.

The process of de-centralisation started in 1990.

- Stage 1 was to establish the local Municipalities (towns and villages)
- It was anticipated that regional self-government would follow. However, this became a sensitive political issue – what powers to devolve/ what territory/ what competency/ etc. Consequently this stage took much longer, with the regional self-governments being legally established in 2001, ahead of accession to the EU and the requirements of the EU re. Structural Funds and regional development.
- The reform of the District authorities was undertaken in 1996, and is about to be reformed again in 2004.

National Government

Slovakia is a parliamentary republic. It has a proportional representation system, with 16 parties and elections every 4 years. The President is the head of Government, elected every 5 years by the National Council. The National Council is the parliament with 150 members. The Cabinet is led by the Prime Minister and the President appoints all Ministers. There are 16 political parties, the present Government is a coalition of 4 parties and there are 8 parties in the Parliament.⁵



⁵ The main parties are: Slovak Democratic & Christian Union; Christian Democratic Movement; Smer; Hungarian Coalition Party; New Citizens Alliance; Movement for a Democratic Slovakia; Communist Party of Slovakia

Regional Government

State Regional Authorities

The regional branches of the State authorities are organised on many different levels, without co-terminus boundaries with the regional local authorities. There are separate regional Ministry offices for environment, transport, social affairs and education. Other offices are not yet established. In 1996 there was a territorial reform of the State District Authorities. This increased the number of Districts from 38 to 79. This is part of an older system, with a State office in every district. These have limited responsibilities, eg. emergency systems, business register etc. There are also 11 Regional Development Agencies⁶. These are effectively the regional arms of the Ministry of Regional Affairs, managed and financed by the Ministry. They will be responsible for assisting the implementation of the structural funds, along with the Regional Councils. There is concern as to the lack of co-operation between State and local regional authorities.

Regional Councils

Since the administrative reforms of 2001, Slovakia is divided into 8 regions⁷, with a regional local authority in each. The Regional Councils are statutory, locally elected bodies, established in January 2002, at the request of the EU to establish regional government as a condition for delivery of the structural funds and regional policy and to enable subsidiarity. There was no previous regional level of local government since World War II.

The division of Slovakia into 8 regions has caused changes in the administrative map of the country, with some opposition from local people. The role of regional government was removed during the Soviet period. The pre-existing regions, some dating back to historic periods, and on a smaller scale than the new ones, still hold cultural importance and local allegiance.

⁶ This has changed since January 2004, and there are now over 30 Regional Development Agencies
⁷ Bratislava, Trnava, Nitra, Trencin, Zilina, Banska Bystrica, Presnov, Kosice

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The main role of the Regional Councils is to guarantee the development of the regions and to fulfil the principle of regional policy and the law for regional development. They are the organisations with statutory responsibility for regional development, responsible for undertaking territorial, strategic and action planning, and setting the framework within which others (eg. Municipalities) must operate. They are also responsible for delivering infrastructure and major services - health, schools and education, culture, environment, social care and transport. The typical role in service delivery is that the Regional Council prepares the strategy and delivers the regional components, and the Municipalities deliver the local components. In some cases the Regions also carry out State responsibilities eg. social affairs and health care.

The members are elected for 4 years, with 1 elected representative per 12-15,000 people. The Chair is directly elected. Departments and related committees undertake the work. Departments typically comprise: Administration, Regional Development (inc. land use planning, construction, transport), Finance, Education, Health and Social Care, Culture, Services, Investment.

The reform of public administration and taxation is not yet complete. So at present the Regional Councils are funded directly by the State, with the exception of local property tax, though in future will be funded through direct taxation. In addition, they can raise funds through the sale of property, rentals, cultural activities etc.

Local Government

Municipalities

See *Case Study* – Municipalities

There are currently 2878 Municipalities, of which 138 are towns and 2740 (95%) rural villages. Each village is a statutory local authority in its own right, with all of the powers and responsibilities of a local authority. The rural settlement structure is dominated by small villages of less than 500 people. The village is a traditional unit of administration in Slovakia, though this was broken to some extent during the Communist period. Every village, no matter how small, is

a local Municipality, the smallest has a population of just 9 people.

The responsibilities of the Municipalities include the delivery of local services including: roads, street lighting, water and waste services, public buildings and facilities, kindergarten and primary education and emergency services. They are also responsible for local economic development and cultural activities. In Slovak legislation all villages must prepare a master plan. This is the bottom level of the planning process. Each level must respect the framework set by the level above, but take into account the level below in the process of plan development.

This is a huge responsibility for an organisation that may only have one part-time executive, very little money, limited access to professional skills and facilities that are old and in need upgrading. Very often it is the unpaid mayor and councillors who undertake much of the work, along with unemployed labour. Municipalities can set up a common office for certain responsibilities – eg. in Lipto Region there is a common office for 50 Municipalities to implement regional development.

Funding to Municipalities is from a share of income tax, local taxes (property tax, dog tax, waste tax), revenue (sales and rental) and State grant. Municipalities do not currently have full tax raising powers, but this is under review, with the expectation that this will change following the fiscal reforms. Tax reform will make income tax directly available to the Municipality, which it is hoped will motivate Municipalities to address economic development. The funding problems caused by the current lack of decentralisation are extreme for Municipalities.

There are two non-governmental organisations, the Union of Towns and Villages and the Association of Towns and Villages of Slovakia. These are national associations of Municipalities, with regional structures and are strong lobby organisations to the Government. At regional level they also work together on big infrastructure projects eg. sewerage.

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Non-statutory structures

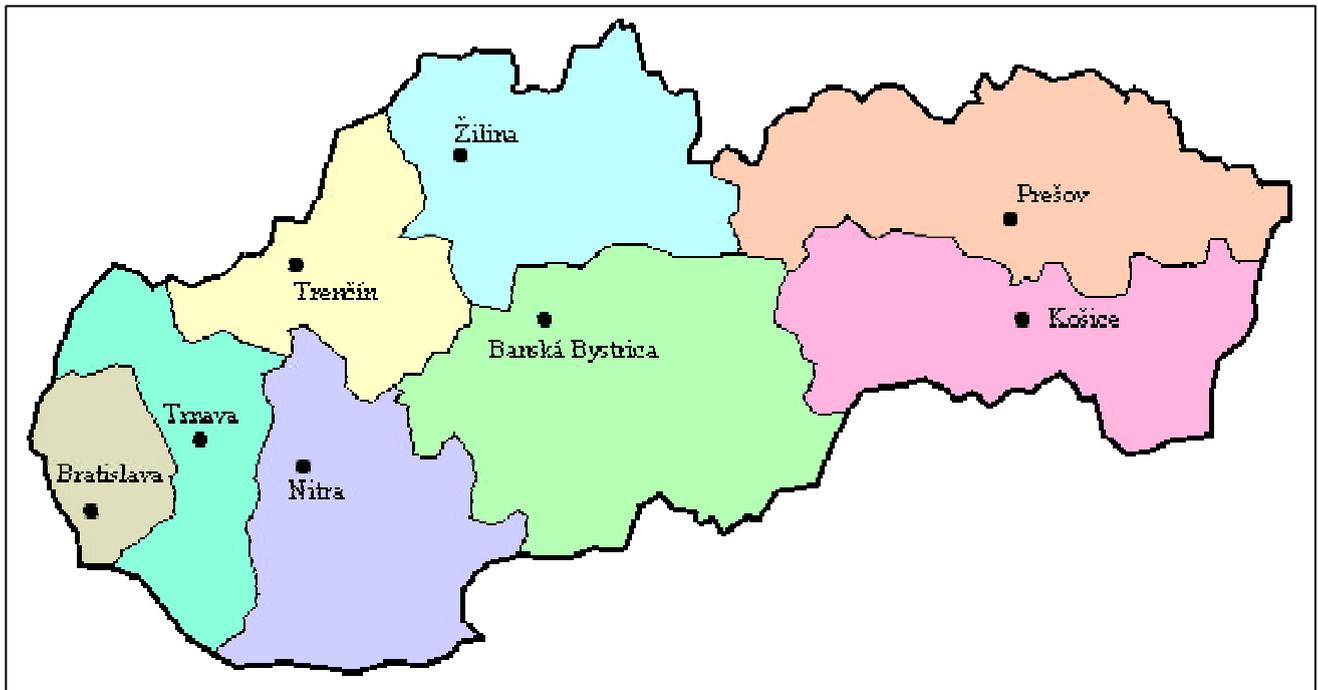
Traditional regions

The country is divided into a number of traditional regions, which date back to a longer period in Slovak history. These still have significance for the local people, though they are no longer represented through the formal administrative structures. *The Slovak Rural Parliament*⁸ is trying to work with these regions, which are represented on the boards of the Regional Rural Parliaments, as they have significance and coherence for local people.

Micro Regions

There is a strong movement to create micro-regions, by networking groups of Municipalities and other local NGOs. To date there are 224 such Micro-regions. Micro-regions are of increasing importance in the Slovak system. This is partly in response to the increased scale of the regions, and the EU requirement for 'partnership'. Micro-regions are not part of the legal administrative system, they are voluntary coalitions to solve

mutual problems. They operate at a variety of geographical scales, in response to local need and issues, and involve public, private and civil organisations. There are various models, but most are spontaneous rather than following a pattern. One important role is to enable the very small Municipalities to co-operate on issues at a wider scale. They are receiving support as a cost-effective way of unlocking local human and other resources. All are members of the Slovak Rural Parliament, but were not set up by it. The Micro-regions form the basis of the Rural Parliament system at local level.



⁸ The Slovak Rural Parliament is the subject of this report. See the following Chapter for details

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CASE STUDY – Regional Authorities

Zilina Regional Development Agency / Council

Information provided by the Head of Regional Planning in the Regional Development Department

Zilina is one of 9 regions, established in January 2002. It is located in the north of Slovakia and has a population of 680,000. The Council is the statutory body with competence for regional development. Its main functions are: health, schools and education, culture, environment, social care, transport and regional and territorial planning.

Council structure:

There are 52 elected members, elected for 4 years, 1 elected representative per 12-15,000 people. The Chairperson is directly elected by the population, and controls the Chief Executive and manages the Council meetings. The Vice-Chair is elected by the Council. All decisions are taken by the Council. There are also committees of elected representatives, reflecting the different departments:

- Administration
- Regional development – inc. land use planning, construction, transport
- Finance
- Education and schools
- Health and social care
- Culture
- Internal administration, services and investments

Funding:

The reform of public administration and taxation is not yet complete. So at present the Regional Council is funded directly by the State, so is not very independent of Government at present. In addition, the Council can raise funds through the sale of property, rentals, cultural activities etc. It has not yet been decided who will hold the funds for co-financing of EU projects, this will give some powers to decide on projects.

Relationships:

It was noted that the State District Authorities have very small responsibilities (emergency systems/ business register etc.) and do not co-operate much with the local authorities. There are also separate regional Ministry offices for environment, transport, social affairs and education, with which the Council must work. The Council has no control over the Municipalities. They are responsible to the citizens and are independent partners, with competencies defined by law.

Planning:

The regional planning function falls under the Regional Council. This is divided into a Territorial Plan, a Strategic Plan and Action Plan. These set the framework within which others bodies must operate. The plans are developed in partnership with the Municipalities.

Implementation:

The example of education was given to demonstrate how the Council's role works: The State Department of Education prepares the concept for education. The Regional Council is given the responsibility to develop the school system. The Regional Council runs the high schools and the Municipalities run the primary schools. Similar systems operate with health care, roads and other services.

Relationship to the Rural Parliament:

The Regional Rural Parliament has signed an agreement with the chair of the Regional Council for co-operation on action planning for rural areas. There is however no funding for collaboration, or to support the work of the RRP, it is hoped to raise funds to manage this in the future. Some funding for NGOs is available from the Council. Advocacy in the EU is seen as a particularly important role of the Rural Parliament for the Council.

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CASE STUDY – Municipalities

Kvacany Municipality

Information provided by the Mayor of Kvacany Municipality

Kvacany Municipality is the main village in the Oblasky Micro-region (see case study), in Zilina Region, located in the foothills of the Tatra Mountains. It has a population of 530 but is suffering from depopulation and an ageing population. Employment in the area is very limited and most people choose to work in the expanding towns. In 1991 there were 130 jobs in the agricultural co-op, now there are 37. Only 40 people are now employed within the village, 177 are retired and 13 disabled. This leaves the task of running the village to the older people.

The Municipality has a Mayor and 7 elected members. Each elected member has 1 district of the village to look after – consisting of approximately 33 family units. There is 1 paid Clerk, who does all of the administration of the Municipality along with the Mayor. It was noted that there are some small Municipalities without a clerk. The job of Mayor was said to be more an honour than a job as it is not really paid, and it was noted that Mayors often have a very low educational level as more educated people want a better job.

The Municipality has other employees. 3 people are employed in the kindergarten (35 children), which is managed and financed through the Municipality. There are 25 jobs in the school (247 children 6-15). The school is independent of the Municipality, but is indirectly funded through the Municipality from Government money. Many other tasks are undertaken by the unemployed, on unemployment schemes.

The tasks assigned by Government to the Municipality include: roads, street lighting, water and waste services, public buildings and facilities, education, fire and emergency services, economic development.

To carry out these tasks, the Municipality has an annual budget of 1,700,000 SKK (42,500 Euro) derived from:

260,000	Government funding
900,000	share of income tax
480,000	local taxes – land/ road etc. rentals waste management
80,000	other small income sources and bank interest

The Municipality cannot take out loans.

Shortage of funds is a crisis. The delay in instituting fiscal reform has prevented Municipalities from raising adequate tax revenue. The tax reform will make income tax directly available to the Municipality. Large infrastructure works are outwith the financial capacity of the Municipality and must be funded through other sources, often this is not possible. For instance, water services requires an additional 40mill SKK (1 mill. Euro).

The Municipality has 5 committees to deliver their tasks, with an elected member responsible for each. They undertake research in the village, identify the key issues and match funding sources to key issues. They also perform a social welfare function in building community life, visiting the elderly and disabled, discussing local problems, revitalising cultural traditions etc. The business and tourism committee is developing basic tourism infrastructure, trails, café, folk festivals, environmental improvements etc.

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Rural Areas

Context

Slovakia is still a very rural country. There is no official definition of a rural area in Slovakia and different definitions are used for different purposes. Slovak rural areas represent 87% of the total land area. According to OECD and EU (Eurostat) criteria >50% of the population live in 'predominantly rural' districts, 15-50% in 'transitional' and <15% in 'predominantly urban'. 2241 Municipalities out of 2878 are rural.⁹

The situation in the rural areas is particularly difficult and the rural population has experienced greater hardship than urban areas from the transition to an independent market economy. This includes higher unemployment, lower incomes, decline in social and other services, poor information, training and education and inadequate planning. This is evidenced in terms of GDP, Slovakia has only 45% of the average EU GDP, though Bratislava is on the same level as the average EU GDP.¹⁰



In many villages, most employment is no longer in agriculture, but in industry and servicing. From the economic perspective, the Slovakian countryside is sub-urbanising, especially in the city regions, where many urban people are moving to the rural areas to live/ commute. This is leading to a suburban culture and loss of traditional values.¹¹

⁹ NUTS 5 <100 people / km²

¹⁰ Jela Tvrdonova, Head of the Slovak Rural Development Agency, unpublished paper

¹¹ Lubomir Faltan, Head of the Institute of Sociology, Slovak Academy of Sciences – pers. com.

Rural areas are today characterised by the out-migration of young people, high unemployment, low income and poor infrastructure. This calls for another kind of development than the previous models based on agriculture. Other forms of activity and income need to be developed.

Agriculture has been in severe decline since independence. The value of agricultural subsidies has substantially reduced, along with an increase in the cost of agricultural inputs and market limitations on agricultural prices. The land reform process and privatisation of collective farms has also reduced employment levels in rural areas. However agriculture is still the main source of rural employment. Crops range from livestock, cereals and potatoes in the north, to tobacco, fruit and wine in the south.

57% of the region is forested. During the communist period it was owned and managed by the State, but is now mostly privately owned. This has led to asset stripping by farmers to counteract the effects of agricultural decline.

The environment is one of Slovakia's big assets. Slovakia is less industrialised than the Czech Republic and not as badly damaged by pollution. It is very beautiful country, with great potential appeal to tourists. Its wildlife is rich, particularly in the High Tatra, where there are bears, wolves, lynx, chamois and other important species. Slovakia has many protected areas, including 7 national parks, 16 landscape protection areas, 1500 nature reserves and 12 Ramsar sites. These occupy a substantial area of the country. Walking and skiing are important activities, and tourism in many areas is now a growth industry, with much local effort put into its development.

Great importance is placed on retaining the existing cultural heritage and quality of life of the rural communities, as this gives them identity and special qualities in the wider world. The environment and built heritage is also important, especially in the areas where this is of high quality, and there is concern as to how to protect this resource. Economically Slovakia is becoming an urban society, but the rural areas have a chance to provide a high quality life with a good environment, architecture and living conditions. These are seen as their assets for the future.

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SWOT Analysis

The following SWOT analysis of Rural Slovakia was produced by a group of Swedish experts who were advising on the establishment of the Rural Parliament in 2001:

<p>Strengths: Beautiful nature Interesting history and culture Social networks Knowledge about sustainable cultivation Handicraft and other skills Quite good public communications Quite good public services, schools, medical care, post etc. Commercial services - shops, cafés, restaurants, banks Kind and helpful people</p>	<p>Weaknesses: Poor regions High unemployment Low incomes Smaller roads in bad shape Management of waste and wastewater Pollution (industries, cars, heating) Low educational level Few speak English or other foreign languages Bureaucracy and troublesome rules Lack of credit and working capital Lack of entrepreneurs and "know how" Non service minded civil servants Lack of incentives to start businesses or to be self employed</p>
<p>Opportunities: Influence the use of EU Programmes Choose direction in agriculture Sustainable agriculture Local food processing Develop rural tourism Develop alternative energy for heating and fuel Alternatives for handling waste and wastewater Use of information technology Use the rule of subsidiarity to achieve influence A good local infrastructure and "open landscape" is a part of growth in rural areas Find incentives for entrepreneurs Secure credit and working capital Mobilise and encourage people to take care of themselves on the local level Identify and change legal barriers Identify and change preventing tax laws</p>	<p>Threats: Use of EU Programmes for "big scale" solutions CAP (The Common Agricultural Policy) push towards "industrial" agriculture Increased unemployment among farmers Visible growth just in urban centres Lack of common visions or concordance Young and educated people move away Less people decreases all kind of services</p>

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Civil Organisations

There are currently 18,000 registered NGOs in Slovakia, mostly at local and regional levels, but only a fraction of these are very active. It is important to note that many NGOs were established through the assistance of international, especially US, aid during the early 1990s. It is said that the EU and USA are influencing the forms of administration through programmes of civil society building, and that the USA has worked through NGOs to tackle the Government. The NGOs were trained in lobbying, advocacy and networking and became very professional in their work. Local organisations in villages and micro-regions have also been established as part of this work. This aid has now moved on to other countries and the sustainability of many of these NGOs is questionable. There is wariness from funding bodies about investing in projects with some of them because of this.¹²

Funding Sources

Slovakia is currently in the midst of a major administrative and fiscal reform. There is insufficient money in the public system, so all taxes and social security payments are under review. The proposal is to set a flat rate of 19% for income and corporation tax. The reform process has taken considerably longer than anticipated and there is doubt as to whether the Government will succeed in passing the reforms. This has had a severe impact on the financing of the country, and was a source of concern to all levels.

The decentralisation of responsibilities to the Regional Councils took place in January 2003, but one year later the decentralisation of funds and tax raising powers had still not yet happened. The result being lack of funds at regional level and strong Government control of Regional Councils, who are mostly funded directly from the State budget. Following the fiscal reforms, now expected in 2005, both Regional Councils and Municipalities will have tax raising powers.

The Regional Councils are also likely to be important partners for the EU Programmes.

However it has not yet been finally decided who will hold the funding for co-financing of EU projects. This will give some powers to decide on projects.

At present there is very limited funding available to the civil sector from State, Regional or Municipal authorities. A range of other funding sources are used by NGOs and local groups, these include:

- The National Lottery – which is mostly aimed at traditional charitable causes and sports, but is not used for rural or community development
- Rural Community Fund – established by VOKA¹³ in April 2002 for small grants to local groups. It is currently raising money from corporate donors etc. and has approximately 600,000 SKK (15,000 Euro) from endowments, grants and projects.
- Foreign aid organisations, mostly from the USA – which have provided significant funding to NGOs during the first decade of independence. This has now diminished as the aid organisations turn their attention to the next group of countries in Eastern Europe.
- The EU SAPARD and PHARE Programmes – PHARE has a grant scheme for rural and regional development
- Charitable tax relief - Individuals have the option of giving 1% of their tax to charitable purposes. In 2004 companies will also be able to contribute in this way.

¹² British Council in Slovakia – pers. com.

¹³ A Slovak rural development NGO

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Rural Policy

“It is a misunderstanding of the Government that rural development falls under the Ministry of Agriculture, which leads to a focus on agriculture and a narrow definition of rural development”¹⁴



As seen above, most of Slovakia is rural or semi-rural. This should also be reflected in policy. However, policy for rural areas is mostly limited to agriculture. Integrated rural development policy is entirely missing. Some pilot integrated rural development projects showed the need and success of this type of approach, but the power of the sectoral Ministries has proved to be a barrier to progress. There is no single Ministry dealing with rural affairs. This is divided between the Ministry for Regional Affairs, which is responsible for regional development and plan management, and the Ministry of Agriculture, which is responsible for rural affairs. The Slovak Agency for Rural Development was founded in 1995, through the initiative of the Ministry of Agriculture, and staff received training from FAO experts. Its role relates to all Ministries, but it was founded by, and placed under, the Ministry of Agriculture. The Agency works for rural areas as a whole, not just for agriculture, supporting them with technical assistance, funding and training to deliver projects, form partnerships and set up enterprises. They also have responsibility for the education of advisors for the SAPARD programme.

The Government, it was said, is not taking into consideration the issues of rural areas.

¹⁴ Lubomir Faltan, Head of the Institute of Sociology, Slovak Academy of Sciences – pers. com.

For the Government, the district level is the most important in statistical terms and there are no statistics for rural areas on their own. The Rural Parliament has no capacity to acquire these statistics, and has difficulty in making a case to the Government without strong factual information.¹⁵ There is need for broad-spectrum rural research. There is no rural research institute as such and agricultural research is mostly focussed on economic and labour issues. The Institute for Sociology has one focus on regional development, and a small team focussed on local problems. This has researched questions of Municipalities, cross-border co-operation, local democracy and local identity.¹⁶

The following extracts from an unpublished paper by the Head of the Slovak Rural Development Agency, paint a clear picture of the development of rural policy and its impacts on the rural areas:

“Since 1993, the importance of rural development in Slovakia has been stressed in many official Government documents on the macro level, but no common policy existed in the field. In September 1998, the Slovak Government accepted the Concept of Rural Development in Slovakia as a general political outline. The Concept was followed by the Plan for Agriculture and Rural Development, which was prepared by the Ministry of Agriculture, in order to access the pre accession aid from EAGGF Structural Fund in the SAPARD Programme. Agriculture policy and its main instrument – subsidies, are also supporting less favoured areas, as well as rural economic diversification. Additional important Slovak Government policies which target rural areas include the Program of Village Renewal, the Small and Medium Business Development Program and the Program of Tourism Development.”¹⁷

Tvrdonova goes onto say: *“Despite these initiatives, the real impact of these policies and related instruments is not significant. After ten years of transition the rural populations’ quality of life is constantly*

¹⁵ Peter Rusnak, Chairman of the Rural Parliament

¹⁶ Lubomir Faltan, Head of the Institute of Sociology, Slovak Academy of Sciences

¹⁷ Jela Tvrdonova, Head of the Slovak Rural Development Agency

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declining. Traditional problems connected with infrastructure development and the environment are still unresolved and the existing Program of Village Renewal is far from satisfying the real needs of rural communities. The labour market does not provide enough job opportunities for youth. The unemployment rate is growing and State and commercial bank support to SMEs is very limited. Potential rural entrepreneurs have limited or no access to information and capital. The Government assistance program, which claims to significantly help tourism development in rural areas is not supported by efficient financial instruments. Agriculture subsidies are not encouraging competitive areas and products and a lot of the funds are not well targeted. Rural economic diversification also has very limited support. Indirect instruments like taxes are not very efficient due to the unfinished State administration reform. There is big hope for the EU pre-accession instruments like PHARE, SAPARD and ISPA, but they can only represent additional sources to the existing national ones. In general, the current political and legal framework conditions are not very friendly to the entire society, but they have very hard implications on rural areas especially in marginal regions.”¹⁸

The Ministry of Regional Affairs is preparing for first the Objective 1 Programme, for the 2004-6 programme period. Measure 3.4 is focussed on renovation and development of villages and preservation of countryside heritage. It aims to solve the problems of rural areas by supporting activities where non-agricultural activities prevail. The measure comes from the Agriculture and Rural Development Plan of the SAPARD Programme, adopted by the Government. Competence for the measure has been moved from the Ministry of Agriculture to the Ministry of Regional Affairs. The Regional Authorities will administer it.

The SWOT analysis carried out during the development of the measure showed that the main barriers to rural development are:

- Insufficient provision of technical, public and social services in rural Municipalities
- Social isolation

- Inability to create regional physical and cultural infrastructure at a level that is sufficient for the general economic and social development of the region.

A consultation process on the Structural Fund measures was recently undertaken by the Ministry. Municipalities were asked to put in preliminary applications for projects for the coming period. This is being used to give an idea of demand and priorities, and to priorities the measures. Out of 2878 Municipalities, they received 2000 applications. This has shown, at first sight, that their priorities lie with schools and healthcare facilities, and especially with the poor condition of the buildings.



Rural areas usually have less developed facilities and a high proportion of old buildings are in a State of decline. Other infrastructure, roads, bridges etc. are also in disrepair or damaged. At present the Municipalities lack the resources to address these problems. This level of decline contributes to rural depopulation and threatens the stability of rural communities. The Ministry are hoping to utilise EU funds to address some of these issues.

The objectives for Measure 3.4 are to:

- improve the state of the village and other estate
- create new jobs
- improve material and non-material rural infrastructure
- preserve local identity and cultural continuity
- exploit natural and cultural potential of villages for their development

The total Measure is 25mill Euro pa.

¹⁸ Jela Tvrdonova, Head of the Slovak Rural Development Agency

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The on-going difficulties posed by the situation outlined by Tvrdonova have been a key motivation for the development of the Slovak Rural Parliament. Prior to this, however, the civil society undertook a number of steps to tackle rural development at local and regional levels. These introduced various structures and measures to encourage co-operation between rural communities and interest groups. The main purpose of this activity was to help rural areas to organise themselves and to take more ownership of their own development. This is a significant challenge following the long period of communism, during which the State assumed responsibility and rural people came to rely upon this. The activity was also directed at diversifying the economies of rural areas, away from the declining agriculture. This period of development has drawn heavily on the work of rural women and those with vision, energy and confidence to act.

During this period, many civil organisations were formed at local, regional and national levels. Many of these received strong development support from aid organisations and foundations, mostly from the USA, and from a range of professional bodies. These helped the early development of civil associations and trained their workers in the skills of management and implementation of rural development. Some of the organisations established took the form of traditional NGOs, others partnerships, including the micro-regional partnerships.

This period established a culture of civil action and self-help in the rural areas, with organisational structures to support it. However, it was also realised that all of the individual civil groups and organisations did not in themselves amount to a comprehensive and co-ordinated approach to rural development. There were gaps and duplication in their activities, and no network to enable mutual learning and a strategic overview. This issue was finally raised in the late 1990's, and the idea of closer co-operation was put forward. The Slovak Rural Development Agency, under the Ministry of Agriculture, organised an annual forum of rural initiatives, to exchange experience and ideas. Following the third such forum, it was felt that something more than a forum was needed. This marked the start of the Slovak Rural Parliament initiative.

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The Rural Parliament of Slovakia *Vidiecky Parlament na Slovensku*



**VIDIECKY
PARLAMENT
NA
SLOVENSKU**

History

Rural Forum

A significant development of civil society in the rural areas took place in the decade following independence, with many civil groups and organisations being established, at local, regional and national levels. However, there was no mechanism for networking these or for developing a more co-ordinated and strategic approach to rural development. In an effort to address this, in 1994, the Slovak Rural Development Agency, under the Ministry of Agriculture, organised an annual forum of rural initiatives, to exchange experience and ideas. Following the third such forum, it was felt that something more than a forum was needed to enable integrated rural development.

Preparatory Committee

In February 1999 proposals were put forward for a common cross sector platform. In August 1999, a Preparatory Committee was appointed to prepare the way for the establishment of a 'Rural Parliament', the objectives for which were outlined as:

- collection, processing and dissemination of information about and for rural areas in Slovakia
- exchange of experiences in rural development
- co-ordination and development of a bottom-up rural policy
- co-operation with national policy makers and advocacy of rural areas in Slovakia.¹⁹

The Preparatory Committee was registered as an NGO with 11 members representing all regions of Slovakia and all sectors involved in rural development - public, civil and private.

The Committee was voluntary and provided access to key information and institutions. Its main tasks were to:

- create the conditions for the establishment of the Slovak Rural Parliament
- prepare the first session in October 2000
- create the platform for communication between the main rural actors
- create conditions for bottom-up Rural Development Policy
- create a structural framework for the Rural Parliament to involve the different levels and sectors
- facilitate effective communication and information systems in partnership with the Government
- collect and disseminate information about funding options for rural development
- facilitate the development of a network of communication centres at micro regional level
- train facilitators of rural development at local and micro-regional levels
- support equal opportunities for rural and urban areas to obtain EU technical assistance.

The initiative was taken by a group of national and regional bodies, government agencies and NGOs. The professional knowledge and contacts of those involved enabled the formation of effective partnerships with rural development players at all levels, from the Government to the rural communities. This was critical to the success of the preparatory phase.

Rural Parliament

After 11 months of work the committee organised the first session of the Rural Parliament in October 2000. This involved representatives from all local, regional and national rural development NGOs, agencies

¹⁹ Jela Tvrdonova, Head of the Slovak Rural Development Agency, (2000) unpublished paper

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and associations, plus a range of local rural issue groups, researchers, journalists etc. 150 people participated in four working groups: Environment, People, Economy and Policy. The groups identified the rural policy priorities for the Rural Parliament for the coming 2 years:

- sustainable utilisation of natural resources
- protection of natural and cultural heritage
- revitalisation of the rural landscape
- implementation of public administration reform
- increase efficiency of the Village Renewal Program
- establishment of efficient institutional infrastructure in rural areas
- rural tourism development
- creation of effective marketing, information, education, training and extension services
- development of regional cross sector co-operation and partnership
- enhanced local participation in rural development.

Public administration reform was prioritised for urgent action. This led to meetings with the Prime Minister, Chairman of the National Parliament and chairmen of political parties. The Rural Parliament was recognised by all these policy makers as an important partner in discussions on Public Administration Reform. This was the first significant achievement of the Rural Parliament.

During the first session the initial organisational structure was also established:

- A Rural Parliament session to be held every two years.
- 13 working groups established on selected policy priorities.
- A Board of 30 members elected to include 50% women and all types of member organisations.
- An Executive Committee of 3 Board members to be the statutory body of the Rural Parliament

The Rural Parliament of Slovakia was established as a civil organisation with legal status following this meeting in October 2000.

EU Special Preparatory Program

In 2000, the Rural Parliament became one of the main beneficiaries of the Special

Preparatory Program (PHARE) of the EU Structural Funds, in a Pilot Project for Rural Development. This played an important role in building the capacity of the Rural Parliament and in strengthening the partnership between the Ministry of Agriculture and the Rural Parliament.

The work led to the establishment, in just 1 year, of a network of 30 Communication Centres around the country, equipped with IT for information exchange to and from the local level and among all institutions, groups and individuals involved in the Parliament. The network was also intended to:

- improve the capacity of local and regional actors to participate in the development process
- disseminate information about rural areas and the potential utilisation of their assets.
- aid the capacity of the Rural Parliament to design a bottom-up rural development policy.

This work was intended to develop the Rural Parliament as a sustainable institution, able to fulfil these tasks in the long-term. It also aimed to aid the Rural Parliament, as a partner to the Ministries and State agencies, to participate in and influence rural development policy.

The Rural Parliament did not have its own central administrative office. It is a conscious policy, that the organisation should be hosted by one of its member organisations. During its first 3 years, a regional member NGO - 'A-Projekt' hosted the Rural Parliament in their offices, based in the north of Slovakia in Liptovský Hradok. At this time A-Projekt was well funded through Slovak foundations and the PHARE pilot project. In 2003 the hosting passed to another national rural development NGO 'VOKA' based in Banská Bystrica, where there is now a small staffed unit.

The preparatory phase involved contact with the similar organisations in other countries, through the PREPARE Programme. It was inspired by the Swedish Village Movement, the Hungarian Rural Parliament and Kodukant in Estonia. Sweden played an important role in assisting the establishment of the Rural Parliament, and two Swedish representatives spent one year working in Slovakia. The movement took 15 months to establish and to build trust between the participating organisations.

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Structure

Membership	The RP has a wide range of members and different types of groups. All organisations who wanted to work for rural areas, public/ private/ NGO, can be members. Currently there are 120 members at national level.
Session of the Rural Parliament	A bi-annual gathering for all who want to contribute to the development of rural policies. This is the most important tool for exchange of experience and formulation of needs and priorities for rural development for the following 2 years.
Presidium	<p>The Presidium is the executive of the Rural Parliament. It manages the activities of the association between the annual general assemblies. Its 17 members are elected at the general assembly for a 2 year period, according to the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8 representatives of the chamber of regions • 5 representatives of the chamber of national institutions • 3 representatives of the chamber of leaders and local groups • 1 Chairperson elected directly by the chambers <p>The Presidium is the executive of the Rural Parliament. It manages the activities of the association between the annual general assemblies. Its 17 members are elected at the general assembly for a 2 year period, according to the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8 representatives of the chamber of regions • 5 representatives of the chamber of national institutions • 3 representatives of the chamber of leaders and local groups • 1 Chairperson elected directly by the chambers
Committees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutional development • Media and public relations • Analysis and advocacy • International co-operation <p>Each committee consists of at least three members with the chair a member of the Presidium. Committees are composed of both members and non-members of the RP.</p>
Central office	<p>Responsible for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Management for the Presidium and its committees • Organisation of events and activities • Fund raising • PR/ media/ newsletter/ publications • Website development and management • Communications with members, committees and communication centres
Regional Associations of the Rural Parliament	<p>As of October 2003, there are 4 regional associations of the RP:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Civic Association Rural Parliament of Banska Bystrica – OZ VIPA - BB • The Civic Association Rural Parliament of Presov – OZ VIPA - PO • The Civic Association Rural Parliament of Trencin – OZ VIPA - TN • The Civic Association Rural Parliament of Zilina – OZ VIPA - ZA <p>3 more are in the process of setting up. These are established to work with the regional authorities.</p>
Micro-regions	Rural public-private partnerships ensure implementation of the mission and aims of the RP on a local level. Those partnerships consist of Municipalities, private business and NGOs. They are basic building stones for programming and planning of rural development on the local level. They are created on a bottom-up principle and are the main target group for the activities of the RP.
Communication Centres of the RP	A basic network of 38 communication centres established. Their main task is to ensure information flow to local people, to provide feedback for regional and national levels and to assist local people in the creation of partnerships, programming and preparation for rural development.
Information Points of the RP	18 Information Points established with similar functions as above, but their staff have not undertaken the training for facilitators, organised by the RP

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The Rural Parliament's main objective is to improve the quality of life of the people living in the rural areas of Slovakia, in rural areas in a sustainable way.

Its main tasks are to:

- promote tools to improve the quality of life of rural inhabitants
- provide advocacy for the interests of rural people
- secure exchange and information flow
- analyse the socio-economic development of Slovak rural areas
- promote rural areas both in Slovakia and abroad
- liaise with international structures and networks

The Rural Parliament is a non-profit civil association of individuals and organisations, operating on a national level, registered at the Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic. The structure of the Rural Parliament is a network of many independent associations at local, regional and national levels, who operate in a co-ordinated way. The organisational structure of the Rural Parliament was changed in 2003, from that set out in 2000. The main components of the current structure are:

Power in Slovakia is divided between national and regional authorities, so the challenge of the Rural Parliament was to match their structures and activities to this. At national level the Rural Parliament provides a key partner for the Government to work with on rural development, which networks many other rural organisations. At regional level the Regional Rural Parliaments work with members at regional level and aim to link to provide a partner for the Regional Councils to work with.

Membership

'Members are those who want to help and who need help'

The RP has a wide range of members and different types of groups. Currently there are 120 members at national level, and the Rural Parliament provides information to 180 organisations as a network. Following initial debate as to who should be able to participate, it was finally decided to accept all organisations who wanted to work for rural areas – public, private, and civil.

Session of the Rural Parliament

The most important tool for formulating policy is the bi-annual Session of the Rural Parliament. This is open to all who want to contribute to the development of rural policies. It is a platform for exchange of experiences from rural development and for formulation of needs and priorities for rural development for the following two years. The bi-annual big meeting sets policies. The new board (Presidium) is elected following the big meeting, to implement those policies.

The model for the Session has been strongly influenced by the Swedish Rural Parliament. The Session lasts for two days and is an open meeting, with both members and non-members attending. It is held in a rural micro-region, chosen by the board and organised by the local association. The whole meeting consists of thematic workshops. The first two Sessions, in 2000 and 2002, organised a preparatory process, with several local meetings. But at that time there were no Regional Rural Parliaments, in future this will be the responsibility of the Regional Rural Parliaments.

The process includes:

- Plenary session to review the results of the previous period
- 4 working groups: human resources, economy, politics, land & environment
- Brainstorming to raise ideas and identifying problems and solutions
- Plenary meeting to present ideas
- Prioritising

The Presidency then works with the priorities identified at the conference. These are discussed at the AGM following the Session, and agreement made as to the development of a programme for two years. The Presidium is then responsible for working with these priorities, and creates committees around each issue, with a board member responsible for each priority/ committee.

Presidium

The Presidium is the executive of the Rural Parliament. It manages the activities of the association between the annual general assemblies. Its 17 members are elected at the general assembly for a two-year period, according to the following criteria:

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- 8 representatives of the chamber of regions
- 5 representatives of the chamber of national institutions
- 3 representatives of the chamber of leaders and local groups
- 1 Chairperson elected directly by the chambers

All interests have representation in the Rural Parliament system for voting and all main groups have a representative in the presidium:

- large NGOs
- small NGOs
- Municipalities
- State organisations
- farmers
- journalists
- experts in rural development

The association has an AGM each year.

The Presidium meets every two months. It is responsible for the development, implementation and monitoring of the Rural Parliament's policy strategies, programs and projects. It decides on the Rural Parliament policy activities, action plan and projects. It also co-ordinates rural policy activities of the working groups. It reviews, monitors and evaluates previous activities and plans future ones in line with the rural policy suggested by the Rural Parliament's last session.

Committees

The Presidium creates regular or ad-hoc executive committees. Regular committees :

- international co-operation
- media and public relations
- institutional development
- analyses and advocacy

Each committee consists of at least three members and their head is always a member of the Presidium. Committees are composed of both members and non-members.

Management

The management of the Rural Parliament is carried out through the offices of one of its member organisations. In this respect it operates as a partnership, rather than an hierarchical organisation. This was a conscious decision to utilise the expert

potential of the members. At present this function is delivered through the auspices of the NGO – VOKA. For the three first years it was carried out by another NGO – *A-Projekt*. The central secretariat is currently carried out by one paid and one volunteer staff. This is an administrative task, all other work is done on a voluntary basis by committee members.

The central office of the Rural Parliament is responsible for:

- management for the Presidium and its committees
- organisation of events and activities
- fund raising
- PR and media
- newsletter and other publications
- website development and management
- E-conference management with committees and communication centres
- communications with members at all levels

VOKA had at one time itself been proposed as the organisation to undertake the function of a rural parliament, but this was not their choice. After *A-Projekt* finished their period of management for the Rural Parliament in 2003, VOKA took over the hosting, and now houses a special dedicated management unit for the Rural Parliament, with its own staff.

Regional organisations of the Rural Parliament – R-VIPA

As of October 2003, there are 4 regional associations of the Rural Parliament, each with their own statutes:

- The Civic Association Rural Parliament of Banska Bystrica Region – OZ VIPA - BB
- The Civic Association Rural Parliament of Presov Region – OZ VIPA - PO
- The Civic Association Rural Parliament of Trencin Region – OZ VIPA - TN
- The Civic Association Rural Parliament of Zilina Region – OZ VIPA - ZA

Three more regions are in the process of developing (Nitra/ Kosica/ Trnava with Bratislava).

The main reason for establishing the regional structure of the Rural Parliament was to move co-ordination of rural development activities from central to regional level, and to partner with regional government. Each regional association has a formal agreement

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with the Regional Council. The main task of the regions is to provide assistance, education and networking to rural initiatives.

The regional associations have the following functions:

- Represent rural areas within their region
- Advocate and develop the interests of rural areas on a regional level
- Represent rural areas in regional committees and commissions
- Co-ordinate activities of rural associations and micro-regions
- Participate in the development of regional development plans
- Manage information flow and exchange between members and the Presidency
- Help local structures to build their capacity
- Organise training and consultation for local associations
- Co-operate with partnership organisations at local level

The regional associations have no paid staff or funds as yet, and are currently trying to raise money to assist their work.

Rural partnerships – micro-regions

(See Case Study – Micro-regions – below)

Micro regional public–private partnerships ensure implementation of the mission and aims of the Rural Parliament at the local level. These partnerships consist of Municipalities, NGOs and private business. They are the basic building blocks for the programming and planning of rural development at local level. They are created on bottom-up principle and are the main target group of the activities of the Rural Parliament.

Micro regional civil associations:

- co-ordinate co-operation of all sectors in the territory of the micro region
- involve the public in solutions for sustainable development of rural areas at local level
- organise activities to implement programmes for development of the micro region
- establish their own communication centres and/or information centres and management of rural development

- ensure information flow and exchange between regional and local levels
- co-operate with neighbouring micro regions on common development projects
- create networks of rural development

The first micro-region was created in 1992, to enable villages to co-operate. The existence of the many village scale Municipalities as the competent legal bodies at local level, has led to the focus of the Rural Parliament being on how to link these into more effective partnerships, with other organisations, through micro-regions. These are voluntary coalitions set up to solve mutual problems. They are typically local partnerships of 5-10 villages formed spontaneously, not through the Rural Parliament. They are often created through the work of local and regional NGOs. There are various models and they do not follow a set pattern. All are members of the Rural Parliament, but were not set up by the Rural Parliament.

There are 2 forms of micro regional partnerships in each region:

- associations of villages
- associations of NGOs, small enterprises and farmers

Ideally, all 3 sectors should be present in each micro-regional partnership

The Rural Parliament is advocating micro-regional partnerships and prefers them as partners to the villages or individual local groups. This is because they want to reduce the fragmentation of the villages. The Rural Parliament intend to support micro-regional partnerships and to help with training. The Committee for Institutional Development has a priority to establish a common system for training, in which micro-regions identify their training needs and the regional associations deliver the training, at a regional level.

Communication Centres of the Rural Parliament

The Communication Centres are the basic infrastructure for regional development at a local level. A network of 30 communication centres was initially established and trained through a special preparatory programme under the Structural Funds – priority B – Rural Development. Their main task is to ensure information flow to local people, to provide feedback for regional and national

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levels and to assist local people in the creation of partnerships, programming and preparation for rural development. The network has now expanded to 38, and further expansion is intended at a later date. Their funding was only for one year, following which they have had to seek their own funds. The workers are not employed or paid by the Rural Parliament, they must raise their own funds or work voluntarily. The relationship of the communication centres and the micro-regions depends on the area. In some, the micro-regions are the guarantors for the communication centres.

Information Points of the Rural Parliament

18 Information Points have also been established around the country. Information Points have similar functions to the Communication Centres, but their staff have not undertaken the training for facilitators, organised by the Rural Parliament. These form local centres within micro-regions for meeting and information exchange and dissemination. The network is linked by e mail conference. They are 'the place where national level meets the local level'.

Financing²⁰

It is difficult to estimate the costs of running the Rural Parliament, as so much of the work is done on a voluntary basis, through the auspices of member organisations or through project funding. At present, the Rural Parliament is living from very low funding. Current time inputs include:

- 2 administrative staff
- 1 manager and chairperson
- 17 presidium members, who do most of the work (4 days per month each)
- 4 regional co-ordinators

Only administrative staff and Chairperson receive a salary.

Projections for future funding needs are:

- a minimum of 2 core staff
- a paid Chairperson
- paid support to the 4 regular committees
- 8 regional co-ordinators

²⁰ Information from Peter Rusnak, Chairman of the Rural Parliament and Janka Meciarova, Director of VOKA

During its first 3 years under *A-Projekt*, 2-3 mill. SK were spent, most of this from various funded projects. 1 mill. additional funds were provided through *A-Projekt*

Current funding comprises:

- 17,000 Euro from the Mott Foundation for the core costs of the central secretariat
- Membership fees – these are very low
- Project funds to specific projects
- All other costs for time and expenses are carried by the member organisations
- Possible future funding being sought from the Government - Ministry of Regional Development
- In 2002 the Rural Parliament received 400,000SKK (10,000 Euro) from the Ministry of Agriculture, but in 2003 this money was not available to support rural development.

There are currently no public funds going to the Rural Parliament. This is a priority as it is not seen as sustainable to support the structures of the Rural Parliament - at national, regional and local levels - from local resources, without State support. To date, there is no indication that State funding will be available to the national association. The Ministry for Regional Development has a budget of 20 mill. SKK (0.5 mill. Euro) for regional development. However they will not give money to Rural Parliament centrally to dispense to their regional associations. This will only be accessible locally through the Regional Development Agencies for support of rural development managers in Micro-regions (mainly in the Communication Centres of the Rural Parliament).

Many of the NGOs, working in conjunction with the Rural Parliament, were established during the 1990s through foreign aid, principally from the USA. This funding was at a relatively high level, and these organisations have struggled to survive once the aid was withdrawn. The Communication Centres were established and funded for their first year through EU Structural Funds for rural development, and now have to find their own funding to continue.

It was also noted that there is some competition for funding between Rural Parliament and its member organisations.

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CASE STUDY - Regional Rural Parliament

The Civic Association Rural Parliament of Zilina Region – OZ VIPA - ZA

Information from the Zilina regional co-ordinator

The Zilina Regional Rural Parliament mirrors the Zilina Region, located in the mountainous north of the country. (see *Case Study of Zilina Regional Council*).

Structure

There are 19 members of the Zilina Regional Rural Parliament (RRP) and 7 Board members, 1 NGO from each sub-region, and 1 representative from the Regional Council (Head of Regional Development). The region has 7 traditional sub-regions, which originate from the early middle ages - 10th Century. The RRP is based on this structure – every sub-region has a representative on the Board. The RRP has a regional co-ordinator, who works 40 hours per week on a voluntary basis. In order to pay the rental on the office he also has to work in a local sawmill. The RRP charges a membership fee of 150 SKK for individuals and 500SKK for organisations.

The RRP was established to reflect the new regional government, and to help to engage the people of the region in the process of rural development. From 1989 an informal group of people grew in the region, with expertise in rural development. These people started the RRP. The NGOs that have worked for 10 years in the region have gained the respect of the Municipalities for their work – it is therefore a strong partnership.

The biennial Session of the Rural Parliament develops the strategy, which is used to shape priorities at regional level. Much of the work of the RRP is linked to this strategy.

Work with the Regional Council

There is a formal contract between the Regional Council and the RRP setting out the framework for co-operation and common responsibility for the development of rural areas. The regional development plan for rural development is prepared by the Regional Council and the RRP is co-operating in this process. The RRP is not developing a strategic plan of its own, as it would have no power, but prefers the partnership approach to work with the local authorities to develop the statutory plans. The RRP has a contract with the Regional Development Agency (Ministry of Regional Development) to write grant applications. They also have a contract with the EU Delegation to help to evaluate EU PHARE projects.

Work with Micro-regions

There are several in the region, not all are members of the RRP. It was noted that it can be hard to identify all of the partnerships that exist. Micro regions are registered with the Government, but this information is not updated, and not all are still functioning. The RRP undertakes various activities, through its member organisations to support the work of the micro-regions including: assistance with strategic planning, training, support for fund-raising etc. The RRP has also tried, unsuccessfully, to create cross-border micro-regions with the Czech Republic.

Work with local communities

Support is given to local communities in various ways. This is the responsibility of the local NGOs in the RRP. It is voluntary work as there is no funding available. The PHARE Programme was the first chance to raise money for this work. Local and regional government has no money for this. The RRP participate in the committee of the annual 'Village of the Year' competition.

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CASE STUDY - Regional Rural Parliament

The Civic Association Rural Parliament of Banska Bystrica Region – OZ VIPA - BB

Information from the Regional Chairman

The Region of Banska Bystrica is situated in the centre of Slovakia, and is a focal point in the country, with a rapidly growing regional centre.

Structure

The Regional Rural Parliament (RRP) has 4 sub-regional committees – one in each of the original historical regions. The regional committee is made up of the chairs of the sub-regional committees, plus 3 other elected people. At all RRP meetings there are representatives from the Regional Council and Micro-regions present. Representatives of the Communication Centres and important regional NGOs also participate in most meetings.

Work with the regional authorities

The RRP has a formal agreement with the Regional Council, and work closely with them. The RRP are also a member of the Committee for Rural Development of the Regional Council and of the Regional Partnership for the Development of Employment, and co-operate with the institutional network for regional development. A common task is to formulate an action plan for rural development as a basic document for programme planning for EU. They also work with the Council to solve the problems of the Communication Centres. The RRP also co-operates in projects with the regional authorities, eg. with the national labour office and Regional Council on IT as a way of increasing employment.

Work with Micro-regions

This region has 45 micro-regions, the biggest density in Slovakia. Because of this the RRP has organised many activities for them. In 2003 the priority was the preparation of rural areas for accession to the EU and the Structural Funds. They have a grant from the Open Society Foundation for this work, with which they have run 70 workshops – 2 for each micro-region, with around 1600 people participating. The workshops provide information on the EU and instruments for rural development and how to be successful in the process of getting funds from the EU. At the end of the year, there was a meeting of people from the NGOs, micro-regions and regional self-government, to sum up the results of the work and the plans for the EU. Their aims are to:

- create a regional action group to co-ordinate the common project in this region
- increase amount of money to rural areas outwith existing sources
- reinforce the Rural Parliament through these projects

Work with Communication Centres

RRP Projects aimed at fulfilling the needs of the Communication Centres include: providing equipment, training workers, gaining State support for their work and defining priorities. The Communication Centres have defined their basic needs. These will be the basis for preparing training and to argue for funding for the centres for programming projects, information, dissemination and PR, training and cultural events. The Communication Centres are fully equipped with modern IT equipment. The new ones are operating under the Association of Tele-cottages. The RRP are seeking to unite the network of CCs and divide the task of supporting them between the RRP and this association.

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CASE STUDY – Micro-Regions

Oblazy Micro-region

The Oblazy Micro-region is situated in the mountainous north of Slovakia, in Zilina Region. The Micro-region has a population of 2000 in 10 villages, each a Municipality, the largest village has 530 people. These Slovak mountain communities are suffering badly from the loss of the Soviet system, which secured their income and agriculture. Most of the population used to live in the villages, but now they are depopulated leaving mainly old people, living in very poor conditions. All the land was cultivated under the Soviet system and before, but now is mostly abandoned. Agriculture is not competitive. People lead a very traditional lifestyle. The landscapes and environment are beautiful and there is an increasing trend towards holiday homes.

The Micro-region was formed in the area which was the catchment area of the old water mill – traditionally the centre of the community. Its purpose was to support the regeneration of the area through working in partnership. The activities that lead to the setting up of the micro-region were initiated in 1993 by one of the rural development NGOs, *A-Projekt*. *A-Projekt* has been very active in establishing micro-regions in and around the national parks, which occupy this region. In 1995 a community foundation was established in the micro-region, which in 2003 became a civil association, to meet the requirements of the law and to be able to apply for EU grants. The association is open to membership and works with the whole micro-region.

The partners include the Municipalities, church, landowners association, agricultural co-operative, primary school and local businesses. They have a co-ordinator who works 20 hours per week on a volunteer basis, and an office in the local school.

This was one of the first micro-regions to be established in Slovakia, and is used as a model for training other areas. It was noted that *A-Projekt* had been a very important organisation in supporting the development of the micro-region.

Activities:

The activities of the association are focused on supporting the wellbeing of local people and the development of rural tourism. Their policy is to develop community enterprises rather than private entrepreneurs. They have established a community mini-grant programme for very small projects. Key activities include:

- information and education centre for visitors
- community newsletter, also for visitors
- programme to restore the traditional architectural features
- citizen's foundation aimed at the development of traditional values
- "Tourism under the Choc Hills" promotion and activities
- 'The Amber Way' – a rural tourism route
- Support to local people to establish Bed & Breakfast facilities
- A current priority is to provide a restaurant for tourists

The micro-region is looking for ways to bring the 10 villages together through joint activities, starting with their common history and traditions. They are also starting to co-operate with other neighbouring micro-regions. The micro-region is a member of the Regional Rural Parliament and aim to connect their information centre to the local Communications Centre.

Their main problem is the capacity of people in the villages to continue the work after 10 years. They want to strengthen the villages, but face the problems of an ageing population and the leaders of the committees being elderly people. It was noted that the young are not interested in this community work.

It was noted by *A-Projekt* that they are typical of micro-regions in that they:

- get involved in small but meaningful actions
- use voluntary, not professional workers
- raise small amounts of money
- have goals for a wider focus
- face difficulties in keeping the partnership alive

THE RURAL PARLIAMENT OF SLOVAKIA

Activities

The Slovak Rural Parliament is concerned to strengthen civil society at local level. To this end, it has created a network across Slovakia and disseminates information about and for rural areas; promotes exchange of knowledge and experience; formulates common interests and lobbies for these and co-ordinates approaches to rural development.

The work of the Slovak Rural Parliament takes place on 3 levels:

- National - through the National Association and its members
- Regional - through the Regional Associations and their members
- Local - through the Communication and Information Centres and micro-regions

The whole organisation is very recent, the national association being just 4 years old and the regional associations 1-2 years old. Activity to date has been focussed on the establishment of the Rural Parliament and its structures at the different levels, on building effective partnerships and gaining a profile for the organisation with Government and regional authorities. Capacity is limited by the human resources available, as funding is scarce. Most work is on a voluntary basis, or through the member organisations.

Broadly speaking, the activities of the Rural Parliament fall into the following categories:

- Strategic planning
- Organisational development
- Advocacy and lobbying
- Information and communications
- Focussed projects
- International co-operation

These are undertaken at both national and regional levels.

Programme for Slovak Rural Areas²¹

Priorities for action are determined biennially, at the Session of the Rural Parliament. The ensuing 'Programme for Rural Areas' sets a 2-year framework of priorities for the national and regional associations.

²¹ Detail of the action programmes can be found in the Appendix

The Programme is the strategic plan, which guides the activities of the Rural Parliament. The Programme for 2003-5 originates from the Session of the Rural Parliament in 2002, and was formally approved by the General Assembly in March 2003.

Strategic objective

To contribute to the creation of favourable conditions for balanced residential and regional development, so that rural people would like to live in rural areas and take care of their environment.

Priorities

1. Fiscal decentralisation and fair redistribution of resources for rural areas.
2. Improved readiness of rural areas for EU accession
3. Professional and sustainable support infrastructure for rural development
4. Strengthen the role of Slovak rural areas in Europe

Actions

1. Increase the effectiveness of the tools and increasing the budget for rural development:
 - Elaborate a model for integrated rural development and the tools to deliver it
 - Gain public support for activities of supporting infrastructure
 - Increase the budget for the Programme of Rural Areas Renewal
2. Involving Slovak rural areas in European structures:
 - Maintain and develop co-operation with partner rural parliaments and institutions of the EU
 - Develop and co-ordinate co-operation with future Member States of the EU, especially with V4 countries in the field of rural development
 - Build good relationships with EU institutions
3. Building a network of supporting infrastructure for rural development
 - Complete, enlarge and increase operational capacities of the network of Communication Centres
 - Create regional support institutions for consultations and education
 - Information and educational system for rural development

THE RURAL PARLIAMENT OF SLOVAKIA

Achievements

The organisation has only recently been established, and its achievements have been substantial in that time. The major achievement is the establishment of a strong network of organisational structures at national, regional and local levels. Through this the Rural Parliament has made its presence felt on the national and international stages.

Local:

- A network of 38 Communication Centres and 18 Information Points has been established
- Facilitators have been trained in 30 of the Communication Centres
- The Communication Centres are very involved and active in the movement

Regional:

- 4 regional rural parliaments are established and another 3 in the process of formation
- Help to establish and support public-private partnerships – micro-regions
- Regular contacts and partnership have been established with the regional authorities
- The Rural Parliament has membership of several regional committees and boards
- Lobbying and advocacy has been successfully undertaken at regional level

National:

- A national democratic structure for the Rural Parliament has been established
- The Rural Parliament has gained a strong national presence and recognition
- There is a strong attendance at the biennial Session of the Rural Parliament
- Lobbying and advocacy is undertaken with the Government
- Participation of RP representatives in national expert and consultative committees²²

International:

- The RP is fully involved with networking, activities and lobbying at European level.

Problems

- Co-operation and communication with the Ministries has proved difficult to achieve. There was good co-operation with Ministry of Agriculture at first, but problems developed when the Rural Parliament raised opposing ideas.
- Funding is a major issue and the whole organisation relies on voluntary work, which is unsustainable in the long term, or on the contributions in-kind of the partner organisations. To date it has proved very difficult to raise core funding from the Government, and there is a concern as to the extent to which such funding would compromise the neutrality of the Rural Parliament.
- Capacity at local and national levels is very limited to undertake the scale of the work required. The lack of funding is a major factor in this, but also lack of experience.
- Lack of clarity in the relationships between member organisations and the Rural Parliament eg. Communication Centres which the RP has started to think of as their local units, but are in effect independent bodies.
- There is a danger of the Rural Parliament subsuming its member organisations in the eyes of Government and others, also in relation to achieving funding.
- Competition for funding between the national, regional and member organisations
- Early problems with poor financial control
- Personality changes and difficulties, both in the Rural Parliament and in public bodies.

²² Slovak Government, National Council for the Slovak Republic, Steering Committees for EU Structural Funds.

THE RURAL PARLIAMENT OF SLOVAKIA

Commentary

The Slovak Rural Parliament is now 4 years old. It was among the most recent to emerge from this expanding rural movement in Europe, and the third in Eastern Europe – following Estonia (1992) and Hungary (1998). The emergence of the Slovak Rural Parliament owes much to the actions of the PREPARE Programme, which undertook the early networking and mobilisation of the rural movements in the pre-accession countries of the EU. In this respect it was able to learn much from the experiences of the already established movements, especially those in Sweden, Finland, Estonia and Hungary. The Swedes spent one year in Slovakia training and assisting the establishment of the Rural Parliament. It is clear that the structures and objectives of the Slovak Rural Parliament draw strongly on those established elsewhere. However, it also has its own unique blend of characteristics, which reflect the Slovak situation, system and political culture. In this respect, it has a different ‘feel’ to those in Scandinavia and Estonia. It also faces its own particular blend of challenges.

Origins of the Movement

The national context

As Slovakia became independent in 1993, it met with a particular set of challenges in establishing a new democratic State. As seen in the first chapter, these related to the establishment of a new political and administrative system, the loss of the former economic base and transition to a market economy and the social / political culture inherited from the Communist period. The rural areas in particular were very badly hit, with a massive decline in agriculture, employment and services and out-migration. Then came the challenges of accession to the EU, placing requirements on the Government to align with the economic and structural conditions of the EU.

Slovakia has inherited a very centralised political culture derived from the Communist period and preceding Austro-Hungarian Empire. Many leading figures in the country today were also leading figures under the Communist system and have carried this

culture with them. The Government Ministries were said not to be good at sharing information and power and to be unreliable. The political culture is not seen to favour civil society.

In the years following independence, many foreign aid organisations moved in to assist with the early development of democracy and the civil society. One inheritance of this period, was the existence of many civil organisations, very many of them operating in the rural areas. These organisations were established and trained according to the best practice of western NGOs, and were conversant with the structures and processes for rural development. However, they were operating in isolation from each other. These organisations formed the foundation for the Rural Parliament, as did individuals working in the Ministries who had also received training and experience in western development models, for example through FAO, the UN and foreign Governments.

It was against this backdrop that those concerned with rural development in Slovakia began to address the question of how to support the rapidly failing rural areas and to overcome the overly strong focus of Government policy on agriculture, at the expense of integrated rural development.

*“There is a tendency to romanticise rural life. It is important to distinguish between what is progress and what is regress. Rural development requires a learning, rather than a prescriptive model, and it is useful to work with people from different disciplines to help evolve visions for the future”.*²³

It has been identified that rural areas need to better understand the local economy, how it functions and how to protect it. They also need to know about the wider context, and how to work successfully with it. They need to know how to protect endogenous activities and use this asset in relationship to the wider economy. Especially they need to know about the development of a multi-functional and integrated economy, utilising local assets.²⁴

²³ Lubomir Faltan, Head of the Institute of Sociology, Slovak Academy of Sciences (pers. com.)

²⁴ Lubomir Faltan, Head of the Institute of Sociology, Slovak Academy of Sciences (pers. com.)

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At present, it was said, Slovak people are more interested in individual enterprise than in co-operation. This is in part a reaction against the Soviet system. The first stage in the social transition has been towards individualism and competition. There is a lack of co-operation, for instance, between Municipalities and between small businesses, and a lack of realisation of the importance of co-operation to build a local economic system.

Rural areas have also become an interesting market for 'consultancy'. But the roles of NGOs, Government and the private sector are unclear, these are seen as three forms of the same job and hence they are all in competition with each other. However, people in the rural areas do not have the money to pay for these services, which leads to a fight for power and resources, especially the power of information.²⁵

This political backdrop, linked to the emergence of the new civil culture in Slovakia, and set against the worsening conditions in rural areas, provided the rationale for the start of the rural movement. The existence of several other national rural movements as models, and the networking of the PREPARE Programme provided the catalyst.

The Village in Slovakia²⁶

The movement, in its establishment was reacting to the underlying structure and culture of the rural areas. At the heart of this lies the village - traditionally a very important unit in Slovakia. The pre-Communist tradition of local government was focused on the village and its Mayor, in which the power of the Mayor was strong.

In 1974, the Communist Government tried to establish an amalgamated local administration system with one central village and a group of satellite villages. This was a centralised decision, in which the villages had

no say. This loss of village autonomy was resented.

In 1989-90, following independence in Czechoslovakia, the first step was for the villages to reject this system in favour of their previous autonomy. This was a reaction against the State control of the Communist period. It was therefore politically very sensitive, and the Government is unable to do anything about it at present. *"The Government cannot impose the structure of local Government, in reality it will have to come from the bottom"*. The Government needs non-directional instruments to influence the structure of local Government, but not through direct political intervention.

The scale of the village Municipalities is a problem, the majority having under 500 population, and the smallest has only 7. The demographic trends are also problematic, with rapidly ageing village populations, sometime unable to support an effective Municipality. Many have only 1 part-time Mayor to undertake the work, and little chance to develop competence, or to employ specialists. This pressure is beginning to lead to a process of co-operation between villages, especially in relation to the delivery of certain common functions like waste disposal.

This presents a unique opportunity for the evolution of local authorities, to reach a scale that is viable and acceptable to the local level, and meets local needs and wishes rather than being imposed from the Government. However, there is traditional animosity between many villages, especially stemming from the Communist period, when one village assumed a more powerful status over others. There is therefore resistance to working together, though many are learning because they do not have the capacity to do what they want to alone.

A process to facilitate the co-operation between villages with common problems was needed. The Micro-regions are very good examples of how this can happen. In Poland, the establishment of Micro-regions happened during the Soviet period when the *'Gmina'* was established by the Government, with 1 village supporting the affairs of several, with a common office and services. However the

²⁵ Vlasta Kornerova, first Chairperson of the Slovak Rural Parliament (pers. com.)

²⁶ Information based on discussion with Lubomir Faltan, Head of the Institute of Sociology, Slovak Academy of Sciences

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villages retained their legal autonomy, which has made the *Gmina* more acceptable.



Micro-regions

Slovakia has begun to evolve systems of public-private partnerships to deal with the challenges of the existing administrative structure, and also in response to the demands of the EU. The most significant of these are the 'Micro-regions'. Mobilisation of rural groups at micro-regional level began in the early 1990s. Currently 224 micro-regional partnerships are registered. The Micro-regions reflect the regional situation, they were often started in problematic regions, to solve common problems. Their achievements are to enable the villages to work together, establish joint consciousness and awareness of the need to co-operate and to develop practical solutions to common problems. They also create an identity for the villages and the micro-region.

Micro-regions are, however, non-legal entities without statutory powers, which limits their access to funding and decision-making. One regional NGO commented that, after 10 years experience of working with Micro-regions, they have come to the view that they are not the right bodies to take responsibility for rural development, because they are voluntary and have no powers or resources, unlike Municipalities.

The Rural Parliament has evolved to deal with the structures that are present in the rural areas, and the gaps that exist in them. It is notable that, in contrast to the Swedish, Finnish and Estonian rural movements, the Slovak Rural Parliament is not a 'village movement'. Indeed, it is said by many to be very 'top down' at this stage in its

development. One reason for this is that the village level is already a formal level of local administration. As such, the villages are already structured and networked nationally, through the Union of Towns and Villages. The gap lies in the ability of the many small village Municipalities to work together and with others at local level. It was commented that whilst the villages can co-operate to solve mutual problems, they haven't yet realised that this partnership is useful for the wider development of the area. It was said that they are quite arrogant because of their legal powers. Hence the emphasis placed on the Communication Centres and Micro-regions by the Rural Parliament, in an attempt to link the resources and capacity of the many local organisations in the rural areas. "*The Micro-regions are a strong part of the creation of civil society in the country*".²⁷

The Slovak Rural Parliament

"Rural problems have a strong relationship to problems in the country as a whole, however, there are big disparities between life in rural and urban areas. Rural areas are so big, with so many players, that we now realise we need support from each other. It is important to have the support of the local people / civil society behind you. The strength of the Rural Parliament is their wide support within the rural community. It is difficult for the Government to ignore this".²⁸

It is noticeable that the Rural Parliament is a very precisely structured system which, at least on paper, looks impressive. Every aspect of its structure and functioning has been strategically thought out. Some concerns were expressed that this may not work in practice, and that it was quite a theoretical model. In reality, as it develops, it may be slightly more messy. However, the amount of careful thought and planning that has gone into establishing the strategic framework provides a very strong foundation to build on. The originators have clearly learned many lessons from examining the experience of other countries, and from taking advice from many people. The

²⁷ Regional co-ordinator for the Zilina Regional Rural Parliament (pers. com.)

²⁸ Jela Tvrdonova, Head of the Slovak Rural Development Agency (pers. com.)

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movement has also benefited from the involvement of committed individuals from national Government and academic bodies, which has enabled the development of a strong national overview and identification of issues and links to Government.

Internal relations ²⁹

“The Rural Parliament is functioning as a network, not as a centralised organisation”. Structures and tools for enabling this have been established, including partnerships at different levels and communication systems.

The strongest partners within the Rural Parliament are national, regional and local NGOs, professional organisations active in rural development and local government associations, followed at a lower level by academic and research institutions, relevant development agencies and small and medium size businesses. The weakest partners are professional associations and private companies. It was noted that there had been conflict over whether Government organisations should be members of the Rural Parliament, on the basis that NGOs compete for their resources.

The Presidium of the Rural Parliament has a cross-sectoral character. At one level this is identified as its greatest strength, but at another it causes some tension between sectors in the decision-making process. Although all members have good motivation to participate in the Rural Parliament's activities, differences still exist between them, which make for difficulties in agreeing priorities.

“The Rural Parliament provides a platform for the NGOs and is not replacing them.” The relationship between the Rural Parliament and its member organisations is an important, but potentially sensitive one. The Rural Parliament is trying to operate as a partnership, rather than a hierarchical organisation. It is achieving this by dividing responsibilities between different member organisations and only undertaking functions through the national body, which cannot be done by others. Each Regional Association

and Communication Centre is also an independent organisation. This has the advantage of enabling the Rural Parliament itself to maintain a very slim core operation, and strengthening the roles of the different organisations in implementing the policy of the Rural Parliament. However, there are signs that this may be difficult to sustain in the long term, and that funding for a core staff unit is becoming an important issue. *“The management of the Rural Parliament requires strengthening with paid staff, an office and a bank account”.*³⁰

*“It is the role of the Rural Parliament to create synergy between NGOs so that they avoid competition and increase their mutual capacity to meet rural needs”.*³¹

There are some problems in the relationship between the Rural Parliament and the individual member organisations, and in some respects there appears to be competition. It was commented that there is an increasing tendency for the Rural Parliament to subsume the identity of its member organisations in the eyes of the outside world. Individual members are seen as only one NGO in a wider network. This becomes critical when it has an impact on competition for funds. On the other hand, it was said that some members are competitors and use information from the Rural Parliament to promote themselves. There is also some sensitivity as to the degree of ownership claimed by the Rural Parliament of local bodies, especially the Communication Centres, which the Rural Parliament has started to think of as their local units.

The role of individuals within the Rural Parliament can cause problems. On occasion it has been observed that individuals can take too much power to themselves, thus threatening the open and egalitarian structure of the movement. In some cases this has ended in dispute. It was commented:

“If you share power you get it, if you keep it you lose it. Open and transparent decisions are critical to the success of the Rural Parliament.”

²⁹ Information from Jela Tvrdonova, Head of the Slovak Rural Development Agency and Janka Meciariova, Manager of VOKA.

³⁰ Peter Rusnak, Chairman of the Rural Parliament (pers. com.)

³¹ Lubomir Faltan, Head of the Institute of Sociology, Slovak Academy of Sciences (pers. com.)

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Gender is an important issue for the Rural Parliament, and a great effort is made to make sure that women are equally involved at all levels and in all events. The Presidium is set up to be 50/50 men/ women. However it is noted that at conferences there is a general tendency for those representing grass root organisations to include more women and those representing national agencies and Ministries to be predominantly men.

Relations with the local and regional levels

The Slovak Rural Parliament is still perceived as a 'top-down' model. The development of the grass-roots foundations is still only at an early stage. It has been commented that whilst the organisation is seen as an 'umbrella' its roots and base are still rather anonymous, and connections into the rural communities are still quite limited.

The regional and local levels of activity are in the early stages of development, with the main focus being on building structures at these levels. The links to the local level have been established through the medium of the Regional Associations and Communication Centres. The Regional Associations are seeking ways to engender co-operation and partnership at local level and to build local capacity, through training and support. They are keen to support the existing system to function better, rather than to set up a parallel system, especially in relation to strategic planning and regional development. *"It is better to participate in influencing the new system than to set up our own system, we just want to influence what we can with our knowledge"*³²

The Communication Centres are felt to be an important achievement. These were initially set up and trained by the Rural Parliament, and form the basic local infrastructure and most local level of connection to the rural communities. However, they are independent entities. It was commented that they feel part of the movement, are very committed to it, and can be more active than those on the Presidium, even though most of them are not paid. The members of the Communication

³² Co-ordinator of the Zilina Regional Association (pers. com.)

Centres are now raising funds and doing things they would not have done before, hence they have been a significant contribution to local capacity building.

The links to the village Municipalities are more tangential, with the co-operation of villages being promoted through the Communication Centres and Micro-regions to enable a more effective local level administration. The Municipalities themselves are networked through the Association of Cities and Villages. This tends to be more politically focussed, whereas the Rural Parliament is more practically focussed. There is still not a lot of co-operation between the two, and the Rural Parliament tends still to be seen as a threat.

"The Regional Councils are now responsible for regional development, not national Government. It will be very important for the Regional Associations to become very effective in future, to work with the processes of regional development and ensure strong civil involvement in the process".³³

Each of the Regional Associations has signed a co-operation agreement with the Regional Councils, and has regular co-operation meetings. Both organisations are very recent, and are evolving alongside each other. The Regional Councils reported that they have a good impression of the Rural Parliament and that the system is helpful to their work. They have good information and contacts from the rural areas, and the Councils are using their expert capacity to help with regional development challenges. As yet there is no funding available for collaboration, or to support the work of the Rural Parliament, but the Councils are hoping to raise funds to manage this collaboration in the future, once their own funding position is clearer.³⁴

Relations with Government

"The Government should have one partner to speak to. The member organisations can work with the communities".³⁵

³³ Peter Rusnak, Chairman of the Rural Parliament (pers. com.)

³⁴ Zilina Regional Council and Banska Bystrica Regional Council (pers. com.)

³⁵ Peter Rusnak, Chairman of the Rural Parliament (pers. com.)

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Providing a 'one-door' access for Government to the network of rural organisations is the aim of the Rural Parliament, and the focus of much of their work at national level. To date they have tried to develop working relationships with the key Ministries relevant to rural development.

The Rural Parliament has already developed a strong partnership with the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Regional Development. In addition, they have established co-operation with regional State administrations on the Provincial and District levels.³⁶

The Ministry of Agriculture was supportive of the Rural Parliament from the start, especially during the PREPARE pilot. They also asked the Rural Parliament for feedback on SAPARD etc. They expected the Rural Parliament to provide services to communicate with the local level. This is why they have supported the involvement of one of their staff in the Rural Parliament.³⁷

The Ministry of Regional Development reported that they want to involve the Rural Parliament and the Association of Towns and Villages in developing the plans for Objective 1. For the next programme period they will be a full partner in the process and a member of the monitoring committee. The Rural Parliament is also on the preparatory committee for the Structural Funds, the chair of which is the State Secretary. They have also been advisors to the National Development Plan on a consultative basis.

Despite these positive developments, most people commented on how hard it was proving to develop good working relations with the Government bodies. One member of the Presidium observed that relationships with the Ministries were unreliable, they do not always keep their word and there is very little internal transfer of information, so most people in the Ministries know very little about the Rural Parliament. It is also difficult to obtain information from the Ministries.

One key member of the Rural Parliament Presidium, and one of the original instigators of the Rural Parliament was also the Head of the Slovak Rural Development Agency³⁸. This is an interesting and complex relationship, which can also be compared to the situation in Finland. The Slovak Rural Development Agency functions within the Ministry of Agriculture, and has responsibility for the administration of SAPARD, technical assistance for rural projects and training. This relationship has both positive and negative aspects, and was a very difficult role to play. It proved very positive during the establishment of the Rural Parliament in gaining the support of the Ministry and building the institutional relationships needed for its recognition. The in-depth experience of the individual in the field of rural development has been invaluable in developing thinking within the Rural Parliament. However, it also presented situations of conflict between the interests of the Rural Parliament and the position of the Ministry. This created sensitivities within the Ministry, and some feel contributed to the lack of financial support. It was also noted that the Agency is also sometimes competing with NGOs working in the rural development field. This raises the old chestnut, that the Rural Parliament needs support and funds from Government, but getting too close will compromise its neutrality and lobbying power.



³⁶ Jela Tvrdonova, Head of the Slovak Rural Development Agency (pers. com.)

³⁷ Vlasta Kornerova, first Chairperson of the Slovak Rural Parliament (pers. com.)

³⁸ up until March 2004

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Future issues

The Rural Parliament has undergone a period of very rapid development. There have been significant achievements in the four years since the idea was proposed. Energy has been put into building the structures of the Rural Parliament, promoting the position of the Rural Parliament in Slovak society, developing working relationships with the Government and administration at all levels and in developing a clear strategic plan of action. The strategy sets out quite clearly where the priorities for the coming period lie.

The Chairman of the Rural Parliament identified the main priorities as follows: *“The first priority of the Slovak Rural Parliament is to maintain the existing policies of central Government for rural areas, like the Village Renewal Programme, which are now threatened because of lack of funds. We also want to advocate for the development of new policies and programmes to support rural areas, eg. an integrated rural development programme like Leader. At a local level, we are seeking support to build the capacity and management of the local structures”.*

The roles of the different parts and levels of the movement are also under scrutiny. *“There must be a clear division of tasks between national and regional levels, there is not enough capacity for the centre to work at all levels. The national level must remain in advocacy and international work. The regional level is undertaking its own organisational capacity building, and acting as the catalyst and co-ordinator for the capacity building of the local partners, like Communication Centres and Micro-regions, through the work of the member organisations”.*

The financial viability of the Rural Parliament is a critical issue to be addressed. It is currently run from volunteer labour and the in-kind contributions of member NGOs, with no public funding at any level. Whilst this is a great achievement, it will not be sustainable in the longer term. The success of the whole movement will depend on their ability to raise funds to support the national, regional and local level bodies.

The connections of the Rural Parliament to the local level are still quite tenuous. This is

being addressed through the development of the Regional level associations and the Communication Centres. However, there are still large parts of the rural areas in which such structures do not exist, and also the work of developing the connections between these structures and the rural people is still at an early stage. This will be an important focus for the development of the Rural Parliament in the coming period.

The people who are investing such energy and faith in the development of the rural movement in Slovakia are doing so because they see this as the best way to turn the tide for rural areas and to make the most of the scarce human and financial resources available. At the moment, the investment is very great, and the outputs are only just beginning to be felt. *“In 12 years with the Slovak Agency for Rural Development we have not seen the same level of outcome as the level of energy invested in rural development. The inputs have been much greater than the outputs”.*³⁹

The conviction is that it is possible to turn this around and to create the vision, profile, capacity and political support to make *“all Slovakia live”*.

³⁹ Jela Tvrdonova, Head of the Slovak Rural Development Agency (pers. com.)

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Appendix 1

Programme for Slovak Rural Areas⁴⁰

Priorities

1. Fiscal decentralisation and fair redistribution of sources for rural areas

The Rural Parliament does not have an ambition to influence fiscal decentralisation on its own. But its ambition is to contribute to advocating activities towards executive and legislative power. It wants to watch and control the steps of the central Government and national parliament, and their commitment to ensuring conditions for increase of sources for balanced development of all regions and rural areas as well as improve quality of life of rural inhabitants through fiscal decentralisation.

VIPA also has its own ambition – to gain public (State) support to finance facilitators / managers of rural development and the network of rural communication centres. Rural areas suffer from lack of capital and do not have enough resources to finance institutional infrastructure. State support in this matter would help diminish the main handicap of rural areas, which is lack of tools for rural development. It would also improve access of rural areas to EU Structural Funds.

Objective 1: To gain the support of members of the national parliament and Ministries to improve the position of Slovak rural areas in the process of accession of the Slovak republic to the EU.

Objective 2: To influence legislation and other tools - mainly fiscal decentralisation and regional and rural development policy - and thus create conditions for increased financial resources for rural areas.

Target groups: Central Government, National Council, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Construction and Regional Development, Ministry of Agriculture.

Main activities of the national association - VIPA:

- Organise Rural Days in the National Council of the Slovak Republic annually
- Promote participation of VIPA representatives in committees and commissions of central Government and the National Council
- Watch and monitor preparation of legislation
- Prepare proposals, changes and amendments to legislative documents
- Communicate with members of NCSR and persons from offices of the central Government
- Co-ordinate and harmonise course of action with partners – Association of Towns of Slovakia, Union of Towns and Villages of Slovakia etc.
- Co-operate on elaboration of a National Rural Development Plan

Expected outputs:

- VIPA has its representatives in committees and commissions of central Government and NCSR
- VIPA is on the list of institutions eligible to comment on legislative proposals
- Existence of laws on tax reform, fiscal decentralisation and regional policy respecting rural issues
- Existence of financial tools for decreasing regional disparities
- VIPA is a partner of the Ministry of Agriculture of the Slovak Republic in the process of elaboration of a National Rural Development Plan
- Existence of national support programme for rural management and their networks

Expected outcomes:

- Improvement of the situation of Slovak rural areas in terms of resources for their development

Responsibility for implementation:

VIPA Committee for Analysis and Advocacy

Term of implementation: 2003 - 2004

2. Improve readiness of rural areas for European union accession

The Rural Parliament will give its effort mainly to the creation of tools for integrated rural development, to helping rural structures to be

⁴⁰ Extract from the Programme for Slovak Rural Areas 2003-5

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able to use such tools and to preparing them to changes in financing resulting from accession to EU. The Regional structures of VIPA will be especially active in this task. The Rural Parliament will focus on methodology, support and preparation of educational programmes on the national level.

Objective: Create conditions for effective distribution of support for rural development and increase of absorption capacity and utilisation of structural aid.

Target groups: Central Government, National Council, Ministry of Finance and another Ministries, rural inhabitants and rural local governments, regional governments

Main activities of VIPA:

- Elaborate a model for integrated rural development and its tools
- Gain support for internal development on regional level
- Advocate and promote the introduction of these tools at national level
- Elaborate methodology and procedures for rural structures and partnerships
- Edit and publish manuals to prepare rural areas to utilise resources from EU Structural Funds
- Train rural managers in programming

Expected outputs:

- Existence of tools for the integrated rural development of rural areas and rural regions
- Existence of uniform methodological procedure for preparing rural areas to utilise resources from EU Structural Funds.
- Rural areas are informed of how to prepare programmes and project for EU Structural Funds
- Educated rural managers in programming development process
- Rural regions and micro regions have elaborated development programmes
- Rural structures have prepared projects

Expected outcomes:

Improvement of absorption capacity of rural areas for implementation of structural aid

Responsibility for implementation:

Committee for Institutional Development in co-operation with Committee for Analysis and Advocacy and regional rural parliaments

Term of implementation: 2003 - 2004

3. Professional and sustainable support infrastructure for rural development

In the three years of its existence the Rural Parliament has been identifying its role and organisational structure. The challenge now is to become a strong organisation able to fulfil its mission to improve the quality of life of rural inhabitants. The Rural Parliament must increase its credibility and expertise to advocate for the needs and interests of rural areas effectively. Therefore it needs an appropriate organisational structure, support tools and institutions. Therefore it must continue to build its structures, to improve the information level and to network its organisational structures.

Objective 1: To continue to build the structures of the Rural Parliament and strengthen its importance, credibility and ability to advocate for the interests of rural areas effectively.

Objective 2: To ensure good information levels and communication in rural areas.

Target groups: Rural parliament, rural inhabitants, initiatives and partnerships

Main activities of VIPA:

- build services for the activities of VIPA Presidency and its committees
- regular operation of VIPA structures
- complete, innovate and manage information system about and for rural areas
- complete and enlarge regional structures and their support institutions
- create regional support institutions for consultation and education
- complete, enlarge and increase the operations of the network of Communication Centres
- hold seminars, workshops and meetings on experience exchange
- create a Slovak Rural House

Expected outputs:

- VIPA has professional support institutions for its activities
- regular and working operation VIPA structures

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- Working and actual information system about and for rural areas
- Existing network of regional structures with professional and expert services
- Doubled in number, operating and active network of Communication Centres
- Realised events on experience exchange
- Operating Slovak Rural House

Expected outcomes:

Rural parliament is effective and functional structure for rural development in Slovakia

Responsible for implementation:

Presidency of VIPA in co-operation with its committees and regional rural parliaments

Term of implementation: 2003 - 2005

4. Strengthen the role of Slovak rural areas in the European context

Support for rural areas has high importance and attention in the Member States of the EU. There are sufficient tools necessary to improve the quality of life of rural inhabitants in the EU. Slovak rural areas have no experiences in using that support and influencing tools on the national level in order to influence the direction of support for rural development in an effective way.

Objective 1: To ensure active co-operation of VIPA with foreign partners and institutions of EU

Objective 2 Active involvement of Slovak rural areas in the international network PREPARE

Target groups: Institutions of the EU, co-operating rural parliaments abroad, V-4 countries, applicant States (future Member States of the EU)

Main activities of VIPA:

- Prepare and process materials for the presentation of VIPA abroad
- Participation of VIPA representatives in meetings of co-operating rural parliaments abroad
- Start official contacts and co-operation with institutions of the EU
- Active participation of VIPA in the PREPARE network
- Start co-operation with the V-4 countries

- Organise Travelling Workshop 2003 of the PREPARE network in Slovakia

Expected outputs:

- VIPA has presentation and promotion materials for international co-operation
- VIPA is connected to international exchange of experiences with co-operating rural parliaments abroad
- VIPA is active member of the PREPARE network
- Travelling Workshop 2003 of the PREPARE network in Slovakia held
- VIPA has functional communication with institutions of the EU
- Conference about situation of rural areas of the V4 countries held

Expected outcomes: Slovak rural areas are respected part of European rural areas

Responsibility for implementation: VIPA Committee for International Co-operation

Term of implementation: 2003 – 2005

Actions:

1. Increasing the effectiveness of the tools and increasing the budget for rural development

Motivation: "Slovak rural areas suffer from lack of capital. There are not enough resources to revitalise the local economy and for sustainable social and environmental development. Rural areas are dependent on external resources and aid, but this aid is not systematic and does not ensure fair redistribution of resources. There are no rules, criteria or principles to ensure the equal development of regions. In the present situation it is not likely that there will be an increase of financial resources targeted at rural areas. The RP is aware that the resources of central Government are limited. It also accepts that regional policy, in this general State of scarce resources, is focussed on support to significant development projects. Despite this, the RP cannot accept the fact that the Slovak central Government does not have the tools to support integrated territorial development. All sectors have their own resources, a small percentage of which go to rural areas, but they do not co-ordinate their activities. These measures diminish disparities among regions only by sectoral lines (eg. environment/ agriculture/ transport) and do not respect the

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needs of the regions. These measures do not create synergetic effects and do not reflect local needs and priorities. Sectoral support tools are therefore ineffective and in fact are a waste of scarce public resources. On the other hand, total allocation of resources for rural areas are sufficient and if appropriately utilised, would be able to create the conditions for the re-vitalisation and development of rural areas, and increase in the quality of life.”

Aims of RP for next 2 years:

- elaborate a model for integrated rural development and the tools to deliver it
- gain public support for activities of supporting infrastructure
- increase the budget for the Programme of Rural Areas Renewal

2. Involving Slovak rural areas in European structures

Motivation: After accession to the EU, Slovakia will have to resist strong competition pressures. Support for rural areas has high importance and attention in Member States of EU. There are sufficient tools necessary to improve quality of life of rural inhabitants of the EU. Slovak rural areas however, have no experience with the implementation of such support and influence. Other countries in the PREPARE network are in a similar situation. It is therefore very useful for Slovakia to co-ordinate its steps with other countries and to gain experiences from Member States of the EU. It is very important for Slovak rural areas to lobby for their needs in the EU. Slovak RP has gained trust of Brussels during its existence. It is a big opportunity and it is necessary to use it for advocacy activities for the needs and interests of Slovak rural areas.

Aims:

- Maintain and develop co-operation with partner rural parliaments and institutions of the EU
- Develop and co-ordinate co-operation with future Member States of the EU, especially with V4 countries in the field of rural development
- Build good relationships with EU institutions

3. Building a network of supporting infrastructure for rural development

The low interest of central Government in the development of rural areas, coupled with the poor information available to rural areas, lower education levels, and traditional ways of thinking, cause the lagging of rural areas. The most visible effects are high unemployment and damage to the natural and cultural values of the countryside. Rural areas themselves are not able to initiate development themselves. They need external aid, especially to invest in the development of human resources and to improve information and education levels. Accessibility and growth of information and the need for new skills in rural areas, are the keys for the revitalisation of rural areas and improved quality of life. It will not be possible for rural areas to utilise support from the EU Structural Funds effectively without building up supporting institutional structures and services. The lack of recognition of the rural character of Slovakia in central Government strategic documents, and low interest in solving the problems of rural areas, call for the need to create a strong organisation for rural initiatives, which will be able to advocate the interests and needs of rural areas and their inhabitants. Effective promotion, contacts with media and public relations are also very important. In the 3 years of the RP identifying its role and structure, the challenge is to develop a strong organisation able to fulfil its mission to improve the quality of life of rural people. The RP has to increase its credibility and expertise to become an effective advocate for the needs and interests of rural areas. It therefore needs an appropriate organisational structure and support tools and institutions.

Aims:

- Complete, enlarge and increase operational capacities of the network of Communication Centres
- Create regional support institutions for consultations and education
- Information and educational system for rural development

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Appendix 2 SLOVAKIA – Itinerary

PREPARE travelling workshop – Poland:

- | | | |
|----------|--|---|
| 12.10.03 | Warsaw - PREPARE Pre-travel meeting
Travel to Western Polesie in Lubelskie Region
Bankowy Centre, Baile Lake | The Polish Rural Forum
Polish Rural Development Foundation
Delegation of the EC in Poland
Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development
Rural Development Programme
WWF Poland
UNESCO Club |
| 13.10.03 | Western Polesie Biosphere Reserve:

Polesie National Park headquarters
Gardzienice Academy of Theatre Practices | Sustainable Strategy for West Polesie
The River Bug cross-border co-operation
Festival of three cultures

Environmental issues within the Biosphere Reserve |
| 14.10.03 | Dolina Strugu Partnership

Green Bieszczady Partnership – Bobrka near Sloina | Community telephone company
Sustainable agricultural produce
Local direct marketing
Alfred Water – mineral water plant
Blazowa Manor – information and training centre
Eco-tourism
Greenway – cycle way
Local crafts |

Banska Stiavnica, Slovakia:

- | | | |
|-----------------|---|--|
| 15.10.03 | PREPARE gathering | PREPARE gathering
19 countries: Albania; Belgium; Bulgaria; Czech Republic; England; Estonia; Finland; Germany; Hungary; Latvia; Moldova; Lithuania; Poland; Romania; Russia; Scotland; Slovakia; Slovenia; Sweden.
Reports of the travelling workshops
The Slovak Rural Parliament
Workshops
The role of rural movements in influencing government |
| 16.10.03 | PREPARE gathering | Reports of the national movements
Workshops |
| 17.10.03 | PREPARE gathering | The Prepare Network
Prepare recommendations to the Salzburg conference |
| 18.10.03 | Banska Stiavnica | |
| 19.10.03 | Liptovsky Hradok:

Meeting with Vlasta Kornorova of A-Projekt
Former President of the Slovak Rural Parliament | |
| 20.10.03 | Meeting with the staff of A-Projekt | Rural tourism
Participatory methods of territorial planning
Village development planning
Micro-region partnerships
Roma minority development
Environmental education |

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	Oblazy Community Foundation	Bela River Association
	Kvacany Municipality – meeting with the Mayor	The role and issues of the village municipality Celtic links
21.10.03	Zilina Regional Council – meeting with officer responsible for regional planning	The role and activities of the regional council
	Slovak Rural Parliament – Zilina Regional Association – meeting with the regional co-ordinator	Work of the regional level of the Slovak Rural Parliament
	Wood Carvers network	Development of arts in Slovakia
	Banska Bystrica:	
22.10.03	Meeting with Peter Rusnak, President of the Slovak Rural Parliament	
	Meeting with Mr. Gisel, Head of Regional Development in Banska Bystrica Regional Council	
	Meeting with Darina Saxunova – Co-ordinator of the Rural Community Fund	Bzovik local fund-raising event Community planning event
	Meeting with Ingrid Bernathova – Rural Womens Leadership Network	
	Meeting with delegation from Kosova, Ismet Isufi – Executive Director of the Kosova Development Centre	
23.10.03	Meeting with Jana Mediarova – Director of VOKA and board member of the Slovak Rural Parliament	The management of the Slovak Rural Parliament VOKA and the rural development NGOs
	Nitra:	
	Meeting with Jela Tvrdonova, Head of the Slovak Rural Development Agency, and Board member of the Slovak Rural Parliament	The Slovak Rural Parliament Relationships with government Rural policy issues EU policy issues
	Bratislava:	
24.10.03	Meeting with the Ministry of Regional Affairs	EU programmes Rural development
	Dinner with conference of the international funding foundations operating in Eastern Europe.	
25.10.03	Meeting with Dr. Lubomir Faltan of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, Head of the Institute of Sociology Board member of the Slovak Rural Parliament	Rural research in Slovakia The role of the ministries The Slovak Rural Parliament