

REFLECTIONS FROM THE CF STUDY TRIP TO SLOVAKIA
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“It is not the milestones that matter, but the journey/work between the milestones”
Lubica Lachká

I. Introduction

I was glad to be included in the Slovak study trip this year and eagerly waited for the details to come in. I noticed a certain curiosity lurking in me: I have seen so much of the Slovak community foundations in the last two decades; what would I see this time? When I learnt the schedule I was not sure what to think: I would be visiting two community foundations, in Nitra and Pezinok, the ones I had visited exactly a year ago in 2013. Would I learn new things, gain new insights? I was unsettled and wondered if I should change my group. In the end, I did not change anything, and accepted that this would give me the learning I needed.

It was a good move! I could not have been luckier with the trip: it enriched my picture of Slovak community foundations, I saw some things again while I discovered new things I had not seen before.

Before I start the reflections, I would like to make a comment. When I am reflecting back two words come to my mind: sensitivity and delicate. The Slovak community foundation movement is 20 years old and a lot of people put a lot of work into making it what it is now – therefore I hope I approach the subject with the sensitivity which reflects my respect for their efforts. There will be a lot in this paper about stability and status quo, the pros and cons of the current state of affairs, and ideas for change. Change, often times, appears as ‘good’, however, when a situation is changing there are often many things that are lost. And Slovak CFs, since they have achieved a lot, they can also lose a lot, so the situation seems rather delicate to me.

Although this paper will be focusing on two CFs and to a lesser degree on the Slovak CF movement, we have to recognise that the world outside is also changing and affecting CFs across the region. Since the last study trip two things have happened that nobody predicted: Russia’s military attack on Ukraine and annexation of Crimea and the Hungarian government’s attacks on NGOs. How do these things affect us? Is there a particular role for CFs in showing solidarity? were the questions study trip participants discussed but will not be dealt with in this paper.

II. What I saw, heard, read, sensed

The greatest news I came away with from my trip is that *the community foundations (CFs) in Nitra and Pezinok are part of the ecosystems of their community*. Since their establishment more than 15 years ago they have become part of the picture in Nitra and Pezinok and I did not hear a single comment or sense a hint that they would not be here in 15 years’ time. Of

course there are certain worries about the changing tax system, the difficulty of not having new board members and so on, but for an outside observer like me these problems seem to be ‘manageable’. I consider this state of affairs a great success and everybody who has been involved in initiating, developing and supporting CFs in Slovakia should feel happy about it. This is not a small thing in our part of the world which has seen a lot of changes and turbulence and seen many organisations¹, once considered great, become unimportant or disappear completely.

I also sensed that *the two CFs have been on a plateau for the last few years*. There has not been a substantial change in many of their most easily traceable features, including:

- the people involved: most of the board members have been serving for many years, the directors have been with the organisations from the beginnings, the staff is stable even if shrinking in one organisation, the other has not had staff for years, the volunteers we met have also spoken of the CFs as if they had known them for a long time;
- the income and financial situation: the level of income, with ‘reasonable fluctuation’, seems to have stabilised, so are the sources of income as well as their proportion in the budget, the level of endowment has not changed;
- the programmes, both grant-making and operational, seem to have been running for years and years, enabling donors and recipients to count on them, if there is change it is normally initiated by an actor outside of the community (like the Academy’s programme on communication).

A well earned plateau? Yes, indeed, and they still act like community foundations (without significant mission drifts). After the pioneering heydays of 1994-2005 when many capable local leaders decided to implement the new and appealing concept of CFs with plentiful of support, mostly international, different and more difficult years came. It was especially noticeable in the financing of CFs: apart from the occasional foreign support (mostly coming from the Academy for the Development of Philanthropy in Poland and the Global Fund for CFs), funds had to be raised nationally or locally. CFs have successfully muddled through several crises, including the economic crisis of 2008-2010, they also manage well some of their on-going challenges (most importantly the burn out of the directors and the need for increased human input into the organisations) while they – together with their fellow CFs – have created many good things.

III. What I am taking home? The things I liked and found interesting/inspiring

What keeps Slovak CFs going in their second decade? was a question I arrived with to Slovakia. In the case of the two CFs I visited, I would dare to say that I found two main characteristics:

- i. a micro community of about 20-30 people provides its main life force. This group includes trustees, staff, volunteers and core donors and has been built up

¹ For instance NGO support centres in some countries, tele cottages in others and the list can be continued.

since the foundations beginnings. These are people who know and understand the CF's work, *trust* it, and see its positive contribution to the community. They are ready to promote the CF, work for it hard and go out their way if in crisis.

- ii. the 2 % tax assignation coming from companies and individuals. This is the financial foundation of CFs as this source of income provides the single most important revenue flow: 47 % in the case of Nitra and 65 % in the case of Revia².

I was impressed with the 'micro community' around both CFs, at first glance this is a significant achievement for the past 15 plus years and the source of sufficient energy to nurture the CFs into the future. I found the existence of this group fascinating and a good and a relatively easy/simple way to think about the level of rootedness, sustainability and resilience of the CFs. I found myself thinking: *to what degree the number of people and the group's diversity could be a useful and simple 'tool' to assess the CF?*

As for the 2 % tax assignation, I share the concern of many study trip participants and Slovak friends that it is too shaky and uncertain a ground on which to build a (financial) future. *'What can be done with a system that works so well for both donors and the CFs?'* is the question to ask, but it seems to me that the *'How can we start thinking about changing it?'* might be more important. (Some preliminary answers are in the following chapter.)

The second thing I liked was the *National Community Foundation Day* organised by the Association of Slovak Community Foundations. Held once a year on the 15th of May all Slovak CFs organise activities and events in their communities to reach out to people and draw attention to their work. As we heard, the day represents a good 'tool' to show that CFs have a presence both at the local and national level and increases the visibility of CFs at both levels by bringing about a good deal of (positive) press coverage. The preparations and implementation of the day also strengthens the joint identity of Slovak CFs and bring together, even if only virtually, all the communities that nurture a CF. *I wonder if a Regional Community Foundation Day would bring similar benefits at all three (regional, national, local) levels to CFs?*

Finally, I would like to highlight *one grant-making practise* out of the many I saw and liked. In Pezinok we met three ladies³ who have been the heart and soul of multiple community initiatives over the years. CF Revia has supported their work with several grants over the years. When one listens to the ladies' stories and experiences it is clear why: they have the relations and the skills to mobilise people around them, to show people that things can be done in their communities, to address important and often times difficult issues. (I would

² Based on the the combined income for the years 2010-2013.

³ Miriam Funova (used to be a PR expert for a big company, now works from home) was one of the leaders to establish a relaxation park in Modra, now she is at the helmet of an effort to renovate a listed building to host an orphanage; Tatiana Srokova (teacher from a school in Pezinok) whose students have visited several companies, scientific sites as well as entered (and won) competitions nationally and internationally (including one in the US) while she has equipped the school with high-quality equipment so that everybody can study science in an interesting way; and Eva Kulichova who organises different community activities in the 1,000 strong Grinava neighbourhood of Pezinok.

mention here that engaging the Roma community was mentioned several times as ‘difficult’ or outright ‘impossible’. Well, it took a 5-minute walk and €12 for Ms. Kulichova to design and implement a joint project with the members of the Roma community.)

I am impressed and glad that CF Revia has dared to support them several times. The multiple support, that entails money as well as non-financial support, makes complete sense, but – as far as I know – goes against the mainstream thinking and practice of CFs (and other grant-makers in the region) searching for and giving opportunities to ‘new’ individuals, groups, organisations. The two approaches could co-exist easily and let’s do what makes sense!

IV. What makes me think ...

Both CFs visited felt as though they have been on a plateau for some years, with great achievements behind them, but without much recent change in their position and work. Being on a plateau means that one can gain further height, but also can lose what one has already achieved. As in the case of Slovak CFs, it is not clear what is the next stage of their development (the next ‘milestone’). Or, to mention something from the opposite end, one can easily believe that a change in the tax assignment law would take away a significant portion of CFs’ income therefore it would seriously challenge CFs. One thing seems sure for me: change is coming and there are clear signs which indicate to the CFs what sort of changes!

It was not clear to me what or who is helping CFs to read these signs and face the possibilities and challenges of their current situation, so that they can begin to come up with some, even preliminary answers. To me the natural actors could be:

- *new people around individual CFs* (the possibilities are much broader than ‘just’ trustees, staff, etc.) who could enable CF leadership to recognise the importance and urgency of the challenges, begin to formulate answers as well as help implementing these answers in a very practical way;
- *the Association of Slovak Community Foundations* which could bring together the experience, wisdom and ideas of individual CFs in order to see what is common and what is unique in their situation; develop strategies and practical ways how to address the common issues while provide support, even if it is only moral support, for CFs to deal with their unique challenges;
- *People and/or organisations around the community of CFs* (the movement) who understand the world of CFs, have the necessary insights into it as well as the trust of the movement so that they can ask the right questions in a way that it mobilises CFs to act. These people/organisations can come from Slovakia, they could be people/organisations familiar or completely new to CFs; but these people can also come from beyond Slovakia).

What is certainly not helping CFs to change or even to experiment with new ideas is the fact that they have very little non-earmarked funds. Most of the money they raise goes to specific funds and predetermined activities while there seems to be little money available for ‘running the foundation’ and potentially new or ‘experimental’ activities. This state of affairs defines the work in a way that keeps the attention focused on specific activities/funds and encourages changes to the individual activities/funds without seeing the bigger picture. In other words, this income structure does not make it easy to see the CF as one entity with a coherent identity that should be apparent in all activities, therefore initiating greater changes/adjustments in the organisation is not easy.

It is interesting and telling to note that there are two sources which could provide at least some funds/space to experimentation and change/development: the Academy and the Global Fund. My sense was that both visited CFs got a grant from these donors but the money is/was used to fund specific projects (like youth bank-type activities) and/or complement scarce resources for staff and admin costs, and not for changes at the organisational level.

Many of us on the study trip noticed how few philanthropic (private or corporate) euros were raised by Slovak CFs⁴. *If there was more philanthropy involved it may help CFs be more open to change.* The tax assignments, which consists the largest part of CFs’ annual budgets, are gifts of the state: at the moment they are available, but they can also be easily taken away by the faceless ‘state’. Equally important is the fact that there is a set way how assignments are used, and it seems difficult to change it.

Given CFs’ position, achievements and the micro-circle of people around it, they are in a good position to conduct serious conversations with potential donors about the needs of the community/CFs and desires of the donors. This open flow of information could provide important impetus to CFs to see their situation in a fresh way, look closely at the opportunities and challenges they face. In addition, they could also address their opportunities and challenges better through raising more flexible (and long-term) funds from donors they can engage with in a meaningful way.

Perhaps more *closely related to the difficulty of embracing change is the fact that both CF directors we met talked openly about being burnt out.* This is completely understandable after having served the foundation for well over a decade, often times being the only person to deal with difficult situations and surrounded by mostly the same people (trustees, staff and volunteers). The literature describes and personal experience supports the fact that the directorship of a CF may well feel like a repetitive and lonely job for an organisation that is unique in the community.

What can be done to tackle being burnt out? A quick brain storming with colleagues or a peak into the literature would throw up quite a few valuable ideas. Just to highlight the ones I like the best⁵:

⁴ ‘Philanthropic’ understood simply as giving from your own and not redirecting tax dues from the state to nonprofits. In the last four years, corporate and individual gifts constituted 10 % of Revia’s income, while 18 % of Nitra’s.

⁵ Thanks to Beata Hirt for brain storming with me.

- Attend a long (at least one month) course (away from your home town) – it can be about work, but it does not have to be, the important thing is that it should take away you from the daily chores of the CF work;
- Look for new influences from beyond the CF field: find expert/scientists of different fields whose ideas and findings you find relevant to your work or look for artists whose work shed a different light on what you are trying to do;
- Take a longish sabbatical: go and have a holiday somewhere far away or do a few months' work for an other organisation in a different city. Here the important thing is to arrange your work so that it is done without your presence while you are being exposed to different experiences and realities.
- Surround yourself consciously with (new) people whose work, ideas, energies, outlook on life, etc. you like. Investigate gently how you could work together – it does not necessarily have to be CFs or community philanthropy.

I suspect many readers of this paper will find some of these appealing (or can come up with similarly attractive ideas) and clearly beyond one's reach. Just for the sake of it, resist resigning from these without dreaming about them for a couple weeks: put together what you would need to be able to attain them and start asking people for whom the CF and you are important for help and support ... and be ready for the unexpected!

As I am finishing my paper, I think more and more about L'ubica's quote. I think what resonates with my experience is that often times I could only identify a milestone retrospectively. Looking back it was clear and easy to point out, but I just did not see it when it was in front of me. Even in such situations, one needs to do the walk to get there and beyond. I am sure you can, my Slovak friends!

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Community Foundation Support Programme, Hungary