

Country: Slovak Republic

VOPE name: **Slovak Evaluation Society/ Slovenská evaluačná spoločnosť**

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Title: **Slovak Yeti: when will we see it?**

Background

The first appearance of “evaluations“ in Slovakia dates back to 1996 and it was financed by and motivated purely by external pressure of the European Commission Services. At that time the Commission Services launched a contract dealing with the evaluation of pre-accession funds in 10 candidate countries and one of the offices was located in Bratislava. This was the place where the first local capacities to evaluate were born. At the same time the term “evaluation” became familiar at least to those who were involved in the implementation of PHARE projects/programmes that were subject to the “operational monitoring and assessment”.

Another less sustainable initiative that built evaluation capacities in the country was a project at the National Labour Bureau, carried out by Dutch partners with MATRA funding from the Dutch Foreign Ministry. About 10 people from public institutions, research institutes and NGOs were trained in the area of Active Labour Market Policy evaluation. The Bureau was later merged into the Ministry of Labour and most project outputs were not used.

Apart from that no other local evaluation capacities have been developed as the evaluation of development aid and other interventions provided to Slovakia was carried out by foreign consultants.

Decentralisation of PHARE implementation transferred monitoring and later also evaluation responsibilities to the local authorities, which became responsible for the management of the system. The first tenders launched for evaluations confirmed that the lack of evaluation capacities is not a limiting factor. The demand immediately created supply mostly consisting of the consultancies previously engaged in the provision of technical assistance for pre-accession funds. The knowledge and experience on both supply and demand sides thus predetermined the quality of the evaluations.

The knowledge of evaluation was limited and there was a lack of guidelines and methodologies in the local language. Evaluation was often perceived as a personal attack on officials and ministers and, therefore, not supported by policy and administration. The internal pressure from the side of institutions such as the National Council of the Slovak Republic, National Audit Office or Ministry of Finance aimed at strengthening evaluation has been weak. Consequently, an evaluation culture did not exist and the crucial evaluation stage of the policy cycle was largely ignored. However, pressure from the European Commission and the

obligation to evaluate all the interventions funded from the EU sources, meant that the number of evaluations had to increase.

All the above mentioned factors resulted in the effort of three consultants engaged in this area to establish the Slovak Evaluation Society (SES) as a non-profit association, which would group professionals and promote evaluations in order to use the evaluations by the policy/decision-makers to make informed and evidence-based decisions. SES was established in December 2006 and membership is open to all interested individuals and organisations. The main objectives of SES are:

- to build evaluation culture in Slovakia,
- to raise awareness of the general public and promote evaluation in the public sector, its theory, practice and use (for the evaluation of policies, programmes, institutions,...) in order to increase transparency and accountability of the use of public finances, and
- to develop cooperation, exchange of experience and knowledge with partner organisations at home and abroad.

The invitations to join the society were distributed to all relevant Ministries, public bodies, private companies, universities, research and the third sector institutions but remained without any response. New members seem not to be attracted due to the membership fee, practically no incentives and expected voluntary work for the society. Moreover a few months later, another association – Slovenska spolocnost pre evaluacie (Slovak Society for Evaluation was established. Very limited number of the evaluation practitioners and low interest of the public institutions has not enabled any substantial increase of the members. On the other hand, the size limitations have helped the organisation to be driven by quality considerations rather than work as a large society with a huge number of members - free-riders. Members of SES have a genuine interest in evaluation and are willing to volunteer their time and energy. Although the structure of the society is formalised, all the work is done and all communication takes place on an informal basis. Distribution of information takes place via emails while the most interesting and important news and events are placed on the web site. (See www.evaluation.sk.)

Since 2008 SES is a member of the Network of Evaluation Societies in Europe (NESE), which is the network under the auspices of the European Evaluation Society (EES). SES participates in annual meetings to exchange experience and discuss good practice cases.

Strategy and implementation

The first activities that have been taken up by the SES in order to enhance individual capacities to conduct credible and useful evaluations were focused on promotion and education:

- a short book with basic information on monitoring and evaluation in Slovak language was published and is available for downloading from the SES web site,

- evaluation became part of the university curricula for the students of the Public Policy Institute (Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences, Comenius University in Bratislava),
- several trainings and seminars led by national and international experts have been organised for the staff of ministries and other interested people from the NGO sector, private companies, universities and research institutions,
- database of evaluations is being built and all collected data are available on the web site of the society,
- Slovak version of “Eva the Evaluator”, a fun and accessible introduction to evaluation, was printed and distributed to all ministers, deputy ministers and members of parliament,
- all members of SES have access to the electronic library of books, articles, guidelines, methodologies, etc.
- close cooperation is maintained with the Czech Evaluation Society. Since 2008, in cooperation with our Czech colleagues we annually organise one-week International Programme for Development Evaluation Training (IPDET) in the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Bottlenecks/challenges

As already mentioned, the situation in the country has not been “evaluation-friendly.” One of the important factors is apparently incomplete public administration reform, which has not managed to address all related problems. Therefore the country is still facing difficulties with prevailing political nominations of civil servants and their high turn-over, numerous organisational changes, which take place continually, lack of modern, professional and experienced civil servants, and lack of institutional memory. This means that many efforts result in short-term benefits, which are not sustained. Effects of training activities are often lost with the change of personnel, in better cases these are moved to other public institutions.

The official obligatory coordination of the monitoring and evaluation services, in relation to the EU funded activities, has been initially subject of a vague division of responsibilities between the Office of Government and the Ministry of Construction and Regional Development. However, strong leadership and ownership have been largely missing. The Ministry of Construction and Regional Development was abolished in 2010 and responsibilities were taken over by the Government Office and six months later by the enlarged Ministry of Transport, Construction and Regional Development. Personnel changes took place again after the elections in March 2012 and are still ongoing.

There is no institution in Slovakia officially responsible for evaluation at the national level and no effort has been observed to create a national evaluation system or policy. The advocacy activities of SES have thus been limited. This was due to the very low interest of the

institutions and frequent changes of staff. For example the cooperation with the Ministry of Construction and Regional Development, which was the central coordination body for Structural Funds monitoring and evaluation, was formally initiated and agreed in 2007. The letter of cooperation was signed but no further initiative, support or requirement has appeared. The proposal of SES to create and maintain a database of evaluations was welcomed but data collection was neither assisted nor secured. The data have been collected based on requests for information (in compliance with the Act on Free Access to Information) addressed to 10 central state administration bodies (mostly Managing Authorities for EU Structural Funds or Intermediary Bodies). The effort to bring the central coordination role for evaluations to the Supreme Audit Office is also pending due to the current change of top management.

The external environment is generally not at all supportive of evaluation. The obligatory evaluations of Structural Funds interventions are taking place but their scope and average number a year is decreasing (in 2011 it was 10 evaluations with the total value of 168.000 Euro). The effort of the Ministry of Finance to introduce obligatory monitoring and evaluation of all public finance was observed in 2005 when this duty was introduced in the Act on Budgetary Rules of the Public Administration. However, with the change of government after the elections in 2006 no visible enforcement of these duties could be observed.

The interest of the ministerial staff is minimal, if the exceptions appear they are often limited by the bureaucratic rules and lack of support from the management. The management of ministries is hardly ever available for trainings or seminars. The interest of the target group thus not always corresponds with the efforts, time and resources spent on the preparation of activities. For example. the video-conference on public procurement of evaluations, which is considered to be the hottest topic due to the numerous problems encountered in the process, was attended by the representatives of six institutions. The overall participation of the Slovak trainees at the IPDET was 16 people in the last five years, which is seven times less than Czech participants.

So far, evaluation in Slovakia does not serve transparency or accountability purposes. The primary aim is either to comply with administrative obligations or up to a certain limited extent to improve the management of EU funded activities and/or to assist the management bodies with their obligatory reporting. With the exception of *ex-ante* evaluations, no mechanism is established to ensure that recommended measures are taken on board and implemented. Moreover, the qualification, knowledge, experience and skills regarding the administrative monitoring and evaluation functions are very limited.

Progress and results

Realistically we can conclude that the results of our activities are not very visible. The promotion of evaluations through “Eva the Evaluator” did not bring any direct feedback from the politicians but some signals could be observed that it might be under consideration. The benefits of training activities could not be mostly sustained due to the above mentioned problems. Despite that, evaluations have become better known and they are at least discussed.

To quote one of our trainees: *the evaluations in Slovakia are like the Yeti. Everybody talks about them, but no one has seen them, yet.*

Members of SES recently provided evaluation training to the Supreme Audit Office as part of a complex training package. Some 240 staff members of the Office all over Slovakia were trained and the benefits are in this case likely to be sustained. Programme budgeting introduced for all public administration bodies including monitoring and evaluation duties is subject of the Supreme Audit Office control. The knowledge gained will be used in the everyday work of the Office.

The mini-IPDET training has already gained an international reputation. Training is led by former consultants of the Independent Evaluation Group of the World Bank and attended by evaluation practitioners from various institutions (public, private, academic, non-governmental). The next event planned in September 2012 is fully booked and registered participants come from 25 countries all over the world. The training serves as an excellent platform for exchange of experience and networking.

Key enabling factors

The enthusiasm of SES members is considered to be the key enabling factor. Without that, the conditions and environment would destroy any promotion of the evaluation effort with the potential to introduce more transparency in the use of public funds.

External pressure of the European Commission is undoubtedly the driving force of evaluations. Local efforts would not have been sufficient to result in use of any monitoring or evaluation frameworks.

Societal progress is slow but steadily leads to incorporation of evaluations into the policy-making processes.

Next steps

Carefully planned and good quality evaluations in Slovakia have been and are still rare. Until now, the Slovak Republic has not launched any evaluation of a project, programme, policy or any other intervention funded solely from the state budget. The existing legislative duties will be emphasized publicly to ensure that the budget lines of the public administration bodies are regularly monitored and evaluated.

Special attention will be paid to equity-focused evaluation in relation to the very sensitive issue of Roma. This topic has been partly reviewed with the support of the World Bank and resulted in disproving some of the myths widely held among the general public and decision-makers. Preparation of reasonable strategies to resolve the problem would require much substantial evaluation effort and political will. Methodological support will be provided to the ministries and other institutions to assist.

The obligatory evaluations in line with the use of EU funds are practically the only ones taking place. Evaluations are carried out because of the external EU pressure and are generally perceived as an imposed administrative obligation. The use of evaluations is thus very limited. They have no significant impact on accountability. No lessons learned or evaluation feedback receives attention by the policy-makers. Evaluation is not accepted as an integral part of the policy cycle; either by national policy makers or by the administration. Further lobbying to promote evaluation at the national level will take place. The proposal to unify guidelines on programme budgeting will be discussed with the Ministry of Finance.

National policy makers show very low interest in evaluation, its findings and recommendations. The given budget allocations do not allow professional evaluation work at minimum quality standards and evaluation managers do not usually sufficiently understand what they are going to contract, how, why and what they want to get out from the evaluation and how they should use the results. Promotion of evaluation and provision of training, seminars and workshop activities will be continued.

Evidence suggests a strong bias in the procurement of evaluations, indicating a considerable risk of malpractice. Although procurement procedures and guidelines exist and are compliant with EU legislation, they require revision and thoughtful implementation. A request for an explanation regarding the use of price as the sole criterion in evaluation tenders has been submitted to the Public Procurement Office. Further steps will be agreed based on the response.

So far, external EU pressure has not managed to stimulate the internal pressure and to anchor evaluation as an inseparable part of policy cycle and good governance. Bottom up pressure was initiated: activities to promote evaluation and its use are being organised by the national evaluation society. Training is available but its effective use depends on the policies applied by the individual ministries and willingness of staff to participate and/or ministries to fund it.

Top-down pressure is, however, missing and Slovakia needs an “evaluation champion” with the power to install this important instrument for informed decision making in governance. Substantive government demand is an essential pre-requisite for successful institutionalisation of monitoring and evaluation systems. This needs to be internally created and closely related with the need to have a powerful champion (minister or senior official) who can drive the institutionalisation of monitoring and evaluation and persuade colleagues of its importance. The strategy how to identify and support such a person must be carefully considered.