



## 5. SLOVAKIAN RURAL PARLIAMENT, VIDIECKY PARLAMENT NA SLOVENSKU VIPA

### The national context

**The Nation** Slovakia became an independent country on 1 January 1993, after the break-up of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic. This followed a history of almost constant occupation since the 7<sup>th</sup> Century. In May 2004, Slovakia entered the European Union. It has a total land area of 49,035 square kilometres, and a population of 5.4 million, with a fairly high density of 109 persons per Km<sup>2</sup>.

Economically, the country suffered from the transition from a Communist to market system. The former markets were lost along with the important armaments industry. This led to instability, high unemployment and low incomes. The rural areas in particular were very badly hit, with a massive decline in agriculture, jobs and resulting in out-migration. Then came the challenge of accession to the EU, placing requirements on the Government to align with the economic and structural conditions of the EU.

**Administration** Slovak administration is composed of State bodies at national, regional and district levels, plus regional councils and Municipalities. The main elements are:

President	Elected every 5 years by the National Council
Parliament	The National Council with 150 members
National Government	19 Ministries
Regional Government	8 regional local authorities State regional authorities at many levels
District Authorities	79 Districts
Local Government	2,878 Municipalities
Micro-regions	150 non-statutory partnerships at local level

When seeking to understand the Rural Parliament, the most significant elements of public administration are the regions, the local authorities and the micro-regions.

**Regional Government** The country was traditionally divided into a number of regions and sub-regions, dating back to an earlier period in Slovak history. These still hold some cultural importance and local allegiance, but are no longer represented through the formal administrative structures. During the Communist period, the role of regional government was removed. This was reinstated in the administrative reforms of 2001, when Slovakia was divided into 8 entirely new regions, with a regional local authority in each - see map below.



Source: Tax Directorate of the Slovak Republic, [www.drsr.sk](http://www.drsr.sk)



### **State Regional and District Authorities**

Branches of some State authorities are organised at regional or district levels, without co-terminous boundaries with the regional local authorities. There are separate regional Ministry offices for environment, transport, social affairs and education. There are also over 30 Regional Development Agencies.

**Regional Councils** The Regional Councils are statutory, locally elected bodies, established in January 2002 at the request of the EU, as a condition for the delivery of Structural funds and regional policy and to enable subsidiarity to operate. Their main role is to guarantee the development of the regions and to fulfil the principles of regional policy and the law for regional development. They have statutory responsibility for regional development, and for preparing regional territorial, strategic and action plans, which set the framework within which other bodies must operate. The Regional Councils are also responsible for delivering infrastructure and major services - health, education, culture, environment, social care and transport. The Regional Councils have no control over the Municipalities, which are responsible to the citizens and are independent partners, with competencies defined by law. Some of the Regions also carry out State responsibilities, such as social affairs and health care. The Regional Councils are elected every 4 years, with 1 representative per 12-15,000 people: the Chairperson of each Council is directly elected by the citizens.

**Local government** In Slovakia, the village has traditionally been at the heart of the structure and culture of the rural areas. The pre-Communist tradition of local government was focused on the village and its powerful mayor. In 1974, the Communist government established a centralised system of local administration, with one central village and a group of satellite villages. The villages had no say in this decision, and the loss of village autonomy was resented. In 1989-90, following independence in Czechoslovakia, the villages rejected this system in favour of their previous autonomy and insisted upon the re-creation of Municipalities at village level. This was a reaction against the State control of the Communist period, and was therefore politically very sensitive.

**Municipalities** There are currently 2,878 Municipalities, of which 138 are towns and 2,740 (95%) are rural villages. The rural settlement structure is dominated by small villages of less than 500 people, the smallest with a population of only 9. Every village, no matter how small, has a Municipality, with all of the powers and responsibilities of a local authority. Its responsibilities include local planning and the delivery of local services such as roads, street lighting, water and waste services, public buildings and facilities, kindergartens, primary schools and emergency services. It is also responsible for local economic development and cultural activities. Such responsibilities must be carried out often with only 1 paid staff member and little professional support. Funding for local government is currently very poor and awaiting fiscal reforms.

**Unions of local authorities** There are national associations of Municipalities - the Union of Towns and Villages; and the Association of Towns and Villages of Slovakia. These have regional structures and are strong lobby organisations to the Government. At regional level they also work together on big infrastructure projects, such as sewerage schemes.

**Micro-regions** The small scale of many Municipalities, and the limit on their financial ability to undertake big projects, point towards the benefits that may come if they can work together. Municipalities can set up a common office for certain responsibilities: but a more common pattern is the creation of micro-regions.

Micro-regions are voluntary partnerships of Municipalities, NGOs and private businesses, established at differing scales to solve mutual problems. There is a strong movement to create micro-regions: the first was created in 1992 and there are now 224. They have appeared in response to the problems of Municipalities, the increased size of the regions, and the EU requirement for 'partnership'. Micro-regions have increasing importance in the Slovak system, and are seen by some as the basic building blocks for the programming and planning of rural development at local level. They enable



## 5. SLOVAKIAN RURAL PARLIAMENT, VIPA

co-operation between all sectors and villages within the micro-region, establish joint visions and to develop practical solutions to common problems. They create an identity for the villages and the micro-region, and enable co-operation between micro-regions. However, they are non-legal entities without statutory powers, which limits their access to funding and decision-making powers.

**Civil organisations** There are currently 18,000 registered NGOs in Slovakia, mostly at local and regional levels, but only a fraction are very active. Many NGOs were established and trained through the assistance of international, especially US, aid during the early 1990s.

At present, there is very limited funding available to the civil sector from State, regional or municipal authorities. NGOs and local groups use other funding sources, including the National Lottery; the Rural Community Fund, established by the NGO, VOKA; foreign aid organisations; some EU Programmes; and charitable tax relief.



### The situation in Rural Areas

Slovakia is still a very rural country. There is no single official definition of a rural area in Slovakia, and different definitions are used for different purposes. Rural areas represent 87% of the total national territory. According to OECD and EU (Eurostat) criteria, more than 50% of the population live in 'predominantly rural' districts, 15-50% in 'transitional' districts and less than 5% in 'predominantly urban' districts. Of the 2,878 Municipalities, 2,241 are defined as rural.



The economic situation in the rural areas is particularly difficult. The rural population has experienced greater hardship than urban areas from the transition to an independent market economy. The weaknesses include 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 as a whole has only 45% of the average EU GDP, though Bratislava has the average EU GDP.

In many villages, most jobs are no longer in agriculture, which has declined rapidly, but in industry and services, and increasingly in recreation. From the economic perspective, the Slovakian countryside is in process of sub-urbanising, especially in the city regions, where many urban people are moving to live in the rural areas. The more remote rural areas are affected by out-migration of young people, high unemployment, low income and poor infrastructure. This calls for a different kind of development from the previous models based on agriculture: other forms of activity and income are needed.

Rural areas usually have less developed facilities, and a high proportion of old buildings are in a state of decline. Other items of infrastructure, such as roads and bridges, 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 government is hoping to use EU funds to address these issues.

### Rural policy

Most of Slovakia is rural or semi-rural, with an increasingly diverse economy. This should be reflected in policy. However, policy for rural areas is mostly limited to agriculture, and integrated rural development policy is entirely missing. There is also a lack of systematic information about the state of the rural areas: Government statistics, being mainly collected at district level, do not distinguish rural from urban areas. There is no single Ministry dealing with rural affairs. This role is divided between the Ministry for Regional Affairs, which is responsible for regional development and planning, 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 its staff received training from FAO experts. Its role relates to all Ministries, but it



reports to 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.

The Agency reported that the real impact of policies on rural areas to date has not, however, been significant, and the quality of rural life is still declining.

*"Problems of infrastructure development and the environment are still unresolved. 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."*<sup>1</sup>

## **The Rural Parliament of Slovakia - Vidiecky Parlament na Slovensku (VIPA)**

### **History**

**The evolution of civil society** The weaknesses affecting the rural areas, described earlier, provoked action by non-government organisations (NGOs) from the early 1990s. They took steps 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 was a significant challenge following the long period of Communism, during which the State assumed responsibility and rural people came to rely upon this. The NGOs also aimed to diversify the economies of rural areas, as a complement to the decline in agriculture. Rural women were particularly active in this work.



**VIDIECKY  
PARLAMENT  
NA  
SLOVENSKU**

During this period, many civil organisations were formed at local, regional and national levels. Many of them received strong support from aid organisations and foundations, mostly from the USA, and from a range of professional bodies. 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 this pattern of individual civil groups and organisations did not 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. In order to address this, in 1994 the Slovak Rural Development Agency 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.

**Preparatory committee** In February 1999, proposals came forward for a common cross-sector platform to represent rural interests. In August 1999, a Preparatory Committee was appointed to prepare the way for the establishment of a 'Rural Parliament' to enable exchange, co-operation and co-ordination in support of rural Slovakia. 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 this phase.

**Creation of the 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,

<sup>1</sup> Slovak Rural Development Agency - unpublished report.





## 5. SLOVAKIAN RURAL PARLIAMENT, VIPA

regional and national rural development NGOs, agencies 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 - which identified the rural policy priorities for the Rural Parliament for the coming 2 years.

During the first session, the initial organisational structure of the Rural Parliament 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 all types of member organisations, and equal numbers of men and women,
- An Executive Committee of 3 Board members to be the statutory body of the Rural Parliament.

Following this meeting, the Rural Parliament of Slovakia was established as a civil organisation with legal status in October 2000.

**EU special preparatory programme** In 2000, the Rural Parliament gained EU funding for a Pilot Project for Rural Development under the PHARE Special Preparatory Programme. This played an important role in building the capacity of the Rural Parliament and in strengthening its partnership with the Ministry of Agriculture. It led to the establishment, in just one 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 preparatory phase involved contact with national rural movements 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 process took 15 months to establish and to build trust between the participating organisations.

### Structure

The Rural Parliament's main objective is to improve the quality of life of the people living in the rural areas of Slovakia, in a sustainable way. It also aims 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 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. Power in Slovakia is divided between national and regional authorities, so the challenge for the Rural Parliament is to match their structures and activities to this. At national level, the Rural Parliament provides a key partner for the Government in rural development, with links to many other rural organisations. At regional level, the Regional Associations work with members and aim to act as partners for the Regional Councils.

The organisational structure of the Rural Parliament was changed in 2003, from that set out in 2000. The main elements are:

- Membership
- Biennial Session
- Presidium
- Committees
- Central office
- Regional Associations
- Micro-regions
- Communication Centres
- Information Points



**Membership** The Rural Parliament 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.

*"Members are those who want to help and who need help"*

**Biennial sessions** A Session of the Rural Parliament is held every other year. This two-day Biennial Session, preceded by regional meetings, is the most important tool for formulating policy. It is open to all who want to contribute to the development of rural policies. It is a platform for exchange of experiences, and for formulation of needs and priorities for rural development for the coming two years. The Session sets the policies for the organisation. The Presidium is elected following the Session, to implement those policies. Annual General Assemblies are held every year, to ratify policies and conduct formal business.

**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, and comprise local, regional and national representatives. It meets every two months, and is responsible for the development, implementation and monitoring of the Rural Parliament's policy strategies, programmes and projects. It co-ordinates the 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 Biennial Session.

**Committees** The Presidium creates regular or ad-hoc executive committees. The regular committees are responsible for international co-operation; media and public relations; institutional development; analyses and advocacy. Each committee has at least three members, chaired by a member of the Presidium.

**Management** The Rural Parliament does not have its own central administrative office. It is a conscious policy that the organisation should be hosted by one of its member organisations, in order to use the expert potential of the members. It operates as a partnership, rather than a hierarchical organisation. During its first 3 years, a regional member NGO 'A-Projekt' hosted the Rural Parliament. In 2003 the hosting passed to a national rural development NGO, VOKA, based in Banska Bystrica, which now has a small management unit for the Rural Parliament, with one paid and one volunteer staff. They handle administration, but all other work is done on a voluntary basis by committee members.

**Regional associations** Independent Regional Associations of the Rural Parliament are being formed in each of the 8 statutory regions of Slovakia. As of October 2003, there were Regional Associations, each with their own statutes, in the regions of Banska Bystrica, Presov, Trencin and Zilina. Regional Associations are also being created for the regions of Nitra, Kosica and Trnava with Bratislava. The main reason for establishing this regional structure of the Rural Parliament was to move co-ordination of rural development activities from central to regional level, and to work with regional government. Each Regional Association has a formal agreement with the Regional Council. Their main task is to provide assistance, education and networking to rural initiatives, and to represent the rural areas in the development of regional policies.

**Micro-regions** The micro-regions are non-statutory partnerships between Municipalities, NGOs and private business; and act as the basic building blocks for the programming and planning of rural development at local level. For this reason, they are the main target group for the activities of the Rural Parliament, and play an important part in implementing its work at the local level. They were not set up by the Rural Parliament, but most of them are members of it. The Rural Parliament advocates the creation of micro-regional partnerships; and finds them more valuable as partners than the villages or individual local groups, because it wishes to reduce the fragmentation of the villages.



## 5. SLOVAKIAN RURAL PARLIAMENT, VIPA

**Communication centres** The Communication Centres of the Rural Parliament are the basic infrastructure for regional development at a local level. A network of 30 communication centres was initially established and trained through the Special Preparatory Program. Their main tasks are 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. The network has now expanded to 38, and further expansion is intended at a later date. Communication centres are independent organisations and must raise their own funding.

**Information points** 18 Information Points have also been established around the country. They have similar functions to the Communication Centres, but their staff have not undertaken the training organised by the Rural Parliament. They form local centres within micro-regions for meeting and for sharing and disseminating information, and are networked nationally.

**Finance** 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. During its first 3 years under A-Projekt, 2 to 3 million SKK (50,000 to 75,000 Euro) were spent, most of this from various funded projects. A further 1 million SKK (25,000 Euro) were provided through A-Projekt.

At present, the Rural Parliament is living from very low funding, comprising 17,000 Euro from the Mott Foundation for the core costs of the central secretariat; membership fees, which are very low; and project funds to specific projects. All other costs for time and expenses are carried by the member organisations. The Rural Parliament currently receives no public funds. Securing State support is seen as a priority, because the structures of the Rural Parliament, at national, regional and local levels, cannot be sustained from local resources alone.

### Activities

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 main areas of its work include: strategic planning; organisational development; advocacy and lobbying; information and communications; training; focussed projects; and international co-operation. Activity to date has been mainly focused on establishing the Rural Parliament and its structures at the different levels, building effective partnerships, and gaining a profile for the organisation with Government and regional authorities. Capacity is limited by the human resources available.

**Programme for Slovak rural areas** The current Programme for Slovak Rural Areas, for 2003-5, originates from the Session of the Rural Parliament in 2002, and was formally approved by the General Assembly in March 2003. The Strategic objective is *"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 to take care of their environment."* The Programme states the following priorities:

- Fiscal decentralisation and fair redistribution of resources for rural areas,
- Improved readiness of rural areas for EU accession,
- Professional and sustainable support infrastructure for rural development,
- Strengthening the role of Slovak rural areas in Europe.



The Programme sets out the broad actions to be taken in the two-year period as:

- Increasing the effectiveness of the tools, and increasing the budget for rural development,
- Involving Slovak rural areas in European structures,
- Building a network of supporting infrastructure for rural development.



## Achievements

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

### **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 Associations are established and another 3 are in process of formation.
- Help was given to establish and support public-private micro-regional partnerships.
- 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 vis-à-vis Government.
- Participation of representatives in national expert and consultative committees.

### **International**

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

## Challenges

The Rural Parliament faces the following challenges:

- Co-operation and communication with the Government Ministries has proved difficult to achieve.
- Funding is a major issue and the whole organisation relies on voluntary work, and 'in-kind' contributions of the partner organisations: this is probably unsustainable in the long term.
- To date it has proved very difficult to raise core funding from the Government, and there is also concern that such funding could compromise the neutrality of the Rural Parliament.
- Capacity at local and national levels is too limited in relation to work that is needed. 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 threatens those relationships.
- There is a perceived danger that the Rural Parliament may subsume its member organisations in the eyes of Government and others, in relation to consultation and funding.
- There is competition for funding between the national and regional associations and the member organisations.
- There have been problems of poor financial control, especially in the early years.
- Personality changes and difficulties, both within the Rural Parliament and in public bodies, have led to difficulties in internal and external relationships.

## Commentary

**Origins of the movement** The Slovak Rural Parliament was among the most recent to emerge among the rural movements in Europe; and was the third in Eastern Europe, following Estonia (1992) and Hungary (1998). Slovakia was able to learn much from the experiences of the already established movements, especially those in Sweden, Finland, Estonia and Hungary. 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 faces its own particular blend of challenges.







## 5. SLOVAKIAN RURAL PARLIAMENT, VIPA

**The national context** The structure and aims of the Rural Parliament are much influenced by the social and political structure of the country. Slovakia met a particular set of challenges in establishing a new democratic state since it became independent in 1993. These related to the centralised social and political culture inherited from the Communist period, the establishment of a new political and administrative system, the loss of the former economic base of the Soviet system, and the transition to a market economy. There was a lack of co-operation between local groups and organisations, and between the many, well-trained civil organisations, operating in the rural areas.

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. This 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.

**Municipalities and micro-regions** The movement, when established, was reacting to the underlying structure and culture of the rural areas. At the heart of this lay the village, traditionally a very important unit in Slovakia, and the Municipality, which was revived as the unit of local government after the Communist period of more centralised administration. The founders of the Rural Parliament were aware of the strength of popular support for the Municipalities, but also of the weakness of these small local authorities in terms of financial and staff resources and of their ability to undertake larger projects. They realised that an effective approach to rural development depended upon co-operative action at a rather larger geographic scale. For that reason, they fastened on the process, which was already underway by the time the Rural Parliament came into existence, namely the creation of micro-regions.

*"The Micro-regions are a strong part of the creation of civil society in the country." <sup>2</sup>*

The decision of the Rural Parliament to focus its local activity on the micro-regions gives it a different character to those national rural movements, for example in Finland and Estonia, which have their roots in the villages. In Slovakia, the village level is already a formal level of local administration. Moreover, the villages are already structured and networked nationally, through the Union of Towns and Villages.

**A structured system** 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 theoretical model may not work well in practice and the reality may be more messy. However, the amount of careful thought and planning that has gone into establishing the strategic framework provides a very strong foundation. The 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** The Rural Parliament is conceived of 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 by academic and research institutions, relevant development agencies and small and medium-size businesses.

The Presidium of the Rural Parliament has a cross-sectoral character. This is identified as its greatest strength, but it also 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 can impede agreement on priorities.

---

<sup>2</sup> Regional co-ordinator for the Zilina Regional Rural Parliament (pers. com.).



The relationship between the Rural Parliament and its member organisations is important, but potentially sensitive. The Rural Parliament is trying to operate as a partnership. It achieves this by dividing responsibilities between different member organisations at national, regional or local level. The national body only undertakes functions which cannot be done by others. Each Regional Association and Communication Centre is an independent organisation. This enables the Rural Parliament itself to maintain a very slim core operation, and strengthens the roles of the different organisations in implementing the policy. 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."*<sup>3</sup>

The Rural Parliament aims to support its member NGOs.

*"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."*<sup>4</sup>

However, there are some problems in the relationship between the Rural Parliament and the individual member organisations, and there appears to be some competition between them. 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 NGOs may be seen as only one member of a wider network. This becomes critical when it affects competition for funds.

The role of individuals within the Rural Parliament can, at times, 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.

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 established to have an equal gender balance. However it is noted that, at events, the grass-root organisations tend to be represented mainly by women, and the national agencies and Ministries mainly by men.

**Relations with the local and regional levels** The Slovak Rural Parliament is still perceived by many to be 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. Links to the local level have been established through 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."*<sup>5</sup>

The Communication Centres are felt to be an important achievement. They were initially set up and trained by the Rural Parliament, and they form the basic local infrastructure and the most direct connection to local communities. However, they are independent entities. It was commented that those who manage the centres feel part of the movement, are very committed to it, and can be more active than those on the Presidium, even though most are not paid. Many are now raising funds and undertaking activities they would not have done before, hence they are making a significant contribution to local capacity building.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Rusnak, Chairman of the Rural Parliament (pers. com.).

<sup>4</sup> Lubomir Faltan, Head of the Institute of Sociology, Slovak Academy of Sciences (pers. com.).

<sup>5</sup> Co-ordinator of the Zilina Regional Association (pers. com.).



## 5. SLOVAKIAN RURAL PARLIAMENT, VIPA

The Rural Parliament's links to the Municipalities are less direct. Co-operation between villages is promoted through the Communication Centres and Micro-regions, with the aim of enabling a more effective local level administration. The Municipalities themselves are networked through the Union of Towns and Villages. This tends to be more politically focussed, whereas the Rural Parliament has a more practical emphasis. There is still not much co-operation between the two, and the Rural Parliament tends to be seen as a threat by the Union.

Each of the Regional Associations has signed a co-operation agreement with its Regional Council, and has regular co-operation meetings. Both types of organisation 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. The Regional Associations have good information and contacts in the rural areas, and the Councils are using their expert capacity to help with regional development challenges.

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

*"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."*<sup>6</sup>

The Ministry of Regional Development reported that they want to involve the Rural Parliament and the Union of Towns and Villages in developing the Objective 1 programme. For the next programme period, these two bodies will be full partners in the process, and will be members of the Monitoring Committee. The Rural Parliament has a seat on the preparatory committee for the Structural Funds, the chair of which is the State Secretary. It has also been advisor 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.

*"The Government should have one partner to speak to. The member organisations can work with the communities."*<sup>7</sup>

*"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."*<sup>8</sup>

*"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."*<sup>9</sup>

**Looking ahead** The Rural Parliament has undergone a period of very rapid development, with significant achievements. Energy has been put into building the structures of the organisation, promoting its position in Slovak society, developing working relationships with the Government and administration at all levels, and developing a clear strategic plan of action. The strategy sets out quite clearly where the priorities for the coming period lie.

---

<sup>6</sup> Jela Tvrdonova, Head of the Slovak Rural Development Agency (pers. com.).

<sup>7</sup> Peter Rusnak, Chairman of the Rural Parliament (pers. com.).

<sup>8</sup> Jela Tvrdonova, Head of the Slovak Rural Development Agency (pers. com.).

<sup>9</sup> Vlasta Kornerova, first Chairperson of the Slovak Rural Parliament (pers. com.).



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 the development of new policies and programmes to support rural areas, such as an integrated 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. It currently depends upon volunteer labour and the in-kind contributions of member NGOs, with no public funding at any level. This is a great achievement, but it will not be sustainable in the longer term. The success of the whole movement will depend on its 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 Regional Associations and the Communication Centres. However, there are still many rural areas in which such structures do not exist, and the work of creating links between these structures and the rural people is still at an early stage. This will be an important focus for 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. The conviction is that it is possible to turn this around and to create the vision, profile, capacity and political support so that **"All Slovakia shall live"**.





# Appendices

## APPENDIX 1

### Author's Itinerary for the four case studies

Estonia	17 to 30 August 2003
Finland	1 to 12 September 2003
Poland and Slovakia	12 to 25 October 2003
Denmark	27 October to 8 November 2003

### ESTONIA

17.8.03 Meeting with the President of Kodukant

#### **Meetings in Viljandi County**

18.8.03 Kodukant Viljandi County organisation  
Estonian Farmers' Union  
Network of Regional NGO Resource Centres  
Development Centre of Viljandi County

#### **Meetings in Pärnu County**

18.8.03 Saare Municipality and Kilingi-Nomme Town Council  
Local village leaders  
Local women's group

19.8.03 Soometsa village NGOs  
Tourist farm  
Pärnu County Government  
Pärnu County Association of Municipalities  
Pärnu Business Development Centre

20.8.03 Muraka Municipality  
Muraka Village NGOs

21.8.03 Kodukant Pärnu County organisation

#### **The Kodukant *Maapäev* - Rural Parliament**

22.8.03 Presentations by the President of Estonia, Ministries and *Kodukant* members  
Village action groups market place  
Cultural events and exhibitions

23.8.03 Thematic workshops in villages  
Presentations by Ministries

24.8.03 International Workshop conference

24.8.03 Meeting with Michael Dower - PREPARE Coordinator  
Meeting with the *Kodukant* Manager

#### **Meetings in Saare Island County**

25.8.03 Saaremaa County Governor  
*Kodukant* Saaremaa County Association Board

26.8.03 Paatse Village Development Society  
Leisi Municipality  
Leisi Varks - cultural NGO

27.8.03 Ruhve Village Development Society  
Poide Municipality  
Muhu village societies and community centre

#### **Meetings in Harju County**

27.8.03 Vanamoisa Village celebrations

28.8.03 Vanamoisa Village celebrations  
Harju County Government  
*Kodukant* Harjumaa  
Kotka Municipality and Village NGOs

**Meetings in Tallin**

- 29.8.03 *Kodukant* national organisation  
Estonian Federation of Non-Profit Associations and Foundations  
Estonian Programme for Local Initiatives  
Ministry of Agriculture
- 30.8.03 Saida Farm

**FINLAND****Mäntyharju in Etelä-Savo Region**

- 1-4.9.03 Participate in joint universities Rural Studies Course - opening week  
Village Association of Mantyharju  
Regional Village Association of Etela-Savon

**Meetings in Central Ostrobothnia**

- 5.9.03 Kaustinen in Central Ostrobothnia
- 6.9.03 Central Ostrobothnia Village Day - Himanka  
Regional Village Association of Central Ostrobothnia
- 7.9.03 Meeting with Board member of SYTY and co-ordinator for the Regional Village Association
- 8.9.03 Eskola Village Association  
Chydenius Institute, University of Jyvaskyla  
Kokkola, Central Ostrobothnia
- 9.9.03 The Council of Central Ostrobothnia  
Pirityset Local Action Group

**Meetings in and near Helsinki**

- 11.9.03 Headquarters of The Village Action Association of Finland - SYTY  
Regional Village Association of Varsinais-Suomi, Turku  
Municipality of Pohja and the Village of Fiskars
- 12.9.03 Ministry of Agriculture - Helsinki  
Meeting with Eero Uusitalo, Secretary General the Head of the Rural Policy Committee and Chairman of SYTY  
Board meeting of the Village Action Association of Finland - SYTY

**POLAND and SLOVAKIA****PREPARE Travelling Workshop - Poland**

- 12.10.03 From Warsaw, travel to Western Polesie in Lubelskie Region  
Bankowy Centre, Baile Lake, including contact with:
  - Polish Rural Forum
  - Polish Rural Development Foundation
  - Delegation of the EC in Poland
  - Ministry of Agriculture & Rural Development
  - WWF Poland
  - UNESCO Club
- 13.10.03 Western Polesie Biosphere Reserve  
Polesie National Park headquarters  
Gardzienice Academy of Theatre Practices
- 14.10.03 Dolina Strugu Partnership  
Green Bieszczady Partnership, Bobrka

**PREPARE Gathering - Banska Stiavnica, Slovakia**

- 15.10.03 Participants from 19 countries - Albania, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, England, Estonia, to Finland, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Moldova, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Russia, Scotland,
- 18.10.03 Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden.

**Meetings in Liptovsky Hradok**

- 19.10.03 Meeting with the First President of the Slovak Rural Parliament
- 20.10.03 A-Projekt, first host of the Slovak Rural Parliament  
Oblazy Community Foundation  
Mayor, Kvacany Municipality
- 21.10.03 Zilina Regional Council - officer responsible for regional planning  
Slovak Rural Parliament : regional co-ordinator Zilina Regional Association  
Wood Carvers' network

**Meetings in Banska Bystrica**

- 22.10.03 The President of the Slovak Rural Parliament  
The Head of Regional Development, Banska Bystrica Regional Council  
Co-ordinator of the Rural Community Fund  
Rural Women's Leadership Network  
Meeting with delegation from Kosova, Executive Director of the Kosova Development Centre
- 23.10.03 Director of VOKA and board member of the Slovak Rural Parliament

**Meetings in Nitra**

Head of the Slovak Rural Development Agency and board member of the Slovak Rural Parliament

**Meetings in Bratislava**

- 24.10.03 Ministry of Regional Affairs  
Dinner with conference of the international funding foundations operating in Eastern Europe
- 25.10.03 Head of the Institute of Sociology, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Board member of the Slovak Rural Parliament

**DENMARK**

**Meetings in Esbjerg**

- 27.10.03 Director and staff of the Danish Centre for Rural Research and Development (CFUL)
- 28.10.03 Head of the LEADER network unit  
Visit to LEADER+ in Torsminde, Western Denmark

**Meetings in Jutland**

- 29.10.03 Lindeballe Community - Lises Butik  
Manager and staff of Landdistrikternes Faellesrad LDF, Jelling
- 30.10.03 Editor of the Danish Village Association (LAL)
- 31.10.03 Visit to community renewable energy installations and energy planners
- 1.11.03 Project Co-ordinator of the Centre for Rural Assistance, Romania
- 3.11.03 Rural Development Officer, Ringkjoebing County Council  
Village leader, Soendbjerg village action
- 4.11.03 Municipal Planning Officer Aars Commune  
Secretary of the Village Council

**Meetings in Zealand**

- 5.11.03 President of the Danish Village Association (LAL)  
and Vice-President of The Council for Rural Districts (LDF)

**Meetings in Copenhagen**

- 6.11.03 Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry
- 7.11.03 Ministry of the Interior  
Danish Folk High School Association  
National Agency of Danish Counties
- 7-8.11.03 Annual conference, the Danish Village Association (LAL)

## **APPENDIX 2**

### **PREPARE - Partnership for Rural Europe**

The PREPARE programme aims to strengthen civil society and to promote multi-national exchange in rural development, notably in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, some of which joined the European Union in May 2004 while others fall outside the EU.

The PREPARE partners believe that rural development is most successful and sustainable where strong partnerships are created at national and local level, and where local people are actively involved in the process. But in many rural areas civil society, in the sense of active local democracy and non-government organisations (NGOs), is not yet strong enough to be a full partner of government in rural development.

PREPARE aims to strengthen civil society in rural areas; and to promote dialogue, trust, confidence and co-operation between local actors, governments and all stakeholders of rural development, at all geographic levels. The partners wish to see rural communities empowered to participate in decision-making related to sustainable rural development.

These aims are pursued by three main means

- Country-specific national programmes,
- Multi-national exchanges,
- International networking.

#### **Country-specific national programmes**

These programmes are designed to promote dialogue and co-operation between different actors in rural development in a particular country. The programmes vary according to the needs of each country, but may include national seminars, regional workshops and other exchanges, all leading towards a structure of cooperation which can bring lasting benefits. The first PREPARE national programme was launched in 2001 in **Slovenia**: this led to the creation of the Slovenian Rural Development Network (now a PREPARE partner). Since then, PREPARE has supported:

- two phases of work in the **Czech Republic**, by the non-government organisations Omega Liberec and CpKP, to stimulate the creation and develop the capacity of Local Action Groups,
- in **Poland**, a training programme for local action groups mounted by the Polish Rural Forum (a PREPARE partner),
- in **Latvia**, a sequence of workshops and a national conference which has led to the creation of the Latvian Rural Forum,
- in **Bulgaria**, a national conference initiated by the Ministry of Agriculture to discuss the strengthening of civil society in rural areas: it is hoped that this will lead towards the emergence of a national rural movement in that country.

PREPARE is currently discussing possible initiatives in **Romania** and **Croatia**.

#### **Multi-national exchanges**

PREPARE organised three successful **Travelling Workshops** - to **Estonia** and **Sweden** in 1999, **Hungary** in 2000, **Finland** in 2002 - which enabled key people in the pre-accession countries to see and discuss the active involvement of local communities in rural development.

The aim is to organise one event of this kind each year, in order to bring together people from the 10 countries, to stimulate debate and to review the PREPARE programme. In October 2003, we held in **Slovakia** the first multi-national Gathering of the PREPARE Network, preceded by Travelling Workshops which started in all the accession countries. In September 2004, the second Gathering was held in **Bulgaria**, preceded by Travelling Workshops in that country and in Romania. The PREPARE Gathering 2005 will take place in Lithuania in October, preceded by travelling Workshops in that country and in Latvia.



### International networking

We have set up a formal **PREPARE Network**, to enable exchange and mutual support between all who are interested in rural development throughout Europe. This is served by our Website, **www.PREPARENetwork.org**.

Members of the Network are able to take part in PREPARE events. They are also able to offer support to each other. For example, Kodukant in **Estonia** gave active support to the group in **Latvia** who have founded the Latvian Rural Forum. Network members in **Germany** organised a field visit to LEADER groups and other activities there, for people on the training course organised by the Polish Rural Forum. There is an active exchange between LEADER Groups in **Finland** and people within the Kodukant network in **Estonia**.

PREPARE is increasingly involved in wider networking with other organisations concerned with the well-being of rural communities in Europe. We have a seat on the European Commission's Rural Development Advisory Committee, and are active in seeking to influence EU policies and programmes in the field of rural development. We have increasingly close links with the Nordic Network of rural movements (*Hela Norden ska Leva*) and with ELARD, the European LEADER Association for Rural Development, which embraces the national LEADER networks of France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Portugal and Spain. In June 2004, a delegation of 50 people from rural organisations in the PREPARE partners countries took part in a Cooperation Forum in Cáceres, Spain, hosted by the Spanish Network for Rural Development, an ELARD partner.

### Organisation and funding

The PREPARE programme is jointly initiated by 11 partner organisations:

- Forum Synergies, the international network for sustainable development
- ECOVAST, the European Council for the Village and Small Town
- Kodukant, the Estonian Movement of Villages
- Finnish Village Action Movement
- Hungarian Rural Parliament
- Lithuanian Rural Communities Union
- Polish Forum on the Animation of Rural Areas
- Slovakian Rural Parliament
- Slovenian Rural Development Network
- Swedish Federation of Rural Economy and Agricultural Societies
- Swedish Popular Movements Council

The programme is funded from a variety of sources, public and private. The current work is mainly funded by a generous grant from the C S Mott Foundation.

**Contact:** Michael Dower, 56 Painswick Road, Cheltenham GL50 2ER, England  
Telephone: +44 1242 226511; e-mail: mdower@glos.ac.uk

or visit **www.PREPARENetwork.org**

Printed in France  
by ODIM (04130 Volx)  
on chlorine-free paper.  
Printer n°: 05572



# THE RURAL MOVEMENTS OF EUROPE

by

**Vanessa Halhead**

## A quiet revolution

PREPARE presents this pioneering report on the remarkable 'quiet revolution' in rural Europe. Starting in the 1970s in Scandinavia, national rural movements have been formed in 17 European countries, and the process continues.

These civil movements spring from a desire to safeguard our rural communities and heritage against the tides of centralisation and urbanisation. They aim to empower rural communities to address their own development and to lobby for changes in policy to safeguard their future.

This book is the outcome of a research visit, undertaken in 2003 and funded by the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust. Vanessa Halhead describes the overall pattern of the movements; analyses the way that they work and their significance; and offers detailed findings from case studies of the movements in four countries — Denmark, Estonia, Finland and Slovakia.

This work is of vital interest to rural communities and organisations throughout Europe, who are committed to improving the quality of life in rural areas; and also to governments at all levels who wish to understand the nature of their non-government partners.

