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DISCUSSION: VOLUNTEERING ABROAD

Martina Bolečeková – Veronika Zimová*

On February 26, 2020, **Veronika Zimová**, former student at the Faculty of Political Sciences and International Relations, revisited the auditorium at her Alma Mater to share her experiences with her fellow colleagues after two years of volunteering work in Albania. Being a protagonist of volunteerism, she states that unlike student exchange programs, volunteering abroad is still not as common in Slovakia, even though she finds them both equally as enriching.

Where it all began...

She was majoring in International Relations and Diplomacy when she first came across the concepts and methodology surrounding international development cooperation. In her own words: *'Back then, I had no idea how much it would go on to define my career path. When you hear the word volunteering, you'd most probably associate it with selflessness and service. My initial reasons, however, weren't at all selfless. I needed to improve my Spanish language ability; and what better place to learn a language than the country where it is spoken? When one takes from a culture, why not give something back in return?'*

The answer to these questions led to her first volunteering experience as an English tutor at *Fundacion Educativa CENSA* in Medellin, Colombia - a centre providing affordable education for the less privileged. A year later, she took up an Erasmus+ internship at the *Hope and Joy Foundation* in Madrid, Spain.

'I already knew international development and humanitarian aid was the career path I wanted to take. At the time, the Hope and Joy Foundation was

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focused on education- and health-based projects in Southern India. Working on my first projects, I really felt the distance between the two countries involved; closed off in an office cubicle when I was in pursuit of real experiences in the field.'

That opportunity came in the form of a volunteering programme by ADRA Slovakia, financed by SlovakAid.

Albania, the Land of Eagles

Throughout her presentation, students had the opportunity to discover not just the beauty held within but also the challenges faced by this Western Balkan country.

With a surface-area of 28,748 km² - just over half of Slovakia – Albania is covered by high mountain ranges with canyons guarding the many secrets of Hoxha-era. Magnificent lakes such as Ohrid - the deepest lake in Europe, home to around 200 endemic species; and the very last wild river in Europe, the mighty Vjosa. Last but not least, the waves of the Adriatic Sea crashing against the dunes in Northern Albania and blending into the pebbled beaches and Ionian Sea in the South.

Albania is truly a unique country with a distinctive language, an amalgamation of several rich cultures and documented history dating back as far as 1000 B.C. to their mysterious descendants, the ancient Illyrians. **Veronika Zimová** describes the Albanian sentiment with a quote from a poem by famous Albanian author Vaso Pasha (1825-1892): *'Mos shikoni kisha xhamia, se feja e shqiptarit është shqiptaria!'* (*'Don't look at churches and mosques, because the religion of Albanians is Albania.'*)

With an overarching sense of acceptance and patriotism emanating from the general public, one would think that most Albanians intend to stay in the nation and do their part in rebuilding the country after years spent isolated under a Communist regime. However, not everyone sees things this way. Gallup research from 2017 stated that 56 % of Albanians of productive age expressed the desire to emigrate from the country (Number of Potential Migrants..., 2017).

Deep political distrust, corruption on many levels; economic and social inequality; weak social protection; health and education systems with no vision for improvement have all led to an air of deep frustration, bordering on apathy, amongst people towards the political systems in power.

Instead of waiting for things to improve, several families are choosing to settle

elsewhere in search of a better quality of life. As of 2017, around 1.15 million Albanians were living in other states, which adds up to around 40% of the 2.87 million Albanians living within the country (How are Albanians..., 2017).

ADRA Albania

Veronika Zimová spent her volunteering years at ADRA Albania, an organization active in the country since 1993. Nowadays, ADRA Albania is focused on implementing educational and integration programmes for Roma, Egyptians¹, children with learning differences, and those that come from low income families.

‘In my two years of experience at ADRA Albania, I was given the opportunity to deepen my knowledge in proposal writing, mostly within the fields of educational projects for vulnerable groups, needs assessments, stakeholder analyses and MEAL². Despite the language barrier, on multiple field visits I developed a deeper understanding of ADRA Albania’s primary target groups – Roma and Egyptians. I successfully co-wrote and facilitated the implementation of two major projects in Roma and Egyptian education and integration, and a local advocacy campaign for ADRA Network’s Every Child. Everywhere. In School. global initiative. In the field of media and communications, I created content and directed the refurbishment of ADRA Albania’s website, set up and managed multiple social media accounts, and enforced the network’s new branding policy across all digital and printed media leaving the organization. When at the office, my colleagues and I spent hours brainstorming and evolving ideas over countless pots of coffee. Coffee-culture is an inevitable part of day-to-day life in Albania.’ In 2019, **Veronika Zimová** was awarded the prize “Slovak Aid Volunteer of the Year” for her activities in Albania.

Today, **Veronika Zimová** works at ADRA Slovakia, managing projects within the EU Aid Volunteers and Slovak Aid volunteers’ programmes. This includes the deployment of European professionals to countries across the world in order to enforce the capacities of local organizations in their development and humanitarian work.

What is her message to the students of Matej Bel University? *‘Volunteering broadened my horizons, allowing me to grow personally and professionally.*

¹ Egyptians: A minority with a disputable link to ethnic Egyptians, often considered Roma, however they don’t identify themselves with Roma and do not speak Romani.

² MEAL: Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning.

Thanks to my experience, I have developed great communication and comprehension skills in diverse multicultural environments. I found that collaborating with partners from a variety of countries and backgrounds to be highly challenging, but ultimately of great merit.

By sharing my journey, I hope it illuminates some of the incredible possibilities offered by volunteerism. I hope students found my presentation inspirational and I'm looking forward to seeing them again some days soon.'

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