

Slovakia

Bakers' guild takes initiative on training

In post-war Slovakia, as in other communist countries, the State favoured mass production and heavy industry. This bias, along with the nationalisation of the economy, weakened the status of professional organisations, which, based as they were on professional honour and the defence of individual interests, did not serve the government's political ambitions. Guilds and communities were restored only after 1989. Currently, the Slovak Small Business Chamber (SŽK) and the Slovak Craft Industry Federation (SŽZ) support the interests of small entrepreneurs. These organisations try to combine the State's efforts to create a qualified labour force with their traditional interest in providing quality service and protecting the craft. But revitalising and improving relevant legislation takes time.

The training of apprentices at Slovak VET schools faces a lack of resources that are necessary to update equipment, and a severe brain drain. The return of private entrepreneurship led many excellent professionals to quit teaching. A decline in teaching standards was feared to be inevitable. Yet when the final competition testing the professional competence of bakers from all over the world (World Bakery Cup) was held during the World Bakery, Patisserie and Catering Exhibition in Paris, Slovak team members ranked 4-6 among the 12 finalists. Though this success belongs to the individual competitors, it also constitutes evidence that Slovak vocational schools are getting better.

The Guild of Bakers and Pastry Makers organises extensive continuing training activities. Since 1992, over 500 students have completed a 168-hour course to obtain basic skills and have undergone retraining to take on board professional changes; over 100 practitioners have shown interest in completing the 208-hour school for master bakers. The guild has developed and issued two dictionaries (English, German) and 8 textbooks, of which some were approved by the Ministry of Education as official supplementary textbooks for VET schools. Yet as far as Slovak law is concerned, the master baker certificate confers no formal advantage to its holders. Despite accreditation by the Ministry of Education, graduates are awarded qualifications that are recognised abroad - but not in Slovakia.

The problem lies in existing legislation. Though graduates of such secondary vocational schools can obtain a business licence, no school within the formal education system can provide them with a higher-level qualification in their craft. The last such school for master craftspeople in former Czechoslovakia ceased to exist in the 1950s. Reopening such schools would require the recruitment of qualified trainers and a change of legislation. Vojtech Szemes, the Bakers' Guild Master, is convinced that the necessary know-how is already available in the Guild thanks to the assistance of the Chamber of Commerce of Trier, Germany. As soon as the new Education Act, submitted by the Ministry of Education to the

government in November 2005, allows for the establishment of these schools, the Guild will provide assistance to three regional schools in order to immediately start training master bakers. But this is conditional upon the successful adoption of a new law by parliament, and upon raising the status of trainers at secondary vocational schools. The first graduates should also serve as future trainers at the schools. In the meantime, the State should support trainers already in service to obtain at least the current certificate of master baker issued by the guild. As of June 2005, this certificate has already been awarded to over 90 active entrepreneurs in the field.

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