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GPS – New ways to Basketry Craft in Germany, Poland and Slovakia

report from a study trip III
Slovakia, March 2 – 7, 2026

The study visit to Slovakia introduced the project partners to Slovak basketry (and, more broadly, to traditional crafts) in various regions. Given that Slovakia is home of the Center for Folk Art Production (a state-established organization for the protection and promotion of traditional crafts, unique in the European context), we began our stay right there.

Working Day 1 – Tuesday, March 3, 2026: Experiencing ÚĽUV

Exhibition: One Inspiration, Two Paths. ÚĽUV 1945–1989

The historical context of this institution was presented to us by the current exhibition, installed to mark the 80th anniversary of its founding. The exhibition resulted from research inspired by the idea of writing a publication for this anniversary; thirty authors worked for four years on the book, which charts the history of the institution from 1945 to 1989 in the joint state of Slovaks and Czechs (ÚĽUV ceased to exist in the Czech Republic in 1996). The book's editor, Zuzana Dedík Šidlíková, a specialist at ÚĽUV, is also the curator of the exhibition and personally guided us through it.

More about the history of the institution in Slovakia and the Czech Republic can be found in a separate document prepared by the exhibition curator for the guided tours, which we are including in the GPS project archive. Here, we will briefly outline why the exhibition presenting the model of ÚĽUV's activities from 1945 to 1989 is relevant to our project:

- The exhibition highlights that ÚĽUV used different traditional materials in its production in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, while also taking into account the historical development of each country (Slovak agrarian vs. Czech industrial foundation). ***Inspiration for GPS:*** *When developing our idea, we must take into account the local specifics of the participating countries, as each has a different history and potential.*
- All materials used in production came from Slovakia (whether from nature or industry). ***Inspiration for GPS:*** *This aspect is harder to implement today in a free global market where the cheapest bids are selected, but we must keep it in mind when developing our project with other countries. Using the local materials will certainly add a dimension of sustainability and environmental friendliness to our concept.*
- The exhibition also highlights designers who were systematically sidelined during the socialist era (until 1989) to emphasize the "folkloric" nature of products in the spirit of an ideology aimed at erasing differences. Yet designers, as internal employees of ÚĽUV, guided the work of the artisans working for ÚĽUV from the institution's inception in 1945. ***Inspiration for GPS:*** *Today also requires collaboration between basketmakers and designers knowledgeable about basketry so that the products remain relevant to people today.*
- However, the work of the designers at ÚĽUV was not haphazard. They drew on materials collected since the 1950s by ÚĽUV ethnographers (photographs, drawings, artefacts, and field research reports – now stored as study and collection materials at the ÚĽUV Museum near Bratislava). Their artistic designs thus fully respected traditional roots, transforming the artistic quality of the past into the present while preserving the complexity of technological processes, materials, and patterns. In this way, a benchmark for the quality of craft

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production in Slovakia has been continuously established over 80 years; products sold in ÚĽUV stores are still first submitted for evaluation to an artistic committee composed of leading experts, who identify their strengths and weaknesses and, if necessary, suggest modifications. This approach is also followed by ÚĽUV's internal consultants, who communicate with producers in individual material groups throughout the year. ***Inspiration for GPS:*** *A designer involved in the process of designing new products from natural weaving materials must also be familiar with the traditional framework of the craft. This may require, in the future, a shared European library from the participating countries, accessible online as well.*

- Archival research, which led to the creation of a book and an exhibition marking the 80th anniversary of ÚĽUV, systematized the understanding of ÚĽUV's issues for contemporary audiences and even led to a renewed interest among public institutions in the Czech Republic in ÚĽUV and its history. ***Inspiration for GPS:*** *For the development of basketry, it is also interesting to explore historical aspects in individual countries, which may lead to a renewed interest in the subject; furthermore, international cooperation itself (in this case specifically between Slovaks and Czechs) is a positive factor, as it opens the opportunities for joint partnership projects (and thus a deeper exploration of the subject) in the future.*
- Until 1989, ÚĽUV was primarily a production organization, although it operated under the Ministry of Culture and was involved in the development of intangible cultural heritage. Through a network of stores across Slovakia and the Czech Republic and exports abroad, a model was established over the years that served as a significant source of revenue for the state. A unique export item, for example, were corn husk dolls: hundreds of thousands – even millions – of which were sold worldwide; moreover, their production provided work for hundreds of women in areas with high unemployment. Or clothing produced under the ÚĽUV brand was a luxury item manufactured in limited collections, which further highlighted the uniqueness of the handcrafted work. ***Inspiration for GPS:*** As we develop our project, we must also consider business models so that basket makers can remain competitive and make a living from their craft. One vision is to collaborate with designers to create iconic products that would sell in large quantities. And a business model also appears to be important for organizations involved in the craft of basketry – it would, for example, reduce dependence on politicians.

An Introduction to the Activities of Other ÚĽUV Departments

The ÚĽUV Library, which focuses on crafts, design, architecture, fine arts, and ethnography, has been a part of ÚĽUV since 1956. The center of library is located in Bratislava, with branches in Banská Bystrica and Košice regional centers of ÚĽUV. It primarily focuses on Slovak titles, but foreign titles are also available, including numerous journals not subscribed to by any other library in Slovakia. Its services are used by internal staff, university students, educators, and the general public interested in traditional crafts and design.

Perhaps the most frequent visitors to the library are participants in the courses of the ÚĽUV School of Crafts. They are also interested in titles from the ÚĽUV publishing house, which has several book series (monographs on selected crafts, practical production techniques, a series for children) and publishes the magazine Craft, Art, Design twice a year. Sought-after study materials are also available on the ÚĽUV website www.uluv.sk, where specialized electronic encyclopedias of traditional crafts (with 40 comprehensive entries) and traditional clothing are accessible. The website also features a publicly accessible database of products approved by the ÚĽUV artistic commission, as well as a database of producers, which includes not only the producer's story and photographs of their

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products but also their contact information (if they choose to make it public). In recent years, instructional videos have also been added, capturing the technological processes of selected crafts and freely available on ÚĽUV's YouTube channel.

We also briefly touched on the intersection of craft and design. At ÚĽUV, this principle has been present since its inception. Today, it is being developed through the ÚĽUV Open Studio model, which creates a space for craftspeople and designers to network with the aim of creating designs that can be produced in small series. And also through the international competition "Rings in Water," which has provided a biennial platform for craft-oriented design since 2000.

Perhaps the greatest emphasis ÚĽUV places today on education. In 2024, in the year of the 25th anniversary of its founding, its School of Crafts was inscribed on the UNESCO List of Best Practices for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. The partners familiarized themselves with the basic activities of ÚĽUV School of Crafts on Tuesday and again the following day. For this reason, we will provide a comprehensive overview of the activities of this significant department of ÚĽUV as part of our description of the second working day's events.

Expert Discussion

Since ÚĽUV is a state-funded organization – which is rather an exception in the European context of the crafts sector – we took advantage of our visit to organize an expert discussion. During the discussion, we briefed representatives of ÚĽUV and the Ministry of Culture of Slovak Republic on the objectives of our project; in a joint dialogue, we addressed sensitive issues facing contemporary crafts and also outlined topics whose development appears crucial for the future of crafts, specifically basketry.

In addition to the six representatives of the three GPS project partners, the discussion was also attended by:

- Eva Ševčíková, ÚĽUV, Director General,
- Barbora Morongová, Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic, Department of Living Heritage and Culture of Disadvantaged Population Groups
- Katarzyna Marcol, University of Silesia in Cieszyn, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Pedagogical Sciences
- Andrea Orelová, ÚĽUV, Project Manager, International Relations

We briefly introduced our associations and the goals of their activities to those present. We also outlined our project, which is developing in an interesting way, starting from initial theoretical foundations and progressing through study visits in individual countries. Following the project meetings, we can conclude that cooperation within Europe appears to be an essential step toward the development of basketry, as each organization faces certain limitations on its home turf. It is precisely examples of best practices from other countries that can be beneficial in the search for systemic solutions for basket makers. And since none of the countries involved in the project has systematic support for the development of the traditional crafts sector, we increasingly feel that we must start the initiative from the bottom up.

The discussion was hosted by ÚĽUV, which is why the first question was directed at its Director General, Eva Ševčíková, who presented the organization's current direction. According to her, ÚĽUV's primary role today is to network stakeholders in the field of traditional crafts and design. ÚĽUV has the human and spatial resources for this, and to a certain extent, the financial resources as well.

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However, it is difficult for the organization to focus on specific details – that is, to dedicate itself to a particular type of craft in a targeted manner every day.

This is one reason why, starting in 2021, the concept of "thematic years" (dedicated to a specific craft or material) was introduced, with the aim of supporting that particular area so that it would be discussed more widely and so that creative work would take place within it. This is exemplified by 2023, which was the Year of Natural Weaving Materials at ÚĽUV. As part of this initiative, ÚĽUV and Association of Slovak Basketmakers (ZKS) presented Slovak basketry abroad – at the World Basketry Festival in Poznań and, the following year, at the Korbmarkt festival in Lichtenfels. ÚĽUV welcomes cooperation with ZKS, just as it does with other associations that explore a particular craft in greater depth and contribute financially – in addition to basketmakers, these include weavers, potters, or makers of Kyjatice toys. ÚĽUV is happy to assist them through its staff, whether with expert guidance, contacts, or promotion. International partnerships, such as the GPS project, which aim to establish a systematic framework for traditional crafts, provide added value.

Barbora Morongová from the Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic explained how ÚĽUV's founding body views the organization. The Ministry funds its organizations through an annual contract. However, the current situation is significantly influenced by consolidation measures in public administration, so it is impossible to say exactly what the immediate future holds for state-subsidized culture in Slovakia. ÚĽUV, however, is established by law. Furthermore, Slovakia has ratified the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which is reflected in several national strategies related to the 2030 Agenda and sustainable development. Crafts, as an element, extend beyond the sphere of culture into the fields of education, local economy, and tourism, and for this reason, they hold development potential. Currently, however, a new law is ready for implementation that imposes high monthly contributions on self-employed individuals, which has led many craftspeople to suspend or close their businesses. This is why the Ministry of Culture's current task is to discuss with other ministries what the conditions will be under this law for traditional artisans and other stakeholders in the field of the protection and development of intangible cultural heritage.

In other words, even in turbulent times, the ministry is "fighting" to ensure that ÚĽUV maintains the highest possible standards. The importance of ÚĽUV for Slovakia is underscored by the fact that the Ministry of Culture has nominated the ÚĽUV School of Crafts in the global UNESCO List of Good Practices for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. On an international scale, ÚĽUV serves as a model example of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. It demonstrates how crafts can be engaged with for diverse audiences – from children to seniors and marginalized groups. Today, ÚĽUV has a clear strategy and a forward-looking vision. It does not preserve crafts in the past only as a national identity, but presents them as part of the creative industry and design, connecting them with young creators. However, financial support for ÚĽUV is currently insufficient. This is why the staff of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Department in the Ministry of Culture "fight for every euro allocated to it, knowing that at ÚĽUV, they will multiply its value many times over". At the same time, ÚĽUV is recognized by various ministries as a representative of top-tier exhibition or promotion quality. However, it would be necessary for ministries to support the traditional crafts sector in a targeted manner – by seeking systemic solutions for craftspeople in the areas of business, law, and education.

Paulina Adamska agreed with this as well. Because craftsmanship and entrepreneurship are interconnected. Artisans are capable of generating revenue for the country; they are part of the economy – and especially the rural economy, which is essential today for sustainable development and "green" policies (local natural materials, eco-friendly production, rural settlement). At the same

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time, however, the conditions that artisans face in these countries often push them into the gray economy.

We need to change our perspective, our angle of view on craftsmanship. Serfenta has also gone through this evolution – people began to take more interest in their work only after it was presented not within the framework of intangible cultural heritage, but as an economic factor. That's when they entered a different world – they talk about numbers, about career change opportunities, about acquiring new skills… Today, Serfenta focuses on services based on our know-how in the field of intangible cultural heritage, in which the members have become experts over time.

Andrea Orelová added that associations fighting for the rights of craftspeople currently lack sufficient lobbying power. Nor are traditional artisans distinguished from other artisans. Yet they could receive tax breaks, as they contribute to intangible cultural heritage, which means (since these are not everyday consumer goods) they are not as competitive.

Manfred Rauh added that Slovakia is one step ahead because it has a functioning model of state support for crafts, which does not exist in Germany. The Centre for European Basketry Culture (ZEF) is an association that promotes basketry in the capital of German basketry, where a basketry apprenticeship school also operates. In Bavaria, there are even more craft schools established by the state government (woodcarving, glassmaking). But in the absence of state support, graduates of these schools who wish to continue pursuing their craft are left to fend for themselves. That is also why we are part of this project – to learn from one another and share examples of best practices from other countries in our own. Every country has good models, but each also lacks a systematic, cross-ministerial approach to some extent.

Barbora Morongová shared the latest information from the Slovak Ministry of Culture, which this year decided to support crafts through the State Fund for the Support of Culture – unfortunately, craft experts were not invited to participate in the preparation of the grant program, so it is unclear how this support will be in the reality for craftspeople. This is a shame, as Slovakia has many experts in traditional crafts across various generations.

Paulina Adamska presented the Polish Ministry of Education's grant program, "Master of Tradition". Associations can nominate a master craftsman who teaches their craft to at least one apprentice for a maximum of one year. It is up to the association to organize the training – Serfenta, in its efforts to preserve the craft of weaving root baskets, held meetings almost every Saturday of the year directly in the master's workshop. The grant covers the master's fee; apprentices attend the training for free, as it is an investment in their personal development. And in Poland, there is a similar program run by the Organization for Rural Areas and Cultural Heritage, whose grants cover not only the master's costs but also those of the apprentices. Moreover, this program is also available to individuals – If they find a master, they can apply to the program on their own; they do not need an intermediary in the form of an association.

When asked whether Serfenta also helps producers with product sales, Lucja Cieślar responded by explaining Serfenta's current guiding principle: "Less products, more experiences". They started by selling products, but they had no market. That's why they gradually shifted to offering an experience – so people could try out the product-making process for themselves. This experience subsequently opens many people's eyes regarding the purchase of the product – that it's not so easy to weave a beautiful basket, which is why its price is what it is. Today, the master baskets at Serfenta are luxury goods that ultimately appeal mainly to participants in creative workshops. Once they've gone through the entire basket-making process, they often end up buying the master's work. This is how

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we support the entire sector, because course participants become potential buyers or supporters of the craft – and even active producers themselves.

We in the discussion also touch on the topic of the mental health crisis, which is currently a hotly debated issue (due to the pandemic, war, digitalization, and the individualization of society). We agree that this is a cross-sectoral challenge and that we are specifically working on improving mental health through crafts. Manfred Rauh adds that in Germany, rehabilitation centers for people with mental disorders (burnout, depression, etc.) even have craft programs that are prescribed by doctors...

He then returns to the topic of basket sales today. In Lichtenfels, they wanted to use a project to show the public everything that goes into making a basket. From sourcing materials through preparation and weaving to marketing and sales. ZEF collaborated with a marketing agency, which was tasked with selling the basket at a higher price, as they wanted to demonstrate all the costs that must be factored into the basket's price to ensure it was fair for the producer as well. The agency fulfilled the assignment, created the visuals, and ZEF presented the basket – woven by Jennifer Rubach and priced at 139 euros – to the city council. There, they initially heard skeptical opinions that the basket was unsellable at that price. But in the end, all the baskets were sold, and they are still being produced today for the Lichtenfels tourist office. What draws people to buy them is the story – the story of the maker and the story of sustainability of the craft (which, without state or other support, truly has such high production costs today).

Two outstanding basketmakers were also present at the discussion. So, naturally, the question arose: what is it like today for a basketmaker to make a living from this craft? Jennifer Rubach is a graduate of a basketry apprenticeship school in Lichtenfels and says that while the school prepared her very well in terms of the technical aspects of the craft, it did not prepare her as well for how to make a living from her own work. She had no skills in that area and had to put in a great deal of effort to start supporting herself. She has been self-employed for five years, and it helped her greatly to be part of ZEF as a project manager promoting basketry. Two years ago, however, cultural funding was drastically cut in Germany as well, and her position at ZEF was eliminated; she now collaborates with ZEF only on selected projects. Since last year, she has had to make up for the loss of income with another part-time job in the social sector, which she considers more stable than the craft sector. Her experience with basket sales is that, year after year, people find it increasingly difficult to buy higher-priced items. In recent years, however, it has become increasingly clear that they are still interested in purchasing an experience.

Erika Rudíková is in a different situation because she works as a software developer and basketry is not her main source of income. She started 14 years ago, and at first, basketry was just a hobby for her. Today, however, she can say that she has two jobs and too much work. But for now, she can't imagine making a living solely from basketry, even though she does a lot of basketry work for ÚĽUV and other organizations, as well as on her own. It's all about the workshops, and those are her main source of income from basketry. So for her, too, it's not about selling baskets. If she wants to make money, she makes courses, but then she doesn't have as much time to make baskets, and yet it is precisely basket-making that fulfills her the most. She also enjoys travelling abroad for courses, so she has many friends among the world's basketmakers, especially in England, but also in France, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand... And most of them can't make a living solely from basket-making. They have other jobs, part-time or even full-time, yet they are excellent basketmakers with beautiful designer baskets. They often get tired of it, because it's a tough struggle to pursue their passion. In England, Erika knows two people who make a living solely from basketry, but a large part

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of their income comes from teaching courses. And one works together with her daughter – only then did she decide to devote herself fully to basketry.

We all agree that today it's important to connect – If there are two or three people in a business, it's definitely easier for them. And similarly on an international level – If organizations connect with one another and share their knowledge, it can help everyone move forward.

Andrea Orelová, who represents ÚĽUV in its dealings with foreign organizations, confirms that the sale of handicrafts is a problem across Europe. Even in the economically stronger countries of the West, people prefer to buy Chinese industrially manufactured products rather than handmade goods of domestic origin. The European Craft Alliance (ECA), whose membership consists of some forty European craft organizations, is working to identify the causes of this situation and subsequently assist its members. The ECA's main goal is to promote craftsmanship and create suitable conditions for its development. It is even seeking a strategic and political framework for the craft sector at the European Parliament level. The ECA engages in discourse with relevant stakeholders about why craftsmanship is important for Europe and why it should be supported. It conducts surveys and studies in which it identifies key points that policymakers should consider. Experience shows that the focus for policymakers today is not so much on the intangible cultural heritage itself, but rather on other sectors that also impact the intangible cultural heritage, such as digitalization, sustainability, upcycling, reskilling, etc. This is why it is necessary to steer the discourse on craftsmanship in this direction as well. ECA also does great work in the area of communication. Every month, it prepares two newsletters for members and one for the public, which is subscribed to by more than 3,000 people. They also support their membership base through small grants ranging from 500 to 2,500 euros.

Paulina Adamska adds that Serfenta is also in contact with the ECA, even though it is not a member. She also notes that social media activity is important today. Many people travel to Poland just to participate in their educational program, often funded by grants. Serfenta itself also applies for grant calls; Norwegian grants are currently reopening in Poland. That is why it is good to have partners and projects you want to implement prepared in advance, so that you are ready when calls for proposals are announced... Over the years, Serfenta has received several significant awards, which also adds to its standing in the eyes of potential clients interested in its services – not only from the general public, but also, for example, politicians and investors.

Manfred Rauh adds that for ZEF, international cooperation is an important step toward development. They learn about the past, present, and perhaps even future plans of other organizations dedicated to basketry culture. In 2019, ZEF helped launch the Network of European Basketry Associations, and over the years of its operation, they have found that organizations collaborating within the group are much more visible than if they were going it alone. This is also confirmed by the willingness of the network's members to join in the future the development of the GPS project, which we launched last year. Integrating the efforts of individual organizations into the broader European basketry movement can make things easier for them at home as well, for example by opening up opportunities for collaboration on shared issues. Thanks to this, local politicians and investors will more easily see that the idea of developing basketry is not an isolated one and may be valued much more in other countries.

Lucja Cieślar adds that together we can develop not only basketry but also cooperation with other bodies, such as universities and companies, not only in the field of culture but also by connecting with other sectors. For example, in Japanese society, intangible cultural heritage is interconnected with many other areas; nothing there exists in isolation.

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Katarzyna Marcol appreciates that ÚĽUV is already connecting craftsmanship with elementary schools; such a model does not exist in Poland. As an anthropologist, she wants to show university students the power and importance of crafts. She works closely with Serfenta and invited Paulina Adamska in March to lecture students on the importance of connecting craftsmanship (i.e., intangible cultural heritage) with business, and to demonstrate this through Serfenta's operations… The University of Cieszyn received funding from the regional government to rebuild part of the university campus into a "lab," which will also include space for craft workshops. The Faculty of Arts currently houses the Institute of Fine Arts and the Institute of Music, and they would very much like to establish an Institute of Crafts as well. The goal is to show students that crafts are just as important as other forms of art. So right now, they're trying to "shift" the mindset of the young people attending the faculty in this direction, so that crafts become a promising challenge for them to develop. They do not have influence over elementary or secondary schools, but they know how to effect change within the university environment. And they also want to participate in international projects.

We all agree that children are our most important target group. At the ÚĽUV School of Crafts, it's encouraging to see that the children of past graduates are now attending the courses. For many children, the offered courses are often their very first exposure to natural materials and hands-on creation. For some, this experience is fundamental and will influence them for the rest of their lives. At Serfenta, for example, they strive to use math lessons to open children's minds to a new way of thinking about handmade items: Where do they come from? What are they made of? What must be done to obtain the material? How long does production take? What does it all take? And could they finally understand why a handmade product is so expensive...

Jennifer Rubach also focuses on children when preparing the basketry short film competition for the Korbmarkt festival. Lichtenfels is, after all, the capital of German basketry, but children learn nothing about basketry in school. So, through film – a medium that appeals to the younger generation – she tries to bring local intangible cultural heritage closer to this age group as well. To this, she also added creative wicker weaving workshops so they could become more familiar with the material itself. The children were perhaps even more enthusiastic about weaving than about the films and asked for courses to be held directly in their schools.

Erika Rudíková's experience with a weaving class for 6-year-olds is interesting. The mother of a son with various diagnoses was thrilled after the course that her son sat working for an hour without needing to do anything else. She said that this had happened for the first time in his life.

We note that craftsmanship has a broad scope, and within our project we can outline many possible approaches to understanding craftsmanship today. And we can draw inspiration from one another's models – whether it be the methodology of the ÚĽUV School of Crafts, the Serfenta business model, or the extensive international collaboration of ZEF. Without fear of competition – on the contrary, the stronger our mutual relationships are, the more solid the position of craftsmanship will be in general.

We also touch on the issue of the availability of raw materials for weaving. In Germany, there is a shortage of materials – neither basketry willow nor imported rattan, which is used for furniture. A potential solution is to reach out to willow growers and show them that this sector would have sufficient demand. In Poland, there are large plantations of basketry willow. But other materials (e.g., straw, cattail) are missing from the supply chain; at Serfenta, they order these from the other end of Poland. This also raises the ecological issue of local availability of raw materials, and the unavailability of materials can be problematic even for course graduates who wish to further develop their skills. If

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someone today is interested in improving their basketry skills, it requires considerable effort on multiple fronts. In Slovakia, ZKS encourage people to plant their own willow plantations. They receive saplings from the municipal willow path in Vrbovce in exchange for their help in harvesting or sorting the willow there.

When asked about collaboration with designers, Manfred Rauh mentions a project connecting graduates from the basketry school in Lichtenfels with product designers from the design college in Coburg. The final projects created by the basketry school graduates are prototypes that are usually not developed further. That is why, as part of this project, product designers developed the basketry graduates' designs to make them more market-ready. After all, this principle is beautifully captured in the exhibition on the history of ÚĽUV, where the principle of linking design and craft has been present since 1945, what is clearly reflected in the exhibited objects.

Today, ÚĽUV primarily collaborates with secondary schools of applied arts. Students and teachers are introduced to the basics of a selected craft by ÚĽUV instructors, and school teachers then expand on the topic with students throughout the school year. The outcome is often joint exhibitions featuring multiple schools that have worked on the theme. However, ÚĽUV also has collaborators at universities, and the possibility of engaging in international cooperation regarding the development of the craft among designers sounds appealing. The more people with an artistic vision we can bring into the basketry (or broader craft) movement, the more unique the results will be. However, we must work to ensure that the participating designers truly master the principles of basketry, so that their ideas are grounded in reality. It seems necessary to build bridges between craft and design, but with mutual respect on both sides.

Working day 2 – Wednesday, March 4, 2026: The ÚĽUV Educational Model

After a first day full of interesting ideas, we'll hold an internal meeting the next day in Banská Bystrica to summarize what we need to discuss during our stay in Slovakia. We need also to look back on our time in Lichtenfels, especially the panel discussion. It is also important to discuss the project website, whose content is slowly beginning to take shape. Another challenge is the discussion regarding the presentation of our project at the Korbmarkt festival on September, filming footage for the project video, and promoting the project after its conclusion.
Returning to an assessment of what the stay in Lichtenfels contributed to the GPS project, we conclude that it was a unique opportunity for us to observe processes at the basketry school and town, and the relationships among the actors in the basketry community, as well as their thoughts, visions, and challenges. Consequently, we can more realistically consider what we could contribute to this context through our project. We will need to formulate our proposals sensitively so that they are not perceived as if we were trying to lecture anyone. We must conduct an in-depth assessment of the situation in Lichtenfels to identify areas that need support or improvement – of course, through mutual dialogue with the parties involved. This will yield suggestions for our project on how to improve what is not working well, or inspiration to learn from what is working. And this applies to study visits in all three countries.
In Lichtenfels, we also tried out the panel discussion format. In hindsight, it seems important to conduct the discussion in a single common language and not to interrupt the flow of the discussion with translations. As a result, we only touched on several topics but didn't have time to go into depth. On the other hand, however, we can do this in the future, for example through online

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seminars on selected topics with invited experts. The moderator should also have experience with basketry so they can respond to what has just been said and explore the topic in greater depth.

After discussing these topics, we moved on to the ÚĽUV Regional Center for Crafts in Banská Bystrica, where a methodological seminar of the ÚĽUV School of Crafts for elementary school teachers was taking place.
We had already familiarized ourselves with the basics of the ÚĽUV School of Crafts the day before; in 2024, as part of the celebrations marking its 25th anniversary, the school was honored with an entry in the UNESCO List of Good Practices for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. The goal of the ÚĽUV School of Crafts is systematic leisure-time education in the field of traditional crafts. The target groups include children, youth, adults, and seniors – anyone can participate. Instruction is in Slovak language, but courses in foreign languages are also available (for schools, companies, or individuals). Courses are either long-term or short-term. Long-term courses are trimester-based; depending on the complexity of the technique, they may last several trimesters, with two-hour sessions once a week. The maximum number of participants per course is six. Intensive courses last from a few hours to several days and include, for example, wicker basket-making.
It is important that participants know how to use the technique after completing the course so they can continue practising it at home. The course always results in a finished product or a sample book. Graduates also benefit from books published by ÚĽUV, such as the "School of Traditional Making and Crafts" series, which shows the production process of many crafts. In recent years, ÚĽUV's videos, available on its YouTube channel, have also been a valuable resource.
Registration for courses takes place via the ÚĽUV website, and there is particularly high demand for them in Bratislava and Košice. Most courses sell out within a few days of being announced, though there is also a waiting list of alternates who are contacted if a registered participant cannot attend.
A methodology is developed for each course – outlining how to teach and the course content – which is strictly followed. The methodology is of very high quality; the methodologist is a separate full-time job at ÚĽUV. Throughout the year, the methodologist visits all three centers to observe courses and, based on these observations, adjusts the methodology for specific courses as needed. There is also feedback on course quality from course graduates, who can anonymously fill out a satisfaction survey.

Until recently, ÚĽUV also had in-house instructors (primarily for textiles and pottery), but following the consolidation of public finances, it now relies solely on external collaborators. Instructors are selected from among both craftspeople and skilled graduates who frequently visit ÚĽUV. This year, ÚĽUV is also launching a new program to train instructors from institutions other than ÚĽUV – to ensure that craft education in Slovakia reaches the highest possible standard.
In addition to courses, ÚĽUV offers 1.5-hour creative workshops for elementary and secondary schools. An entire class can attend; students are divided into different workshops and go home with a small handmade item. Schools select the materials for the creative workshops when registering. Guided tours of the workshops, which provide a basic introduction to various craft techniques, are also available for preschoolers.
Slovak elementary school system offer to schools a possibility to teach a course in regional studies, which also provides an opportunity to teach traditional crafts. Many teachers utilize ÚĽUV for this purpose and introduce children to traditional crafts there. They also learn about the history of the craft, and children have the opportunity to try out selected techniques hands-on. Some teachers also receive targeted training at ÚĽUV through methodological seminars focused on specific craft techniques, which they then teach in their own schools, as ÚĽUV provides them with the necessary teaching materials.

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Such programs are lacking in Poland and Germany. Ideally, crafts should be taught more in schools, including in Slovakia. In Iceland, for example, children are introduced to design as early as the first grades of elementary school. They learn how humans are connected to nature, and they learn the basics of craft techniques from the very beginning – that is, starting with the materials needed for creation. It's about tradition, identity, and developing manual skills.
Also popular in the ÚĽUV School of Crafts are the summer weekly day camps for children ages 8 to 15 called "Holidays with Crafts." The children try their hand at five different crafts, and at the end, their work is exhibited together for their parents to see.
More experienced course participants can become members of clubs operating at individual regional centers (wire craft, various types of textiles, woodcarving). ÚĽUV provides them with spaces for regular meetings and collaborates with them on various events.
Today, ÚĽUV has regional centers in three of the eight regional capitals. Ideally, there would be centers in every regional capital – so that every student in Slovakia would have the opportunity at least once in their life to experience firsthand the activities that ÚĽUV offers.

Methodological seminar for teachers

Among the popular offerings of the ÚĽUV School of Crafts are methodological seminars for elementary school teachers. These consist of a theoretical part and practical creative workshops. The theoretical part of the seminar is free of charge, while teachers pay for the creative workshops. This training officially does not count toward their professional development – however, starting this year, in connection with the new law on lifelong learning, ÚĽUV is working on developing a 50-hour innovative training program through which teachers could deepen their competencies in teaching crafts and have them officially recognized.
The opportunity to discuss our project with such an audience opened up new dimensions for where we can direct our project efforts in the future.
Teachers from the Association of Educators from Schools with Regional Education were also present at the meeting. The association has approximately 40 members from various parts of Slovakia who actively work together to develop the subject of regional education in elementary schools. Regional education is a specific subject in Slovak schools, thanks to which crafts can also be incorporated into the curriculum. However, each teacher teaches within the framework of regional education what is close to their heart – a history teacher something different than the Slovak language or art teacher... In grades 5 and 6, regional education is an elective within the school curriculum; in grades 7–9, students can choose it as part of the national curriculum.

One of the teachers present focuses on the basics of craft production in this course, with the aim of showing children the diversity of different types of crafts and how to work with them (clay, textiles, wire, wool processing, natural weaving materials – wicker, straw, corn husk). Integrating crafts into regional education was a process for her. First and foremost, she had to equip the school workshop with tools, then source materials, and gain practical experience with the individual crafts. She found help, among other places, at ÚĽUV's methodological seminars. Now that the classes are up and running, things are easier; several people from the village donate materials to the school or contribute to the workshop's equipment, and the workshop also partially supports itself by selling the students' products. But it took her ten years to get the workshops up and running in their current form. The children are very interested in the workshops – they especially enjoy being able to make products with their own hands. However, this approach by the teacher also requires work outside of class hours, which is unpaid (collecting, purchasing, or preparing raw materials).

Every ÚĽUV methodological seminar for teachers includes creative workshops on selected craft techniques. This time, in light of the approaching Easter, one of these workshops focused on weaving

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Easter whips from fresh willow rods. The tradition of making them is still alive in Slovakia, as they are part of the living folklore associated with Easter Monday (parades where boys whip and splash girls with water). Members of the GPS project team also tried their hand at weaving these whips.

Internal Work Meeting

On Wednesday afternoon, at another internal work meeting, we revisited the issue of our project's logo and website using the sketches prepared for us by German web designers. We explored the topics in a joint constructive discussion, and at the end, we agreed that we would define the website's content in detail during a separate online meeting. From the logos presented, we provided feedback on a design that the creators will continue to work on.

The website will primarily reflect the overall message of our project, which becomes increasingly clear to us after each subsequent study visit. As we compare individual systems, specific examples of best practices are emerging, as well as topics that will be worth developing further even after the project ends – with the goal of bringing more countries and more basketmakers into our "movement".

At Wednesday's internal working meeting, the need for a more in-depth discussion about communication within our team also proved to be equally important. During study visits, the pace at which we learn the specifics of a given system is too fast, leaving us no time to discuss our experiences or feelings; we tend to rely on intuition instead. However, some of us are more structured, while others are more free-spirited, and this can lead to certain hidden frustrations that go unspoken. We should also keep this in mind for future projects – communicating openly about things we have doubts about and creating more time for work meetings throughout the day.

Furthermore, we all agree that there was very little time between the German and Slovak stays to analyse our time in Germany. Our recommendation for any future projects is therefore to allow more time between study visits. Alternatively, if there are multiple participating countries in the project, groups could be formed among which visits to individual countries would be distributed so that no one attends more than three meetings during the year. Subsequently, the findings from each country will be summarized in reports.

Working day 3 – Thursday, March 5, 2026: A Trip to the Regions

Slovakia is still characterized by cultural differences across its various regions. We travel to Očová, the hometown of basketmaker Erika Rudíková, where we see her willow path, her tools, and the space where she creates. We sit down again for an internal work meeting and revisit the communication aspects of our project. What is important for us to feel comfortable in the project? Do we have the immediate space to talk in depth about what we took away from each experience, so we can develop our ideas for the future? Everyone has their own vision, but we should also discuss this together. Others see communication within our project as fine – after all, each of us knows what awaits us at the end of the day and what we need to do to get there. In any case, finding more time to talk together about what we've just experienced is a good idea.

Or, looking ahead, we could hold more online meetings, even immediately after our study visits, during which we could summarize our feelings, ideas, and thoughts. Because discussions about the outcomes of our meetings are already necessary at this stage of the project – for writing reports, for the content of the website, or for the final report...

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During our meetings, especially during the expert discussions, many topics were raised that we didn't have time to discuss, even though they are interesting to everyone. However, some topics cannot be discussed immediately; a better understanding of them requires time and studying further contexts. These could then be explored in online meetings, which would not be limited to our project team but could also invite other experts. This is a recommendation for future projects, so that we can also consider this aspect.
Or there would be the option of extending the study trip to more than three days – so that we would have sufficient time both to explore basketry in individual countries and to engage in deeper discussions among team members about their experiences. Or, as part of the project, we could secure an external collaborator for documentation or reporting to the Erasmus+ program – we can also consider this.

Vrbovce – A Village Welcoming to Basket Weavers
From Očová, we traveled to Vrbovce, where the ZKS enjoys excellent facilities thanks to its good relations with the village representatives. In 2023, the association initiated the establishment of a village willow path and contributed to its planting by supplying materials as well as providing physical assistance and expert advice, since several members of the association have experience in growing willow. In the following years, local residents became involved in caring for the willow path, and several also completed courses in weaving various types of baskets. The municipality also provides the association with space for its professional activities. Earlier this year, this project was recognized in the regional competition "Face and Soul of the Village" as an example of good practice in cooperation between local government and the civil sector.

Vrbovce is a village with a rich tradition of basketry, where straw was the primary material used in the past. It was straw that also connected Vrbovce with our GPS project in Germany at the Bamberg Short Film Festival, where the film Slamienkar (Strawbaskets Maker) about local basketmaker Ján Patinka was projected. In Vrbovce, we visited the village's willow path (already harvested) and also toured the museum exhibition, which documents also the history of straw basket-making in the village. Finally, we met with local activists in the field of basketry, many of whom got into basketry through the ZKS initiative to plant willow path in 2023. Among them were students of Ján Patinka, who also mentioned him during a discussion with members of our project team.

"Grandpa" Patinka, as everyone in Vrbovce called him, also told them about the village's history of straw basket weaving – a large number of them were woven, especially in winter, and then sold in Moravia. In the past, this was a significant source of income for the family, so all family members took part in the weaving. Ján Patinka was no exception, even as a young boy.
He loved weaving straw baskets and was happy to show anyone how to make them; he also talked about the differences between various types of straw, its harvesting and preparation, the necessary tools, and the preparation of willow splits for weaving. And along the way, he wisely spoke about life – so learning from him was beneficial in many ways.
Of his students, only retirees currently devote themselves to weaving on a regular basis, as working people have less time. In any case, the local people are passionate about basketry, which is evident in their active involvement in caring for the village willow path and their participation in basketry courses. What is interesting about this model of basketry development is that the village willow path project in Vrbovce was established and is still maintained as a non-monetary activity – the basketmakers provided seedlings and expert assistance free of charge, and similarly, local residents participate in caring for the willow path without compensation. Over three years of care, a group of dozens of people has formed, comprising both basketmakers and local residents, who understand the importance of the willow path for the village and for basketry. In the past year, people from

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outside the region have even become involved in caring for the path; in exchange for their help, they can take home materials for their own projects.

Working days 4 a 5 – Friday, March 6, and Saturday, March 7, 2026: Basketmaking Practice in Slovakia

When planning the dates for our study trip to Slovakia, no one had any idea that it would coincide with the most important basketry festival in Slovakia, "Unusual Forms of Wicker," held in the village of Rudník. Like Vrbovce, this village is located in the Myjava region, which is home to many active basketmakers. That is why we ultimately agreed to extend our study visit to Slovakia by two days.
On Friday, members of the project team had the opportunity to participate in creative workshops using various natural weaving materials. They primarily chose to work with cattail (bowls, mats), and in one case, with willow rods for weaving a basket using the so-called Irish weave. The courses lasted all day and were all held in the large hall of the cultural center, offering an immersion into the workshop activities of the members of the ZKS.
On Saturday, the project partners experienced the atmosphere of the festival itself, attended by numerous Slovak and Moravian basketmakers, whose work was complemented by a folklore program. Guests could see that in Slovakia, the craft tradition is strongly intertwined with folk dance and music, a remnant of the care for traditional culture during the socialist era prior to 1989. (In addition to ÚĽUV, there is another state-supported organization in Slovakia that focuses on developing traditional dance, music and singing.) On the one hand, this image of craftsmanship is certainly appealing. On the other hand, however, it limits to some extent the artisans' efforts to make a living through their own work. It is as if it were an ideal world of leisure, where market reality is not really a concern. This is also evidenced by the statements of the basketmakers present, almost none of whom – even though several of them were trained as basketmakers in schools – make a living from the craft. In any case, the foundation of talented individuals is still alive, so there is something to build on in the future.

Brief Summary

The question that has accompanied us since the beginning of our project remains: how to make a living through basketry in today's system. We have experienced a country where craftsmanship is supported by the state – yet even here, systemic solutions at the political level are lacking that would harness the economic potential of the sector. The question is, in which direction should we orient the outputs of our project? We have plenty of inspiration. But do we want to eventually create a broad community or even a movement? Perhaps this is not a futile idea, because fighting for one's interests individually today is immensely exhausting.
However, we must think very carefully about our recommendations for the basketry community so that we can also convince outstanding basketmakers to support or even join the project. So that our efforts are interesting to them as well. And at the same time, so that we can convince outstanding designers, as well as marketers and economists – so that our efforts are contemporary, and not just a reminiscence of the past. So that capital (symbolic and, in part, financial) is created within the basketry sector, which can help promote systemic solutions as well.

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