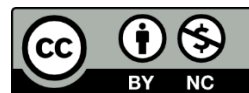


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Social Economy in Visegrad Countries: Sector Characteristics and Employment in Social Economy Entities

Sociálna ekonomika v krajinách Vyšehradskej skupiny: Charakteristiky sektora a zamestnanosť v subjektoch sociálnej ekonomiky

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*Abstract: The aim of the article is to analyse the characteristics of the social economy sector in the Visegrad countries and to examine the employment structure within social economy entities. Using secondary data from the European Commission's report *Benchmarking the Socio-Economic Performance of the EU Social Economy*, complemented by national sources, the study provides a comparative overview of the composition of social economy entities. The results highlight differences in the prevalence of associations, foundations, and registered social enterprises across the V4 countries and show that, despite contributing to job creation, their employment share remains modest. The findings confirm that the sector is still at an early stage of development in the V4 region.*

Key words: *Social economy. Non-profit entities. Visegrad countries. Employment in social economy entities.*

JEL Classification: B55. J21. L31.

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Introduction

The concept of the social economy emerged in nineteenth-century Europe and has undergone a significant revival worldwide in recent decades. In the twentieth century, the term “social economy” was officially recognized by the French government, for the first time in 1980, and subsequently incorporated into French legislation (Pčolinská, 2021; Korimová et al., 2008). This renewed interest reflects its conceptualisation as a response to a range of escalating socio-economic challenges, including recurrent financial crises, the limited capacity of welfare states to address social problems, rising inequalities, and unsustainable patterns of production and consumption (Moreau et al., 2017). Social economy represents a novel approach to addressing issues of social inclusion and unemployment, creating opportunities particularly for individuals who are unable to enter the labour market independently. It therefore encompasses dimensions of solidarity, inclusion, reciprocity, and the creation of the common good, as well as broader economic benefits.

According Bellemare et al. (2022, p. 107) social economy model “rests upon the principles of equity, inclusion, and diversity, sustainability, economic democracy, and new models of local and shared prosperity. The overall objective of the social economy enterprise is to produce for the common good with a focus on the needs of citizens and groups in localized places and regions.” Moreau et al. (2017, p. 502) state that “the main focus of the social and solidarity economy is to give more importance to people and to the planet, rather than to the accumulation of capital or profit”. Similarly, Defourny et al. (2000, p. 30) state that the social and solidarity economy can be summarized as prioritizing the following principles: “service to its members or to the community ahead of profit; autonomous management; a democratic decision-making process; and the primacy of people and work over capital in the distribution of revenues.” According Fraisse (2003, in Moreau et al., 2017), social economy is practiced differently around the world. Although social entrepreneurship appears on the public agenda in several EU countries, the interpretation of the concept and the institutional frameworks supporting its development differ significantly across nations (Defourny & Nyssens, 2008).

This paper aims to analyse the characteristics of the social economy sector in the Visegrad countries and to examine the employment structure within social economy entities. The study uses secondary data provided by the European Commission in the document „Benchmarking the socio-economic performance of the EU Social Economy“ by Carini et al. (2024). This paper summarises the findings of the project Benchmarking the Socio-Economic Performance of the EU Social Economy and uses 2021 as the reference year for the underlying data. Using a

comparative approach, it assesses the composition of social economy entities across the V4 countries, particularly the prevalence of associations, foundations, and registered social enterprises, and evaluates their contribution to national employment.

1 Theoretical Framework

The social economy represents an economic system that fosters sustainable and inclusive development and makes a significant contribution to addressing the key challenges confronting contemporary economies and societies (Enciso-Santocildes & Caro-González, 2023). The social economy also demonstrated its crucial role in strengthening the resilience of societies during the COVID-19 pandemic (Suarsana & Lowitzsch, 2024). The initial boom in the establishment of social enterprises, for example in Slovakia, coincided with a critical period: the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly at the business level. Paradoxically, most social enterprises were established during this period (Pčolinská, 2025). As Enciso-Santocildes and Caro-González (2023, p. 303) state, “Employment is one of the most decisive mechanisms for a more just and cohesive society, where social economy has a very important role worldwide.” The social economy plays a crucial role in generating employment opportunities for individuals facing disadvantages that prevent them from accessing the labour market independently. Without the support of an appropriately structured system, these individuals would remain excluded from labour market integration. Social enterprises are therefore supported through public funding due to their contribution to reducing unemployment among disadvantaged groups. Within the system of social economy entities, particularly social enterprises, the integration of disadvantaged citizens is prioritised over profit generation.

More practically, the social and solidarity economy operates at the local or regional level, bringing together cooperative efforts and promoting democratic participation in economic activities (Moreau et al., 2017). The social economy includes all economic activities conducted by enterprises, primarily cooperatives, associations, and mutual benefit societies, whose ethical principles reflect the previously mentioned principles defined by Defourny et al. (Defourny & Develtere, 1999). As Enciso-Santocildes and Caro-González (2023, p. 303) state, “European Union policy and its European Action Plan for the Social Economy aim to increase the development of this business model, precisely in order to improve its impact on employment and social cohesion.” By prioritising people over profit, the social and solidarity economy clearly articulates its underlying value framework, promoting more equitable labour conditions and participatory decision-making, while also contributing to social well-being and the broader democratisation of the economy (Moreau et al., 2017).

The social economy extends beyond addressing the needs of disadvantaged groups and increasingly incorporates objectives aimed at promoting environmental sustainability. As Bellemare et al. (2022, p. 107) state, “Social economy is a socio-economic movement that puts people and the planet before profits.”

A relatively new concept in the business world is the circular economy, based on the 3R principles: reuse, reduce, and recycle. This raises the question of which determinants motivate business entities to transform their business approach from a linear to a circular model (Raftowicz-Filipkiewicz, 2017). While the social economy primarily refers to economic democratisation, collective enterprise, and the pursuit of the common good, the circular economy tends to focus on environmental sustainability (Bellemare et al., 2022). Unemployment programmes aimed at social reintegration may involve partial state subsidisation of labour costs within selected remanufacturing initiatives (Moreau et al., 2017). Although the social economy predominantly focuses on the labour market integration of disadvantaged individuals, environmental protection and planetary sustainability are intrinsically embedded within the broader concept of the common good.

The social and solidarity economy challenges the conventional boundaries and conceptualisation of the non-profit sector (Bellemare et al., 2022; Moreau et al., 2017). As Enciso-Santocildes and Caro-González (2023, p. 303) state, “Social economy is an economic model based on specific values, principles and operating logics, as well as its own legal structures.” The social economy is based on collectively and democratically governed enterprises, such as cooperatives, non-profit organisations, and mutual societies, that operate in the market while prioritising social objectives over profit generation (Bellemare et al., 2022; Moreau et al., 2017).

The understanding and acceptance of the concept of the social economy differ worldwide, and even more so among the individual Member States of the European Union. Its perception is shaped by historical context as well as by the economic and political realities of each European country.

The concept is well established in countries with a tradition of strong interaction among its components, such as France, Belgium, Portugal, and Spain. In contrast, it is rarely used in countries where cooperatives, focused solely on serving their members’ interests, are clearly separated from associations, as seen in Austria, Finland, Germany, and Italy. The limited recognition of the social economy in Central and Eastern Europe can be partly explained by the negative perception of cooperatives, despite the significant acceptance of traditional non-profit organisations, such as those in the Slovak Republic (Carini et al., 2024). Overall, however, the

social economy has recently gained prominence in countries that have introduced targeted policy measures, including Croatia, Czechia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovenia.

2 Material and Methods

This paper adopts a descriptive approach based on secondary data provided by the European Commission in the report *Benchmarking the Socio-Economic Performance of the EU Social Economy* by Carini et al. (2024). This report summarises the findings of the project *Benchmarking the Socio-Economic Performance of the EU Social Economy — Call for Tenders EISMEA/2022/OP/00159, Lot 1* — using 2021 as the reference year for the data. Where 2021 data were not available, data refer, in order of priority, to 2018, 2019, or 2020.

The dataset includes indicators on the prevalence of entities within the non-profit sector, the proportion classified as part of the social economy, and their employment capacity. Data were aggregated at the national level for the Visegrad countries in order to capture structural characteristics and labour market involvement.

The first part of the analysis focuses on the prevalence of social economy entities in the V4 countries and compares this with the number of social enterprises among these entities that are nationally recognised as social actors. The second part examines the social economy and its entities as a space for job creation and as an employment instrument. We highlight the number of people employed in social economy entities, the share of part-time positions, the proportion of women employed, and the involvement of volunteers. Volunteering is included as an indicator of civic engagement in supporting these entities.

For the cross-country comparison, the analysis considers social economy entities predominantly perceived as part of the non-profit sector: cooperatives, associations, foundations, mutual benefit societies, and other legal forms.

For the data analysis, we used secondary data from the European Commission report mentioned above, as well as data from the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic and the Employment Institute on overall employment in the V4 countries for 2024, as presented in Table 1. Since the dataset provided by Carini et al. (2024) contains only absolute numbers of social economy entities, the initial graphical outputs were based on absolute values. To ensure analytical clarity and comparability across countries, the absolute data were subsequently recalculated into relative indicators by the author. On this basis, an additional graph was constructed to compare the relative shares of individual legal forms within social economy entities and social enterprises.

While some graphs present absolute values to illustrate differences in sector size, their interpretation is systematically supported by relative proportions, which are reported in the accompanying explanatory text. The use of both absolute and relative indicators allows for a comprehensive analysis, combining information on the scale of the sector with its internal structural composition.

MS Excel was used to process the data and produce graphical outputs. The analysis applied basic mathematical measures, including absolute and relative values. Data visualisation was carried out using stacked column charts and combined charts, depending on the analytical purpose of each figure.

For the interpretation of the results, standard scientific methods were employed, namely comparison, analysis, synthesis, induction, and deduction.

3 Results and Discussion

Across the 27 member states, the social economy includes more than 4.3 million entities. Social economy entities are mainly cooperatives, mutual benefit societies, associations, and foundations. In addition, other legal forms are recognised as part of the social economy by national or regional legislation. Finally, the data also take into account limited liability companies that can be considered social enterprises, although these represent only a very small percentage of the total number of entities counted (Carini et al., 2024, p. 14). For this reason, governments need to improve the relationship between the for-profit and non-profit sectors and encourage volunteering among inhabitants (Nappo et al., 2024).

In some countries, concepts that only partially overlap with the social economy, such as the third sector and the non-profit sector, are predominant. There may also be a narrow understanding of the social economy, as well as either an overly broad or overly narrow understanding of the concept of social enterprise (Carini et al., 2024, p. 14).

Some European countries have ad hoc legislation on the social economy or social enterprises, including Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg,

Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Spain (Enciso-Santocildes & Caro-González, 2023, p. 304).

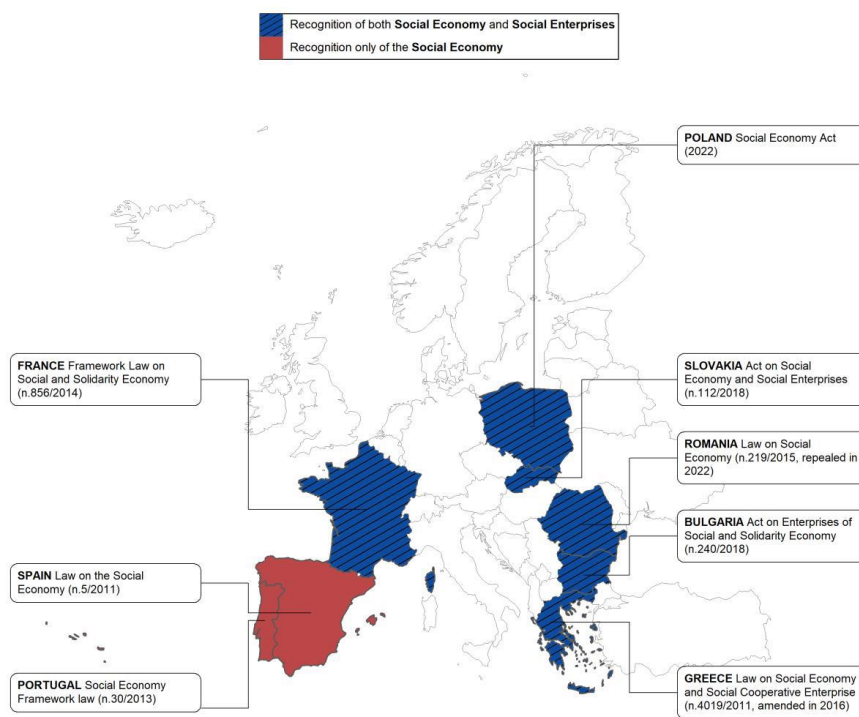


Figure 1 Implemented laws on social economy within European member countries
Source: Carini et al., 2024, p. 39

In Portugal and Spain, legislation is focused on the social economy, while in countries such as France, Poland, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece, there is also awareness and a legislative framework for both the social economy and social enterprises.

Social enterprise is a relatively recent phenomenon that cuts across various legal forms, depending on the legal traditions and culture of each country (Carini et al., 2024, p. 47).

3.1 Composition of Social Economy Entities and Social Enterprises by Legal Form in V4 Countries

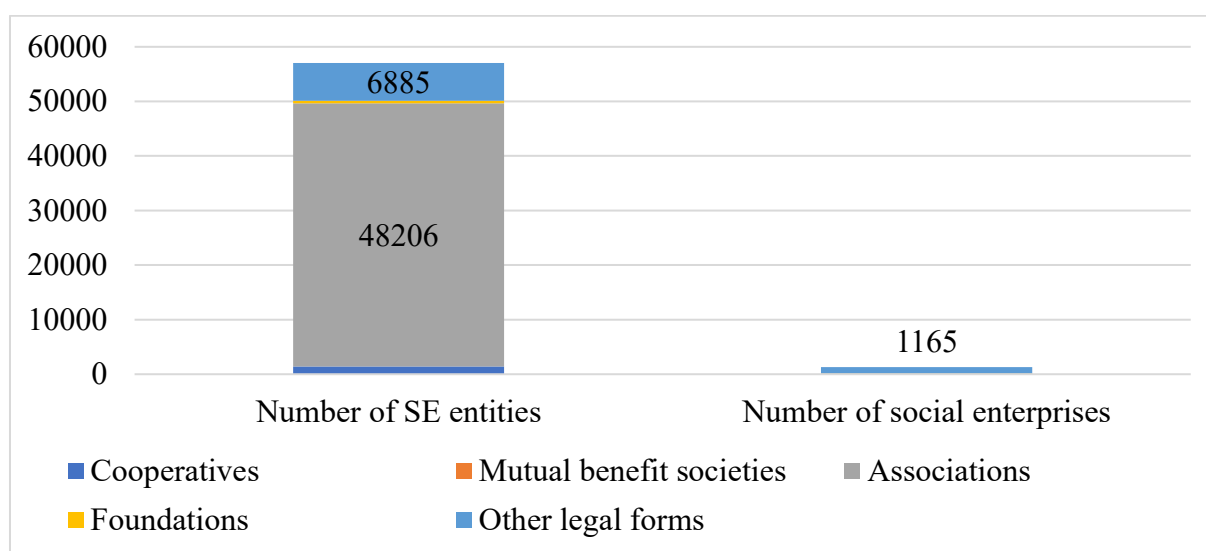
Although Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland are neighbouring countries and share many historical and societal contexts, the social economy and its development differ in each of these states.

In Slovakia, the Act No. 112/2018 on the Social Economy and Social Enterprises was adopted in 2018. This contributed to the development of the sector, resulting in the creation of approximately 600 social enterprises.

According to Section 4(1) of Act No. 112/2018 on the Social Economy and Social Enterprises in Slovakia, the following types of social economy entities may exist: civic associations, foundations, non-investment funds, non-profit organisations, church-affiliated purpose-oriented facilities, commercial companies, cooperatives, and sole traders.

For social enterprises, the Act defines the conditions under which an entity may acquire the status of a social enterprise or may be recognised as a social enterprise with social impact.

The distribution of social economy entities in Slovakia, presented in Graph 1, is noteworthy, as the majority are represented by associations, which form the most stable component of the non-profit sector.

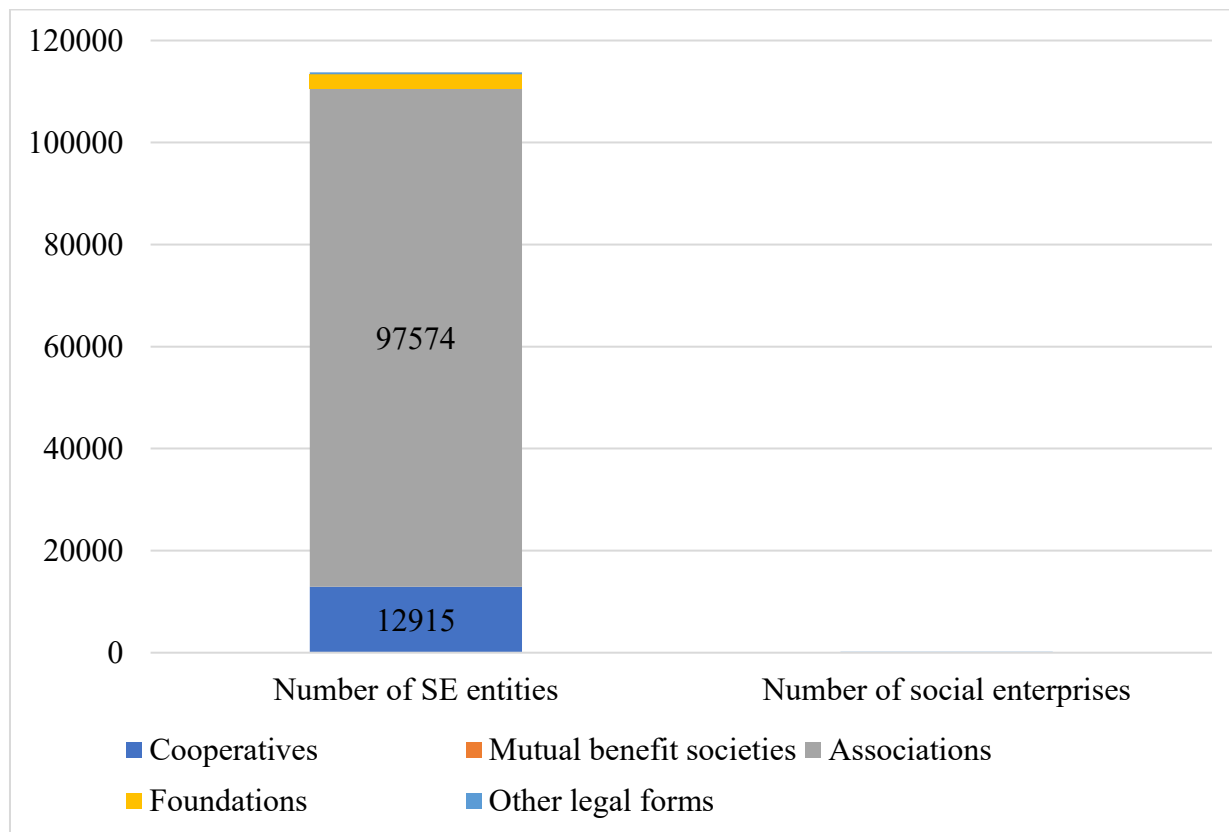


Graph 1 Distribution of Social Economy Entities and Social Enterprises in Slovakia
Source: Carini et al., 2024

Of the total 57,012 social economy entities, nearly 85% — 48,206 entities — are associations. A smaller share consists of foundations, with 477 entities, and cooperatives, with 1,444 entities. While cooperatives are a permanent feature of the social economy in Western European countries, in Slovakia they remain a legal form of business that still carries a rather unattractive association as a legacy of socialism. Other legal forms operating within the social economy, amounting to 6,885 entities in total, include non-profit organisations providing general-purpose services, non-investment funds, purpose-oriented church facilities, and limited liability companies.

Among the total 57,012 entities, 1,297 are classified as social enterprises. This group comprises non-profit organisations providing general-purpose services, with 569 entities; purpose-oriented church facilities, with 119 entities; and limited liability companies, with 477

entities. Together, these 1,165 entities may hold the status of registered social enterprises under Act No. 112/2018 on the Social Economy and Social Enterprises. Overall, social enterprises represent only 2.27% of all social economy entities in Slovakia.



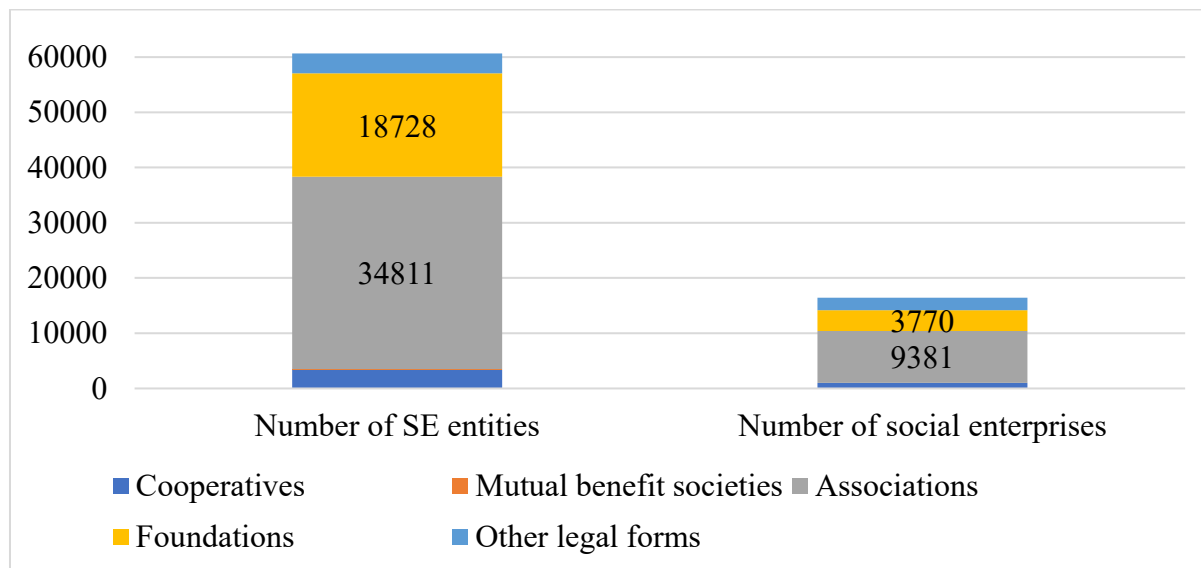
Graph 2 Distribution of Social Economy Entities and Social Enterprises in Czechia
Source: Carini et al., 2024

The country also has 2,909 foundations and a significantly larger group of cooperatives, with 12,915 entities, which account for 11.4% of all social economy entities. Other legal forms consist mainly of legal persons established by churches, with 251 entities, and limited liability companies, with 88 entities.

The share of social enterprises is extremely low, with only 198 entities, representing 0.2% of the total. This negligible proportion can be attributed to the long-standing absence of legislation regulating the social economy and social entrepreneurship, in contrast to Slovakia, where such legislation was adopted as early as 2018.

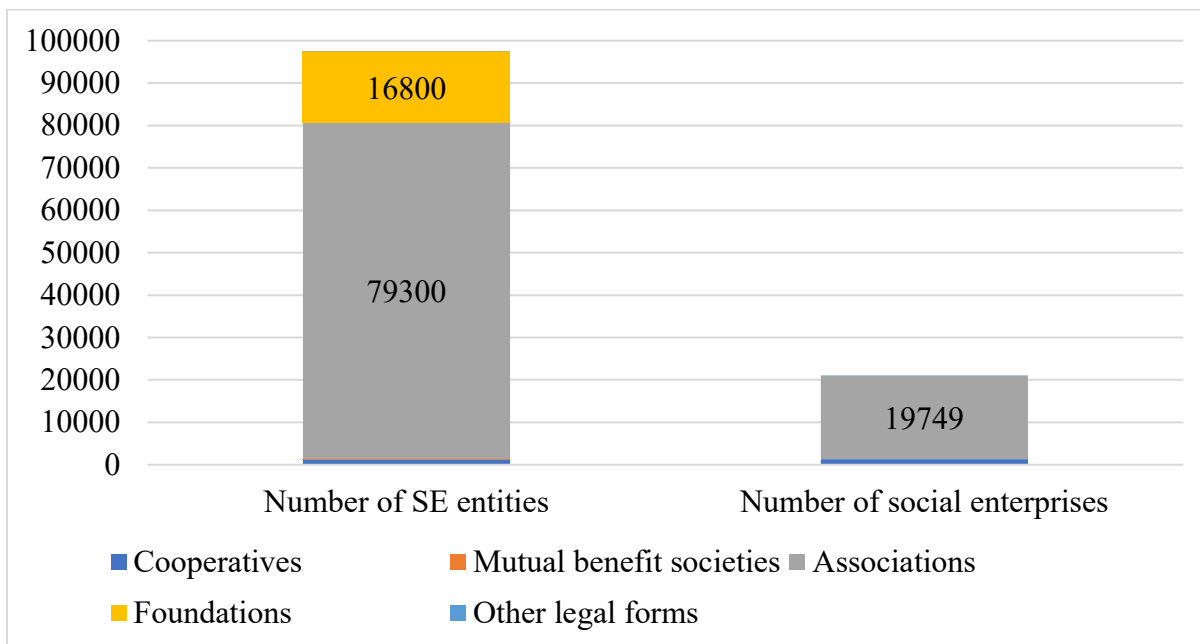
In Hungary, the concept of social enterprise appeared in the second half of the 1990s, in relation to the more widely known notions of civil society, the non-profit sector, and the social economy (Kiss, 2024), although there is still no dedicated law on social enterprises.

The social economy comprises a total of 60,644 entities in Hungary, as shown in Graph 3. Associations represent the largest segment, accounting for 34,811 entities, which corresponds to 57.4% of the overall structure.



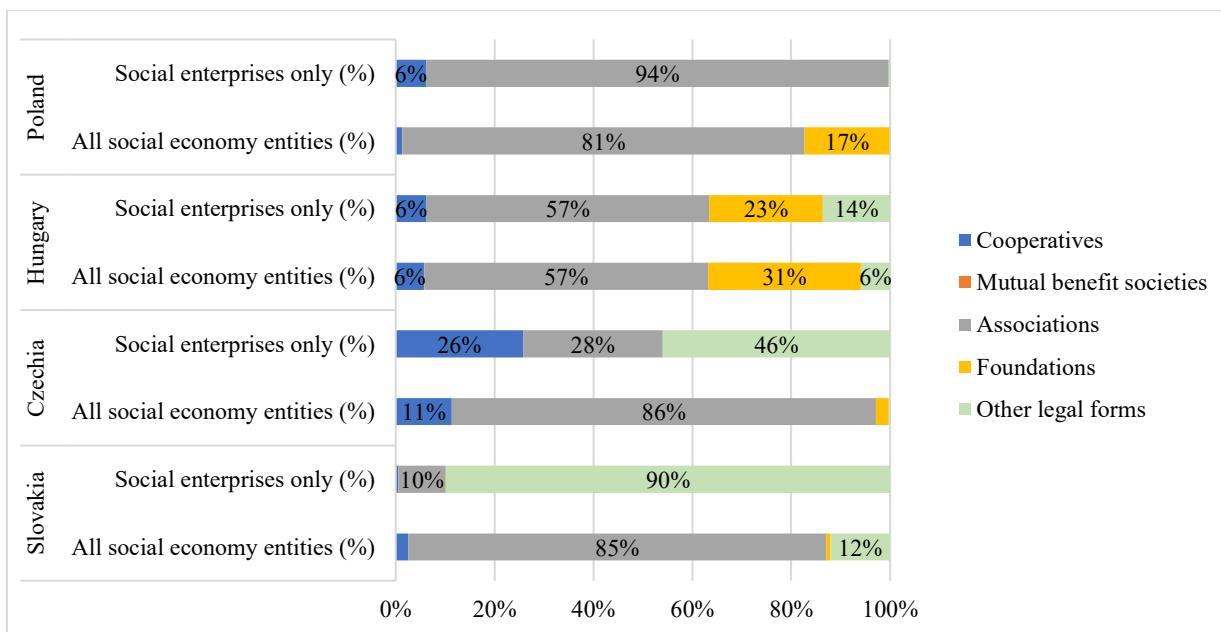
Graph 3 Distribution of Social Economy Entities and Social Enterprises in Hungary
Source: Carini et al., 2024

Foundations also constitute a substantial share, with 18,728 entities, representing 31%. Cooperatives and other legal forms exhibit comparable proportions, each approaching 6%. An interesting component of the social economy is represented by mutual benefit societies, which operate in Hungary as 49 entities, accounting for less than 0.1% of the overall structure. Notably, 16,412 social economy entities are classified as social enterprises, representing a significant share of 27%, considerably higher than in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. These enterprises are predominantly associations, totalling 9,381 entities. Following the trend observed in Hungary, Poland exhibits a similar disparity between the total number of social economy entities and the number of social enterprises, as shown in Graph 4. The social economy comprises 97,468 entities in total. Associations constitute the largest segment, with 79,300 entities, representing 81.4%, which is the highest share of associations among all analysed countries. Foundations rank second, accounting for 16,800 entities, or 17.2%, while cooperatives represent a modest share of 1.3%. Mutual benefit societies are also present within Poland's social economy, although only 11 entities operate under this form. Out of the total number of social economy entities, social enterprises account for 21.7%, most of which are organised as associations.



Graph 4 Distribution of Social Economy Entities and Social Enterprises in Poland
Source: Carini et al., 2024

Based on the conversion of absolute figures into relative values, we can compare the shares of individual legal forms of social economy entities in the Visegrad countries and determine the proportion of these legal forms within the total number of social enterprises.



Graph 5: Comparative Structure of Legal Forms in the Social Economy and Social Enterprises in Visegrad Countries (%)
Source: own elaboration

When considering the first comparison, associations represent the largest share among the legal forms of social economy entities in each country. Their highest representation is found in

the Czech Republic, where they account for as much as 86%. Conversely, mutual benefit societies have the lowest representation among the V4 countries, as these entities are historically more common in Western European countries. As for cooperatives, they are most prevalent in the Czech Republic, where they account for 11%, while foundations reach their highest share in Poland, at 31%.

In the second comparison, presented in Graph 5, we examine the distribution of individual types of entities within the group of social enterprises. The share of social enterprises within the total number of social economy entities — cooperatives, mutual benefit societies, associations, foundations, and other legal forms — is relatively low, as can be observed in the preceding graphs showing absolute values for the V4 countries. The highest proportion of social enterprises is found in Hungary, reaching 27%, although Hungary has no explicit legislation governing the operation of social enterprises. Instead, their activities are regulated under various laws related to cooperatives or non-profit sector organisations, which are commonly regarded as social enterprises. In the remaining V4 countries, this share is very low due to historical and societal circumstances.

The assessment of the shares of individual legal forms reveals, for example, an interesting pattern in Slovakia, where the highest proportion falls under legal forms other than the four basic categories: cooperatives, associations, mutual benefit societies, and foundations. These are predominantly limited liability companies, accounting for as much as 90%, established by both natural and legal persons. In the Czech Republic, other legal forms likewise represent a significant portion, while cooperatives and associations also hold a notable share. In Hungary and Poland, associations have the largest share among social enterprises, accounting for 86% in Hungary and 94% in Poland.

3.2 Employment in Social Economy entities

As noted in the Methods section, the second part of the analysis examines the number of individuals employed in social economy entities, the share of part-time positions, the proportion of women in the workforce, and the extent of volunteer involvement. Since many social economy entities operate in fields such as social work, caregiving, and healthcare, it can be expected that women are more frequently employed in this sector. This assumption also supports the inclusion of women's employment as an indicator for assessing whether these sectoral patterns are reflected within social economy organisations. Volunteering is included as an indicator of civic engagement, reflecting the societal support directed towards these entities.

Overall, employment within social economy entities across Europe is relatively significant. The analysis shows that there are more than 4.3 million social economy entities in the European Union (Carini et al., 2024, p. 42), employing more than 11.5 million people, which represents some 6.3% of the employed population working in the social economy (Carini et al., 2024, p. 51).

According to Figure 2, employment in the social economy increases from Eastern to Western European Union countries. In Central European countries, it accounts for around 2% of total employment, whereas in Belgium it reaches almost 13%, in Germany 8.6%, and in France

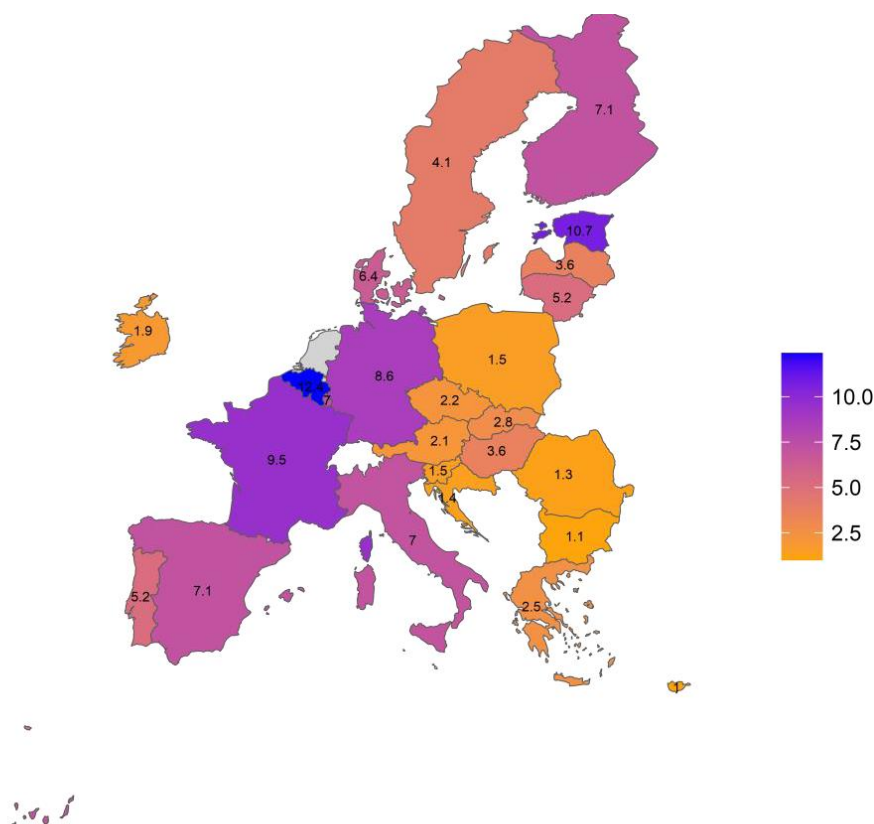
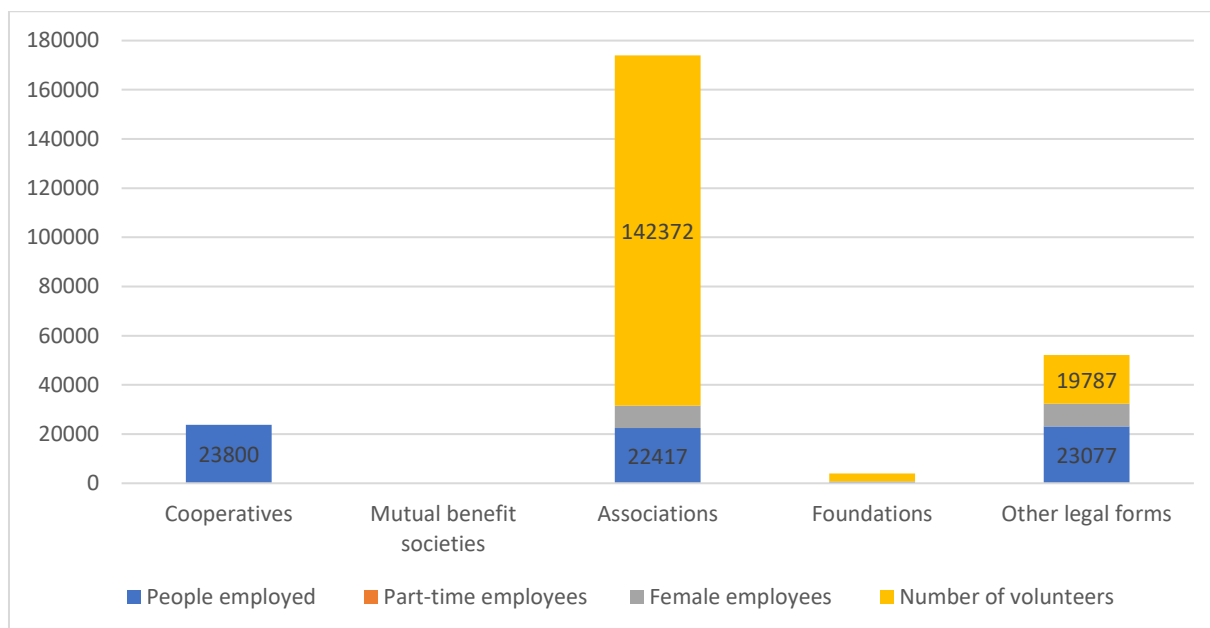


Figure 2 Employment in the social economy entities within European member countries
Source: Carini et al., 2024

In recent years, employment in Slovakia has shown positive figures, with the unemployment rate standing at around 5.3% in 2024. As previously mentioned, the COVID-19 crisis prompted many employers, who were forced to close their operations due to restrictions, to seek alternative solutions, either to sustain business activities or to integrate disadvantaged workers (Pčolinská, 2025). During this period, increased interest in establishing social enterprises was also recorded. In Slovakia, these enterprises are predominantly represented by

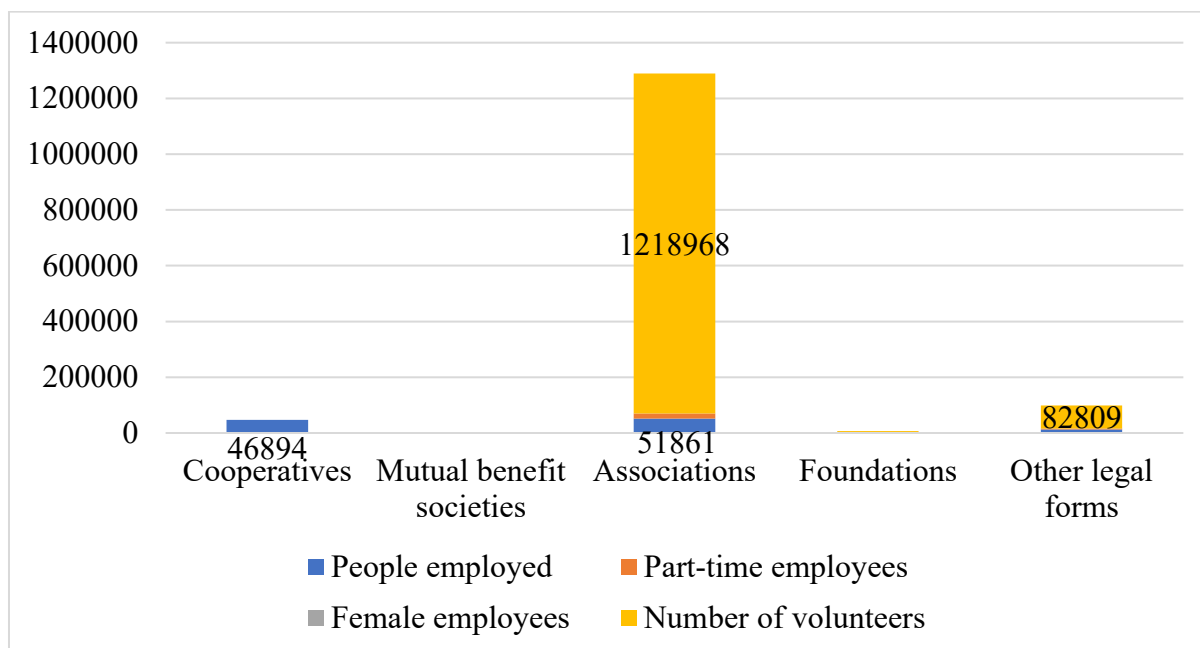
limited liability companies. Moreover, municipalities, towns, and regional self-governing authorities are significantly involved in this type of business activity.



Graph 6 Employment and volunteering in social economy entities in Slovakia
Source: Carini et al., 2024

Employment within social economy entities in Slovakia, totalling 69,700 employees, is almost evenly distributed among three types of organisations: cooperatives, associations, and other legal forms, with around 23,000 employees in each category, representing approximately 33% each. Part-time work was not reported. A comparable number of women are employed in associations and other legal forms, with around 9,200 women in each category out of a total of 18,765 women employed in the sector; for cooperatives, data were not available. Mutual benefit societies have no employees, as this legal form is not practised in Slovakia, nor in the other V4 countries.

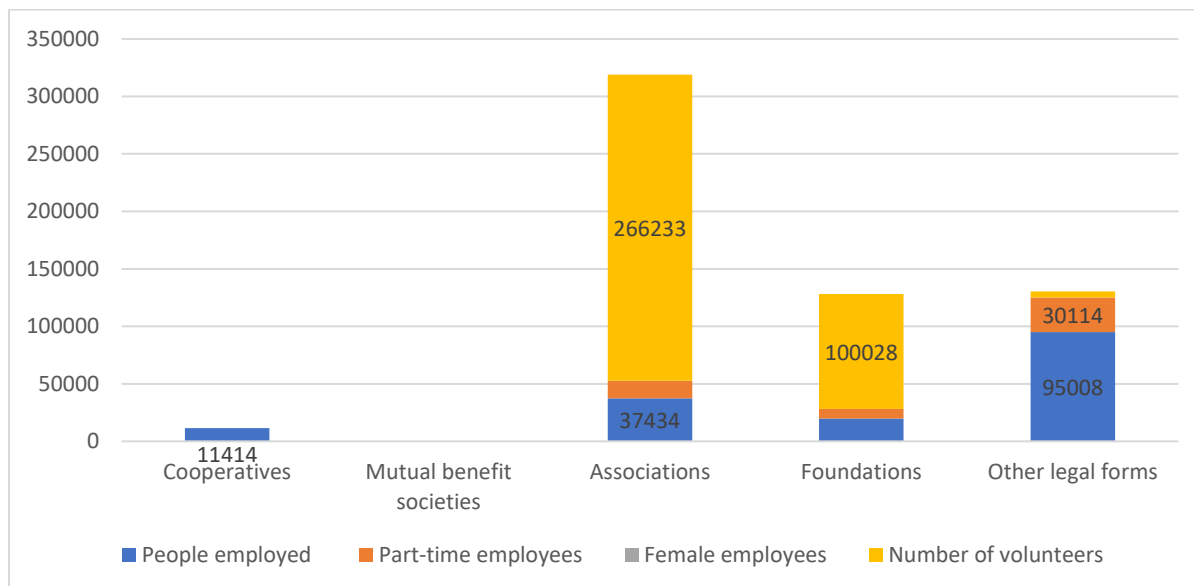
Regarding volunteering, which is included as an additional form of workforce, although unpaid, it contributes significantly to shaping the social economy. Its presence is dominant in associations, reaching 142,372 volunteers out of a total of 165,442 volunteers, which is more than six times the number of full-time employees in associations.



Graph 7 Employment and volunteering in social economy entities in Czechia
Source: Carini et al., 2024

In Czechia, 112,369 people are employed within social economy entities, as shown in Graph 7. Of this total, a comparable number of employees work in cooperatives, with 46,894 employees, representing almost 42%, and in associations, with 51,861 employees, representing around 46%.

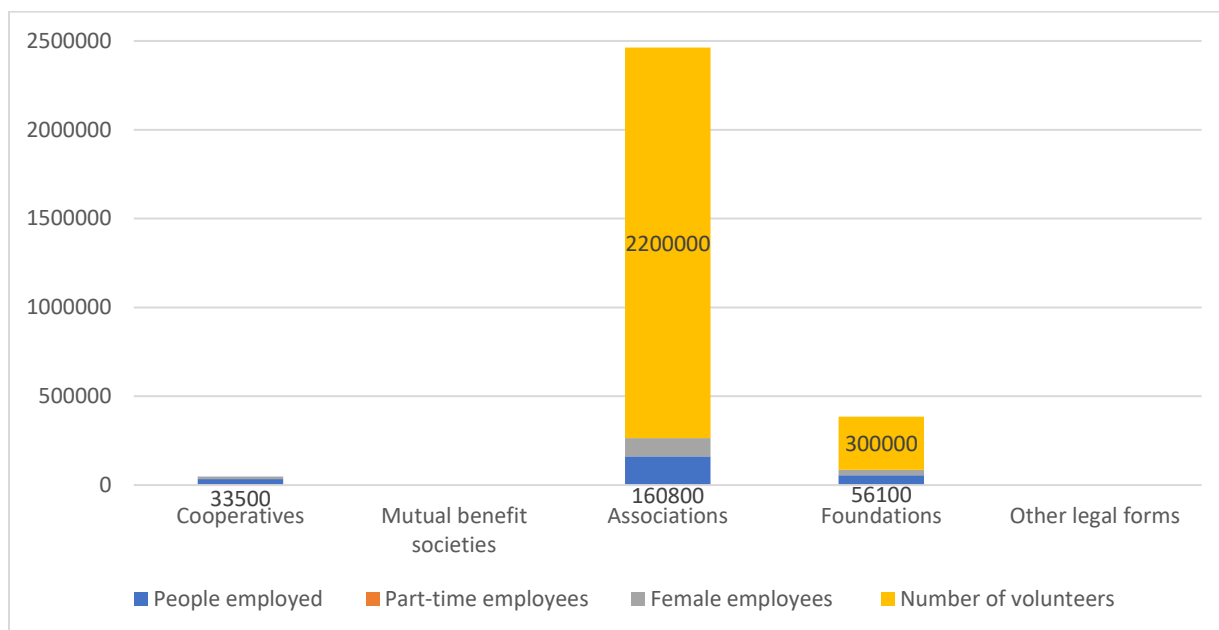
However, the largest share within the social economy is represented by volunteering, which brings together a significant number of individuals, particularly within associations. As many as 1,218,968 people engage in voluntary work in associations, representing 93.3% of all volunteers, while 82,809 volunteers are involved in other types of entities and 5,119 in foundations. This indicates that volunteering is deeply rooted in the Czech Republic and reflects the willingness of individuals to contribute to society without financial compensation across various fields and areas of social life. The dataset did not include data on female employees.



Graph 8 Employment and volunteering in social economy entities in Hungary
 Source: Carini et al., 2024

Employment within social economy entities in Hungary, as shown in Graph 8, shows a slightly different distribution across individual types of organisations. More than half of the total number of full-time employees in the social economy, 163,727, work in other legal forms beyond the four core types of social economy entities, amounting to 95,008 employees, or 58%. Associations employ 37,434 individuals, representing nearly 23%.

There is also a relatively high number of part-time workers, totalling 53,566, of whom 56% are employed in other legal forms of social economy entities. Regarding volunteering, a total of 371,534 individuals are engaged in voluntary activities in Hungary, with 266,233 active in associations, representing 72%, and 100,028 active in foundations, representing 27%. The dataset did not include data on female employees, as these data were not available.



Graph 9 Employment and volunteering in social economy entities in Poland
Source: Carini et al., 2024

Employment within the social economy in Poland, as shown in Graph 9, does not include data on part-time workers or employees in other legal forms. Data are available only for three types of entities: cooperatives, associations, and foundations. Of the total number of people employed in the social economy, 250,400, the largest share is employed in associations, with 160,800 employees, representing 64%. Cooperatives employ 33,500 individuals, or 13.4%, while foundations account for 56,100 employees, representing 22%.

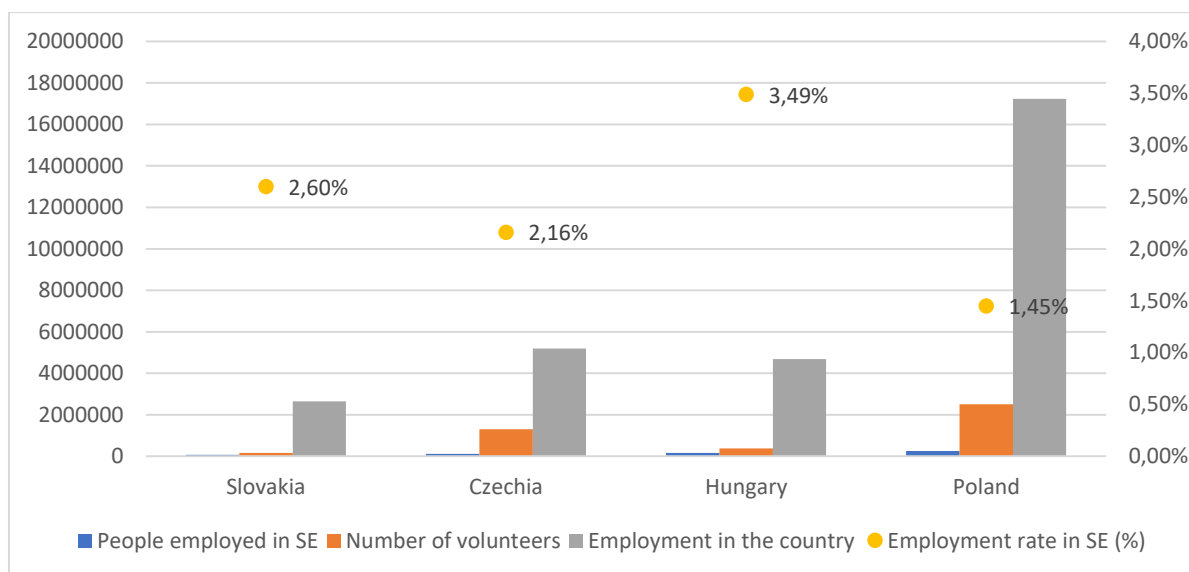
Volunteering reaches the highest level among the V4 countries, which is natural given Poland's population size. In total, 2,500,000 volunteers, as shown in Table 1, are active in the social economy, of whom 2,200,000 are engaged in associations, representing 88%, and 300,000 in foundations.

Table 1 Employment in social economy (SE) in Visegrad countries

	People employed in SE	Number of volunteers	Employment in the country	Employment rate in SE (%)
Slovakia	69700	165442	2646000 ^a	2.60%
Czechia	112369	1306896	5192400 ^b	2.16%
Hungary	163727	371534	4689000 ^b	3.49%
Poland	250400	2500000	17231000 ^b	1.45%

Source: own elaboration according to data commissioned by Carini et al. (2024), ^aStatistical Office of Slovak republic and ^bEmployment Institute, 2024

As presented in Table 1 and Graph 10, in addition to basic data on employment within the social economy and the number of volunteers in individual countries, we aimed to determine the share of employment in the social economy relative to total employment in each country. The analysis was based on absolute employment data for the year 2024. Data were sourced from the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic and the Employment Institute for the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland.



Graph 10 Employment in social economy (SE) in Visegrad countries

Source: Carini et al. (2024). *Benchmarking the socio-economic performance of the EU social economy: Improving the socio-economic knowledge of the proximity and social economy ecosystem*

The highest share of employment in the social economy relative to total employment is observed in Hungary, reaching 3.49%. In Slovakia, the share is 2.6%, and in Czechia it stands at 2.16%. The lowest proportion is in Poland, where employment within the social economy accounts for 1.45%. These figures differ slightly from those presented in Figure 2, which may be due to variations in employment numbers across different years. Given the differences in population size across the analysed countries, it becomes evident that the share of employment in social economy entities is lowest in Poland, even though Poland reports the highest absolute number of employees in this sector.

When examined in relation to the total employed population, the findings indicate that the social economy in these countries remains at an early stage of development compared to Western European countries, where it has a longer tradition and a more established position

within the economy. In Western Europe, employment in social economy entities typically reaches between 7% and 12%.

The number of people employed in social economy entities depends on several factors, including the overall design of the social economy system in each country; the existence of legislation regulating the sector; the attitudes of policymakers and civil society towards the non-profit sphere; the remuneration of employees within it; and the extent to which citizens are interested in engaging in social entrepreneurship.

For example, Slovakia has had legislation regulating the social economy and social enterprises since 2018, which facilitates the distinction between social enterprises and other non-profit sector organisations. Poland adopted a dedicated Social Economy Act in 2022. The Czech Republic adopted legislation specifically addressing social entrepreneurship — the Act on Integration Social Enterprises — in 2025; however, a comprehensive law regulating the social economy as a whole has not yet been enacted. In Hungary, such standalone legislation is absent and, according to the OECD (2025), the country also lacks a national strategy for the development of the social economy.

Conclusion

The paper sought to analyse the characteristics of the social economy sector in the Visegrad countries and to explore the employment structure within social economy entities. The results indicate that the stated research objective has been fully accomplished.

It can be concluded that the composition of social economy entities and social enterprises is similar across all V4 countries, particularly with respect to the three main types of social economy organisations: cooperatives, associations, and foundations. The most represented category of social economy entities in all V4 countries is associations. From a historical perspective, mutual benefit societies appear less frequently in Central European countries; this legal form is entirely absent in Slovakia and Czechia, while only a small number exist in Hungary and an insignificant number are present in Poland.

The share of social enterprises is highest in Hungary, where they are predominantly organised as non-profit companies, although legislation on the social economy is missing. In Slovakia, social enterprises also include commercial companies, primarily limited liability companies. Under Act No. 112/2018 on the Social Economy and Social Enterprises, these entities may hold the status of a registered social enterprise, which requires compliance with the conditions stipulated by law.

In the analysis of employment within the social economy sector across the V4 countries, we observed that the highest share of employment in the social economy is in Hungary, while the lowest is in Poland. Regarding individual types of social economy entities, Slovakia and Czechia show a comparable situation, where full-time employment prevails in cooperatives, associations, and other legal forms. Mutual benefit societies are entirely absent in both countries.

An important dimension can be seen in volunteering, which in Czechia represents a remarkably high number of individuals engaged in social economy activities without financial compensation. Up to 1,218,968 people are involved in voluntary work in associations, accounting for 93.3% of all volunteers. It can be assumed that these organisations operate across various spheres of economic and non-economic activity, creating opportunities for innovative job creation through the interconnection of the social and circular economies. Similarly, volunteering is also evident in Poland, although the figure of 2.5 million inhabitants engaged in voluntary work is proportionate to the country's population size.

Regarding employment within the social economy sector in Hungary, the highest number of employees is concentrated in associations, foundations, and other legal forms. In Poland, most people employed in the social economy work in associations. Part-time employment and the employment of women are not clearly reported due to a lack of available data.

We can state that the social economy sector in the V4 countries is still at a developing stage, and its share in employment does not reach the levels observed in Western European countries. According to the report by Carini et al. (2024), at least 11.5 million people, or some 6.3% of those employed in European countries, work in the social economy. Germany, with 3.4 million people, representing 8.6% of those employed, has the highest number, followed by France, with almost 2.6 million people, or 9.5%; Italy, with over 1.5 million people, or 7%; and Spain, with almost 1.4 million people, or 7.1%. These Member States are followed by Belgium, with more than 592,000 people, representing 12.4% of those employed; Poland, with around 250,000 people; and Portugal, with almost 245,000 people.

In the V4 countries, around 2–3% of employed people work in the social economy. This may be attributed to the sector's historical trajectory, which differs from that of Western Europe and affects most of the analysed social economy entities, as well as to low remuneration in the non-profit sector. The V4 countries are post-communist societies in which the non-profit sector did not exist in its current form during the socialist period. The legal form of cooperatives also shows relatively low numbers, as cooperatives are still often perceived as a legacy of that era.

The V4 region also includes specific types of organisations, such as church-based institutions operating in social and human services, which are seeking to define their role in society amid ongoing societal transformation.

Nevertheless, there is potential for the development of volunteering, which demonstrates interest in social economy activities and the possibility of future job creation through government policies. A viable solution could be the integration of the social economy with, for example, the circular economy, which creates employment opportunities across various fields, such as waste management, furniture and consumer goods reuse, repurposing and upcycling materials, and environmentally sustainable production processes.

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