
Social Policy in Independent Slovakia

The Present Situation and Perspectives for the Future

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Abstract: The article is a description of the present social policy in the Slovak Republic and a deliberation of the long-term possibilities for social strategy development in one of the youngest European countries. The independent Slovak Republic is coping with many economic, political and social problems. In this paper we are trying (1) to describe the problem of implementing social reform whose main purposes are a) to separate financing of social and sickness insurance from the state budget; and b) to create new social security system whose fundamental elements should be state social support, social assistance, and social insurance, and (2) to answer the question: What could be the long-term goals and possibilities of social policy development in Slovakia?

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Introduction

During the debates on the "inevitability" of the division of Czechoslovakia into two independent states, the "specificity" of both the Czech and Slovak Republics was an often-used argument. The notion "specificity" expressed two different conceptions.

First, it delineated the differences in the economies. There were visible differences in the industrial structures of the Czech and Slovak Republics. In Slovakia the advanced weapon industry represented a large portion of industrial production. As a result of its conversion, economic performance has decreased and unemployment greatly increased in this part of the former federal state. In July 1993 the unemployment rate was about 2.6% in the Czech Republic, while in Slovakia it was around 12%. Some Slovak economic experts expect an 18% unemployment rate by the end of 1993. Unemployment, homelessness and the crime rate are not only expanding rapidly, but constitute the main social problems in the Slovak Republic.

Second, there were also differences in the political sphere. A difference in political orientation was apparent between Vladimír Mečiar's political movement (HZDS) and Václav Klaus's party (ODS) -- the leading political powers in the Slovak and Czech Republics. They differed in their views on how *fast* and in *what sequence* the central planning regime should be transformed into a market economy. Moreover, Mečiar stressed building a "social market system" while Klaus preferred a market system "without any attributes." These differing approaches to solving the problems of the transformation in Slovakia were formulated before the country's split in the Program Statement of the Slovak government from July of

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1992. The Slovak government declared the need to place *equal* emphasis on both economic and social reform. It is worth mentioning, however, that political declarations and reality are two different phenomena. Until recently the Slovak government had not made specific the general items of its Program Statement, and had not clearly articulated the long-term aims of the transition and the tools to be used for attaining them.

Today it is more than evident that implementing and balancing economic and social reforms is a highly demanding process which, on one hand, presupposes close cooperation between ministries, and on the other, a high level of cooperation between the government, the opposition and other non-governmental bodies. In addition, one has to realize that balancing economic and social reforms is far from easy when economic performance is declining, the social structure is changing and new interest groups are emerging.

In this paper we would like to pinpoint and identify some important facets of the social transformation in Slovakia. We will pay special attention to the following:

- identifying the fundamental problems of Slovakia's social strategy;
- comparing the particular attempts aimed at solving these problems at the former federal and the present national levels;
- considering the long-term possibilities for social policy development in Slovakia; and
- issues concerning the harmonization of the short-term goals of Slovakia's social policy with the long-term social strategy of the country.

1. Are there any differences between the present social strategy in Slovakia and that of the original federal scenario?

1.1. Policy proposals

The Slovak Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, and the Family has recently produced a document entitled *The Strategy for Social Reform in 1993*. The Strategy should have served as a basis for the "different" approach to solving specific social problems in Slovakia, especially in the spheres of a) unemployment, b) household incomes, and c) the social security system.

The Strategy, however, does not offer positive solutions for Slovakia's increasing *unemployment*. Instead, it declares that the budgeted financial resources (500 million Slovak crowns) are not sufficient to combat the expected growth rate in unemployment to 15.4-17.4% by the end of 1993. To quote the Strategy: "It is no use talking about *active* employment policy or even about employment policy at all when the amount of available money drops below this level." [*Stratégia* 1993: 12] Neither do the proposals for improving *household incomes* offer any new ideas: the need to amend the Minimum Living Standard Act, as well as to adjust the minimum wage to meet the rising cost of living, are mentioned and the government is also called on to introduce new and simplified rules for wage control.

Two illustrations of the present situation in this area are that household incomes in Slovakia are about one-tenth of those in the EC countries, and that about 50% of all household expenditure goes to food and clothing. [National 1993]

Finally, important changes are expected in the *social security system*. The fundamental elements of the new system are state social support, social assistance, and social insurance. The main feature of the first two is the *individual direction* of benefits, which should reflect the deepening social differentiation in the society.

State social support is intended to be a system of rates representing the financial participation of the state in solving certain "state recognized events" in the lives of people and families with children. This should involve child allowances, parental benefits, loans for young families, students, the elderly and disabled, as well as contributions to housing, funeral benefits, delivery benefits, etc. The structure of these "state recognized events" is still in flux, and the final proposal should be worked out by the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, and Family in October 1993. The important point here is that state social support should be provided to *all citizens* of Slovakia irrespective of their incomes. There is a tendency to diminish the number of "state recognized events" in order to minimize social expenditures in the state budget.

Social assistance will be directed primarily toward ensuring social support in cases of an acute shortage of income. A very important precondition for providing social assistance is the definition of "need." A person is "in need" when he or she "is not able to secure his or her basic living conditions, and the protection of his or her rights." In other words, when he or she is not able to secure a legally accepted minimum standard of living. The main objective of this aid will be, however, not only to guarantee a living standard at the level of a public social minimum, but also to *encourage* people to search for ways to overcome their unfavorable living situation. The proposed social assistance program, therefore, includes not only "passive" financial aid on the part of the state, municipality and voluntary (non-state) bodies, but other means such as counselling, social and legal protection, social assistance services, and material aid.

The social insurance system (the system of short-term hospital insurance benefits, and long-term old-age pension insurance benefits) has recently been partially introduced.¹ One can hardly say, however, that the effect of this change has been unambiguously positive; we will therefore pay closer attention to this point. Moreover, social insurance is an important means of extending *social rights* within society, and this is a crucial question, especially for societies undergoing transformation.

1) Retirement insurance benefits include old-age pensions, orphans', widows' and widowers' pensions, invalidity benefits, and seniority benefits (benefits for length of service). Hospital insurance benefits include sickness benefits, maternity benefits, contributions for pregnant women and financial support for persons looking after an ill family member. There is also a compulsory health insurance scheme, in which the benefits cover general health services and preventive medical care, specialized hospital care, medical care for persons requiring constant help or attendance and medical care for infertile women.

1.2. The new insurance system: its conception and institutional arrangement

In January 1993 the National Insurance Company Act was introduced, with the twin purposes of separating the financing of social insurance from the state budget and setting up a compulsory national scheme of sickness, hospital and retirement insurance. According to this Act employees, employers, individual entrepreneurs, and the state should make payments to independent sickness, hospital and retirement funds. At first glance the Act promises an extension of social rights. The reality, however, is much more complicated. Initial experiences have already shown that the Act has many defects, but here we will pay attention to only the most apparent.

Although the National Insurance Company (NP) came into existence on January 1, 1993, its Board of Representatives (which should have been its executive body) was not appointed until February. The second meeting of the Board (in March) did not adopt the Statutes of the NP, which means that more than three months after the NP was established, the fundamental requirement for its functioning was not fulfilled. Furthermore, as of this writing the NP's information system has not been built up to the necessary level. Many experts, including those of the World Bank who visited Slovakia in July 1993, often mention this problem.

However, the Act's *conceptual defects* are much more dangerous. During the first two months of 1993 many small entrepreneurs returned their entrepreneurial licenses. This was a direct result of the implementation of the National Insurance Company Act and a new tax system *simultaneously*. Insurance payments were too high for new entrepreneurs (see Table 1), and the new taxation system was not very favorable for them either.² The simultaneous launching of these measures resulted had an unintended consequence -- instead of supporting small enterprise development, a number of small entrepreneurs were liquidated.

Table 1. Payments to Health, Hospital, and Retirement Funds

| | health insurance | hospital insurance | retirement insurance |
|--|---------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| employees (% of last month's income) | 3.7 | 1.4 | 5.9 |
| employers (% of last month's income) | 10.0 | 4.4 | 20.6 |
| individual entrepreneurs (% of last month's income) | 13.7 | 5.8 | 26.5 |
| state (% of minimum wage) | 13.7 | 5.8 | 26.5 |

Note: The state should pay for other, non-earning groups of the population such as children and students, pensioners, unemployed people, prisoners, etc.

Source: National Insurance Company Act, Bratislava 1992.

² Already towards the end of March the government had to adopt the *Statute*, which lists conditions for an income-tax exemption for small entrepreneurs.

After launching the Act, whose main purpose was to *separate* the financing of insurance from the state budget, the government adopted supplementary measures. According to these measures, all financial means administered by the National Company Funds should once again be placed in the state budget. To explain this decision the government stated that it was an inevitable step in stabilizing the Funds, for which the government is responsible. At the very beginning there were doubts whether or not the stabilization of the Funds was really the main objective of the Act, and whether the government's amendment would really only be in effect until the end of July. The amendment could have been pursuing a quite different aim -- to keep the state budget in balance and, through this, to give Slovakia better access to important international financial and monetary institutions, such as the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund.³ Reality confirmed these doubts. In July the Slovak Parliament passed an amendment to the State Budget Act for 1993, which included an extension of the period during which the financial means of the National Insurance Company Funds will be included in the state budget to the end of year.⁴ This was accompanied by a 10% devaluation of the Slovak Crown (effective July 10). Both of these measures were aimed at lowering the state budget deficit.

1.3. General conclusions

All that we have described above shows that no *salient* changes in the social policy of independent Slovakia have occurred during the last nine months. There is virtually no visible difference between the original federal scenario and the present approach of the Slovak government to "social strategy issues." In fact, the government has not repudiated the "federal approach" based on the statement "*first* we have to built up markets and *then* we can pay attention to issues of social development." It seems that there is no real will to search for ways that would enable simultaneous restructuring in both the economic and social spheres. Economic and social reforms are *not* seen as having the same importance. Social reform is reduced to changes in the social security system, household incomes, and employment - aimed at establishing the "social reconciliation" of the society.⁵ It is, however, beyond the scope of this paper to search for all the possible reasons for which this may be so, and render exhaustive criticism of such an approach. Instead we will look at the possibilities for social policy development in Slovakia.

2. What are the long-term possibilities for social policy development in Slovakia?

If we are seeking the answer to the above-mentioned question, we must take a great number of facts into account, including:

3) In which case the National Insurance Company (and, when all is said and done, the citizen) would insure the present government.

4) The same rules were adopted for the Employment Fund, which also should have been independent of the state budget.

5) In our opinion, equating the importance of social and economic reforms presupposes seeing social reform as creating a new quality of life. This very general statement is explained further in the following pages.

- the current economic situation in Slovakia and its development prospects;
- the political situation in Slovakia, its stability and overall direction, including a certain "legacy" in view of the relationship between the individual and the state;
- the economic, social and political development of Europe -- in both the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and in Western European countries.

If we take these and other facts into consideration,⁶ it is more or less apparent that social policy *must* undergo a substantial reform in both its content and its institutional background.

One can assume that this reform will not be "radical" in relation to the speed of change. At the same time one can suppose that for two reasons this reform will not simply be an application of already existing or theoretically substantiated social policy models that have developed in advanced capitalist countries. Firstly, the mechanical application of social policy models functioning within developed capitalist countries to the conditions in our country would not be appropriate. These models arose in an evolutionary way in democratic countries with advanced market economies. This would not be the case in our country, where a market economy and democracy, the inevitable prerequisites of a developed social policy, are only nascent. Secondly, any model of social policy is only an abstraction, and is changeable over time. The general economic recession, mass migration, increases in long-term unemployment, changes in patterns of behavior and other phenomena will lead to social policy modifications and adaptation to new conditions.

However, if we admit that these models involve certain *strategies* of social policy, it becomes useful to identify a few important factors. First, one can suppose that, despite considerable limitations on social policy resources (financial, institutional and others), the *residual welfare model of social policy*⁷ will not prevail in Slovakia in the long term. The main reasons behind this assertion lie above all in the legacy of views of the state's functions in society and in a European tradition that emphasizes solidarity and social justice.

Second, *the industrial achievement-performance model of social policy* stresses the importance of social welfare institutions representing a supplement to the economy and according to which social needs should be satisfied on the basis of merit, work performance and productivity. This model presupposes an advanced market economy as well as a developed institutional basis for satisfying social needs. It is based on the idea that a market economy is a natural constituent of civil society and potential tensions between the market and the state will be solved by means of negotiations among the various social partners. However, here the danger arises that during these negotiations the important interests of some social groups will not be respected satisfactorily if at all. This could lead to long-term social tensions or even outright conflict, and thus jeopardize the stability of the

⁶) For example the fact that no social policy, as a relatively independent decision-making process, existed under the previous regime.

⁷) Here we rely on R. M. Titmus's classification of social policy models [Titmus 1974].

country's development. In choosing a strategy for social policy, this fact must be taken very seriously.

Third, *the institutional redistributive model of social policy* supports providing universal services separate from the market on the basis of need. Here an important role is played by the state, it becomes the decisive subject of social policy and an important distributive and redistributive force with the same potential strength as the market. Within this model the greatest emphasis is placed on *full employment*, which is implemented by means of an active state employment policy which itself employs a considerable amount of people. This model has been achieved in its most developed form in the Scandinavian countries, especially Sweden.

Although this model has worked successfully for several decades and has brought about a considerable extension of citizens' social rights, as a *real strategy* in our country it could be met with some resistance, especially on the part of developing entrepreneurial circles. The point is that the countries where this model has been applied have paid for their advanced welfare with high taxes which "disadvantage" high income groups in society. The adoption of this strategy, despite whatever positive results it would bring in the extension of social rights, could in some respects run counter to the goal of supporting small enterprise development. This kind of model, in our opinion, also requires the state to maintain a strong position and, as such, stands in sharp contrast to current tendencies which deprive society of the functioning of state influence.

What we have said so far about the possibilities for forming a social policy strategy in Slovakia has been more or less "negative," that is to say it is an explanation of what the social strategy will *not* look like. At the same time this means it will be necessary to search for new approaches stemming from our own traditions, experiences, present possibilities and expectations as well as from the more clearly formulated goals of social policy. In other words, existing models of social policy can serve as a source of inspiration, but it is necessary to refrain both from copying them mechanically and copying institutions and particular measures that can only work successfully within these models.⁸ Further, in our view it would be an over-simplification to say that social policy in Slovakia will be a "combination" of particular elements taken from various types of social policies. In some ways, as we have tried to suggest, it will be necessary to look for a *new strategy*.

⁸) This is quite an important point. There have been some attempts to introduce specific foreign insurance schemes in Slovakia. For example, the German health insurance system is labelled "the best of all for us." However, the analyses of many experts show that it would be a great mistake to implement this policy because the German scheme is only able to work efficiently under advanced market economy conditions and a relatively stable and low unemployment rate. This is not our situation. The adoption of such a scheme in Slovakia would lead to an uncontrolled increase in the costs of medical care and, in the end, to its total collapse.

The new strategy should reflect and support the fact that there is an advanced (educated, skilled, experienced) human potential in Slovakia. This is our "comparative advantage" and should be used for building a modern and progressive society with all the relevant attributes in Slovakia. This refers not only to a functioning market system, but also a socially just system that respects the human dignity of each individual, and enables people to develop to the full extent of their capacities. In searching for this strategy it would, therefore, be dangerous to subscribe to the notion that the *final* goal of the transformation consists of building up a functioning market system. The point is that in this case social policy would *invariably* remain derivative and second-rate, and social needs would once again be reduced to economic needs.⁹ In our opinion, the shift towards the creation of modern *civil society* (with advanced social rights), rather than the supporting means of a *market system*, should be the core of Slovakia's new social policy. The social policy of the country, however, is not moving in this direction.

2.1. An attempt at a positive formulation of social policy elements

We have said that it would be dangerous to reduce the goals of the transformation simply to building up functioning markets. That is why we must always bear in mind that the transformation has both an economic and a social dimension, and the latter cannot be understood solely in terms of solving the unwanted impacts of economic reform on the "social sphere." If social reform is to be tantamount to economic reform in reality as well as in rhetoric its *goals* must be more clearly formulated.

The "final" goals of economic reform are the creation of markets and their separation from the state.¹⁰ The analogous aim in social reform would be the separation of the state from the social sphere, better expressed as *civil society*. The development of all kinds of rights -- civil, political and social [Marshall 1964] -- would in this case be the main objective of social reform, along with the protection of the above-mentioned rights from unlawful state intervention.¹¹ The formation of civil society is a long-term historical process, the content of which is the protection of the individual's *fundamental civic freedoms*, his or her *political rights*, and his or her *social rights* -- including the right to earn his or her living in a freely chosen occupation, the right to social security, social assistance, and so forth.

Civil, political, and finally social rights have progressively developed in advanced capitalist countries. Social rights are potentially contradictory to market expansion, and can illuminate the existing tensions between the market and civil society [Titmuss 1974]. The fundamental problem of transition (not only the

⁹) Walter Korpi, the well-known Swedish theoretician, often stresses that the role of social policy should not be to compensate for the negative outcomes of "imperfect market functioning," but rather to *modify* the functioning of markets.

¹⁰) This means a need to distinguish between *markets* and the *state* as different social institutions with different functions in society.

¹¹) This distinction does not mean that the state will not be responsible for the "social sphere" of the society. Here we would like to express the need to define the functions and competencies that the state should fulfill within civil society.

transition in the former "Eastern Bloc," but also within the "transforming" Western European countries) is the means of removing this tension and balancing the economic and social spheres of society.

Many authors argue that simultaneously satisfying the requirements of both the market and civil society is not possible; this is why they occasionally adopt extreme solutions. One extreme solution is to *fully regulate the market*, so that the social rights of all citizens are protected. This is, however, very often implemented to the detriment of political and civil rights (as was the case in the former Eastern Bloc countries). Another radical proposal results in the preference for a *free market* and basic civil rights, especially the right to private property. We rejected the first solution during the "Velvet Revolution" of November 1989. The second solution has, at least rhetorically, been rejected by the present Slovak government, and is moreover contradictory to the Constitution of the Slovak Republic, which includes the basic principles of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.¹²

However, there is a third solution: the separation of market criteria from the criteria of social rights¹³ and the attempt to balance them. This option is the most complicated, but also appears to be the only viable one, even given the inner contradictions.

An important part of accepting this approach is a redefinition of notions such as social justice, solidarity, etc., and choosing certain *ethical* criteria that would be the basis for the principles of the distribution and redistribution of resources in society,¹⁴ and the implementation of social rights.¹⁵ That means that issues connected to the just distribution of resources and the implementation of social rights constitute the content of the strategic options for a social policy aimed at the development of civil society and its detachment from the state. The

¹²) One should keep in mind that the Slovak Republic is a member of the Council of Europe. The Social Charter is one of the most important documents of this institution, and is more or less a "condensation" of the "standard" social rights developed in Western European countries during recent decades. After ratifying the Social Charter, Slovakia will be fully responsible for pursuing policies that ensure these rights and principles in practice.

¹³) The basic principle of the functioning of markets (the principle of supply and demand) is of an "impersonal" nature. Social rights, however, are based much more on *ethical* criteria.

¹⁴) There are some well-known maxims of fair redistribution, such as:

- an equal share for each individual,
- to each individual according to that individual's ability,
- to each individual according to that individual's needs,
- to each individual according to that individual's effort,
- to each individual according to that individual's productive contribution.

Each of the above-mentioned maxims is connected with a particular ethical concept. Moreover, each ethical concept has its own understanding of such notions as need, equality, justice, etc.

¹⁵) Full implementation of social rights presupposes not only their *formal* guarantee, but their *actual* fulfillment as well. For example the *formal* right to a freely chosen occupation is not the same thing as the *actual* possibility of finding it (especially under the conditions of economic recession and rising unemployment).

distribution of resources and the ensuring of social rights are inseparable from one another. It would therefore be a great mistake to simply reduce social policy to the "just distribution" of the resources produced by the economy. The point is that there are various social policy criteria, and if they are not counter-balanced with extensions of social rights, they cannot guarantee the formation of *civic equality*.

3. Harmonization of the short-term goals of social policy with long-term social strategy

It is fair to say that discussions concerning the long-term goals and strategies of social development are not very popular in Slovakia at present. On one hand, this is connected to the fact that there is a need to solve the *burning* social problems of the transformation and, on the other, it is related to the fact that considerations of "long-term goals" remind many people of the ideology and central planning of the previous communist regime. In our opinion, however, these considerations are of paramount importance because (1) they provide an idea of what future developments in the society could look like, and (2) they make it possible to take *immediate* steps to harmonize particular aspects of economic and social policy on the basis of certain principles.

In our view, the following short-term goals are high on the list of priorities for Slovak social policy. The first is the creation of a social safety net that will compensate for the *immediate* negative impacts of the economic reform on the population. The second goal is the creation of a new system of social insurance that complies with a market economy. The third and final primary goal is the creation of new instruments for the social protection of the unemployed.

As far as these issues are concerned, it is necessary to distinguish between a social safety net and social insurance; if this is the case, then each of these items has its *own instruments* and means of functioning and is intended for *different* groups of people. [Rys 1993] The solutions to these current social problems, however, should not contradict the accepted strategy and long-term goals of social reform. Otherwise the threat of social disintegration arises, as a result of the insufficient harmonization of the short- and long-term goals of the reform, in other words as a result of haphazard solutions to *burning* social problems and their relation to the long-term social development of our society.

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