Youth Policy in Slovakia and EUROPE

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Slovakia – in the very heart of Europe. The geographical position of Slovakia evokes in the Slovaks exalted emotions that they are anchored in the very heart of Europe. Slovakia is a small country whose territory measures some 49,000 square kilometres populated by fewer than five and a half million people. One third of the population lives in communities of fewer than 2,000 inhabitants. It is bordered by five nations: Poland, Ukraine, Hungary, Austria, and the Czech Republic. Slovak communities are typically small because of the mountainous terrain of much of the country; Slovak society is therefore traditionally rural. Indeed, significant industrialisation and urbanisation has taken place only very recently (and especially during the socialism 1960s -1980s).

Civil Society and the growth of the third sector in Slovakia. Civil society represents the sphere of the spontaneous association of people on the basis of their partial, mostly non-political interests, the sphere of self-organisation and self-regulation. The articulation of various interests in this sphere is possible through membership in voluntary organisations, associations, movements and social organisations (Macháček, L., 1998). The state does not interfere in this sphere and can only create favourable conditions for its existence. In this sphere many conflicts of interests between different actors are peacefully resolved. Hence, the basis of social transformation should not only be seen as the introduction of a market economy through the return of private property, but also as the return of a variety of activities, which had previously been dominated by the state, to civil society.

The development of civil society and citizenship in Slovakia can be divided into four stages.
1. In the first phase(1948-1988), under communism, there were groups of citizens who opposed the dominant state, but generally, civil society was crushed.
2. During the second phase (1989-1994) there was the gradual re-establishment of civil society, often with the help of dissidents from the earlier stage and assistance from international organisations along with state sponsorship of various kinds.

3. In the third phase,(1994-1998) under the domination of Mečiar, intellectuals and activists who had been active in establishing the new civil society were made to leave government positions and moved instead to the third sector. During this period the regime tried to undermine civil society and reintroduce state control.

4. After 1998, when Mečiar was defeated, the intellectuals and activists once more moved from the third sector into governmental life (1998-2002).

**Historical aspects of European youth policy.** On the occasion of the 5th Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Youth in Bucharest, April 27-29, 1998, the Council of Europe Youth Directorate published an information document called ”25 Years of Youth Policy in the Council of Europe: Taking Stock and Looking Ahead”. It points out that the years 1964 – 1969 were the actual stimulus to creation of a European youth policy, when the conflict between young people and society and its values had plainly manifested itself. For that reason the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe decided in May 1968 to regularly analyse and discuss the situation of youth in Europe and recommended to establish the European Youth Centre and the European Youth Foundation.

In Slovakia, the years 1964 – 1969 were also characterised by attempts to solve the problems related to the generation gap. Originally, the discussions on non-conformism of youth art in the magazine Kultúrny život (Cultural life) turned into reflections upon new elements of youth subculture (hairstyles, clothing, dance, music). Philosophical and sociological reflections on the generation gap nevertheless clearly indicated (M. Kusý, J. Suchý) that it was not just a self-serving protest against the older generation. The stagnation of society became a problem of both the young and the older generation, which understood the socialist state-party regimentation of social processes to be limiting individual career possibilities and aspirations.

The public discussion, joined by a large circle of writers and journalists led to the demand for research of youth’s taboo themes. Hence, in addition to the already existing (since 1964) Youth Department of the Slovak Sociological Society at the Slovak Academy of Sciences, the Initiative Team for Youth Research of the executive body of the youth organization in Slovakia came into existence in 1966.
It initiated research (Quo vadere – Where we walk) on the relationship between the young people and their youth organization (Š. Lahita, K. Šuran, P. Ondrejkovič, L. Macháček), which led to a proposal for a division of the organization according to individual interest and age groups. A group of experts from the Sociology of Youth Committee of the Institute of Sociology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences (Prof. J. Čečetka) suggested to bring about some changes in the state youth policy. During an exciting discussion the group argued in favour of creating a government youth committee-ministry. Direct party and state management and the control of young people’s lives within their organization was seen as their internal characteristic. The true meaning of this kind of system decision-making was aptly summerized by one of the experts in an altogether blunt remark: if the Ministry of Youth is established we might as well dissolve the youth organization (SLOVAK KOMSOMOL).

It is a well-known fact that August 1968 was a crucial month for the young people in Slovakia. The invasion of Warsaw Pact armies and the ensuing “normalization” after April 1969 blocked the modernization process in countries of Central and Eastern Europe for 20 years – even the lives of young people, their youth organization and the state’s youth policy. Many sociologists of youth in Slovakia were persecuted and marginalised.

In some Central-Eastern European countries, above all in the Soviet Union, the fresh impulse in the youth research was brought by the “perestroika” socialist reform idea of M. Gorbachov’s “European House”. Still, these concepts never received a wide enough acceptance in Slovakia.

**The State Youth Policy in Slovakia.** Young people's moral and social potential resulting from their natural orientation towards the future sparked the mass civil movement of discontent that had swept away the old power structures. The real destruction of the political system of a "state party" took place when the Slovak University Students Union and Secondary School Students Union came into being and the Socialist Union of Youth, an element of the old system ceased to exist (November 1989). It was also the start of a new, broad process of restoration and formation of a civil society among the young people. This is also the immediate context of approaches to young people and their European Identity. At the same time there are some very specific circumstances for Slovakia. The rapid changes since 1989 have opened up a lot of new opportunities for young people, which have been welcomed. On the other hand, especially since 1991 the restructuring of the economy has led to a high degree of youth unemployment, a
Designing a state youth policy in post-communist independent Slovakia has been a complicated process. The country is still searching for a satisfactory distribution of responsibilities among its central organs of state administration. Similarly, the state administration and civic society are still searching for the best mode of their co-operation. The youth movements and associations are still not sure whether they want a state youth ministry. Neither politicians nor youth organisations are sure what the responsibilities of such ministry ought to be like. A host of government departments have become entrenched in disputes about their own particular responsibilities.

Why has youth policy in Slovakia become such a muddle?

First, the independent Slovakia needs rather a new youth work law than the legislation aimed at the youth per se.

Second, a new youth work law shall by-pass conflicts between the various government institutions.

Third, the independent youth movements need the protection and support from the state. The absence of such support, based on legislative acts, is the greatest threat to their independence and existence.

The need for a change in the Slovak government's strategy of legitimising youth interests and needs in the legislative process has pragmatic and theoretical roots:

The pragmatic source lies in an unusually strong inertia of competence interests in different organs of the central state administration in Slovakia but there is really no need to challenge this inertia.

The theoretical point of view follows from the retreat from the model of paternalist state care and from strengthening liberal tendencies in the transformation of Slovakia's political, social and economic systems.

There is no reason, in a democratic market-oriented society, for a paternalist, social welfare based state youth policies. The state interventions should not regulate market forces and civic society but rather encourage self-help and assist youth organisation to become independent, and to encourage young people to become active citizens, partly but not exclusively via their involvement in youth organisations, thereby strengthening modernising tendencies and the
development of Slovakia into a truly open society.

Ultimately, it is irrelevant whether a case for state care, expressed in the form of rights to protection or support, is derived from age, gender or ethnic status. From the point of view of the legislative process the principle goal, for both theoretical and pragmatic reasons, has to be the support for active citizenship and civic participation. In the case of young people this goal can be pursued largely through institutions engaged in organising young peoples’ leisure time. The promotion of active citizenship comprising social and political participation is fostered and practised, providing opportunities for self-socialisation according the contemporary demands and values of a polity that focuses on social progressivism, and is especially amenable to the extension of civic rights, since they conform the needs of young people an the independent raison d'etre sociale.

The political development in Slovakia after 1993 suggests that the political polarisation between governmental coalition and political opposition is reality also among young people’s political representatives and their associations. Of course, also young people struggled for their ideas, opinions and attitudes. In the spring of 1996, a new ‘umbrella-like’ organisation called the Slovak Youth Congress was founded, supported by the governmental coalition. Its goal was to "become an alternative to the Youth Council of Slovakia", which was on contrary supported by the governmental opposition till 1998, but between 1998-2002 vice versa, by the governmental coalition.

The majority of young people observed the struggle rather passively since they were actively involved in the problem solving following from demanding tasks on the market of education and labour since the youth unemployment became high. The real youth movement "lives" outside the structures of youth associations.

It takes the form of various local cultural and sport fan clubs and even the form of spontaneous (skin, roma) groupings in the cities.

Principles of the State Youth Policy and Programmes of Youth Support and Protection in Slovak Republic from 1992 till 1999 and new Governmental Conception of State Youth Policy from November 2001 significantly encouraged the development of out-of-school pursuits of young people in all districts of Slovakia and helped to build a new network of associations, unions, youth initiatives as well as adult citizens with deeper interest in youth work.
Development of civic youth associations is an important source of the socialisation of a young person as the citizen of the Slovak republic. The system of institutions of non-formal education and training of young people is thus expanded and a system of civic education, its active or participate paradigm is created.

**Literature**


