Youth in Slovakia and European identity

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Introduction

The 'velvet' revolution in former Czechoslovakia and the subsequent split of the federal republic into two sovereign states has brought Slovakia and the Slovaks more prominently into the international public eye than has been the case for many decades.

Czechoslovakia began its seventy years of 'cohabitation' after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian empire at the end of the First World War in 1918. This represented, at that time, a step forward for the Slovaks in terms of educational development and cultural self-determination.

Within the Soviet bloc after 1945, Czechoslovakia was re-established and finally established as the Czechoslovak Federal Socialist Republic in 1968; the fate of Dubcek's aim to build socialism with a human face is too well known to need repetition. Nevertheless, during the 1970s, progress was made in equalizing the rates of development and living standards of Czechia and Slovakia.

Following the collapse of Soviet bloc after 1989, Czechoslovakia was plunged into an economic transformation process that had - and continues to have - dramatic consequences for the population. Government economic strategies were seen to be producing severe inequalities between the two countries in the federation. For the Slovaks, this meant that heavy engineering - disproportionately represented in Slovakia's industrial structure - was forced into a rapid conversion process that destabilised the regional economic base and, in general, rates of unemployment rose much more sharply in Slovakia (15-20 percent.) than in Czechia (5 percent.).

The confrontation between conservative liberalism in Czechia (V.Klaus) and nationalist populism (V.Meciar) in Slovakia eventually resulted in the decision to end the federation in summer 1992. The independent republic of Slovakia came officially into existence at the beginning of 1993. In the eyes of the Slovaks themselves, independence is understood as the positive outcome of over one hundred years of struggle for national sovereignty.
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. This anchorage is not perceived in a metaphorical geo-cultural sense, as in the case of Czechs, Poles, Hungarians, Austrians or other ethnicities that consider themselves to be Middle-Europeans. There are many Slovaks who will argue with the stubbornness of a geographer that the point of intersection of the "x"-axis connecting the European coast of the Atlantic with the Russian Ural from the West to the East, and of the "y"-axis, connecting the Baltic Sea with the Mediterranean Sea from the North to the South, lies exactly in Slovakia. They are even ready to swear solemnly that the point in question is almost identical with the parish Krahule.

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).

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 phenomenon that was unknown in previous times.

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.

However, creating a civil society is not a one-way process of handing over the tasks to voluntary organisations and NGOs (Non Governmental Organisations). It involves a process of decentralisation, regionalisation and local self-government. Civil society should be protected from state interference by law. That is, the citizen is permitted to do anything except what is explicitly forbidden, and the state bodies are permitted to do only what they are allowed by law. Thus, the state limits its own power by law in order to create a society of responsible citizens who take over substantial parts of the activities, which were formerly usurped by the totalitarian state.

The development of civil society and citizenship in Slovakia can be divided into four stages.

1. In the first phase, 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.

**Youth participation in Slovakia**

Under these circumstances the Slovak Republic also finds itself in a unique situation for constructing a new youth policy.

As the political system of Slovakia is still changing, we must not neglect the role of the young generation, especially of the students, in this process. Young people's moral and social potential resulting from their natural orientation towards the future sparked the mass
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. It was also the start of a new, broad process of restoration and formation of a civil society among the young people.

The term civil society is returning to our language. Not long ago, the terms "political and social activity, engaging, consciousness" had been fully sufficient. The notion "citizen" had been replaced by the words "people, working people, masses, inhabitants, the street". We became citizens only when being made responsible for violating traffic regulations. The term citizen was often associated with being "citizens of gypsy origin" a group stereotyped negatively by many in the non-gypsy population. The terms citizen became discredited and used very scarcely. Now it is being recognised that civil society contradicts loss of freedom and dictatorship; it implies the demands of freedom and democracy as an attribute of spontaneous life invested in people.

In the project proposal the idea is emphasized that the pre-November paradigm of a continuous and harmonious social growth had quite naturally failed. In the communist system, social problems were primarily seen as a consequence of an insufficient identification of the people with the idea of socialism, later, as an inability of the management or lacking rationality in the planned development of national economy. It was only in November 1989 when the social problems started to be seen in the context of civil society that the real causes became fully visible.

We, the sociologists, have the chance to formulate the hypothesis presuming that the most significant source of social energy and social potential is not found in economy, even though we do not underestimate the significance of the optimal functioning of economical structures, but in the civil society. The people’s grouping around particular interests, the horizontal process of organisation, the autonomous and spontaneous formation of structures, the free will of every individual: all this is implied in civil society. It must be understood as a self-contained "layer" of the social life that generates self-regulation mechanisms, which in turn influence the social life development. It is irreplaceable in articulating and defending differentiated citizens’ interests and in controlling state power. An inevitable but natural tragedy for our society’s development was the misunderstanding that the process of a continuous rise and decline of spontaneous associations, party associations, clubs, interest and social corporations, citizens’ initiatives and movements cannot be linked with bourgeois forms of social life only, but that it is a general merit of the development of
society. The subjects, mechanisms and tools of civil society enable the solution of social problems in various spheres of everyday life that cannot be managed successfully by a central state power.

The politics of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia crippled civil society. During the past forty years the totalitarianism of the state party destroyed almost all its potential with fatal consequences for the individuals’ freedom and rights. Associations and clubs were restricted and forced to play the role ascribed by the Party. Thus, the old system manipulated people and constrained their spontaneity and creativity, their motivation to achievement and self-improvement.

In the present historical era we should see the education of young people for citizenship with a European dimension. The new concept of citizenship, which is the most relevant here, involves not only responsibility of individual citizens for themselves and their country, but also for others on our continent. It is my contention that this can happen in an adequate way only through the construction of new forms of solidarity.

Solidarity is to be understood as systems of mutual support including readiness to redistribute vital resources and opportunities with respect to the environment, housing, establishing families, bringing up children, access to education and jobs, according to the various needs of different citizens. This kind of solidarity is missing in both Eastern and Western Europe where collective solutions are passed over in favour of individual ones. There is a typical tendency for youth in Europe towards individualisation. This does not mean a growth of egoism of the individuals or their unwillingness to cooperate in a group. (Macháček, L., 1998)

It is rather a movement away from the previously strictly state-planned orientation towards personal objectives, as was the case in Slovakia. The adolescents must focus more on their own personal development and self-realisation, and bear responsibility for the consequences of their decisions. This applies as much to their professional orientation as to their choice of partner. This process is not quite so developed in transition countries where young people continue to depend extensively on their parents, relatives, state or municipal care, but we can still discern developments in this direction since 1993. For example young people are more likely to exhibit those values which are most important for the transformation to a market economy, including greater competition, greater consumer choice and less state protection (Wallace, C., 1998).
European integration and identity

An important factor in maintaining this burst of activity in civil society has been the affiliation of the Slovak Republic with the European Union and its membership in the Council of Europe. For young people, this means that the activities of the youth associations and notably the Youth Council of Slovakia are of considerable importance in view of Slovakia’s integration in the new Europe, all the more so since many initiatives encouraging this process are realised precisely through the help of the emerging European youth policy and its current emphasis on education for citizenship. The development of civil society in Slovakia was greatly influenced by the civic youth associations and movements, especially the uniting of national councils and international youth organisations in Europe under the recently created Youth Forum.

It is not only in youth movements, but also the activities of other social movements (e.g. ecology, peace, human and civil rights, women’s movement, etc.) where young members are important. One might say that the higher developed modernised societies tend to become “movement societies”. Youth movements that appear in this context tend to take the form of the organised and continuous collective efforts of co-operating individuals, groups and organisations aimed at supporting and sustaining social change by means of public protest activities. Therefore, it is not enough to create a state of affluence as a material base to introduce citizenship and modern individuality to everyone. Young people become citizens through organised effort, or initiatives of people of equal standing and interests who, within the legal framework, join forces to achieve a social change.

The further modernisation of Slovakia will depend as much upon the creation of an active civil society as on the process of political and economic reform. That is, it will depend on the creation of self-aware and active citizens (Roško, R., 1996). In recent years we have seen a remarkable institutionalisation of civil society through the creation of a variety of third sector organisations. This has been greatly assisted by massive financial support from the European Union by the program PHARE and from the USA by the program Democratic Network. This support can be regarded in the context of the urgent need to strengthen the transformation of European post-communist countries and their development towards a pluralistic democracy. This is a prerequisite for their integration in the community of European democracies associated with the European Union and NATO. We should bear in mind that in the context of transitional societies, where civil society is not well established and civic participation is low, state sponsorship still plays an important part.
The volunteer and non-government sector of civil society and its development between 1993-1998 has been considered an important factor of transformation and modernisation of the Slovak Republic. The NGOs in Slovakia "...are now much more than an island of isolated idealists or the so-called island of positive deviants, as the independent civil activists in late 1980s were called by Slovak sociologists. They created a vivid, vibrant and efficient ‘civil archipelago’, an archipelago of hope and positive action” (Bútora, M., 1997). However, the maintenance and development of citizenship will depend upon the active continuation of these non-state organisations in a situation where many of their leaders have become members of the government or state administration or have left the country.

The problem is one of how to establish the framework by which the state does not interfere, despite considerable state sponsorship, and where different political regimes will not influence the shape of civil society. The empowerment of young people as voters and as social actors can have important consequences for a political change as we have seen during the 1998 elections. The challenge for the future will be to create and encourage a civil society in which young people will play an active part and which can help to sustain the progress towards democratisation and the development of a market economy in this new member of the enlarged European Union.

**Literature**


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