



Weekly Briefing

Slovakia Social briefing:
Recent Social Development in Slovakia
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According to the Human Development Report (HDR) for 2016, the Slovak Republic is at 40th place (with a Human Development Index, or HDI, of 0.845 in 2015), ranking among countries with a very high level of human development. However, even though Slovakia's HDI was been slowly rising the country has dropped 7 places in the HDI ranking since 2010. This represents more of a relative decline compared to better-performing countries, rather than an absolute decline in the standard of living. The Gross National Income per capita was 26764 USD, while life expectancy at birth is 76.4 years; 80 years for females and 72.7 for males.

The rate of poverty in Slovakia stood at 12.7% in 2016, representing c.670000 people. While this meant a slight increase of 0.4% from the previous year, the overall trend shows that the rate of poverty is declining, though also very slightly, from the recent high of c.715000 people in poverty in 2012. The social groups that were under threat of falling into poverty were primarily the unemployed (48% of all unemployed were faced with poverty), households with three or more children (with 34.8%), and incomplete families (missing one breadwinner) with one or more children (at 33.6%). Another group with a significant risk of poverty were children to 18 years or age, at almost 20%. Interestingly, pensioners were among the social groups that were less threatened by poverty, at 6%. This is even less than the poverty threat level of the economic active people, at 6.5%. More predictably, the regions of Slovakia that were threatened with poverty the most were in the South and East of the country. The differences in the threat of poverty level between the regions were quite great with 18.6% of people facing poverty in the Northeast Prešov region compared to 5.4% in the Western capital region of Bratislava. This can be explained by the lack of infrastructure and corresponding lack of investment (and thus a lack of employment opportunities) in the less developed South and East. These less developed regions are also home to a majority of the ethnic Roma population, described below. These results place Slovakia among the EU countries with the

lowest rates of poverty, ahead of such highly developed countries like Austria or Finland. The methodology of the survey, common for all EU members as well as some non-members (like Norway and Serbia), defines the poverty line as 60% of the median of the national disposable income. In Slovakia in 2016, this poverty line represented 348 Euros per month or 4171 Euros per year. It is debatable to what extent the utilized methodology is able to capture the real state of poverty and social inclusion. It would be useful to take into account not only the median wage, but also the level of local prices, the strength of the currency or the robustness of the national welfare safety net. As for inequality, the Gini index for Slovakia is 26.4, placing it within the group of countries with a more equitable distribution of income. This is mostly due to the influence of the social safety net. Since the middle of the previous decade, the position of Slovakia has been oscillating between 23-29%, but usually hovering around 26%. Income inequality has therefore remained relatively stable over the last several years.

The most serious social problem in Slovakia since the fall of Communism 28 years ago is the situation of the Roma or “Gypsy” minority. The “Roma question”, as it is called in the media, represents a combination of most of the relevant social problems in Slovakia; especially poverty (and its associated problems of unemployment, inadequate healthcare, illiteracy and lack of education opportunities, lack of affordable housing, and a high rate of crime) and racial discrimination. Officially, according to the census of 2011, there are 105000 Roma in Slovakia, representing 1.96% of the population. But unofficial estimates put the percentage of Roma much higher, at 7% even as high as 10%. It is difficult to obtain relevant statistics for the Roma community due to lack of statistical research based on ethnicity. Unemployment among the Roma in 2005 stood at 79.8% (with 62.8% being long-term unemployed), over four times as high as that of the general population. These numbers did not change significantly over the next five years.

The situation of the Roma is also related to the housing shortage as mentioned in the previous briefing. Many of the poorest Roma cannot afford

regular housing and as a consequence they live in illegal settlements on the periphery of towns and villages, similar to slums in developing countries. These settlements are not connected to waste disposal services or to the water and sewage treatment system, leading to poor hygiene. Consequentially, these settlements are often sources of local epidemics, such as hepatitis.

The poverty of the Roma is both a source and a consequence of prejudice against them by members of the non-Roma or “white” majority population. The high level of poverty leads to a high crime rate and substance abuse. The Roma also tend to have an above average number of children, as is typical for poorer families and social groups. This, combined with their high unemployment, makes the Roma an easy target for nationalists and populists who claim that the Roma are parasites that live off welfare payments and state benefits that are ultimately paid for by the working non-Roma majority. The Roma are also criticized for having a large number of children that they cannot afford to raise in proper conditions. There is a myth that Roma families with many children are the largest social group that is dependent on welfare. Even though this has been disproved by research indicating that the largest social groups relying welfare are people living alone, incomplete families or households with one or no children, the myth persists. This prejudice leads to discrimination, most noticeably in the workplace and in education. Many employers are reluctant to hire Roma, even when the Roma are qualified for the job, because Roma are seen as unreliable or lacking discipline and motivation. As investigations have demonstrated, Roma are significantly less likely to get a certain job over equally qualified non-Roma applicants, even when the Roma applicant applied first. In the schooling system, Roma children are often segregated from their non-Roma schoolmates. When the relevant authorities try to remedy this by creating integrated classes, they are met with resistance on the part of the parents of the non-Roma children, who are worried that their children will be influenced by the truancy and bad behavior of the Roma children. Another tendency is to put Roma children in special needs classes, even though the children do not have any

mental deficiency. While it is true that Roma children from the poorest and most disadvantaged communities often lack basic social skills or a basic command of the Slovak language, this is something that can be remedied with an additional kindergarten year of schooling – a solution that is rapidly gaining popularity. Instances of discrimination both in the workplace and in the schoolroom are well documented and frequently publicized, in an effort to decrease prejudice.

The various governments of Slovakia, with the help of NGOs, have been trying to alleviate the situation of the Roma and integrate them into mainstream society for years, without much success. There have been attempts to demolish the settlements and relocate the Roma into purpose-built low-cost housing, but these initiatives often fail. The reason behind this may be because they are too poor (due to their unemployment or underemployment) to finance the upkeep of these houses or apartments. The Roma do not (either for lack of funds but often also by choice) pay the water and electricity bill, which leads to the water and electricity being switched off and the housing projects then become devastated, turning the area into a slum or forcing the Roma to move to a new settlement. Another policy aiming at integrating the Roma is to withhold state welfare benefits to force the Roma (along with the non-Roma poor) to send their children to schools and thus lower their high truancy rate and increase their education and social skills. So far, the most successful projects seem to be the above-mentioned extra year of schooling for Roma children, and the use of Roma assistants in schools and Roma patrols in the settlements. The success of the Roma assistants and patrols are due to the greater trust placed in them by the Roma communities. A related problem for the government and NGOs of Slovakia is to combat the negative stereotypes about the Roma. Success in this endeavor is even lower than in integrating the Roma. The prejudice against the Roma, along with the failure of the government to act on other social problems, such as the high cost of living, contributes to the rise of right-wing extremism like the LSNS party, as described in the first briefing. If the government does

not strengthen efforts to combat extremism and dispel stereotypes about the Roma, the rise of the extreme right is set to continue.