



Weekly Briefing

**Slovakia social briefing:
Education Reform and the
Continuous Struggle against the Pandemic**
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Education Reform and the Continuous Struggle against the Pandemic

Summary

The current briefing concerning Slovak societal development discusses two partially interrelated topics. The first section is engaged with the issue of the education reform, with a special focus on the attitude of universities. The objective of the second part is to provide an overview of the current anti-pandemic measures, including the most recent changes and developments.

Introduction

November in Slovakia is traditionally linked to two occasions. Firstly, it is the month in which we commemorate the fall of the Iron Curtain, i.e. the end of the communist era and the turn towards western democracies and freedom. The date of Velvet Revolution – 17th of November – has been declared a state holiday. On this day, the media actively report on the past events and their legacy for the present day. Secondly, resulting from the Christian tradition, November is when the advent begins, and many people start to get ready for Christmas, which is for many the most wonderful time of the year, just like the popular song goes. Furthermore, the significance of this time is linked to the fact that most of Slovaks are deeply religious, adhering to the rituals.

The present briefing, however, will focus on two topics contemporarily resonating in the Slovak society. The first part of the text will be dedicated to the proposed reform of schools and universities, as well as the current state of education in Slovakia, still under the influence of the pandemic. The second topic, that is actually intertwined with the first one, is an overview of the current anti-pandemic measures in general, as there have recently been some amendments leading to more strict restrictions.

Educational reform and its perception in the public

A huge debate has been provoked by the decision to reform the education system. The reform should concern several areas.

The reform is being implemented with the intention to prepare pupils for real life, so they will be able to utilise the acquired knowledge in practice. The reform should support critical thinking, digital skills, environmental awareness, and similar competencies necessary for the 21st century. Moreover, another objective is to enhance innovations and to modernise education. *Hospodárske noviny* cited the Minister of Education, who said that the greatest reform months are just ahead of us.¹ The Ministry of Education accentuates on its official website that the practice-oriented education is what both parents as well as experts have been requesting for a long time. As far as teachers are concerned, they will have the possibility to apply for a grant for their own further education, as high-quality teachers training is also one of the reform's cornerstones.²

A special attention has been paid to the part of the reform focusing on universities. Several universities have publicly expressed their discontent with it, out of fear of its allegedly limiting academic freedom and politization. As a result of these concerns, a public protest was held on the 16th of November, attended also by numerous students. Slovak Rectors' Conference has even requested the reform of universities and higher education institutions to be withdrawn. The Education Ministry believes, politization is not possible, and the Prime Minister says, the reform of universities involves many positive points.³ We hope, the implementation of the overall reform will eventually enhance not only the competences crucial for the digital era, and will not limit academic freedoms at higher education institutions.

As for the education in pandemic times, it has still not completely returned to normal. There is no willingness to close all the schools again, hence individual classes are closing in case of a pupil being tested positively. The situation at universities is diverse; some have reinstated in-person classes, others are still operating online.

Current restrictions

Anti-pandemic measures in Slovakia have already been altered several times since the pandemic outbreak, trying to adopt to the ever-changing situation. For several weeks now, a so called COVID-automat has been used. The country is divided in accordance with its regional distinction (79 administrative units in total). On a weekly basis, the automat is updated, which

¹ HNonline (2021): Gröhling ohlásil spustenie reformy školstva. Parlament schválil prvé zákony.

² Ministry of education, science, research and sport of the Slovak Republic (2021): B. Gröhling: Čakajú nás najväčšie reformné zmeny v školstve.

³ Aktuality.sk (2021): Slovenská rektorská konferencia žiada stiahnutie reformy vysokých škôl, rezort to neplánuje.

is graphically demonstrated using a colour scale. For regions with the most favourable situation, green is used. Then, with a worsening situation, the automat is moving to orange, red, purple or black, respectively. The same can go also vice-versa, i.e. in case of improving situation, the colour of the region is also changed accordingly.

When categorising the regions, following indicators are utilised for calculations:

- the number of cases per 100,000 inhabitants within 7 days;
- the level of vaccination;
- evaluation of the respective region by the local health authority.

There are further principles to be implemented. For instance, bordering regions may only differ by one place of the colour scale. Higher vaccination rate also plays a role.⁴

In summer, the whole country, thus every region was green, indicating very favourable pandemic situation. The green colour namely states for monitoring, with no strict measures in place. Later, with the third pandemic wave hitting us, the country slowly started „changing its colours”. At the moment,⁵ most of the Slovakia’s regions are black, which means the 3rd level of threat. This state comes with the strictest anti-pandemic measures and restrictions. There are also some purple regions, and even less red ones, including primarily the capital of Slovakia Bratislava and its districts. The regional diversification for the week 22-29 November should include even less red regions; Bratislava remains in red.⁶

Taking a closer look at the map, we can conclude that South-Western part of the country is showing a better situation, relative to the rest of the country. These regional differences could have been observed also in previous weeks, and they are actually copying the percentage of vaccinated people in the regions. As of now, the highest level of vaccination is in Bratislava and other regions in the South-Western part of the country, which may not be that surprising, as the capital cities usually have distinct social and demographic structure.

At the time of elaborating this text, further restrictions have been announced, that will concern predominantly people who have not been vaccinated so far. The state of hospitals is currently highly critical, there are many new patients every day and the capacities are lacking. In spite of that, the level of vaccination in the country as a whole has not reached the percentage needed for the collective immunity yet. We dare to say, some people will never understand that vaccination is the only way out of this nightmare, but this is probably a global problem. Starting

⁴ Korona.gov.sk (2021): COVID automat na Slovensku.

⁵ The briefing was elaborated in the mid-November 2021.

⁶ Korona.gov.sk (2021): COVID automat na Slovensku.

on Monday, 22nd November for the duration of three weeks, the life of those who have neither overcome COVID nor been vaccinated will get a little bit more complicated. Until now, a so-called OTP regime was implemented, referring to three groups of people, namely the vaccinated (*Očkovaní*), the tested (*Testovaní*) and those who have overcome the disease (*Prekonaní*). According to the new model, only the people who have been fully vaccinated or have overcome COVID will be allowed to move relatively freely. Non-vaccinated people who have not overcome the disease will only be allowed in stores offering essential goods and services, such as groceries, pharmacies, banks or gas stations, and thus even being having to be tested. However, their entering a shopping mall will not be permitted. Some call it *lockdown for non-vaccinated*, as the OTP regime is switching to OP (*Očkovaní, Prekonaní*). These new measures are connected to the current colours on the COVID-automat, and apply for regions in red, purple and black.⁷ Of course, the new regime does not restrict the non-vaccinated and those who have not got COVID from commuting to work. They are allowed to go to work as usual, provided they have themselves tested twice a week. Some new restrictions concern also the vaccinated part of the population and those who have overcome COVID. This is linked mostly to social events, where the maximum number of people allowed has been reduced slightly. There are experts who were even in favour of another complete lockdown, but this proposal did not receive enough support in the Parliament. One of the parties in the coalition reminded of the slogan *Vakcína je sloboda* (in English *Vaccine is freedom*), saying that adopting the proposal would absolutely contradict it. Actually, in this situation, we should not talk about lockdown, as the state of emergency has not been declared.⁸

Conclusion

The objective of the briefing was to briefly outline the new education reform, and some planned changes regarding primary but also tertiary education. The second part of the text dealt with the latest steps taken with the aim to combat the pandemic. Even though the newly implemented measures, which are stricter in nature, may upset many people, they may eventually help improve this horrific situation considerably.

⁷ HNOnline (2021): Čo potrebujeme na vstup na pracovisko či do obchodu? Otázky a odpovede o nových opatreniach.

⁸ SME (2021): Vláda potvrdila zákazy neočkovaným. Čo sa mení v covid automate?

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