

Social Cohesion – a priority after enlargement?¹

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The referendum on EU accession confirmed a principal civilization decision of Slovaks on long-term direction of Slovakia. EU integration provides an opportunity to modernize Slovakia, to overcome its lagging behind Western Europe in economic performance³ and living standard as well as to overcome big disparities between individual regions within Slovakia⁴. It should also ensure social cohesion of the society as a whole and specifically of less developed regions. Thus they aimed to create equal opportunities for numerous marginalized groups, mainly Roma, as well as stop the decrease in the quality of life, especially for those living in rural areas.

As shown by discussions about EU budgetary policy after 2006 – it will not be possible to receive the same amount of funds into less developed regions into current accession countries, as was the case for Ireland, Spain, Portugal and Greece after their accession into EU. Nevertheless the preservation, development and improvement of transfer of resources from rich to poorer countries has to remain an inseparable part of enlarged Europe. Otherwise Europe may suffer from permanent division into countries of first and second category as a long-term phenomenon.

Keeping that in mind, one of the biggest challenges after the enlargement will be to overcome regional disparities. Slovakia faces a task to learn fast how to use

¹ This paper has been presented at the conference „*EUnomics - Strategies for European Cohesion*“, held at the Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa Portugal, March 4-5, 2004.

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³ Gross domestic product per person /Euro compared to EU average exceeded 50% and in 2003 reached 53%, Slovakia, thus, ranked third position along with Hungary among candidate countries from Eastern Europe (Economic and social factors of Slovakia s EU integration, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Institute of Slovak and World Economy, Bratislava 2003, p. 161 – 162)

⁴ According to official data concerning GDP from 1995 to 2000, GDP per person grew in Bratislava region by 14, 8%, whereby in other regions at the level of NUTS II only in the band of 12, 77 to 12, 87%. Regional disparities between Bratislava and Eastern Slovakian region from 2,36 (in 1995) to 2,73 multiple (in 2000) and at regional level (NUTS II). Bratislava and Prešov region from 2,91 to 3,41 multiple (economic and social factors of Slovakia into European Union p. 119).

effectively every euro from structural funds and cohesion fund, to ensure co-financing and building administrative and personnel capacities and implementing a rational long-term regional policy based on a broader national consensus. It has to specify solutions to problems including low economic performance of regions, imbalances between demand and supply at labor market, insufficient quality of labor market functioning, low amount of fixed capital in the regions, insufficient technical and innovation level, structural problems of enterprise sector, insufficient transport infrastructure and high ecological debt, insufficient use of development potential of regions and insufficient functionality of research and education.

Proclaimed objectives of EU are in line with these needs for modernizing and development of Slovakia.

In Article 3 of the EU draft constitution the following objectives are defined. "The Union shall work for the sustainable development of Europe based on balanced economic growth, a social market economy, highly competitive and aiming at full employment and social progress, with a high level of protection and improvement of the quality of the environment. It shall promote scientific and technological advance."

It shall combat social exclusion and discrimination, and shall promote social justice and protection, equality between women and men, solidarity between generations and protection of children's rights.

It shall promote economic, social and territorial cohesion and solidarity among member states.⁵

On the basis of these policies, member states should give up such domestic policies and procedures in the process of preparation of budget for 2006 – 2013, which are against economic, social and territorial cohesion and solidarity between member states. This refusal to apply a ruthless national egoism and such economic policy, which would lead to disruption of economic and social cohesion, is not only based on the fundamental values of the Union. Social cohesion is also one of the priorities of Lisbon agenda. At the Lisbon summit Prime ministers of 15 EU member states defined the goal as a „modern, innovative a sustainable European social model: more work and better work, society which does not exclude anybody, and provides equal opportunities for everybody“. The political purpose of Lisbon agenda is to strengthen social policy as a factor for achieving a strategic objective – to make from EU the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world.

⁵ Draft Constitution for Europe passed by European Convention on June 13 and July 10, 2003 submitted by President of European Council in Rome July 18, 2003, European Convention, CONV 850 103, SK, p. 6

For that reason social policy has to be interlinked with economic policy and it has to strengthen solidarity, social justice and social cohesion.

This aspect of Lisbon strategy was elaborated in detail in Nice.

In December 2000 European Council passed European strategy against exclusion and all forms of discrimination and updated European employment strategy. A specific document titled European social agenda was passed. Top representatives of EU member states defined the goal of social policy: „The agenda has to strengthen the role of social policy as a productive factor, it has to ensure that this productive factor follows concrete goals in protection of individuals, limiting of inequalities and social cohesion“.⁶

Logic of thinking of representatives of EU member states was based on the premise that a society with higher social cohesion and lower level of exclusion is successful from economic point of view“.⁷

Second progress report on economic and social cohesion⁸ shows that there are serious difficulties

in complying with European social agenda. The report includes the following data: The ratio between the 10% of the most prosperous regions and the 10% of the least prosperous ones in the EU 25 is 4.4, compared to 2.6 in the EU15. In The EU 25, only 30 regions in the current Member States (i.e. 47 million people representing 12% of the population) will be below the threshold of 75% of the new average GDP. In an EU 27 there would be only 18 such regions (i.e. 24 million people representing 6% of the population). 15 percent of the people in Europe live below the national poverty threshold (without social transfers other than retirement pensions this figure would be 24%).

The report states a serious prognosis: “In the EU 25, disparities in terms of employment and social cohesion will widen. The average rate of joblessness will rise, in the same way as the share of agricultural employment. Industrial employment will remain unchanged and the weight of services in overall employment will diminish.”⁹

⁶ EU document, European Council meeting, 2000 in Santa Maria de Feira, Institute of International Relations in collaboration with Ministry of foreign affairs Czech republic, Annex international policy 7/2000, p. 5

⁷ EU document, European Council meeting, 2000 in Santa Maria de Feira, Institute of International Relations in collaboration with Ministry of foreign affairs Czech republic, Annex international policy 7/2000, p. 5

⁸ Second progress report on economic social cohesion (January 2003) Unity, solidarity, diversity for Europe, its people and territory in territory, Summary and conclusions of Document (2003) 34, European Commission, Brussels.

⁹ Second progress report, p. 3.

On the basis of significant differences between richest and poorest regions in the EU history and after enlargement by¹⁰ East European countries, we have to pose a question again – what EU will be able to solve this problem in a more effective way? Is it just going to be Europe of intergovernmental cooperation and single market? Those who raise concerns about possible establishment of a super state warn that EU Charter of Rights could be included into EU constitutional treaty as an instrument giving equal rights to EU citizens, regardless of the fact whether they come from rich or less developed regions. They need to be addressed with a question. Is not strengthening of European democratic institutions and community law and harmonization and balancing of competences between these institutions and national states on the principles of solidarity the most effective answer? Perhaps only in this way could we overcome in reasonable time the economic and cultural lag behind of Eastern Europe, which was caused by the building of an ‘iron curtain’ as a result of Yalta agreements?

Enhanced application of principles of supranational collaboration is the best safeguard against unhealthy national egoism focusing on inherited economic and civilization differences which bring social, national and religious tensions and conflicts and migration waves and finally open space for destabilization of East as well as West.

It is, no doubt a very sensitive issue. Not only Czechs and Slovaks, but also nations of former “big” Yugoslavia and unified Germany experienced discussions about who is losing on whom including resulting political tensions and conflicts. It is not possible to underestimate the decreasing support of enlargement process in some EU member states. This is caused by worries about costs for balancing the differences between “old” and “new” countries, as well as by worries that those countries who have drawn funds from structural and other funds will have to give it up for the benefit of poor regions in the current accession countries. But succumbing to the moods of national egoism, not reforming European institutions and budgeting of EU on a strengthened principle of solidarity, not investing into prevention of possible future conflicts caused by economic underdevelopment, social tensions and migration, would mean opening door to these conflicts. The discussions about EU budget from 2007 to 2013 will therefore be about basic purpose of EU enlargement and its future.

¹⁰ Second progress report, p. 4 – 5.