Uneven Development and a New Approach to Regional Development in Slovakia

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"(A)s measured by the Gini coefficients, Slovakia shows the highest regional disparities among EU countries", a recent report of the International Monetary Fund (IMF 2017: 4) points out. Per capita income gains have been concentrated in the Bratislava region in recent years so that the regional gap has increased even more. Long term-unemployment is about three times higher in Central and Eastern Slovakia than in the rest of the country (IMF 2017: 4 f.). Thus, uneven regional development is a real and deepening problem in Slovakia. For the IMF (2017: 4), "(l)ower educational attainment and underdeveloped infrastructure explain much of these disparities." The explanation of the IMF does not touch the root causes of the huge regional developmental disparities in Slovakia. This article argues that these disparities are linked to the character of the Slovak development model. Additionally, it will explore a recent government initiative aimed at correcting these disparities and focusing especially on the less developed districts of the country.

Basic contours of the Slovak development model

The present unevenness of the Slovak socio-economic development has its roots in the transformation crisis and the development model. During state socialism, the Czechoslovak state put a lot of effort into equalizing the socio-economic levels of the Czech lands and Slovakia. Whereas the per capital national income in Slovakia reached only 61.2 % of the Czech level in 1948, it reached 85.7 % in 1989. Regarding the industrial production, the Slovak catch-up process was even more impressive. Industrial production per worker was even higher than in the Czech part of Czechoslovakia in 1989 (Průcha 2003, 27, tab. 2). As Průcha (2003: 27) points out, Czechoslovakia was more successful in equalising the regional patterns than the Soviet Union or Yugoslavia where enormous regional differences persisted. The industrialisation process in Slovakia got a big push in the 1970s, and the convergence of the national income levels between the Czech and Slovak part of the country was particularly strong in the 1970s and 1980s (cf. Smith 1998: 123 ff., Londák 2013: 205, tab. 25). In the 1970s and 1980s, industrial investment was particularly channelled to the hitherto rather rural regions of eastern and southern Slovakia. However, the extensive growth model reached its limits in the 1980s, and the growth dynamic slowed down (Smith 1998: 130).

The capitalist transformation process had a different impact on the Czech and Slovak parts of Czechoslovakia and on the different regions within Slovakia. The disintegration of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance and the lack of interest of the then Czechoslovak government in concluding transitional barter agreements in order to attenuate the effects on the external trade hit industry in the eastern parts of the Slovakia which had had particularly strong links with the Soviet Union particularly hard. The conditions of

the Association Agreement between the EU and Czechoslovakia concluded in 1991 were economically disadvantageous for the Czechoslovak side. The rapid trade liberalisation had a particular negative impact on the Slovak economy (Průcha 2003: 31). The restrictive character of macro-economic policies in the early transformation period massively dampened the domestic market. The early recession was much deeper in Slovakia than in the Czech part of Czechoslovakia and, after the division of Czechoslovakia, in the Czech Republic. Unemployment increased much more rapidly in Slovakia than on the Czech side. In 1992, the last year of the existence of Czechoslovakia, it reached 2.6 % in the Czech land, but 10.4 % in Slovakia (Průcha 2003: 29, tab. 4). Within Slovakia, the more agricultural and more recently industrialised regions in the south and east of the country were stronger hit by the recession than the more diversified west (cf. Smith 1998: 256 ff.).

After the separation, privatisation in favour of an incipient domestic bourgeoisie was the main priority in both the Czech Republic and Slovakia. There was no pro-active industrial or developmental strategy. The state lost its development capacities and, partially, there also existed a strong ideological resentment against a developmental state because it was associated with the state socialist past (Myant/Drahokoupil 2011: 173).

In 1998, the national-conservative coalition headed by Vladimír Mečiar lost the elections against a broad, pro-EU coalition. The European Commission had excluded Slovakia from the first group of Central-East European countries with which accession talks were started. This exclusion was obviously due to the too obvious preference for national business displayed by the Mečiar government.

The new coalition governments headed by Mikuláš Dzurinda embraced the EU agenda. The European Commission pushed strongly for privatisation and FDI-led development. Within Slovakia, the "comprador service sector" (Drahokoupil 2007) which is closely linked to the interests of foreign capital gained decisively in political influence. State structures became geared towards attracting foreign capital and the Slovak government competed with the other Visegrád countries for foreign capital by providing generous incentives to foreign investors.

Since the late 1990s, the Slovak development model has rested on two basic pillars: export industry and financialisation. Export industrialisation relying on relatively low wages and a skilled labour force has been mainly driven by foreign direct investment (FDI). In 2008, manufacturing accounted for 36 % of the FDI stock (Hunya 2012: 100, tab. II/9.1.A). The predominance of manufacturing in FDI has not been substantially modified by the great crisis. In 2014, manufacturing still accounted for 32.4 % of the FDI stock. Car industry had been the main recipient among the manufacturing sub-sectors – accounting alone for 24.4 % of manufacturing FDI stock. It was followed by the basic metals (especially US Steel in Košice) with 17.7 % and rubber, plastics and other non-metallic mineral products sub-sectors with 13.6 % (Hunya 2016: 107, Tab. II/10.1).

The car industry is clearly the lead-sector of manufacturing in Slovakia. This sub-sector displays the typical features of dependent export industrialisation. There are three car plants in Slovakia – Volkswagen, PSA Peugeot Citroën and KIA (cf. Pavlinek et al. 2009: 56, tab. 3). Jaguar is presently constructing a fourth car plant (Morvay 2017: 53). The Slovak car industry consists basically of assembly platforms that are "vertically integrated into externally organised GPNs (Global Production Networks, JB) and are weakly embedded with the Slovak economy" (Pavlínek 2018: 160). Empirical research of Pavlínek (2018: 152 f.) shows that, even though foreign subsidiaries slightly increased their supplies from the host countries, these supplies usually came from foreign-owned rather than from do-

mestic firms. Research and development is insignificant in this lead-sector, it is even less developed than in other countries in the region (Pavlínek et al. 2009: 55, Pavlínek 2018: 156 f.).

Thus, the Slovak manufacturing industry is outward-looking, displays relatively few inter-sectoral linkages and relies on relatively cheap labour. In line with this, the share of compensation for employees in GDP was only 38.4 % in 2015. This is in percentage points below the EU level (47.4 %). The Slovak wage share is lower than in the Czech Republic and Hungary, but slightly higher than in Poland (Dunn 2018). Like in other countries in the region, wages had collapsed in the early transformation phase. They have recovered afterwards, particularly in the pre-crisis years. Wage growth slowed down after the crisis (Galgóczi 2017: 11, fig. 1). Almost full employment in the prosperous western parts of the country has recently give a new push to wages. For the first time since 1990, trade unions organised a strike in one of the car plants – Volkswagen in Bratislava – in 2017. The strike was relatively successful and can be regarded as an encouragement for more assertive workers' demands (cf. Ondráček 2018: 30). These wage increases have shown that spaces for pushing wages do exist within the existing model (though with variation depending on the branch and the region). As Martin Myant (2018: 33) points out in a recent publication of the European Trade Union Institute, the existing patterns of FDI-based industrialisation, however, put limits to wage growth and wage convergence with West European core countries.

The more complex activities and research and development activities (R&D) tend to be concentrated in the core countries. In Slovakia, R&D activities are very limited. However, the share of R&D expenditure increased in recent years from 0.62 % in 2010 to 1.18 % of GDP in 2015 whereas in core countries is rather around 2.5 % of the GDP. The share of external sources in financing R&D has substantially increased during those years, but is still very low (0.46 % of GDP in 2015; Morvay et al. 2017: 33, tab. 3.1).

Manufacturing contributed substantially to the post-crisis recovery (cf. Morvay et al. 2017: 27, tab. 2.2). However, the crisis revealed the high vulnerability of the narrowly specialised manufacturing sector in 2008/2009. The export specialisation of Slovakia is even narrower than that of its neighbours. The decline of exports of 14.8 % in the crisis year 2009 was the strongest among the Visegrád countries (Myant et al. 2013: 386, tab. 1). Thus, the industrial key pillar of the Slovak development model displays a couple of problematic features.

The second pillar of the Slovak development model – financialisation – is likewise closely linked to FDI. Financial and insurance activities already were the second largest recipient sector of FDI with a share of 19.7 % in 2008 (Hunya 2012: 100, tab. II/9.1). In the subsequent years, their share even increased to 24.4 % in 2013 (Hunya 2016: 107, tab. II/10.1). Real estate is through real estate credits closely linked to the banking sector. Its share in the FDI stock reached substantial 10–9 % in 2008 (Hunya 2012, 100, tab. II/9.1). In the wake of the crisis, its importance for foreign investors declined and its share in the FDI stock shrunk to 6.2 % in 2013 (Hunya 2016: 107, tab. II/10.1).

Since the late 1990s, the Slovak banking sectors has been almost completely taken over by foreign banks. Credits form the basis of financialisation in Slovakia (Becker/Ćetković 2015). In the more limited sense that foreign capital is driver of interest rate-based financialisation, the Slovak financialisation can be characterised as financialisation with features of dependency. Credits to households have been a key feature of banking business in Slovakia. The ratio of household credits to GDP increased from paltry 5.6 % to 18.9 % of the GDP between 2004 and 2008 (Becker/Ćetković 2015: 81, tab. 5). Household credits

continued to grow even during the crisis. Credits and deposits were basically balanced. Banks in Slovakia had not relied heavily in external refinancing for their credit business. In that regard financialisation had a higher degree of autonomy in Slovakia than it was the case in many other countries of the region. The drying up of capital flows during the crisis affected the banks in Slovak less than in most other countries of the region. Presently, the growth of credits to households is more rapid than in any country in the euro zone respectively in Central and Eastern Europe (Národná banka Slovenska 2017: 20). In the third quarter 2016, household credits amounted to 40.8 % of GDP (IMF 2017: 35, tab. 5). Slovakia displays the highest household credits/GDP ratio in the region, the Slovak National Bank pointed out in its recent Financial Stability Report (Národná banka Slovenska 2017: 21). This credit growth is stimulated by the very low interest rates. The Slovak National Bank has introduced some tightening measures in order to counter the emerging risks due to excessive debt burdens of households (Národná banka Slovenska: 6).

The major part of the household credits – 76.5 % in 2016 (Morvay et al. 2017: 81, tab. 7.1) – is destined for real estate/housing purposes. Subsequent governments have fostered private housing property. Relatively few flats are for rent (10.5 %; Ekonom 2018: 17), and rents are very high. Social housing is almost inexistent. Housing prices increased very rapidly immediately before the crisis. The crisis led to a substantial reduction, but recently prices have again risen substantially (cf. Morvay et al. 2017: 83, graph 7.5). The real estate boom has been particularly strong in the capital Bratislava (ibid.).

Although the banking sector in Slovakia has proven to be more resilient to crisis than in many other countries of the region, the rapidly increasing indebtedness of households has potentially problematic features. The same applies to the real estate boom. Due to the character of the housing sector and housing policies, there is a massive lack of affordable housing in Slovakia.

Domestic capital is mainly active in the internationally not exposed sectors – like certain services, real estate, and construction (cf. Becker 2016: 54). Thus, it is concentrated in sectors with little developmental potential. Domestic capital consists of some large, diversified holdings (like Penta or J&T) on the one hand and smaller firms on the other hand. Domestic capital which partially has very close links to political parties has profited as well from privatisation policies. Partially, it is rather highly dependent on public tenders. There are partially close links between segments of the state and specific business interests (cf. Becker 2018). Collusion between the administration and specific business interests has been made more difficult. As part of anti-corruption measures, the transparency rules for public tenders have been significantly tightened (Cunningham 2018: 21). As a consequence tendering rules have become more complicated which makes it more difficult for small companies to comply with them. Thus, there is an implicit bias in favour of larger foreign and domestic companies.

Economic Drivers of Uneven Regional Development in Slovakia

The key pillars of the development model have certain traits that drive uneven patterns of development in Slovakia. FDI is highly concentrated in the West of the country, particularly Bratislava. In the years 2006 to 2012, the Bratislava region alone attracted 64.9 % followed by neighbouring Trnava with 8.6 % and East Slovakian Košice with 7.5 %. They were followed by Žilina (6.4 %), Trenčin with 4.9 %), Nitra with 4.1 %, Banská Bystrica with

2.6 % and Prešov with only 1.1 % (Úrad vlády Slovenskej Republiky o. J.: 73, graph 16). Thus, FDI is concentrated in the Vah valley in the west and in Košice, the second largest city of Slovakia with a huge steel enterprise) whereas it is extremely low in the de-industrialised centre and large regions of the east of the country. The extreme share of Bratislava might be slightly statistically overstated because most headquarters are located in Bratislava and inflows are accounted there. Over the last years, FDI has tended to become even more concentrated in the West of the country. Already since the early 2000s, the share of the East Slovak regions – both Košice and Prešov – has declined. In the case of Košice even substantially from 16.0 % in 2001 to 8.8 % in 2010 (Sochulakova/Igazova 2013: 505 f., tab. 2). This pattern reflects the location decisions of manufacturing FDI (cf. Sochulakova/Igazova 2013: 505 f.), in particular the car industry that has clearly preferred locations in the west of the country (Bratislava, Trnava, Žilina – and soon Nitra). Likewise, R&D activities are highly concentrated in Bratislava, though its share has fallen from a bit less than 50% to 42 % between 2007 and 2015. In those years, the R&D share of Žilina increased significantly (Morvay et al. 2017: 34 f.). The West of Slovakia is closer to the West European markets and has better transport infrastructure. FDI is a key driver of uneven development patterns in Slovakia (cf. e. g. Sochlakova/Igazova 2013: 506 ff.). It has deepened inherited patterns of uneven regional development. And the geographic patterns of FDI have tended to be even more polarised after the 2008/2009 crisis – both regarding the territorial concentration of foreign-owned firms and their turnover (Medve-Bálint 2015: 81).

Financialisation and its effects are likewise geographically unevenly distributed. The real estate boom and its rising prices have been highly concentrated in Bratislava. In the pre-crisis years, Košice, the second urban centre, and Žilina which experienced a local boom due to the KIA investment displayed particularly strong increases in housing prices in the pre-crisis years as well (Morvay et al. 2017: 83, graph 7.5). High housing prices and lack of affordable housing in the more prosperous urban centres dampen labour mobility within Slovakia.

Pro-active regional and industrial policies of the national state that would have dampened the polarising effect of FDI were lacking for many years.

Dimensions of Uneven Regional Development in Slovakia

Uneven development has several inter-related dimensions. There is an enormous and growing gap between the West – particularly Bratislava – and the rest of the country. The relation between the GDP/per capita in the richest region – Bratislava (35,342 EUR) – and the poorest region – Prešov (8,628 EUR) – was 4.09 to 1 in 2015. This is a considerable higher gap than in 1999 and in 2004, the year of EU accession, when the gap was 3.49 to 1 and 3.77 to 1 respectively (Ministerstvo dopravy a výstavby Slovenskej republiky s. d., own calculations). Though the Bratislava GDP per capita might be a bit overstated due to the headquarter functions concentrated in Bratislava, this gap is enormous. The tendency towards a widening gap can be observed not only between Bratislava and the rest, but also between the west and the rest, particularly the east of the country (Ministerstvo dopravy a výstavby Slovenskej republiky s. d., Štatistický úrad Slovenskej republiky 2017: 22). Apart from Bratislava, its neighbouring region Trnava is the only region of the country where the GDP per capita is above the Slovak average (Ministerstvo dopravy a výstavby Slovenskej Republiky s. d.). The central and Eastern regions which had been characterised

by industrialised monostructures during state socialism and had suffered severely from the collapse of the main local firms during capitalist transformation tend to lag behind. Similar long-term trends can be observed in some of the agricultural peripheries, e.g. regions close to the Hungarian border (cf. Smith 1998: 262f.).

Not surprisingly, wages show a huge difference as well. In 2013, the average gross wage in Slovakia was 824 EUR. Bratislava was the only region where the average gross wage (1049 EUR) was above the Slovak average. In all other regions, it was below the average. The lowest average gross wage was recorded again in Prešov where it only reached 636 EUR (Úrad vlády Slovenskej republiky s.d.: 72, graph 14, cf. also Štatistický úrad Slovenskej republiky 2017: 18).

A similar pattern is reflected in the employment and unemployment statistics. The employment rate varies widely between Bratislava (78.7%) on the one hand, and Prešov (65.1%) and Košice (64.0%) on the other hand (2016; Štatistický úrad Slovenskej republiky 2017: 16). Bratislava also displays the highest level of university education (Workie Tiruneh et al. 2014: 120, tab. 3.38). The unemployment figures show similar regional patterns. The most problematic cases, showing the highest unemployment rates, have been in Banská Bystrica in the centre (with particularly high unemployment rates in districts close to the Hungarian border), in Prešov and Košice in the east, which have suffered from de-industrialisation, have a rather rural character and have not been part of the FDI-led export industrialisation (ibid: 113f., Pauhofová et al. 2017: 48ff., Štatistický úrad Slovenskej republiky 2017: 17). Differently from the poorer regions in neighbouring countries, agricultural activities do not provide a form of employment buffer. In 2013, only 3.3% of economically active population worked in the agricultural sector in East Slovakia (compared with 32.8% in the neighbouring Podkarpackie Voivodship in Poland; Blachut et al. 2015: 32). In January 2018, registered unemployment differed between 2.01% in Trnava in the West and 18.18% in Rimavská Sobota (close to the Hungarian border) while it reached 5.88% in Slovakia as a whole (Pacherová 2018: 7). Thus, even in times of an economic boom, unemployment remains quite high in the regions which have suffered from de-industrialisation and with a strongly rural character. In those regions, unemployment often has a long-term character (cf. IMF 2017: 5). The regional differences in the unemployment rates are significantly higher than in the Czech Republic and Hungary (Pauhofová et al. 2017: 36ff.). Poverty indicators like the share of the population at risk and, even more pronounced, the share of those suffering from relative material deprivation have been significantly higher in the East (Prešov and Košice region) and the centre of the country (Banská Bystrica region) than in the west of the country. Again, the worst indicators are recorded for Prešov (Žeklinský 2014: 115ff.).

Thus, lasting structural patterns of uneven development can be identified in Slovakia. The socio-economic divide between the west and the rest of the country has widened.

Political strategies against uneven development

The Slovak case conforms well to the dependency analysis on spatial developments – dependent, peripheral development replicates internationally uneven patterns at the national level (cf. Sunkel 1978). Transnational corporations have been through FDI major agents of the uneven development patterns. Therefore, it is not realist to expect a correction of uneven regional development patterns and impulses for the less developed regions from FDI.

In the 1970s and 1980s, authors inspired by the Latin American dependency approach and arguing for "development from below" underlined the need for enabling local actors and strengthening local productive capacities. This implied for them a "selective territorial closure" (Weissenbacher 2015, Friedman/Weaver 1979).

Strategies of "development from below" require developmental capacities of the state at the local, regional and national level. This capacity is at best little developed in peripheral, post-transformation states in Central Eastern Europe. The states in the region are structurally heterogeneous. On the one hand, the branches of the state that are close to transnational capital and the "comprador service sector" cater mainly for attracting foreign capital (Drahokoupil 2007) and channelling EU funds. They tend to be the best organised parts of the state apparatus and to employ experts necessary to comply with the international and EU economic norms. On the other hand, there are branches of the state that cater for specific business groups (domestic and, partially, foreign) and are characterised by close links to those groups which are often mediated through political parties (Becker 2018). The scope for pro-active policies at the national and sub-national level is severely limited by EU regulations, particularly competition regulations. EU regional policies focus on infrastructure and do not encompass building directly productive capacities in peripheral regions.

Since the late 1990s, successive Slovak governments banked primarily on FDI. This was in line with the conceptions of the EU. The implicit and, at times, explicit hope was that FDI would diffuse to the more peripheral regions over times. In the present strategy for regional development in Slovakia, a key role is still attributed to FDI (Úrad vlády Slovenskej republiky s. d.: 59). However, the plan also envisages the promotion of small and medium enterprises and the mobilisation of public investment (Úrad vlády Slovenskej republiky s. d.: 62 f.). The government led by the mildly social-democratically inclined Smer party has acknowledged the need for a more locally centred approach that would complement the hitherto FDI-led approach (cf. Krivošik 2016). For supporting a complementary, locally focused approach for the least developed districts, the government nominated a Commissioner for the Support of the Least Developed Districts in 2016 (SITA 2016). He has coordinating role. A Council for the Least Developed Districts was established as well (Úrad vlády Slovenskej republiky 2018). The Commissioner for the Support of Least Developed Districts, Anton Marcinčin (2018a), states clearly that "real change must come from below". In activating local initiatives, he sees providing expertise and finance as key tasks of the government structures in fostering development. In a commentary for the Slovak financial daily Hospodárske noviny, he argues that there is a need for changing the understanding of the role and powers of government at the different territorial levels of the state (national, regional, local). In particular, local authorities should play an active role in planning local development. The regions should link regional and broader general interests in the interest of "regional social-economic development. The government is not here for selected businessmen, but for linking the national and international with regional and for providing services." (Marcinčin 2018) He emphasizes that policy making, including planning, should be done jointly with the local communities (Marcinčin 2018c). Marcinčin mentions as well that present administrative practices result in bad planning and use of financial funds (including EU funds) and that highly complicated administrative procedures pose problems for projects (Marcinčin 2018b). In a recent commentary for the daily Pravda, he noted that there has been a tendency to change the participatory approach to the "administrative undertaking of a couple of individuals, 'our people', what is in contradiction to the cooperation with the regions." (Marcinčin 2018c)

He emphasizes that the regional character of the production-distribution-consumption cycle should be strengthened and that the development of manufacturing firms should be based on the capitalisation of domestic sources. Regarding local and regional infrastructures (transport/water), own capacities and the local workforce should be used (Marcinčin 2018b). This approach is to some extent reflected in the action plans of the districts (cf. Ministerstvo dopravy, výstavby, regionálneho rozvoja 2016: 10 ff., Ministerstvo Financii Slovenkej Republiky 2015: 17 ff.).

Since this approach towards local development in the least developed districts is relatively recent, it is too early for an evaluation. The building of local capacities that is part of the approach would take even under favourable circumstance some time. Marcinčin (2018c) underline that his expert teams were able to helping to the local structures in defining their potential, building platforms, starting to plan and act as partners for the national and regional governments. It seems that implementation so far has been most successful in the education sector and infrastructure (business parks). Its financial scope is rather limited.

Conclusions

The Slovakian development model is characterised by significant and increasing regional differences. The gap between the west and the rest of the country are increasing. The regional differences are inscribed into the dependent export industrialisation that is a key pillar of this model. FDI is a key driving force behind the very uneven development patterns. Therefore, it should and cannot be expected that foreign direct investment will bring about a rapid development of the peripheral Slovak regions and reduce regional inequalities. A more regionally even model can only be brought about by alternative policies that construct an additional more inward looking pillar of the development model.

As the "development from below approach", inspired by the dependency theory, argues, a development strategy based on local actors and a selective territorial closure would be necessary to change the uneven patterns. The conditions for such a change are not favourable in Central East European countries like Slovakia for a number of reasons. One key obstacle is that the state at its various territorial levels lacks developmental capacity. The second key obstacle are the severe constraints on pro-active development strategies and policies imposed by the EU regulations, particularly competition regulations.

Complementary to the "traditional" reliance on FDI, the Slovak government recently developed a more locally- and regionally focused approach and created a small administrative support structure for this. This is an innovative approach which still seems to have to grapple with serious problems linked to state capacity. Its potential scope is constrained as well by EU regulations (e. g. competition and fiscal rules).

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