

Reviews

Vladimír Krivý (Ed.): How the Slovak society has changed

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In early summer of 2014, a monograph of more than 400 pages was published, edited by Vladimír Krivý and written by ten authors of various generations, working in five academic institutions. The quality of this noteworthy book was guaranteed by eight reviewers.

The book was issued at the threshold of the 25th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution, which brought an end of the state socialism in Czechoslovakia. A few months before November 1989, the journal SOCIOLÓGIA published an unusually critical and open-minded article by Vladimír Krivý about the barriers to social development in a society of so-called “real socialism”. He used a metaphor about a frog swimming in a pot, which does not notice that the temperature of water is rising and misses the chance to jump out before getting boiled. Soon, this metaphor expressing a self-denying prophecy became very popular. In those days, a tacit question was hanging in the air: will the citizens of Czechoslovakia finally overcome the syndrome of learned helplessness and mobilize against the declining oppressive regime?

Before the fall of the former regime, the intellectual community in Slovakia yearned for a sociology that would deal with real problems, instead of producing ideologically biased apologies of the malfunctioning socialist system. Ivan Laučík, a renowned Slovak poet, expressed this longing in his response to a mail survey organized by the Slovak Sociological Association in summer 1989: “During recent twenty years, Slovak sociology has not been here for me or for us... We needed it, by it was not available, and when it appeared, it did not speak about our real lives ... Slovak sociology needs to concentrate on the basic issues. I am quite sure sociologists know which issues are important.”

The book *How the Slovak society has changed* proves that the dream about a sociology that would overcome its alienation from the society has become reality. The readers will find it virtually impossible to open the publication on a page that would not bring interesting information and insight into the “real life” and “basic issues” of people.

It should be emphasised that this publication, a long-expected child of academic sociology, has important predecessors in Slovakia – collective publications of the Institute for Public Affairs. Since 1997, this independent think tank has been continuously issuing books monitoring various aspects of the transformation. Especially the last two comprehensive books are worth of mentioning. The book *Where are we? Mental maps of Slovakia* (2010) was dedicated to the developments after November 1989 and the book *From where to where? Twenty years of independence* (2013) analysed the developments in Slovakia and in the Czech Republic after the 1993 dissolution of the common Czechoslovak state.

The new book published by the Institute for Sociology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences is organized in six chapters. The analysis is based on a variety of empirical sources, including data from several comparative sociological surveys.

The first chapter *Social inequalities: the century of changes* written by Ján Bunčák, Roman Džambažovič, Anna Hrabovská and Ján Sopóci analyses the changing social structure in an impressively long time span of four generations. As data from three time

periods – around the year 1910, in 1967, and after 1990 – show, the development of social inequalities in Slovakia can be seen as a history of success.

In early 20th century Slovakia, more than 80 percent of economically active population belonged to the lowest two classes on a 6-point social status scale. The social elite was enormously thin and mostly alienated from local inhabitants. During the following decades, the pyramidal shape of social stratification became much less steep. At the same time, as the team of Czech and Slovak sociologists headed by Pavel Machonin empirically proved in 1967, the socialist society – despite all ideological proclamations – was not able to remove social inequalities. The highest rank of the social ladder was occupied by a limited number of members of the power elite, whose position presupposed their membership in the Communist Party.

After 1989, the income differentiation in Slovakia increased and the distance between social classes widened. Simultaneously, the pyramidal shape of social stratification became less steep and the position of middle class strengthened. A considerable part of population, in particular young people, experienced upward mobility. The share of economically independent persons increased substantially. Only the proportion of the lowest social class of low-skilled manual workers remained unchanged.

Nonetheless, general public in Slovakia has not acknowledged these positive changes of social stratification. Also today, most people perceive it as a steep pyramid, in which the lowest social classes are the most numerous. The feelings of relative deprivation are widespread. They reflect not only real income differentiation, but also marked diversity in consumption patterns and life styles, emphasized by media. The idealization of social equality under state socialism plays its role, too. As authors rightly state, rank and file citizens perceive the differentiation in a society of abundance more critically than the social equality in a society of poor.

During the post-1989 transformation, higher income has become more closely related with higher qualification and education, as well as with management and executive jobs. The public, especially members of the lower classes, regard such remuneration as unjust and mental labour as over-paid.

Worth of attention are the differences in the behaviour of the members of basic classes. As for the reproduction of social inequalities, people with higher class positions tend to behave in a way that strengthens their chance to move up the ladder, while the patterns of behaviour of their counterparts, individuals belonging to the low classes, increase their probability of staying stuck at the bottom of the ladder.

All in all, this chapter, albeit heterogeneous by its style, offers remarkable findings. Yet, it would be appropriate to focus more attention on the interconnection between the risk-of-poverty-rate and ethnicity, in particular on the position of Roma people in the lowest social class.

The second chapter *Family and life courses of young adults* authored by Michaela Potančoková places the shifts in the reproductive behaviour and family forms in a broader context of transformation processes after 1989, as well as in the context of value changes, which had begun earlier, in the 1980s already. These shifts – the pluralization of family forms, individualization and destandardization of reproductive strategies – are happening also in other neighbouring countries. They present deep socio-cultural changes with far-reaching economic and social impacts.

In recent decades, Slovak society has witnessed a progressing individualization and destandardization of life courses of young adults and of patterns of their reproductive behaviour. The variability of the timing of life transitions is on the rise. The transition to

adulthood has been prolonged and a new phase of post-adolescence has been inserted between adolescence and adulthood. It is characterised by a reluctance to settle down and to take on commitments associated with the adult role. The emergence of this life stage is influenced by the fact that opportunities for self-realization beyond the realm of family have significantly widened. Further factors include a prolonged period of study, changes in the labour market and the absence of a supporting housing policy for young people.

Potančoková pays special attention to the process of deinstitutionalization of procreation. She studies the weakening of the relationship between marriage and parenthood, which is connected with the change of normative family patterns and with the increase of the number of children born outside the marriage. These processes result in the pluralization of family forms and structures. As the data show, families in Slovakia will be smaller and probably also more fragile; the proportion of incomplete and reconstructed families will increase.

The author speaks about the diffusion of new patterns of behaviour from the urban environment, which is more modern and secular, to the more traditionalist and religious rural environment. Although the changes are occurring in different ways in various social classes and subpopulations, they are affecting all parts of population.

The language of the chapter is exact and the tone matter-of-fact, not burdened with ideological zeal and nostalgic moralization, so typical of the current passionate dispute of Christian conservatives with liberals over cultural and civilizational values. Obviously, it would be enriching if this excellent study included a discussion on unintended social and economic impacts of the depicted demographic trends, as well as on policies for coping with them. However, that would not be in accordance with the "general strategy" of the book, which was respected by all authors: not to put on the forefront policy implications of the studied social processes.

The next chapter by Peter Gajdoš *Cities – countryside – regions* describes the development of socio-spatial disparities and presents a series of simultaneous, yet often contradictory processes. They include deurbanization and suburbanization, as well as selective reurbanization; deindustrialization and reindustrialization of cities; migration and depopulation, especially of small villages; and last, but not least, the deepening of disparities among municipalities and among regions.

By the end of 1990s, the crystallization of a fundamental pattern of regional structure at macrolevel took place in Slovakia: it brought a widening gap between the rich northwest and the poor southeast of the country. Since then, this pattern has not significantly changed. Behind this polarization, we have to see also the decision to limit redistribution policies and to promote decentralization. Both processes resulted in the deepening of disparities in the endogenous capital of various regions.

As the author points out, some regions and cities entered the era of transformation with a favourable geographic location, available, qualified and cheap labour, good-quality infrastructure, appropriate economic base and with sufficient human potential. Today, these are the winners of transformation. On the other hand, some regions belong to collective victims of transformation. They struggle with economic problems and poverty, with social problems and sometimes even social pathology. The prevailing mentality of their inhabitants is that of civic helplessness, indifference and presentism. They limit their activities to the saturation of immediate needs, feel alienated from politics and do not believe in civic participation. The regions, where economic problems coincide with a lower quality of human capital, are lacking fundamental endogenous sources for development. Some inhabitants, deprived of job opportunities, solve their difficult social situation by

commuting or moving out of the region, while others prefer the strategy of passive adaptation and fatalist resignation. However, as Gajdoš rightly cautions, the lack of protests and the seeming social “peace” in the region might not be sustainable and the tension and deprivation could erupt in future social conflicts.

The information richness of the chapter proves qualities of its author. Yet, the study has some weaknesses, too. Sometimes the wording is too general and the categorizations are hard to decipher. Surprisingly, Peter Gajdoš asserts that the process of deindustrialization can have only two outcomes – either the existence of devastated areas which can barely be revitalized, or a liquidation of industrial monuments by the developers. As if the author disregarded the third possible outcome – a conversion of a technical monument to an object serving cultural or other goals. Obviously, such solution presupposes intensive engagement of active citizens. By the way, we can read elsewhere in the chapter that besides powerful developers, there are also other actors in the city – albeit often the weaker ones – the members of local community, who can become active citizens.

Despite this criticism, Gajdoš should be praised for being the only author in the book paying at least some attention to the issue of active citizenship. Needless to say, a publication aspiring to offer a comprehensive picture of crucial social changes in Slovakia during the period of transformation should include also a reflection of the development of civil society.

A fruitful interdisciplinary collaboration of the religionist Tatiana Podolinská with sociologists Vladimír Krivý and Miloslav Bahna gave birth to an excellent comparative study *Religiosity: Slovakia and its neighbours*, which deals with recent developments in five countries of Central Europe – in Slovakia, Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and Austria.

As international comparative surveys prove, the trends in the development of religiosity in the region of Central Europe were divergent. In Poland and Austria, the process of secularization took place, while in Slovakia; the opposite process of desecularization occurred. In the period from 1991 through 2008, Slovakia was in fact the only one of the above mentioned five countries in which the religiosity became stronger. On the scale measuring the degree of religiosity Slovakia is positioned between the most religious Poland and the most secular Czech Republic. The closest country to Slovakia in terms of the average degree of religiosity is Austria, followed by Hungary, while the farthest country is the Czech Republic.

Similarly to other countries, Slovakia has experienced a weakening relationship between religiosity and the traditional divisions of the society. The only exception has been an enduring stronger occurrence of traditional church religiosity among women. However, the significance of such factors as age and type of settlement has decreased and the education has lost its relevance at all. Yet some marked differences have persisted. Among the inhabitants of small villages and within the oldest generation, there is the highest occurrence rate of strongly religious people. By contrast, fully secular individuals prevail in the youngest generation inhabiting the largest cities.

While a general trend of detachment of religiosity from the church in favour of increasing individualization and privatization has taken place in the region of Central Europe, the church religiosity is still of considerable importance in Slovakia. In fact, there has been a renewal of the “interrupted tradition” from the pre-communist past. As the analysis shows, some processes in Slovakia oppose modernization processes in Western Europe. However, the question arises whether this contradiction is not a temporary phenomenon and whether recent tendencies – a slight weakening of religious belief, of

church membership and practicing in Slovakia after 1999 – do not indicate a start of a new opposite trend which would be in accordance with modernization processes in Western Europe.

As the authors mention in the conclusion of their study, the renewal of pre-communist tradition in Slovakia brought not only religious agenda into the public discourse, but also national and nationalist issues. Nonetheless, they have not paid closer attention to the interconnection between religion and nationalism. Similarly, they left outside the framework of their analysis activities of the church aimed at solving social problems, as well as the engagement of the church in current value disputes.

The study *Patterns of voting behaviour* presents the most extensive chapter of the book. The ambition of its authors, Oľga Gyárfášová and Vladimír Krivý, was not only to describe trends in voting behaviour since 1989, when political pluralism was restored, but also to identify stable behavioural patterns under the surface of the changes.

It is worth of mentioning that two decades ago Vladimír Krivý made a scientific discovery: in his book *Slovakia and its regions* (1996), he studied regional bastions of the dominant catch-up political party of the 1990s, the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) headed by the authoritarian populist, Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar. Based on data from election statistics in the 1920s and 1930s, Krivý found that these regions were the bastions of Hlinka's Slovak People's Party (HSĽS) – a party based on three pillars: the social, national and religious one. In this new book, the “archaeological sondage” of Krivý reaches to the 2010s: when examining regional bastions of current dominant catch-all party, the Smer-Social Democracy led by Prime Minister Robert Fico, he traces its crucial historical roots back to the same HSĽS.

Besides this finding, the chapter presents other crucial features of the development of voting behaviour in Slovakia since early 1990s. One of them is the volatility of the political landscape. So far, up to the 2012 elections, a full alternation of two types of ruling coalition took place – the former representing mostly rural voters, the latter mostly urban dwellers. The shifts of voters between elections happened mainly within each party bloc (which is a typical feature of so-called shallow volatility). However, as the authors argue, this paradigm might be on decline in Slovakia. They see the signs of a possible change in the shifts of voters across the main dividing line between two party blocs (i.e. in the deep volatility).

The authors analyse key predictors and factors of electoral behaviour. In the early stage of the renewed political pluralism after 1989, the parties were not strongly anchored in the social structure and the impact of socioeconomic status on voters' decision-making was quite weak. Deeper dividing lines between “parties of collective identity” were based on religiosity and ethnicity. In the 1990s, Slovak political landscape was formed mainly by a value conflict between liberal democracy and authoritarianism. However, by the end of 1990s, the impact of socioeconomic status and class self-identification increased and the left-right dividing line came to the forefront. The authors underline also the changes in the social profile of voters and non-voters. During 1990s, voter turnout was higher in the countryside and in the lowest social class; however, the following years brought an increased participation of urban dwellers and people with a higher socioeconomic status. This shift in electoral behaviour indicates that Slovakia is moving toward a standard model typical of advanced democracies.

The extent of knowledge condensed in this chapter is impressive, indeed. Yet, some questions would deserve more consideration. Especially two of them are worth of mentioning. Firstly, the readers can learn about value profiles of voters, but not of non-voters, although this large group presents an indispensable part of the general picture of

electoral behaviour. Secondly, the authors present their findings about the importance of various issues for the voters, but do not inform about the changes in value orientations of the general population since 1989. However – and this comment does not concern only the chapter by Gyárfášová and Krivý, but the monograph as a whole – an examination of changes in a society undergoing transition without an analysis of the development of value orientations is incomplete.

Miloslav Bahna starts his chapter *Two decades of international migration from Slovakia* with a fresh critical reflection of the widespread “migration myths”, which overestimate the extent of the emigration experience of Slovaks. He is not discouraged by the fact, that this myth was nourished even by such authorities like the prominent Slovak historian Ľubomír Lipták.

In the first part of the chapter the author analyses the main migration flows and destinations after 1989. He pays attention to the gender and age profile of Slovak migrants, as well as to the impact of Slovakia’s accession to the EU and of the policies adopted by “older” EU countries. In the first years after the division of Czechoslovakia, Czech Republic was the top destination of labour migrants from Slovakia. However, the country saw also a rising migration flow of Slovak university students. In 2010, they accounted for 17 percent of all full-time Slovak university students. If migration to the Czech Republic is a case of continuity of migration patterns from the period before 1989, two other cases of predominantly female labour migration are quite different: on the one hand, mostly young au pairs leaving mainly for the UK, Germany and Austria; on the other hand, mostly middle aged women providing elder care mainly in Austria and Germany.

After 2004, when Slovakia became a member state of the EU, the flow of Slovak migrants was influenced by the decision of 12 of 15 “old” EU countries to postpone their labour market opening. From the three countries which did not use this option – the United Kingdom, Ireland and Sweden – the UK became the second most important migration destination for Slovaks, following the traditional Czech Republic. Another milestone was May 2011, when Austria and Germany opened their markets. However, the numbers of Slovak citizens working in these countries were lower than predicted.

In the second part of the study, Bahna examines the ability of the theories of international migration to explain migration flows from Slovakia. Using empirical data from several post-communist countries including Slovakia, as well as data from various regions of Slovakia, he proves a significant negative correlation between wages and migration: the lower the wages, the higher the migration. Interestingly enough, the relationship between regional wages and migration is stronger in case of migration to the Czech Republic than to the UK because other factors such as language and geographic closeness intervene, too.

Focusing on the migration within families, Bahna was able to find different remittance patterns of migrant parents and their children. He also shows the connection between labour migration of individual family members and suggests the existence of a “culture of migration”. Moreover, he comes up with a hypothesis explaining why the international migration of Slovaks often serves as a substitute for their extremely low internal migration.

The chapter by Bahna is full of interesting findings. Obviously, it is the author’s right to choose the focus of his analysis. On the other hand, it would be good to hear also about other dimensions of the migration – especially about the conditions of work and life of migrants, their life style, and their inclusion into a foreign society. I believe the readers would appreciate at least some references to the findings of other researchers dealing with these dimensions.

The author briefly mentions the impact of migration on the potential of the Slovak society. However, this fundamental issue cannot be reduced to the number of individuals from the post-accession migration wave who will not return home. Other important questions emerge: What are the features of those, who have come back or probably could do so in the future? What about their education, experience, professed values and internalized patterns of behaviour? What could be their influence on the Slovak society?

Obviously, such questions open a theme which lies outside the framework of the reviewed book: What kind of public policies should be adopted in order to increase the attractiveness of Slovakia for those individuals, who were pushed or pulled from their country by their desire to receive a better education, to fully use or upgrade their professional competence or to achieve a better remuneration for their work?

This brings me to my final comment. The strength of the reviewed book lies not only in the invaluable information, which it offers, but also in the questions, which it inspires. Some of them were indicated by the editor in his concluding remarks, while others are mentioned above. In other words, this publication excites curiosity – and suggests new ideas for further research. All in all, the authors have fulfilled one of the key missions of social scientists – to help people better understand the society in which they live.

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