

Jozef Matulník et al.: The Analysis of the Impact of Social and Health Changes on the Demographic Behaviour in Slovakia

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The Slovak population situation recently attracts more and more attention due to its negative development and consequent social, demographic, economic and other effects and associations. These changes are rapid and dramatic not only in their time concentration (frequency) but also in their symptoms – drop in marriage and birth rates, increasing divorce rate as well as negative population growth rate and ageing of the population – where these are mostly long-term one-way tendencies. On the other hand, infant and pre-natal mortality is falling, life expectancy is slightly increasing as well as positive migration balance. However, the changes caused by current negative demographic development are becoming more and more pronounced and their development trends seem set to be long-term – in particular the birth rate, which is deeply below the level of simple reproduction.

Unfavourable development of population situation is not a purely Slovak phenomenon – other European countries too have been through or are experiencing these changes. In general, it is influenced by the second demographic revolution that took place in Western Europe and North America beginning in the 1960s. Nevertheless, D. J. van de Kaa notes that in Western Europe the evolving changes in demographic behaviour reached such dimensions that experts are openly talking about the possibility of the end of European culture and civilisation and Europeans being replaced by other civilisations.

It can not be overlooked that although Slovakia is encountering these problems later, they are nevertheless important social issues that have so far had partial effects and it is expected that some specific changes in demographic behaviour will take several generations for their consequences to be obvious (for example ageing of the population and its effect on public expenditure).

Problems concerning changes in demographic behaviour have since the late 1960s been at the centre of research in Western Europe and North America and attract the attention of experts from many scientific disciplines. In Slovakia, these issues are discussed among scientists and experts from the viewpoints of several fields of science (albeit in a way that is not necessarily the most systematic), emphasising the indication of what causes changes in demographic behaviour and analysing their impact on various social subjects.

The Analysis of the Impact of Social and Health Changes on the Demographic Behaviour in Slovakia, published at the end of 2006 by the Philosophical Faculty of Trnava University, represents an important and interesting sociological contribution to the discourse of this multifaceted social problem, to its analysis and explanation as well as to the search for ways out of the current complicated situation.

Large team of authors (14 authors) consisting of experts from various scientific fields (multi-disciplined team of authors) led by a well-known authority on these issues J. Matulník (who acts as editor of the book) attempt to analyse not only social, but also health and sanitary consequences of changes in demographic behaviour in Slovakia. This problem-solving nature of the book is in line with current research trends in this field: we see an increasing number of publications focusing on social and health consequences of demographic behaviour changes. The reviewed book is yet another product of such scientific research and presents a concentrate of information and observation on various aspects of this complicated issue.

The aim of the book is to analyse current negative demographic development in Slovakia, as well as discuss the problem of weakening families that are considered a vital pillar of the society by the authors. They actually observe a deterioration of families verging on decay, particularly of families based on marriage. This has a considerable effect on life of individuals, other social institutions as well as value and norms as systemised within the society. Here, authors have identified a broad spectrum of problems associated with social consequences of current demographic behaviour changes. However, this impact is not sufficiently researched in Slovakia. Compared with other countries, local approach is not very systematic. Therefore it is necessary that these issues are analysed in more detail, in a wider framework and based on soft research data – views and attitudes of the people and not only on statistics – in our conditions, changes in demographic behaviour may have different effects from those that have been observed in Western European countries. In this respect, authors point out the example of cohabitation – whereas in Western Europe it was mostly people with higher education that took to this new type of reproductive behaviour, in Slovakia (and other post-Socialist countries) it was mainly less-educated population or those lacking education altogether.

The theoretical and conceptual bases of the publication take up the concept of second demographic revolution and its critical sociological reflection. Authors point out that the theory of second demographic revolution (as elaborated by D. J. van de Kaa) stresses cultural embedding of demographic behaviour changes based on changing value systems, norms and attitudes, inter-personal relations, birth rate but also transformations of families and similar. In Slovakia, socio-economic factors too play a major role alongside culture and value indicators. Of all things, it was this clear definition of the significance of the various factor groups that in Slovak conditions served as a motivating factor for the realisation of a representative sociological survey that led to results as presented in this book. This dimension of Slovak demographic behaviour analysis is important as in this field, most analyses are based on statistical data and a more complex research-based sociological reflection of the issue is insufficient.

If we compare the reviewed book with other multi-disciplinary publications dedicated to this urgent problem that exists within the Slovak society, the advantage of presented publication is obvious: when analysing situation, authors use not only statistical data and information but base their findings mainly on results of a quantitative sociological research (in some parts even several surveys). In a situation where sociological surveys of this nature are quite rare, this book creates the framework for presenting public views and attitudes toward this problem as well as for the fixation of these opinions and attitudes within the analytical instruments of authors and their confrontation with theoretical concepts of various orientations.

In most of its chapters, book is based on results of a representative sociological survey of Slovak population that was carried out in November 2004 on 1 175 interviewees (between 18-60 years of age), assisted by sociology students at the Philosophical Faculty of Trnava University. However, the research also utilises know-how from other sociological surveys

that have been carried out by the Department of Sociology and concern the given issue – this has created appropriate conditions for comparative analyses based on surveys regarding these problems that had been carried out during different periods and the indication of changes and tendencies in demographic behaviour in Slovakia.

Sociological survey that lies at the centre of the reviewed book was focused on analysing the changes in demographic behaviour in Slovakia. Authors analyse not only macro-social factors (referring in particular to Fukuyama) such as weakening of social ties and socially acceptable values, depreciation of social capital, corrosion of all forms of authority, less trust in social institutions and so on; they also look at micro-social indicators within marriages, cohabitations and families, in terms of bringing up children, socio-pathological phenomena etc.. The aim was to gather empirically verified data that would help answer the question how the current changes in demographic behaviour in Slovakia affect lives of individuals, families, society's value and norm system, and define the role played by these changes in determining the health of the population.

At the centre of authors' interest is the family in various aspects of its life, relationships within the family, but also forces affecting families from wider social units (such as relatives), material conditions in which families live etc.. Authors are basing their thoughts on the fact that changes in demographic behaviour, decrease in birth and marriage rates, rise in divorce numbers and higher proportion of children being born outside marriages are all deeply anchored in current changes of social life. They are linked to an overall change in the definition and perception of family as one of fundamental social institutions.

The book is divided into 12 chapters and includes 4 rather extensive appendices dealing with the methodological problems associated with the control of reliability of a summary index in social surveys (*Ritomský, A.*) as well as with specific problems associated with given issues – the sale of erotic magazines or information about the survey and research method, as well as the sample of interviewees.

A brief description of the individual chapters enables a better visualisation of the broad scope of the book as well as the number of authors involved.

Chapter 1 (author: *Matulník, J.*) includes definition of the book's objective, the subject and methods of research, as well as basic referential framework of the monitored issue – changes of demographic behaviour in the context of their impact on family and society. Author points out that several significant factors currently acting to weaken the perception of family as a fundamental social institution. It is in this very context that the author sees the outlines of the broad and complicated issue that is the impact of unfavourable demographic tendencies.

Chapter 2 (*Pastor, K.*) is a detailed but at the same time broad analysis of the effects of changes in demographic behaviour with an emphasis on the period after 1990. It is an analysis of central demographic phenomena that will continue within wider frameworks in following chapters.

In chapter 3, the attention concentrates on the issue of intended fertility and this problem is being analysed on one hand as the subject of population climate research (*Pastor, K.*), on the other hand as a problem documented by the data from a representative sociological survey of Slovak population of 18-60 years of age (*Matulník, J., Ritomský, A.*). The first part contains a detailed analysis of the method used by authors to calculate intended fertility that they have monitored in their research. The applied technique of screening (the way they use so-called vague answers) enabled them to measure the intended fertility more precisely than usually possible and in this way uncover links with various factors that help determine intended fertility. In its second part, this chapter describes fertility of various population groups.

Chapter 4 (*Matulník, J., Ritomský, A.*) presents the attitudes of population toward various methods of birth rate regulation. Depending on these attitudes, the values of intended fertility indicator are analysed.

Fifth chapter (*Matulník, J., Ritomský, A.*) presents the value of marriage and views on extramarital cohabitation. Furthermore, it describes public opinions on extramarital cohabitation of singles and sexual intercourse of minors. Subsequently, the chapter contains an analysis of the impact of the value attributed to marriage by interviewees and the effect of their views on intended fertility.

Chapter six (*Matulník, J., Ritomský, A.*) analyses the extent to which Slovak population is satisfied with their lives, the feeling of happiness and content. This section also presents information on the effect of marital status, level of economic security, assessment of one's own health and other factors on the general satisfaction of people with their lives.

The next bloc of four chapters concentrates on important areas of familiar life in Slovakia. The seventh chapter (*Minichová, M.*) centres the attention on material conditions of family life and living conditions, chapter 8 (*Vavrová, Z.*) deals with household chores, the ninth chapter (*Vavrová, Z.*) focuses on spare time and its different use by men and women, as well as women according to their marital status. Chapter 10 (*Kratochvíla, M.*) concentrates on issues associated with bringing up children of various age groups in complete as well as incomplete families. These sections of the book provide some very interesting contributions to the surveyed areas that are not normally part of analyses of these issues.

Chapter 11 (*Matulník, J., Ritomský, A.*) deals with interesting issues of family and cooperative norms of social capital in Slovakia. It concentrates particularly on the relations between values the Slovak population attribute to marriage, their views on extramarital cohabitation as well as links with other dimensions of social capital.

Chapter 12 (*Matulník, J., Chandoková, E., Ritomský, A., Mojžešová, M., Badalík, L., Heřmanová, D., Orgonášová, M., Ozorovský, V., Kostičová, M.*) is dedicated to problems surrounding health, sanitary behaviour and healthy lifestyle in connection with familiar life. The aim was to monitor health consequences of changes in demographic behaviour of the population. Among the most important findings is the conclusion that those interviewees who are married, better educated and well-off are mentally more balanced, less stressed out and thus more able to cope with difficult situations in life; such people are in general more responsible when it comes to their own health, too. It has also been shown that education and gender is a determinant in respect to an unhealthy lifestyle – negative habits are more frequent among men and interviewees with lower education.

A specific part of this chapter is dedicated to findings from an epidemiological study (*Petráš, D., Vavrová, Z., Petříček, Š.*) based on the results of a survey (carried out in 2005 on 340 interviewees) realised among the patients of a specialised medical facility. The objective was to compare objective state of health and the subjective assessment of perceived own health of patients according to their marital status. This study has endorsed the need to research more modalities in the relationship

between people and their state of health. It has also been confirmed that marital status affects the health of population and the survey outlines further research possibilities in this area.

In my view, the authors' contribution – particularly in view of understanding broader theoretical and attitudinal context of the given issues – is mainly the fact that each of the problem areas (chapters) is introduced (set) within wider theoretical context of hitherto existing knowledge, views and concepts. In this way, they create an appropriate setting that enables good orientation within this topic even for readers who are not experts in this field, as well as allows for confrontation of used techniques and acquired knowledge in Slovakia.

If we want to assess the contribution of reviewed publication it is important to above all point out authors' objective to help create a more complete picture of social consequences caused by changes in demographic behaviour that have been taking place in Slovakia since mid-1990s – in spite of the fact that they focused mainly on demographic, social and sanitary effects. Authors are well aware that this complex of issues is extremely complicated and extensive and that their findings that have come out of their research and analyses do not represent a complete view of this problem in all its complexity. Many questions remain open and require further analyses and surveys or confirmation and verification of current knowledge. Nevertheless, the book contains numerous interesting findings and impulses not only for sociologists but for everyone interested in issues surrounding family. It is useful not only for family sociologists because these issues are closely linked with all spheres of our society and within the book, problems are analysed within broad social and cultural contexts.

Authors have managed to identify a series of substantial negative effects the current demographic development is having, at the micro-social as well as macro-social level. In repeated surveys, they have verified several significant findings that characterise the demographic behaviour of Slovak population and its cultural and value connections. They mention deterioration of families based on marriage in our conditions where family based on marriage is indispensable when it comes to fulfilling its function in ensuring population reproduction. The research also shows that people in marital relationships are happier and more content than divorcees or single mothers.

I would like to point out a feature which is not routinely part of sociological analyses – the possibility to compare own surveys of the given issues and analyse development over time. It is also important to note that the systematic attention paid by the research team (mostly Department of Sociology of Philosophical Faculty of Trnava University) to these issues enables them to link their current research to former surveys and carry out several comparative analyses that have helped identify the intensity and direction of development changes in this field. This is seen as a substantial contribution to the study of demographic behaviour of Slovak population and to the indication and analysis of its impact on various social subjects and different areas of their life.

We should also appreciate the precise statistical evaluation and testing of acquired data which increases the scientific relevance and validity of the findings. Individual chapters are extensively documented through survey results in the form of tables and graphs. The reviewed book provides a lot of observation and information on a range of issues that has wide consequences on most of the relevant spheres of life of individuals as well as society as a whole.

Furthermore, the contribution of the book is clear and significant in that it has widened the opinion spectrum in these issues as well as helped search for solutions to these problems – most of such attempts to solve this multi-dimensional problem have until now been unsuccessful or radical solutions were postponed. This, however, is caused rather by population development itself and lack of interest in transforming the direction population development in Slovakia is taking, rather than insufficient expertise or analysis of this issue.

For these reasons, authors in their conclusion warn those in charge (politicians, journalists...) not to succumb to another illusion that a family based on marriage can be replaced by some other „alternative forms of cohabitation“ or „new forms of intimacy organisation“. Important social functions fulfilled by families would not be ensured and this would bring about considerable negative consequences on children, adults as well as the whole society.

It is obvious that this publication will have many fans who appreciate its contribution to the analysis and its approach to social reflection of current problems with demographic behaviour in Slovakia, along with the search for possible solutions to this negative situation. However it is also likely to provoke controversies, particularly among authors who refer to civilisation and globalisation and their effect on the development of Slovak society and argue that this development is characteristic for most modern Western societies.

In conclusion – the book is an undoubtedly interesting, motivating and expertly sound presentation of a complex of current issues based on a wide opinion framework (of scholars as well as citizens). This is a good incentive to read the publication, which will certainly help see this problem in a wider context and multi-coloured opinion framework.

Peter Gajdoš