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1. The context in Slovenia

Compared to other post-socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe the transition process in Slovenia has been characterised by relatively slow, gradual reforms and changes both in the economic (slow privatisation and de-nationalisation process, slow in-flow of foreign capital investments, low flexibilisation of labour market) and the social sphere (the level of social rights and basic social security arrangements remained untouched or in some cases even increased; social policy reforms were gradual and delayed until the second part of the 1990s). Such a relatively soft transition was made possible by two main circumstances. The first is the fact that even before the transition Slovenian economy was more liberal, decentralised and open than in most other socialist countries and that the economic (market oriented) reforms started already in the 1980s. The second important circumstance is the existence of a high general consensus on the concern to prevent a too quick and radical economic and social differentiation in the population; this consensus is reflected both in the public opinion (public opinion polls consistently showing the rather egalitarian values in the population) and in political and policy considerations (regardless of the government coalition in power).

From the beginning of transition, the central policy in Slovenia has been the active employment policy, with the underlying aim to maintain the high labour market participation thus enabling people in their working age to provide for themselves, and prevent (long-term) social dependency and passivisation of recipients of social benefits that are capable of work. In the first part of the 1990s (during the major economic transformation resulting in a severely increased unemployment and in a drop of activity rate) the employment policy measures were more demand oriented (subsidies for employers to support the employees' retraining and reallocation, subsidies for self-employment and for creation of new-jobs). In the second part of the 1990s, when the economic situation stabilised (and the economic growth started), and the unemployment started to show signs of decrease, while at the same time its structural and regional concentration character¹ became more visible, the employment policy measures turned to being predominantly supply oriented (measures and pro-



grammes to increase employability of the unemployed – i.e. the job-search training, motivation and counselling programmes, education and job training programmes, work placements, subsidies for employers employing long-term unemployed or disabled persons, etc.).

By the end of the 1990s the employment and social policy was aligned with the activation principle, which is being implemented predominantly as employment activation (EA). In terms of the (registered) unemployed the activation principle is implemented by tightening the entitlement conditions (for being registered as unemployed, being entitled to unemployment benefit and/or unemployment assistance) and linking them to the duties of the unemployed (participation in employment programmes, more intensive job-search activities and availability for different jobs) on the one hand, and by offering to the unemployed persons programmes and measures on a more individual basis (according to the individual employment plan) and more regionally embodied programmes (local employment initiatives) to foster employment on the other hand. To prevent the pasivisation of recipients of social assistance² the activation principle is applied in a way that all social assistance recipients that are not employed but are capable of work (that is, are in the active working age and do not have the status of a disabled person and are not in the process of claiming such status) should be registered at local Employment Offices as active job seekers. In case they are removed from the register of active job seekers (due to not fulfilling the obligation of active job search or participation in employment programmes, or because they perform some kind of cash-in-hand work) they in principle³ as well loose the right to social assistance. Employers are stimulated to employ recipients of social assistance by being entitled to receive a subsidy in case of permanently employing a person being on social assistance at least 24 months in the last 36 months.⁴

- 1 Among all registered unemployed persons the percentage of long-term unemployed (for over one year) was slightly over 60% in the period 1999 to 2000, after it started to decrease, lowering to 48.6% in 2003 (NEO, 2004: 34). However, the decrease of the share of long-term unemployed among all unemployed is mostly due to the decrease in areas with the lowest unemployment rates, while in the areas most affected by the unemployment the share of long-term unemployed persons remains over 50%. Among the long-term unemployed the typical categories are those with low educational attainment, the unemployed aged over 40, partially disabled persons and persons with limited work abilities (i.e. people with psychic disorders, addiction problems and similar), and (to a lesser degree) first-job seekers.
- 2 As well as to limit the development of parallel strategies of survival of people in active working age that are long-term excluded from the formal employment (i.e. the combination of different social benefits and occasional or even permanent cash-in-hand jobs performed within the black economy market).
- 3 Some exceptions are stated in the Social Assistance and Services Act; i.e. in the case of the person caring for a child or for an adult person with limited abilities to care for her/herself.
- 4 It however has to be noted that Slovenian employers are very hesitant in using such subsidies (also in the case of employing a disabled person) since the commitment of offering a person a permanent contract is high given the rigid employment legislation.



2. Assessment of possible relevance of the policy/measure to Slovenia

Among different categories of long-term unemployed people and recipients of social assistance the most distant from the labour market and problematic for employment re-integration seem to be the ones that combine the “objective” (i.e. age, education, long absence from employment) and “subjective” (i.e. various psychic disorders, drug or alcohol abuse, experiences of domestic violence, experiences of illegal activities and similar) risk characteristics. A recent study (Trbanc, Bo_ki_, Kobal, Rihter, 2003) identified the following categories as staying at the edge of social and employment policies: homeless people, people with mental health problems, people with drug or/and alcohol addiction problems, people with experience of (domestic) violence, people in post-penal treatment (ex-prisoners) and people without the work permit.⁵ Although (according to the same study) many individuals from these categories state they would want to get jobs (but as well often have unrealistic demands of the type of jobs they want or the job conditions they are willing to accept) and see the field of employment as crucial to improving their life situation, they in reality most often stay at the edge of the labour market⁶ and become unemployable with time. Due to their multiple problems they rarely qualify for being included in the active employment policy programmes.⁷ Although it has been assessed that in the case of the above identified categories the social system is functioning rather well, in terms of providing social assistance and/or the net for resolving their acute social problems (i.e. shelters for homeless people, rehabilitation programmes for addicts, safe houses for victims of domestic violence, etc.), and that there already exist several NGO’s⁸ that provide certain “socialisation” programmes (that is programmes of re-learning the patterns of participation in the society), it still remains evident that there is a gap between the social security measures (that is the passive receiving of social benefits) and the current EA programmes that are expected to lead directly to employment. This gap between the pure social security measures and the active employment policy measures has already been emphasized and debated in the policy discussions in Slovenia, and this seems to be exactly the space for social activation (SA)

5 The rough estimation of the number of persons from the mentioned categories based on the numbers of people with those problems that are annually treated by Centres of Social Work in Slovenia is all together around 10.000 people. Of course, not all of them would qualify for social activation programmes.

6 Or they perform occasional jobs in the black market (cash-in-hand type of jobs), where they often get exploited and report on many bad experiences.

7 The only employment policy programmes potentially applicable to difficult-to-employ people with multiple problems are individual counselling, local employment initiatives and subsidies to employers for permanently employing such a person.

8 However, the network of NGO’s is very unevenly distributed in Slovenia.



programmes as presented in the Netherlands case. There are two obvious arguments why SA programmes should be used to prevent the marginality of the mentioned categories (and the vicious circle of reproduction of social marginality within the same population groups). The first argument lies in the fact that the processes through which the individuals are solving their most acute social problems can take a long time, for which maintaining their high motivation, commitment and determination over a longer period is crucial (for not falling back to the acute phase of the problem). This is exactly the space where (individualised) SA programmes could contribute in helping those individuals to participate in the society, improve their self-perception, feeling of self-worth (and worth to society) and maintain their motivation through the structure of everyday socially useful activities. The other argument is that in the case of population categories with multiple problems who cannot immediately take part in the employment policy programmes, SA programmes would present the first step towards the possible later EA (thus filling the gap between the pure social security and active employment policy).

As an illustration of the need for SA programmes in Slovenia one could mention that in the recent years one of the employment policy programmes – namely, the public works programme (intended for long-term and difficult-to-employ people) – was occasionally used in a way, that has many elements of SA besides the general employment aims. Although in fact the persons were temporarily employed through public works, their payments were way below the normal salaries and they performed different socially useful activities in NGOs or local communities (for example, ex-users of NGO's programmes being temporarily employed at the NGOs; public works in the area of care activities – care for old people, helping problematic youngsters at school, assisting the disabled persons, etc.). Public works used in this way were assessed by counsellors at Employment Offices and Centres of Social Work as one of the few programmes that functioned well for participation of people from most vulnerable categories. However, such use of public works employment programme is now severely limited (only in the form of local employment initiatives in the areas with over-average unemployment rates and more linked to the potential future employment of participants).

Although the organisation, financing and social security arrangements in Slovenia differ from the Netherlands system and solutions, there are no major obstacles for social activation programmes to fit within the policy and legislative system in Slovenia. It seems reasonable to advise implementing the SA programmes



on experimental basis first and for this practically no modifications of the system would be needed. The important feature of experimental implementation would be permanent assessment and evaluation of the experiments (which is not a common practice in Slovenia yet), and adjustment of the SA programmes in case the negative effects appear. For later mainstreaming of SA and its use within the social policy framework, probably some slight modifications would be necessary in the Social Assistance and Services Act (in articles where the conditions for the entitlement to social assistance are stated).⁹

Otherwise, the main difference in the implementation of SA programmes between the Netherlands and Slovenia would probably lie in the organisation and financing. Namely, the system of social provision in Slovenia is much more centralised than in the Netherlands. The local Centres of Social Work (CSW)¹⁰ are directly under the authority of Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs and receive the finances for their functioning (for their material costs and work with the clients) on monthly basis. When the entitlement to social assistance or any other type of social benefit (child allowance and similar) of an individual client is established by counsellors (social workers) at CSW, this is reported (on monthly basis) to the Ministry, which distributes the monthly benefit payments directly to the personal accounts of the claimants. This way the autonomy of CSW in Slovenia is limited to dealing with the clients according to the guidelines from the Ministry and they cannot influence much the distribution of funds for social benefits and social programmes. The discretion right of social workers dealing with people in need however is that they can in cases of severe need allocate the funds immediately and are later on reimbursed by the Ministry; or can in certain cases (in agreement with the Ministry) make some extraordinary arrangements (i.e. in the case of homeless people they can allocate the funds of their social assistance directly to the shelters where those people are placed). Social workers at CSW (and counsellors at local Employment Offices) also practice certain discretion in establishing whether the individual social assistance claimant actually is capable of work (i.e. in the case of clients with multiple acute problems) and whether it is feasible that he/she registers as an active job seeker.

9 Possibly the SA programmes could be implemented even without the modifications of social legislation, but one has to take into account the fact that Slovenian policy actors are very inclined towards arranging everything in the legislation (which is evident from the policy tradition and practices).

10 There are 62 local CSW in Slovenia – in the past there used to be one CSW in each municipality; however after the re-organisation of municipalities, the number and location of CSW remained the same (due to the existing infrastructure), so that now in some municipalities (bigger towns) there are several CSW, while some CSW cover the area of more than one municipality.



3. Assessment of potential transferability of the policy/measure to Slovenia

Probably the most favourable circumstance for the transfer of SA programmes to Slovenia is the already existing policy framework, with the stress on activation principle and the already established agreement on the need for programmes with SA elements for social assistance recipients who have, due to their multiple problems, long integration pathways and can not (yet) be included in the employment programmes (that is in the cases where strict EA is not applicable).

To implement SA programmes in Slovenia in a short term (on the experimental basis) it seems most feasible to place them under the coordination of CSW rather than – as it is in the case of the Netherlands – under the coordination of municipalities¹¹. The main argument in favour of CSW would be that they already are dealing with the social assistance recipients and carrying on social work activities because of which they know the individuals and their problems and would be able to offer consultations for participation in SA programmes. Also the CSW have already established good contacts with the NGOs that work in the field of various social problems, and often cooperate with them when solving problems of individual clients. In this way, CSW would receive some additional finances for coordination of SA programmes, but social assistance instalments would still be distributed centrally to the SA participants (directly from the Ministry).

On the long run, the other organisational possibility would be within the planned decentralisation of public administration. This kind of reorganisation of public administration (including financing and responsibilities at different levels) would present a major change for the whole social system in Slovenia and would mean the change in patterns of re-allocation of funds for social transfers (municipalities or regional level administrative units receiving the lump sums for social benefits, social and integration programmes). Although the decentralisation of public administration has been planned for some time already, it at the moment does not seem very feasible to be implemented soon (there seem to be too many interests in game to achieve the political consensus both on local and regional levels – around the question of who would play an important role on local/regional level).

11 Although the municipalities in Slovenia do have certain experiences in administering the social funds – for example, the municipalities get block grants from the Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs to be used for strengthening social inclusion and integration of elderly at the local level (co-financing the home-care of elderly, supporting the social networks of older people and preventing their social isolation and exclusion).



Among potential problems in transfer and implementation of SA programmes in Slovenia (with CSW as their coordinators) one should especially consider the following:

- The NGOs that deal with certain social problems (addiction, homelessness, domestic violence, etc.) are regionally unevenly distributed in Slovenia and in some areas there is a pending need for the development of such non-governmental (civil society) networks. This means that some types of SA programmes (i.e. voluntary work in associations) could not be implemented in some areas, unless the more even development of the network of NGOs is encouraged. On the other hand, SA programmes could function as a trigger for extending the network of NGOs to the areas where they are currently missing.
- Due to regional development differences and the fact that unemployment is more concentrated in certain areas (regions), the funds for employment policy programmes and measures as well as social funds are more centred to that (deprived) regions (both in terms of finances and in terms of supporting the local programmes). However, certain social problems could as well be concentrated in regions with otherwise low unemployment rates, i.e. in some urban areas like Ljubljana and Koper. It seems important to note that funds for SA programmes should not only be distributed according to the criteria of high unemployment rates but should take into account also the concentration of multiple social problems.
- The level of local initiatives and local SA opportunities would probably vary along Slovenia. From this perspective it seems important to assure the comparable level of opportunities for potential participants of SA programmes.
- In Slovenia there is little experience with tailor-made individualised programmes, so there could be some problems with the organisation, coordination and assessment of such programmes. Also, the experience with experimental programmes and their evaluation is relatively poor, so such programmes would have to be carefully designed and followed, especially from the perspective of the later mainstreaming of SA.
- The degree of discretion of social workers at CSW when selecting (approving) the participants for SA programmes (in terms of distinguishing between those who could register as active job-seekers and potentially take part in employment policy programmes, and those who would qualify for SA programmes) could also present a potential problematic point, especially because practicing discretion in social areas can prove to be controversial. Some additional guidelines concerning this issue would be needed.



4. Important questions about the policy/measure

The main question from the Slovenian perspective seems to be how to distinguish clearly the SA programmes from employment programmes and sheltered employment schemes (to prevent the SA programmes becoming “an alternative” to the EA programmes), and how to, at the same time, maintain the link between SA and EA. If SA is in principle seen as an intermediate stage on the path to employment (for those people whose integration paths are long due to their multiple problems), is there any link between the SA programmes and the EA programmes (possible common elements, i.e. job-search skills, motivation elements) or is the connection expected to happen at the individual level through the process of participation?

There are as well some practical issues connected to the operationalisation of SA programmes that remain unclear, such as:

- what is the selection criteria for participation in the SA programmes (how important is the motivation and initiative of participants?),
- what is the duration of participation (is it limited in time?),
- how to assure that participation in SA programmes will not have a reverse negative motivation effects on the potential job search behaviour of participants?

Finally, it should not be neglected that from a broader perspective the SA programmes actually tackle the question of redefinition of work, that is the question of what are the socially (formally) accepted types of work, which are formally acknowledged (and rewarded). Are these only different forms of employment, or social care and social participation activities as well? Some issues in this context were discussed in Slovenia around the proposal of partial formalisation of voluntary work that would as well include certain monthly remunerations for volunteers. But the Act on Voluntary Work is still in preparation and no such arrangements have been implemented yet.



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