

SELECTED ASPECTS OF TERRITORIAL COHESION IN SLOVAKIA UNDER THE RECENT CRISIS

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Territorial cohesion has been one of the most prominent topics of discourse among spatial planners, urban sociologists, economists and experts from various other fields. Territorial systems with high degree of cohesion are better equipped to withstand the external pressures and situational imbalances. Recent global crisis exposed these imbalances and challenged the smooth and balanced spatial development of European countries. Major economic setbacks influenced entire society in Slovakia. Global financial crisis evaporated the ultimate growth of Slovak economics and exposed hidden imbalances of development policies solely related to GDP growth instead of creating the fundamentals for sustainability in the transition economy. Spatial polarization on different levels of society weakened down the overall (mainly social) cohesion and highlighted the problems of marginalized regions and social groups. Social aspects of territorial and spatial processes are more visible than ever before and regional disparities are becoming more prominent issue in political and scientific discourse. Despite the deep profilation of regional identity and place attachment, there are still considerable distinctions and disparities between metropolitan/urban and rural communities in terms of values, consumption patterns, life style, sense of solidarity or wealth distribution. Selected aspects of territorial cohesion in Slovakia, mainly in the field of social cohesion are in the spotlight in this paper. Focus on integrative spatial development balancing the contradictions by effective mixture of general approach and reasonable and sensible differentiation is considered highly essential.

Key words: territorial cohesion, social cohesion, balanced spatial development, common values, social capital, place attachment.

“At the moment of evaporation of criminal ideology of collectivism, the new highly self-confident but helplessly lonely singularity was born. This singularity slowly and unattending liquidates the future society – it does not have the ancestors. Everybody is smoothly becoming homeless”.

(Alexander Tomský on Demographic crisis in Europe)

INITIAL THOUGHTS

European spatial development and modification of its spatial patterns and structures is a complicated and multifocal process going beyond pure aggregation of national spatial structures (more e.g. in Zillmer, Boehme 2010). Almost every EU policy has its territorial impacts and reflections. Back in the 1990s, ESDP states that „sustainable development covers not only

environmentally sound economic development which preserves present resources for use by future generations but also includes a balanced spatial development” (ESDP). Green paper on Territorial cohesion explicitly mentions that „concept of territorial cohesion builds bridges between economic effectiveness, social cohesion and ecological balance, putting sustainable development at the heart of policy design” (Green paper on Territorial Cohesion, p.3). Thus, concept of sustainability is the philosophical and ideological background of this approach. Among the particular priorities we can find coordination of policies in large areas (such as Baltic states region), improving condition on the outermost border of EU, competitive and sustainable cities, fighting the social exclusion, improving the health care and education etc. Promoting territorial cohesion should be part of the effort to ensure that all Europe’s territory has the opportunity to contribute to the growth and jobs agenda (Community Strategic Guidelines on Cohesion, 2006). On the other hand, there

are voices claiming that „political reality of EU characterized by weak position of comprehensive development policies and spatial planning at all is reflected in the official distance of the EC from the responsibility of spatial development” (Finka, Jamečný 2010).

Territorial cohesion was in the spotlight of the European spatial policies even before the start of the crisis. In the times of growth and bright integration perspectives, it became one of the frequently used concepts when arguing the advantages of future spatial and societal development of the Europe (see e.g. Peyrony 2005). The crisis highlighted the importance of the coherent development, and even made it a fundamental precondition of the successful

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progress of the integrated Europe. Before we start to examine territorial cohesion in Slovakia under the pressure of current global financial and economic crisis, we should investigate the methodological backgrounds of territorial cohesion.

Territorial cohesion as an academic/research issue

Each type of cohesion might be characterized as an ability of the parts of the system to „stick together“ bringing synergy effect and enriching all the particular parts without harming any of them. Cohesive systems are better equipped to withstand the external pressures and situational imbalances. Cohesion secures the stability in time and space and makes systems more predictable and more legible both from external as well as from internal point of view. Concept of cohesive development brought on the territorial level should include balanced economic development, social cohesion of the entire society and particular communities living within the territory and preservation of the natural sources. This is reflected in the paradigm of sustainability, ideologically covering the concept of territorial cohesion. The unique and versatile combination of various systems (economic, social, ecological) interacting in the certain territory makes the research of territorial cohesion demanding and multidimensional issue. There are appearing the following haunting questions: How to achieve social and economic cohesion, preservation of natural and cultural diversity and territorial competitiveness at once? How to measure territorial cohesion? In which scale and which units? Is territorial cohesion a qualitative phenomena *per se*, or is it a continuous scale allowing basic benchmarking among the societies and territories? Duehr et al. (2010, In Zillmer, Boehme 2010, p.5) brought the concept of division onto:

- a) territorial quality – living standards, quality of life, social wellness
- b) territorial efficiency – different use of resources and territorial capital
- c) territorial identity – social capital, soft factors like regional identity, City Branding etc.

This concept tries to integrate measurable factors (effective allocation of sources) with unique, soft elements (identity).

Territorial cohesion as a political issue

Idea behind is to reduce the cost of non-coordinated national policies, contribute to goals set up in Lisbon and Gothenburg agendas and counterbalance the economic and social collateral effects of European single market.

Almost every policy and politic documents of EC is dealing with territorial cohesion (see e.g. Barroso, Verheugen 2005, Falludi 2005), starting with ESDP, Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion, ESPON analyses (van Gestel and Falludi 2005), Territorial agenda and its action programme, Lisbon and Gothenburg agenda and even Lisbon treaty. Territorial cohesion became one of the strategic axes of many above mentioned documents and most of them consider this issue as a fundamental precondition for balanced spatial development of EU.

TERRITORIAL COHESION IN SLOVAKIA

Mainly during the 1990s, variety of overestimated expectation of the self-regulative mechanisms of the free market based on the neo-liberal paradigm had been vigorously arisen (more in Finka 2010). The underdeveloped market environment, protectionism, absence of natural control mechanisms like ethic principles in business, lack of political culture and of public sensitivity against political failures seem to be in their synergy behind the development problems. Experience from the centralised planning and politic decision making from the previous era imposed the distrust in any public driven planning (deeper analysis in e.g. Finka 2002, 2003, 2007). The overall situation in Slovakia during the previous decade might be characterized by following patterns (Gajdoš and Pašiak 2006):

- spatial polarization on different levels of society is weakening the overall (mainly social) cohesion
- social aspects of territorial and spatial processes are more visible than ever before (paradigm of new regionalism)
- the regional disparities are still growing from the 1990s and are one of the main scopes of the political and scientific discourse.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the following risk-portfolio is essential to be taken into the consideration (according to Gajdoš and Pašiak 2006):

- risk of deepening the regional disparities, mainly in the field of the quality of human resources
- risk of the social environment of marginalized regions break-down
- risk of the readiness to implement regional policies (mainly due to the lack of financial and human capital) break-down

Beside many great successes and achievements

related to the process of transformation (foreign investments in the lacking behind regions, refurbishments of the city centers, improvements of the living environment) of Slovakia, there have been still persisting many problems and challenges. We are still being witnesses of the rigorous duel between the proclamative economically oriented regional policy and barrier-free neo-liberalism. Proclamative social oriented regional policy is in the municipal practice confronted with post-socialist clientelism and corruption. The bureaucratic elements of decision-making are being multiplied by the bureaucracy in the EU funds and hegemony of ministerial bureaucrats. In addition, the implementation of the EU TA policies in real spatial development policy is further ignored. Despite the utter importance of balanced and cohesive development on the national level, it seems that the era of unprecedented economic growth (2002-2008) has not been fully utilized to diminish vigorous contradictions in spatial development in Slovakia. In opposite, the hidden imbalances became more prominent and social tensions have grown with the first contact with the global crisis.

SOCIAL COHESION IN SLOVAKIA

Concept of social cohesion got into the scientific/research spotlight in the beginning of 1990s. The very term of social cohesion was defined in many ways and under different point of view (more e.g. in Beauvais and Jenson 2002). Main scope of the most approaches was to determine how various social and economic variables are related in the process of social reality construction. Various concepts (or quasi-concepts) of social cohesion integrate the intangible issues of social capital (degree of trust and mutuality, values, perception of collective goal) with direct measurable outcomes (health, education, public participation) of cohesive society.

Social cohesion in developed European and Northern American countries has been put under vigorous challenges during the last decade. Cities and societies are becoming more fluid, fragmented and even chaotic, with unpredictable outcomes of parallel running social processes (see e.g. Bauman's concept of liquid modernity 2002). Decline of social cohesion has been attributed to several factors (see e.g. Bauman 2002 or Putnam 2001): time pressure, various distractive factors, residential mobility and suburbanization, „privatization“ of societal goals.

If we define the social cohesion as an absence of conflict between societal goals and groups and absence of disruptive behavior (Kearns and

Forrest 2000, p.996) the overall social cohesion in Slovakia is low. If we define the social cohesion as the *societal niveau* where all the components are contributing to the fitness of the whole and are profiting from the advantage being a part of the whole, there have been some remarkable achievements during the recent years.

The comprehensible set of the criteria of social cohesion in territorial dimension have been introduced by Kearns and Forrest (2000):

Common Values and Civic Culture

Cohesive society within the field of common culture and civic values is one in which the members share values which enable them to identify and support common goals (Kearns and Forrest (2000, p.997). In more applied way, in such society there is a general support for the political systems and structures which are the pillars of the entire society. In addition, in cohesive society based on the commonly shared values, the individuals do display pro-active behavior in terms of participation in local and national policies, decision making and engagement. In contemporary Slovakia, there are still considerable distinctions and disparities between metropolitan/urban and rural communities in terms of values, consumption patterns, life style or political preferences. The level of participation is rather low, despite some considerable shifts in some behavioural patterns of certain actors of public life. Leadership, engagement and high motivation are present in certain cases, but the majority of the public remains still rather unattached and indifferent.

Social Order and Social Control

Social order and control refers to more mundane level of community life, mutually interlinked circle of daily routine and reciprocities. Social order is seen as the general framework in which the individuals are ready to cooperate, communicate and interact (Wrong 1994, Kearns and Forrest 2000). It is sometimes not easy to harmonize the diversity of urban milieu with the need for informal rules of social order and control (Giddens 1994, In Kearns and Forrest 2000). Incivility, crime and unpunished violent behaviour are the consequences of *horror vacui* in terms of informal social order and control. For example, unemployed people, loosing their „dull daily routines“ are prone to engage themselves in social interpersonal conflicts and territorial struggles (Kearns and Forrest 2000). Social control in territory of Slovakia, represented mainly by rural settlements and small sized cities had been rather strong and deeply profiled in the past. However, nowadays, even in the rural areas the social control was

weakened down by social and mindset gaps between autochthon population and newcomers. This is visible especially in prosperous suburban settlements, which completely adopted metropolitan/urban consumption, life-style and behavioural patterns.

Solidarity and Reduction of Wealth Disparities

Solidarity and reduction of wealth disparities are one of the basic pillars of social market economy. This dimension of social cohesion refers to “extending opportunities for income-generating activities; reduction of poverty; reduced disparities in incomes, employment and competitiveness; higher quality of life; and open access to services of general benefit and protection.” (Keats and Forrest 2000, p.999). If we analyse the tendencies of wealth distribution in Slovakia in absolute numbers, the disparities are not huge, but in relative measurement the distinctions are considerable (especially in certain private sectors). Solidarity is shown in extreme situations (floods), not as an everyday attitude (e.g. toward marginalised social groups). In 2007, 11% of the population qualified as living in poverty, with earnings of less than €198 per month. Those identified as living in material need (under €185) receive a subsidy that varies according to the individual’s situation (www.euractiv.com). Poverty does affect predominantly the Roma population.

Social Networks and Social Capital

Cohesive community is based on the high degree of social interactions. The most important platform for developing social network and accumulating social capital is the local level (Kearns and Forrest 2000, p.999). Repeating mutual support mechanisms within the neighborhood keep the social networks alive and prevent isolation, stress and frustration. Voluntary participation and high degree of trust are essential for socially cohesive society. In terms of social capital, Slovak population had been always rather conservative, that means that social interlinkages are rather stable and are considered to be a subject of high esteem, but lower flexibility. However, there are obvious observable trends, similar to other countries, that social networks are transformed from territorial to virtual dimension.

Place Attachment and Regional Identity

It is generally supposed that highly profiled regional identity and strong ties of place attachment are of utter importance for social cohesion within the territory (Kearns and Forrest 2000). Place Attachment saturates many psychological needs: the need for security, the

need for self-realisation, the need for belonging and structuring the outer environment. Highly profiled regional identity contributes to the legibility of the place and space. The people are still generally territorial in their behavioural patterns. Slovak communities, mainly in smaller settlements (but even in urban milieu) always displayed rather strong and deep place attachment and deep identification with living place and environment. However, we can conclude from recent surveys (e.g. project Identity of River Basins, Jaško 2005) that both these phenomena (place attachment and territorial identification) are saturated more by emotional and social identification patterns („I have grown up here“, „my family lives here for decades“) than by value based identification patterns („I am living here because I appreciated the value profile and behaviour of our municipality“). The territorial identification and sense of belonging is rather deep, but in many cases rather mono-dimensional.

SLOVAKIA IN THE RECENT CRISIS

Before the crisis, Slovak republic enjoyed relatively high economical growth. Foreign investments were the most prominent topics of economic discourse in late 1990s and first half of 2000s and 91% of GDP was made by 22 transnational corporations (more in Staněk 2010). Slovakia utilized its main competitive advantage: favorable geographical position, low salaries level with relatively high skilled workforce. The leader branches were the automotive cluster (Peugeot- Citroen, Volkswagen, Kia) and electronics (Samsung, Sony). Massive investments, improving the conditions within entrepreneurial and business landscape and business innovations brought dramatic decline of unemployment rates within 2002-2007. Even the social and job mobility, that has always been rather weak point of Slovak society, improved. In 2000-06 more than 200 000 people left the country for jobs abroad (80 000 came back in 2009-2010). First half of 2000s is the era when high share of economics (98%) became private, including strategic sectors (energy/water supply, telecommunication, utilities).

Contemporary global economic crisis exposed several hidden imbalances and structural weaknesses of Slovak economy. Specific situation of Slovakia results from the huge development intensity in the last decade (Slovakia’s economy grew 8.7 percent in a 2007/2008 comparison) and synergy of different contradictory processes in the triangle social, economic and environmental policies. Global financial crisis stopped the rapid growth of Slovak economics and in the same time

deepened natural selective processes of economic and spatial development displaying the deformations brought by the development policies focused only on the rush GDP growth instead of creating the fundamentals for sustainability in the transition economy.

Unilateral orientation on automotive industry, dependence on foreign markets, limited effects of state incentives have shaken the Slovak economy. Due to the limited ownership of state, the opportunities for state intervention and reactions on crisis are undermined. As a secondary effect, we are witnessing stagnation of volumes in real estate market and questionable future of overpriced highway building PPP projects. There are no new flagship projects (like Eurovea or Riverpark in the past) ahead and real estate stakeholders are confronted with new paradigm of consumer behaviour („no more debts“). Social consequences are obvious: dominance of certain branches (automotive cluster) with high volumes of production imposed prevailing „passive employee“ mentality over „entrepreneurial spirit“. Another drawback is a brain drain within the country (qualified workforce is moving from Eastern Slovakia toward the Bratislava and western parts) which aggravates regional disparities. Some moderate cultural clashes have occurred (rejection of Corporate Culture of Korean company KIA by Slovak employees, arising of concrete walls in the boundaries between the Roma population inhabited urban areas and majority). Lately, several municipalities are struggling with financial break-down.

The global financial crisis and overall economic decline determined increased competition not only for the enterprises but for the territorial subjects at the communal, regional and national level as well. Slovak municipalities and regions have to face new situation, in which they occur as actors at the global market competing for investments, working places, inhabitants. This brought the pressure on spatial planning to react quickly, to look for hidden potentials as the basis for competitive advantages and to offer efficient solutions lowering the dramatic effects of the crisis and stabilizing local and regional economies. The global crisis pressed them to focus on the development of integrated policies – complex, across economic sectors, spatially interpretable, concentrated on efficient solution of respective problems in respective contexts, often extra-communal or extra-regional.

Similarly to communal and regional subject in other new EU member states, there is the lack of experience in the international and transborder acting as well as in acting as the subjects of

economic competition. In addition, wrong experience from the centralised planning and politic decision from the previous era supported the distrust of public in any public driven planning and so the transformation processes in the post-socialist period have been connected with false expectations and overestimation of the self-regulative function of the market mechanism and with underdeveloped system of public control and public intervention instruments and mechanisms. The combination of this gap with protectionism, absence of natural control mechanisms like ethic principles in business, lack of political culture and of public sensitivity against political failures led to many errors in the spatial development, of which effects have been multiplied under the situation of global crisis.

Stronger limitations of available financial sources in public sector, higher vulnerability of transforming local and regional social and economic environment did not allow, particularly in the weak peripheral regions, to absorb the disturbances caused by the outer economic upheavals. The effects of crisis are brisant especially there, where the economic development is not based on efficient use of sustainable factors of the territorial capital and where the phase shifts of necessary structural transformation processes in economy and in the settlement systems structures is too long. Absence of clear expressions concerning the perspectives of spatial development in enlarged EU and position of particular spaces in those perspectives (see e.g. the E.S.D.P) in the combination with the protectionism in the EU and contradictory EU sector policies made the positioning of many regions in Slovakia and other new EU member states against the competing regions in the EU and around the World not easier. The vague definition of the target quality of territorial cohesion brings again the uncertainty and distrust on the site of the communes and regions and lead to the lost of interest on the European spatial development debates.

CONCLUSIONS

Territorial cohesion as an ability of territorial systems to stick together and bring synergy effects of territorial development even to the most peripheral or most handicapped parts of the whole has been fundamentally challenged during the recent crisis. Recent development in Slovakia has shown, that despite the considerable achievements in terms of economic development, the overall cohesion of the country remains very fragile issue. Global financial crisis exposed hidden imbalances, caused by the deformed development policies

focused only on the rush GDP growth in some regions instead of development sustainability in the transition countries (Finka 2010). The pressure on spatial planning in terms of quick reaction and lower/eliminated impacts of the crisis has considerably grown. Particular elements of the territorial cohesion: social cohesion based on the common values, solidarity and local feeling of togetherness, proper utilization of territorial capital as well as ethical aspects of planning got into the spotlight of the scientific discourse. Focus on integrated policies – complex (spatially, across economic sectors) and in the same time concentrated on efficient solution of respective problems in respective contexts is essential. Integrative spatial development balancing the contradictions and disparities is vitally important especially at times when the system is heavily challenged/shaken (complex transformation, global crisis). Regional disparities should be approached not only as weaknesses and failures of recent spatial development, but as well as the preconditions/opportunities for sustainability (e.g. Camagni (2005) for understanding territorial cohesion as the territorial dimension of sustainability, reflected in an ordered, resource-efficient and environmental-friendly spatial distribution of human activities) and versatile competitiveness (see e.g. Giffinger 2005). The balance between general approach and reasonable and sensible differentiation, based on the serious spatial analyses, is highly essential. New innovative spatial structures/categories are arising: (new spatial-temporal structures, virtual spaces, self-learning spatial structures, interactive spaces, intelligent cities and regions etc.). The actors in spatial development are due to learn new meta-skills (Saentti 2001): ability to learn and to forget, ability to interpret chaos, ability to tolerate distinctions, ability to work and communicate in virtual territories, ability to give vital feedback etc. Only if actively pursuing balanced development of territory, the concept of territorial cohesion has the potential to step ahead toward transformation into the political concept of the EU Territorial Agenda.

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