

Slovakia: Social cuts provoke violent clashes

Ute Reissner
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In several towns in the east of the Slovak Republic last month, poor people looted department stores, repeatedly took to the streets in protest, and engaged in violent battles with the police and army. In particular, families from the Roma minority, who fear for their very existence, tried to defend themselves against a radical lowering of welfare benefits that was to take effect March 1.

The Slovak coalition government led by the Christian Democrat Mikuláš Dzurinda voted to cut payments for the unemployed in half, from a maximum of 2,900 Slovak Korunas to 1,450 Korunas per person—equivalent to 35.80 euros (\$44.70) a month. The maximum benefit for families has been reduced to 4,210 Korunas, while previously a family would receive an additional 1,000 to 1,600 Korunas per child.

When these cuts became known, a number of shopping centres and stores were stormed and looted in the regions surrounding the largest towns in eastern Slovakia: Kosice (236,000 inhabitants), Presov (92,000 inhabitants) and Spisská Nova Ves. It is in these most impoverished areas that most Roma live.

A number of reports gave details that illustrated the nature of these protests. The online publication *Slovacspectator* reported: “Over 300 Roma gathered at a protest rally in the eastern Slovak town of Michalovce, where there are only 114 jobs available to the 14,298 unemployed.... The Roma protested their deteriorating social situation. The speakers condemned the government’s social reforms.... One of the organisers of the protest, Ivan Tokár, said that no political party is organising the rallies; rather, the Roma are acting out of despair over the difficulty of surviving. Tokár said the protesters did not want any welfare benefits, they wanted jobs and living conditions similar to those in western Slovakia.”

The conservative coalition government immediately called an emergency meeting and sent in massive numbers of police. Moreover, on February 24, they deployed 2,000 troops to assist the police. It was the first internal use of the army since the founding of the Slovak Republic in 1993.

The draconian lowering of social security benefits, which were miserable to begin with, is directly bound up with the

accession of the Slovak Republic to the European Union on May 1. (The EU will then include several eastern European countries that belonged to the Soviet bloc before 1990.) The preparation for EU accession involves an elaborate programme of so-called “reforms” aimed at smashing social welfare programs.

The Slovak as well as the western European media all attempted to present the latest protests as stemming from specific problems of the Roma, who belong to the most oppressed sections of the population. In fact, the situation of the Roma is an indication of the deterioration of Slovak society as a whole. It illustrates the fact that the market “reforms” and the integration of eastern Europe into the EU are leading to a deep social divide within these countries, together with the threat that resulting tensions will be channelled into ethnic conflicts—as in the former Yugoslavia. The eastern enlargement of the EU creates social and national divisions that may soon erupt into violence throughout the continent.

As in all the accession countries, the Slovak government, following the dictates of the EU Commission in Brussels, enforces a programme of ruthless cuts according to a pattern that has become all too familiar throughout Europe: Lowering of old age pensions, introduction of university fees, elimination of social services and the privatisation of certain parts of the health care system. An “expert commission” has just been established to determine which medicines will have to be paid for privately.

At the same time, private firms are being attracted by ever more spectacular investment incentives. The latest such measure, which met with widespread popular hostility, was the introduction of the so-called flat tax on January 1, 2004. This is a uniform tax rate of 19 percent that applies to firms as well as to individuals. Thus, corporate tax was lowered to a level comparable only to that of Poland (19 percent) and Hungary (16 percent). (Within the old, pre-accession EU, only Ireland had a lower rate, of 12.5 percent.) The flat tax means the wholesale abolition of any form of progressive income tax, traditionally an elementary mechanism to achieve at least some social balance.

In addition, profits can now only be taxed once, that is on

their inception, meaning shares and dividends accrue no further taxation, a gift for well-off shareholders.

The Austrian government has reacted to the tax policy of its eastern neighbour by introducing its own tax reform, which will lower corporate tax to 25 percent by January 2005—an extremely low level by EU standards. With eastern enlargement, the race for the lowest business taxation will increasingly engulf all the other countries of “old Europe.”

The Slovak Republic, situated between Poland to the north, Hungary to the south, the Ukraine to the east and the Czech Republic as well as Austria to the west, has about 5.4 million inhabitants and emerged from the division of Czechoslovakia on January 1, 1993. The investments that have since flowed into the country, above all from Germany, the Netherlands and Austria, in combination with various EU programmes, have resulted in a pronounced polarisation between rich and poor, both in the overall social structure and between different regions. Unemployment stands close to 20 percent.

The fate of the Slovak Roma, estimated to number between 300,000 and 500,000, is symptomatic of this development. The reason why they could not be integrated lies in the fact that society as a whole is increasingly breaking apart.

According to recent estimates, about one third of Roma live in sordid settlements outside the towns and villages, most of them without the most elementary amenities such as running water, sewage disposal and electricity. Some of these settlements are believed to have been constructed on the sites of former toxic waste dumps.

One example is the settlement of Rudnany in the Spisská Nova Ves region, established at the end of the 1980s on a former mining site. Rudnany has one water tap for 500 people. Even during the harsh winter cold, many children have no shoes to wear.

Another example is a settlement in Kosice known as Lunik IX. At least 90 percent of its inhabitants are unemployed. Half of the children do not go to school. There are four communal cooking facilities for every 10 families. Due to the poor electricity supply, it is not possible to use either refrigerators or washing machines. There is no sewage system, and many families share one toilet.

Under conditions of broad social cuts and high unemployment, the Roma have little chance of escaping their terrible misery. Instead, they are increasingly the target of racist discrimination by a government trying to divert public attention from its own criminal policies.

Even the EU Commission, which made the “protection of minorities” for Slovakia a precondition for admission to the EU, complains about “racist encroachments on the rights of minorities, in particular the Roma.” There are frequent

complaints about police assaults, and prisons in the Kosice region are filled to overflowing.

Slovakia’s situation is symptomatic of Europe’s absurd division into—sometimes minuscule—nation states, across which are scattered various nationalities, each of which constitutes a minority in one country or another.

In this respect, the division of Czechoslovakia had disastrous consequences for the Roma. The creation of two separate states was bound up with a peculiar agreement on citizenship: whoever was born on the territory of—the poorer and less developed—Slovakia was automatically considered to be a Slovak citizen, even if he or she was a resident of the Czech Republic. On the other hand, everybody living in Slovakia counted as a Slovak, no matter which of the two territories they were born in. Applying for Czech citizenship was a complicated and very costly procedure for all Slovak-born residents. Members of the Roma minority, as a rule, lacked both the necessary documents and the necessary money. Moreover, they were the first to be hit by the mass redundancies in industry and public administration that were the result of capitalist restoration.

“The position of Czech Roma has worsened considerably over the past years,” according to Jan Cerny, a coordinator of field projects for People in Need. “Before, most of them used to live in apartment blocks and paid their rent. Then the republic split and troubles with citizenship started. For tens of thousands of Gypsies who lived in the Czech Republic but who were born in Slovakia, the agreement between the newly independent republics was the final straw.” Without citizenship, they were not eligible for social security benefits, so when they lost their jobs, they ended up on the streets. On the Czech side of the border, similar ghettos emerged as in Slovakia.

In Hungary, Gabar Gyorgyovich, a Catholic priest working with migrants, warned that the situation of the 600,000 Roma in Hungary has deteriorated markedly over the past 13 years. Thousands of Roma were emigrating from even poorer Romania, and there was pressure from refugees and immigrants from other parts of the world competing for jobs.

The building of a new political party uniting working people and the oppressed of all national groups is an absolute necessity. Otherwise, new forms of racism and ethnic conflicts threaten to emerge from the social divisions created by the eastern enlargement of the European Union.



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