VERSITA

HUMAN AFFAIRS *24*, 545–563, 2014
DOI: 10.2478/s13374-014-0248-3

# TOWARDS PERPETUAL NEOLIBERALISM IN EDUCATION: THE SLOVAK PATH TO POSTCOMMUNIST TRANSFORMATION

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**Abstract:** Slovak education policy is an example of the kind of transformations occurring in the education spheres of postcommunist countries. While at the end of the 1990s, it seemed that education policy was still attempting to ensure that Slovakia caught up with education levels in western countries, the period that followed brought with it a shift towards neoliberalization of the education sector and towards the economization of education. Slovakia's entry into the EU was accompanied by the total assimilation of the neoliberal agenda within education and since then it can be said that Slovak education policy has followed a path towards so-called perpetual neoliberalism. The aim of this article is to show how education policy has developed within Slovak politics, in terms of how it is gradually adapting to neoliberal ideas. The article analyzes government documents from 1998 onwards, particularly Slovak government programs, which document the process of neoliberalization in education.

**Key words:** perpetual neoliberalism; education policy; the Slovak Republic; government programs of governments of the Slovak Republic.

## Introduction

Although the countries of Central and Eastern Europe have more than twenty years of postcommunist experience behind them, none of this alters the fact that these countries still find themselves in the midst of transformation and are still regarded as transforming today. The changes affecting education and education policies in postcommunist countries, in the 1990s in particular, have been the subject of analysis (the most recent example, for instance, is Silova & Eklof, 2013). The systemic changes that took place during this period, particularly the thorough decentralization and introduction of elements of privatization into education, were a radical and fundamental rejection of the hitherto centralistic and collectivistic traditions of communist education. These changes were so fundamental that at first glance it seems as if the international academic discourse on education and education policies in postcommunist countries is dominated by the notion that in the past 15 years these countries have, systemically at least, followed the path of typical Western democracies.

Hence, relatively little attention has been paid to what has happened in these countries since the end of the 1990s.[1]

Our initial analysis highlights the fact that during this period Slovakia found itself on an entirely new and quite different transitional path from the one it followed immediately after the revolution—the path of neoliberalization, which has brought with it many negative consequences. Since education and education policy were liberalized in the 1990s, at a time when society as a whole was overcoming communism and undergoing democratization, this impacted on the way in which our critique of the neoliberalization of Slovak education was perceived and these criticisms were not easily accepted by Slovak academics or politicians. The search for the causes behind the changes in Slovak education, and particularly in education policy, was therefore seen as "paranoid" and neoliberal rationality was viewed as "the need for transparency, competencies and effectiveness" (Zimenová, 2013, p. 3), which was seen as both desirable and incomplete. Within Slovakia therefore (in contrast to perceptions of Slovakia from abroad), the notion that Slovakia has in fact (in general, not just in education) been neoliberalized is neither thematized nor accepted. The first section of this article is therefore largely dedicated to clarifying the nature of neoliberalization in Slovakia and locating it within the academic discourse on neoliberalization in education policy. Clarifying this is essential to the subsequent analysis on elements of neoliberalization in education policy.

For the purposes of this study, we have selected one particular systemic aspect of Slovak education policy—government documents from 1998 onwards, particularly Slovak government programs. These set out the systemic framework of specific legislative and other reform measures adopted by each government and are of greater consequence than, for instance, long-term strategies on transforming education (in Slovakia, for example, these include documents entitled Constantine, The Spirit of Schools, and later, Millennium, which was adopted in 2001 as the official National Program on Education). These strategic documents do not feature in our analysis; we focus on government programs or binding policies adopted by government (Minerva, for instance). These documents are not simply rhetorical in nature, as is evidenced by the direct link between the government programs and the legislative changes introduced by the Ministry of Education in Slovakia from the mid-1990s onwards.

The aim of this paper is to identify aspects of neoliberal governmentality (Bröckling, Krasmann, & Lemke, 2000) within Slovak government programs, beginning in 1998—the year in which a change of government prompted a new era in education reform. The contribution this investigation makes is that Slovak research on education has ignored the influence neoliberalism has on education policy and that internationally, within academic work on neoliberal governmentality, there have been few national studies analyzing government programs and focusing on education (see Dahlstedt & Hertzberg, 2012 on Sweden, and Gounari, Grollios, 2012 on Greece).

The aim of this article, however, is not simply to identify elements of neoliberal discourse in Slovak government programs. Having followed government discussions on education policy over the last 15 years, we have come to the hypothesis that the neoliberalization

[1] However, in Slovakia at least, curriculum transformation is a subject of interest analytically and is still under consideration. Since curriculum transformation had yet to begin in the 1990s, it was still structured according to a decades old tradition until the end of the first decade of the new millennium.

of government discourse is a general phenomenon regardless of whether the government is left or right-wing, since in terms of their programs they pursue the idea of neoliberal economization. Thus the premise is that perpetual neoliberalization is a feature of government education discourse. The present article seeks to empirically verify this and then describe the nature of the neoliberalizing strategy typically found in the government programs from the various periods. It is the first time that this kind of analysis has been conducted on a postcommunist country.

**Neoliberalism – a heterogeneous process**

Brenner, Peck and Theodore (2010, pp. 184-185) talk of the "variegated" nature of neoliberalization processes which systemically produce "geoinstitutional differentiation":

> Since their initial appearance in the 1970s, neoliberalizing regulatory experiments have unfolded in a sporadic, yet wave-like, non-linear sequence, generating important *cumulative* impacts or sedimented patternings upon the uneven institutional landscapes of world capitalism.

Thus the authors distinguish between two phases of neoliberalization. The first is an unequal transformation occurring in various parts of the world (disarticulated neoliberalization) which, since the 1990s, has been followed by deep neoliberalization.

In order to analyze local forms of neoliberalism, specific neoliberalization processes and acts have to be taken into consideration and described in detail. Once neoliberalism has been described, we can turn to a description of a neoliberalization, "which acknowledges the multiple geographies of neoliberalism through attention to contextual specificity and local experimentation" (Springer, 2010, p. 1029).

The interpretational context within which neoliberalism and the neoliberalizing processes occur should be considered from a historical and anthropological perspective within the conditions within which they occur. Hilgers (2012, p. 80) refers to neoliberalism as being a sort of utopia in the sense that we should draw a "distinction between theoretical and practical neoliberalism," since the impact of the theoretical background on liberalism "always happen[s] in a reality with its own historical, social and economic configuration" (*ibid.*, p. 81). In his analysis of the neoliberalization of countries in the African continent, Hilgers illustrates the fact that neoliberalism as applied in practice should be viewed against the historicity of the state in question. On the African continent, the waves of deregulation, privatization and institutional reforms became part of a policy of stabilization. However, they followed their own trajectories and took on their own shapes and these provide evidence of how the dissemination of neoliberalism has led to the existence of versions in the world that differ from that offered by the western-centered view of neoliberal expansion. Contextually, neoliberalism can be referred to in terms of the concept of "state historicity"; a concept, which is, according to Hilgers, "fundamental to explain[ing] and understand[ing]" these many variations within an apparently common neoliberal framework" (*ibid*., p. 89).

Not even the ways in which neoliberalism is practiced in the western world can be considered homogenous. Although the concept of neoliberalism is hegemonic by nature, the hegemony primarily stems from the international organizations which are able to exert

their will on many different countries. As Golubović and Golubović (2012, p.10) point out, however, "it does not mean that neoliberal policies are applied uniformly, because of different social and cultural context in individual countries." Neoliberalism is not implemented in "pure" form; instead, we see how it manifests itself in many "hybrid" forms. Golubović and Golubović argue that this hybridization is the consequence of two factors: the first is that historical, cultural and social conditions differ, and the second refers to strategic adaptation of the broad goals of the neoliberal reforms (*ibid.*, p. 10).

Golubović and Golubović also state that in economically developed countries this neoliberalism is a shared project implemented by both conservative and social-democratic parties, even though there may well be differences in terms of their own individual neoliberal strategies. The mechanisms, which allow and enable embedding, Golubović and Golubović argue, have an impact at the level of ideological, institutional and social relations. It is the hegemonic nature of neoliberalism that means the impact is felt worldwide. On the other hand "embeddedness" is a concept which enables us to view the variety of ways in which neoliberalism is applied within national contexts and thus also to see that in fact the "neoliberal ideal of free market has never been fully realized in practice" (*ibid.*, p. 9).

It is the interconnections between the discursive and the non-discursive, and economic theory and political practice that render the metanarration of neoliberalism problematic.

Neoliberalism evidently has a "problematically polysemic status" (Brenner, Peck, & Theodore, 2010, p. 184). Therefore, it is commonly believed that rather than being a rationally based abstraction, it is a chaotic and incoherent concept and therefore best avoided. Indeed Fisher, Gould and Haughton (2007, p. 977) suggest that the majority of economists avoid the concept, and yet it remains very popular in non-economic discourses. Alternative concepts are rare and indeed socioculturally specific. Davies, Gottsche and Bansel (2006, p. 306) argue that the concept of neoliberalism or advanced liberalism is most widespread in European discourse, while its semantic core stems from philosophical considerations of human liberty and the nature of liberal humanity in terms of the relationship between the individual and society, and social ethics. It therefore predominantly raises questions about autonomy, responsibility and free will. In Australia the term economic rationalism is more frequently used, where the emphasis is on the economic aspect of liberalism in relation to discussions on the relationship between the individual, government and the market. In the USA neoliberal metanarration is linked primarily with neoconservatism, which focuses attention on the political and ideological aspects. Right-wing systems of government in which the participation of the state is minimal are on the ascendance.

**Neoliberalism in different discourses**

Brenner, Peck and Theodore (2010, p. 184) distinguish between three basic discourses based on neoliberalism. Each of these has its own kind of rationality, its own geopolitical impact and fulfills a specific function. The classic type is based on a "capitalism approach" and has been discussed particularly by Albert who draws a marked similarity between neoliberalism and "neo-Americanism." This discourse is used primarily by continental European authors who see neoliberalism as an imported Anglo-American ideology that introduces liberal market economics into "coordinated market economies (CMEs)," typically

found in Germany, for instance. This discourse therefore plays on cultural tensions that ran high in the 1990s at a time of German economic stagnation and American growth. In this linguistic mode "neoliberalism is understood primarily as a *national* regime type" (*ibid.*, p. 187) that competes with other national types. It is a "methodological nationalism." Neoliberalism as "neo-Americanism" thus represents a national, territorial and bipolar linguistic mode that sees neoliberalism as a *mimesis* i.e. as an imitation of the national economy and government via a culturally alien model (*ibid.*, p. 187).

The second linguistic mode is based on a "historical materialist approach" and therefore has strong neomarxist connotations. Neoliberalism is not viewed as a nationally based regime, but as one that is a non-democratic, global, unifying and integrating phenomenon that has destabilizing and negative effects at various levels. Neoliberalism is seen as a powerful regime with absolutist ambitions that subjugate all social life to market forces. Instead of *mimesis*, here we find the logic of forcing violence from above. Here neoliberalism relates to globalization, which is itself seen as a consequence of neoliberal transformation, and to the increasing importance and influence of multinational corporations. The significance of national governments is viewed as substantially reduced and nationally specific forms of governance are seen as hard to sustain. Neoliberalism is seen as an all-permeating "world order." In this order, the three remaining functions of national governments are the three Cs – government credibility, political consistency and sustaining investor confidence (Brenner, Peck, & Theodore, 2010, p. 187).

The third linguistic mode in neoliberalism is that of approaches of governmentality. Here the starting point is a refusal to describe neoliberalism as Neoliberalism with a capital N, either as a large national or supranational formation. It refuses to see neoliberalism as a metaphor for economic tsunami. Ong and Rose are amongst those who have written about this viewpoint (*ibid.*, p. 187). It stems from a micro-sociological perspective, from an analysis of the techniques of social governance or government and from ordinary normativisation; namely, from what Foucault called the subset of micropowers. The fundamental idea here is that neoliberalism penetrates from below through unreflected practice, specific practical measures, which permeate a variety of different social and sociopolitical contexts (social care, healthcare, education as well as households, families, communities and even individual subjectivisation processes). The micro level analysis is expressed precisely in resolving questions on the nature of the identity and individuality of the individual as a neoliberal, "entrepreneurial" subject. Neoliberalism thus gains legitimacy through everyday interaction and developmental transformation and not through the obvious implantation of society-wide transformation. On a governmentality reading, then, as the subject of analysis, neoliberalism is understood to have a lower case "n". In the Slovak context analyzes of this kind have been conducted by Kaščák and Pupala (2010; 2012). In this article we focus more on analyzes of the Slovak factors that enabled neoliberal models to penetrate education via targeted systemic reforms implemented through government programs and activities.

## Neoliberal reality in Slovakia

Slovakia is interesting in that of the postcommunist countries in the central European region (the so-called Visegrad Four countries), it is the only one to have implemented economic reform fundamental in scope and comprehensive in form. In terms of the

sweeping neoliberalization, the transformation was not in this case simply remarked upon from the critical position of historical materialist attitudes emanating from inside the left-wing opposition. Slovakia was unique in that, at this time, it was beginning to be discussed abroad as a showcase for neoliberal reforms (this is despite the fact that the postcommunist Baltic states underwent even more fundamental and extreme neoliberalization). Similarly, in informed economic circles reference was made, for example, to "Slovakia's Neoliberal Turn" (Fisher, Gould, & Haughton, 2007).

In Slovakia's case, radical neoliberalization began and then developed dynamically under the two governments led by Mikuláš Dzurinda (1998-2006). The following changes were the primary consequences:

> 1. The reform of the state social support system – …the duration of social benefit payments was made a function of the contributive history of the individual rather than age…
> 2. Pension reform, which was partly prepared in conjunction with the neo-liberal think-tank The Hayek Foundation, and has involved an increased retirement age, and a new three pillar, largely privatised, pension system. The reform process has been all about the expansion of the market into the pension system and is likely to create significant differentiation of pension outcomes over time for different social classes depending on ability to pay.
> 3. Tax reform, which has involved the introduction of a flat tax of 19% on income, value added and businesses…
> 4. Labour Code amendments. Changes to the Slovak Labour Code have led to a liberalisation of the labour market and an increasing imbalance between employers and employees. The dominant position of employers in employment regulation has been strengthened…
> 5. Reduction of public expenditure and population covered by social assistance…
> 6. Ongoing health care reform, which has significantly increased financial costs of medicine for the elderly and has had the biggest impact on the poor… (Smith & Rochovská, 2006, p. 47)

Therefore Smith and Rochovská (2006, p. 48) summarize that:

> Together these neo-liberal policy developments in Slovakia have resulted in the rather rapid elimination of concepts of state social welfare provision… and have been replaced by an increasing emphasis on personal responsibility and public expenditure cuts.

In the Slovak post-revolutionary context these democratization processes should be seen as being interlinked to the processes of neoliberalization. A good example is the case of "coupon privatization" which was seen as an economic tool for ensuring the democratic participation of the citizens in the management of the state and the economy. Although it was a total failure, the idea of creating a firm link between democracy and the free market became deeply embedded in the Czech-Slovak social consciousness. Thus the general rule on transforming economies applies here as well:

> What is significant in this recent democratization is that new democracies have been influenced, or (re-) shaped to a large extent by globalization and restructuring geared to establishing the free market on a world-economic scale (Hyun-Chin & Jin-Ho 2006, 8).

Hyun-Chin, Jin-Ho argues that what is being established is a "specific type of democracy, which can be considered 'free-market democracy', giving priority to the free flows of capital, goods and services…" (*ibid*., p. 9).

In Czechoslovakia's case this idea was implemented in the country's attempt to become part of the European community of mature states as quickly as possible, a community where the linkage between the free market and democracy is undoubtedly manifest:

> The experience of First World countries might suggest that democracy and the market system tend to go together; after all, no democracy has existed in nations that did not have the basic contours of capitalism; namely, a large extent of private ownership and competition as the main mechanism of economic coordination (Weyland, 2004, p. 135).

The linkage between the political and the economic stems from the foundations of neoliberalism which see free trade and a free market as the basic form of democracy (Giroux, 2005). In the era of post-revolutionary enthusiasm this union was seen to be natural. It is only now that we can see a more differentiated image of the process of democratic neoliberalization, in for instance the fact "that radical market reform seems to have made a significant contribution to the strengthening of democratic stability and the weakening of democratic quality" (Weyland, 2004, p. 137).

**Slovakia in light of three discourses**

The three discourses relating to neoliberalism described by Brenner, Peck and Theodore (2010) may illustrate the case of the neoliberal reforms implemented in Slovakia on a massive scale between 2002 and 2006 under the right-wing and center-right governments of Mikuláš Dzurinda. The first method of reading Slovak neoliberalism as "neo-Americanism" in a bipolar and mimetic sense of the word is unproblematic. The centralized, postcommunist approach to governance (the traditional pole) was challenged and replaced by measures that culturally and mimetically drew it towards solutions originating in American liberal theory and also from American experiences of reform. Many reformers (and their advisors) had actual experience of these measures as a consequence of their having studied in and having had contacts in America (Fisher, Gould, & Haughton, 2007). This experience then led to the privatization of state monopolies and banks, to fiscal reform and a pension reform based on a three-pillar concept as well as healthcare reform. This attempted to directly introduce market principles into the provision of healthcare services as well as insurance companies and hospitals. Various charges for healthcare services were also introduced. Methods emanating directly from America also led to reform of the justice system, for instance in the "three times is enough" maxim—a variation on the "three strikes and you're out" principle in the Californian system. This kind of assimilation was even referred to as the "Californication of the Slovak Justice System" (*ibid.*, p. 993).

A neomarxist reading of Slovak neoliberalism as a totalitarian globalizing Neoliberalism with a capital "N" was also, and continues to be, popular. The neoliberal turn is seen as a consequence of the pressures exerted by investors. Up until 2002 Slovakia was the furthest behind of all the transitional central European countries both in terms of the number of foreign investors and in terms of the country's ability to attract foreign investment. At the same time, the EU increased pressure in support of implementing neoliberal measures and warned of the dangers of not fulfilling the criteria for Slovakia's entry to the EU. The threat of Slovakia not becoming a member of the EU was a significantly energizing factor. Slovakia

also received negative reports from the OECD, and negative evaluations from the World Bank and other transnational organizations. The turn towards neoliberalism was therefore a consequence of external pronouncements of crisis as well.

However, Fisher, Gould and Haughton (2007, p. 978) also argue that the fact:

> That Slovakia would take a neoliberal turn in 2002 – 06 is somewhat of a puzzle that cannot be fully explained by such arguments as European Union (EU) accession, the competition for foreign capital, demographic shifts or cultural change. Instead, we argue that neoliberalism emerged thanks to domestic political factors.

Internal factors relating to the micro social level were also crucial. The crisis relating to Vladimír Mečiar's controversial government of 1994-1998 (and the social and political disputes associated with it) meant that, in the immediate period that followed, there developed a specific attitude to governance, which led to very particular kinds of practical solutions. In the end, these were not fundamentally questioned even by the 2006 center-left government led by Robert Fico. The pension and taxation systems remained intact apart from some cosmetic tinkering. What emerged in Slovakia was a hybrid form of neoliberalism "a unique form of 'social liberal' capitalism" (*ibid.*, pp. 978-979).

This perspective on governance that distinguishes Slovak neoliberalism with a small "n" is essential because between 2002 and 2006 some areas of social administration remained unaffected by neoliberalization. Education, in particular, is an interesting area. At that time the minister of finance, Ivan Mikloš, was extremely interested in the neoliberal transformation of education embodied in his program *Minerva* that was a response to the EU Lisbon strategy on creating competitive national "knowledge economies." This attempt, which included measures on teaching at universities, was, however, one of the few areas of the government program that was not fulfilled. Paradoxically, many aspects of the neoliberal program in education were introduced under the Fico-led left-wing nationally-oriented coalition government between 2006 and 2010.

In reading the Slovak neoliberal narrative one should bear in mind that neoliberalism can be read at yet another level. This level was typical of Slovakia's first consistently neoliberal government led by Mikuláš Dzurinda (2002-2006) and also of the right-wing coalition that ruled Slovakia between 2010 and 2012 under Iveta Radičová. For these governments neoliberalism represented an explicitly "ideological hegemonic project" and was a leading "intellectual formation" (Springer, 2010, p. 1031). Since we have already dealt generally with the first "pure" neoliberal government in Slovakia, we will now examine neoliberalism as the intellectual basis and political project of the Iveta Radičová government in terms of the actual composition of the government. The Radičová government appointed representatives from the F. A. Hayek Foundation, and co-owners of Hayek Consulting, I. Švejna and M. Chren, to the highest executive bodies (primarily to state secretary positions). I. Švejna, a member of the Mont Pèlerin Society, was also state secretary to the minister for transport. M. Chren was involved in projects at the World Bank and was state secretary to the minister of the economy. The links between the government and the business sector were publicized in 2010 when the "Hayek Scandal" emerged in the media. I. Švejna resigned from his post because Hayek Consulting had gained state contracts from an agency operating under the ministry of the economy, where M. Chren was state secretary.

Naturally, the Slovak national context and neoliberal developmental trends should be viewed within the context of Slovakia's membership within the EU, which was gained in 2004. External pressure to adopt a neoliberal agenda was more or less explicitly conditional to Slovak membership within the EU and this did not weaken after Slovakia's accession to the EU. The growing process of neoliberalization was prerequisite for the EU as a whole and in practice this has meant that "in recent years European governance has become even more thoroughly liberal…" (Van Apeldoorn, 2008, p. 22). However, the neoliberalization process within Europe has rejected Anglo-Saxon orthodox neoliberalism in favor of "a more continental European-style neoliberalism… articulated with a 'modernized' social democratic discourse" (*ibid*., p. 24). This particular combination of the neoliberal with the social democratic was made possible by "asymmetric multi-level governance" (*ibid*., p. 26) within the EU, where issues concerning support for the market and competitiveness became central to the supranational European administration, while issues concerning social protection and equality remained mainly of concern to the national politicians of the various member states. Van Apeldoorn claims that this mechanism of governance has meant that the principles of social security and equality have become entirely subordinated to economic liberalism. The catalyst for this relationship was the EU Lisbon Strategy that introduced the notion of the global economic competitiveness of the EU states. As Van Apeldoorn (2008, p. 27) put it:

> The asymmetric governance of the embedded neoliberal European order make states adopt supply-side oriented national competitiveness strategies, which... promote a thorough neoliberal socio-economic restructuring.

Van Apeldoorn summarizes the restructuralization process thus:

> In sum, the neoliberal restructuring, set in by the relaunched European integration project through the internal market programme and monetary union, reinforced by the marketization drive culminating in the Lisbon 'competitiveness' agenda, and further locked in by the Eastern enlargement, has subordinated the objective of social cohesion to that of a logic of commodification (*ibid*., p. 33).

**Education: from politics to catching up with global neoliberalism**

Like in other postcommunist countries, once neoliberalism reached Slovakia, the country adopted its own specific path in education (Kubal & Kerlin, 2002). Fertile ground for this was to appear immediately after the fall of communism with the first wave of decentralization, which was yet to strive directly for neoliberal goals. It was evident primarily in the diversification of governance of schools via the pluralization of school management and the transfer of executive competence from the center to the regions—one of the first acts to be carried out within Slovak education was the passing of a law on governance within education and on educational autonomy, which sent out a strong decentralizing signal. The first wave of decentralization was mainly undertaken in the name of the democratization and humanization of social relations, including education. Up until the end of the 1990s and onwards it brought with it an increased attempt to reform education in accordance with

liberalization, which, like elsewhere, was grounded in domestic factors, but also on growing foreign influences (Slovakia's entry into the EU in 2004 was crucial here). Despite the fact that after the fall of communism, and throughout each reform period, every reform was seen as a step towards greater democratization in education, it was in fact the neoliberalization of education that introduced a very specific type of democracy into this sector—free market democracy. Two relatively distinctive stages in the democratization of the education system in postcommunist countries indicate that although up until now the transformation of the education sector has been conducted in the name of greater democratization of education, there has been a shift in the motives that lie behind the democratization process towards neoliberalization. These must take into consideration the fact that "the influence of neoliberalism on decentralization also shows that the larger political context in which decentralization is conducted influences the politics and purposes of decentralization and they in turn shape outcomes of reform" (*ibid.*, p. 28).

Analyses of the Slovak government programs since 1998 point to a rupture in political discourse and in the decision-making on education and schooling. In terms of the broad coalition government programs for the years 1998 through 2002, the chapters on education typically contain more general principles and are dominated by a tendency to adopt measures aimed at Slovakia's entry into the EU and to increasing the prosperity of the country. The government declares that it:

> …seeks to create a society in which education will be the source of Slovakia's long-term prosperity influencing Slovakia's standing within Europe and also enabling the all-round development of the individual and affirmation of every citizen… The role of the state is to create conditions for ensuring the quality of the education and training provided and for ensuring equality with mature European countries (Programové vyhlásenie, 1998, 28).

The motive that lay behind the government measures was the power to become equal to other European countries and expand the sphere in which Slovak citizens are actively engaged in to include the "emerging" European labor market:

> The government will take specific steps to ensure that the individual's educational qualifications and ability to carry out his/her profession are recognized internationally and to enable the citizens of the Slovak Republic to work in the 'emerging' European labor market (Programové vyhlásenie, 1998, p. 29).

It is evident that "prosperity" is emphasized instead of competition and that the importance of education for the state is domestic and not aimed at gaining competitive advantages in relation to its "competitors." At the same time, the program also includes concepts relating to social emotions, which are seen as the basis for the "stability of society." Again we see that training and education are directed inwards towards Slovak society.

In a way, the main motivation for EU accession is reflected in the fact that the image of a consciously neoliberal recipient of education investing in itself on the global market is conspicuously absent in the program. The postcommunist complex of inherited inadequacies dominates and so the aim is therefore to overcome this inadequacy by striving to become an equal partner. Thus it is collective identification rather than individual differentiation that is crucial.

The government program from the years 2002 to 2006 portrays continuity between governments; however, there is still a clear emphasis on a right-wing focus. In parts the government program on education cannot be considered to reflect continuity since there is clear evidence of political change. This was made possible by the more coherent ideological position of the government that represented a shift towards the right. As we have seen, it was this government that began the process of extensive, society-wide neoliberalization. However, it should be noted that Slovakia was not yet a member of the EU (accession occurred in 2004) when the government first took power and so there was no need to accept unreservedly the European social democratic hybrid of neoliberalism that was adopted by the Lisbon strategy (2000). The governing elites in Slovakia were personally more involved with the Anglo-Saxon model of neoliberalism, which was consistently adopted as part of the government program on education. This model does not rely upon a state centralized and normative form of neoliberalism but on an individualistic, community-oriented and decentric (from below) form of neoliberalism.

In this government program there is a radical change in terms of how education was viewed in society. Education is unambiguously harnessed for economic goals, where the unit of success is the individual who is continually investing and learning in life:

> The emergent information society and globalization of the economy is leading to a new perception of education and its role in society. The development of technology and changes to the labor market necessitate lifelong learning. Education is becoming the key to success in life, the best investment for the future…The priority will be to make free choice in education a right and thereby create conditions for each person to live fully and successfully position themselves on the European labor market (Programové vyhlásenie, 2002, p. 27).

In the program education is defined for the first time as a service aimed at the needs and personal success of the individual or family. Correlative to this is the fact that education has been incorporated into the economizing discourse and so in this case we can speak of economizing communitarianism. The government program declares that:

> School is considered to be an open community of pupils, teachers and parents and its main mission is to provide comprehensive services for the education and upbringing of each family and others engaged in lifelong education in terms of the provision and demand for these services (Programové vyhlásenie, 2002, p. 28).

Thus we can see how economic terms are used to describe schools and education and the processes that operate within them. The gradual individualization of education as a service inescapably brings with it an individualized and differentiated perspective on education. At the level of the system, the government program seeks strong differentiation between schools and at the same time declares that all educational establishments (state and non-state) should be treated equally in terms of the way they are organized. Thus we can see the trajectory of the weakening role of the state in education management. This principle is also evident in the intention to introduce a so-called two-stage curriculum as a means of decentralizing the curriculum or in requests for salaries to be awarded to teachers in relation to performance:

> The government is drawing up the implementation stages for the restructuring of education with a focus on a two-level participation model for education composed of a national and a school curriculum (Programové vyhlásenie, 2002, p. 28).

This declared intention to pursue decentralization and a communitarian perspective is, however, balanced by other mediating centralizing tools that are once more linked to economic rationality. In addition to the decentralized two-level curriculum, the government program expresses a need to introduce central standards and efficiencies in education results. According to the program, the government:

> will start to create national standards of education together with a system for monitoring this at all levels of education and for calculating the financial aspect (Programové vyhlásenie, 2002, p. 28).

**The road to perpetual neoliberalism**

However, when the government was implementing its program for the years 2002 to 2006, education policy underwent radical change at the level of government. On the one hand this was linked to Slovakia's accession to the EU in 2004 and to the consequent revision of the Lisbon strategy (known as Wim Kok's report) at the European level in the same year. The Slovak government, like all the other governments of European Union states, was invited to adopt measures to ensure that the government program and intended steps were in keeping with these conditions and to create a national strategy for fulfilling the goals of the Lisbon strategy. In 2005, therefore, the Slovak government prepared a policy document entitled Strategy for Developing the Competitiveness of Slovakia by 2010: The Lisbon Strategy for Slovakia (within Slovakia this strategy is best known as "Minerva", see Stratégia rozvoja konkurencieschopnosti, 2005). In this document, the original program for education was altered in line with the global European educational discourse, which, as Van Apeldoorn has described, has been adopted by social democrats across Europe and is therefore not simply associated with a particular section of the political spectrum (Van Apeldoorn, 2008). For the first time, we find that education policy discourse exists in the same form as it does in later government documents regardless of the political parties that constitute the government in Slovakia. The discourse is one of economic competitiveness in education for the purposes of knowledge society and economy, to be achieved via a competent, communicative and information literate and flexible workforce.

In the document, the government's hand is most visible in the emphasis on minimalizing state intervention in the free market and in highlighting the "shared responsibility of the individual and family in resolving their own situations" (Stratégia rozvoja konkurencieschopnosti, 2005, p. 4). This is seen in statements such as "primary responsibility for creating adequate social and economic conditions for the family and individual must be borne by the individual himself" (*ibid.*, p. 4) and in the idea that "students are jointly responsible for paying for the cost of their studies," (*ibid.*, p. 8) alongside a loans system as a means of making education more widely accessible.

The Minerva strategy saw the launch of perpetual neoliberalism in Slovakia, and the ideas contained within it have since been a feature of all the governments up to the present day regardless of whether they are left-wing or right-wing. A change of government in 2006 brought a new center-left government to power in contrast to the right-wing policies of the government before it. The new government coalition continued the project of building

knowledge economy that had been begun with the ideas contained within Minerva. In 2008 this center-left government created a policy for Slovak development entitled "A Modernization Program for Slovakia 21" and set up a Commission for Knowledge Society headed by the Deputy Leader of the Government for Knowledge Society, European Affairs, Human Rights and Minorities. The document was a response to intensive pressure from the European Commission resulting from its assessment of the Convergence Program for the Slovak Republic covering the period 2004-2010 and also pressure stemming from the *Strategic Report on the Renewed Lisbon Strategy for Growth and Employment: new cycle (2008-2010)*. The Modernization Program Slovakia 21 clearly shows how European neoliberalization of the continental social democratic European sort was accepted. In the introduction to its program, where the government suggests creating this document, the government confirms and declares that this form of neoliberalism is universally valid for any future governments:

> The government of the Slovak Republic shall create all…the conditions required to draw up the 'Development Strategy of the Slovak Republic in the short and long term', which it will submit to expert and public debate and adopt only once wide-ranging political agreement has been reached. In this way it will ensure the continuity and stability of the principle strategic direction of the Slovak Republic regardless of the program and ideology of the governing coalitions that follow (Programové vyhlásenie, 2006, p. 9).

Education policy itself, as it was formulated by the government in its program in 2006 subordinates this policy to the concept of knowledge society, which it declares to be the founding stone of democracy. The government program which has traditionally been composed of chapters on social affairs, healthcare, education, and culture was changed for the first time to contain chapters on social affairs, healthcare, knowledge society and culture. Education is subordinated within the chapter on knowledge society.

That we have set out on a new pathway to neoliberalism is clearly discernible if we compare it to some of the sporadic proposed measures contained within the original version of Minerva. For instance, in terms of the proposed fees for university students, the strategy in this document can be described as a strategy from below, whereby a neoliberal society will be created on the basis of the self-constituting entrepreneurial individual through his/her own motivation and capacity. The social democratic version of neoliberalism contained within the A Modernization Program for Slovakia 21 is articulated as the centrally managed production of human capital. An example of this is found in the measures for changing priorities in education goals that now include competencies tested using international evaluation tools. There is specific reference to the importance of PISA testing, which is to be used as the basis for changing the education curriculum:

> The government is therefore adopting measures which will chiefly redefine primary and secondary school curriculum, particularly Slovak, the natural sciences, math and information technology, and explicitly focus on developing skills in reading comprehension, numerical literacy and knowledge of the natural sciences. The changes will focus on fostering creativity, logical deduction skills, perceiving connections, obtaining and interpreting information, and the ability to comprehend, use and reflect on the written language and other skills that can be used in the labor market and in practical life (Modernizačný program, 2008, p. 8).

One of the fundamental priorities of education is developing entrepreneurial skills and financial literacy in such a way that they feature directly in teaching in schools meaning that pupils will leave school with the required entrepreneurial skills:

> These skills relate to proactive project management, effective representation and negotiation, the ability to work individually and in teams and to accept the risks. They also include creativity, innovation and risk acceptance as well as the ability to plan and manage projects in order to achieve aims. This will be implemented in collaboration with the commercial and non-profit sectors via a wide range of activities, mainly through student micro-firms, alterations to the teaching syllabus (optional subjects), various kinds of educational programs etc. (Modernizačný program, 2008, p. 20).

The government of 2006 to 2010 was the first to resolve to implement educational system reforms. This is despite the fact that the very first right-wing government had expressed this very desire back in 2002 and from then on promised, for instance, to decentralize education by introducing a two-level curriculum. This reform was first launched in 2008 and was accompanied by fundamental changes to the law on education, which did nothing other than to apply the neoliberal agenda articulated by previous governments to educational policy. Typically, however, the reforms were introduced in a highly centralized manner and ran aground due to incompatibility with the actual school environment—this was despite the fact that the school sector had long ago expressed a desire for reform. The way in which this reform introduced decentralization into schools did not meet with much enthusiasm from those working in schools, since a policy of decentralization from the center was seen to run counter to democratization and to be manifest of a centralizing desire.

The European neoliberal agenda on education did not change even with the change of government in 2010, when once again a right-wing coalition took power under the leadership of Iveta Radičová. In its government program, the governing coalition continues to emphasize that the school environment should be highly competitive at all possible levels. The notion of competitiveness dominates in the government program, in line with the Lisbon strategy. It is lent support by all the mechanisms capable of developing this skill, particularly internal and external, national and international, evaluation tools, which eventually emerge as school rankings, since the government would like to "increase the availability of information on educational outcomes and results to the public" (Programové vyhlásenie, 2010, p. 33). This system of "internal and external quality assessment of education in primary and secondary schools" (*ibid.*, p. 33) is to be compulsory. It is to be bolstered by state assured independent external testing. Thus we have here the same sort of central neoliberal emphasis as was articulated in A Modernization Program for Slovakia 21, which was the work of the previous center-left government. Further support for this angle is found in the intention to make preschool education compulsory. The Radičová government succeeded in implementing some of these measures despite its premature end due to the collapse of the coalition at the beginning of 2012.

However, in 2011 when it was still in power and as a result of criticisms on the state of Slovakia, the government adopted a new version of the original Minerva project entitled Minerva 2.0 – Promoting Slovakia to the Premier League in order to achieve the ideals of knowledge economy. As can immediately be seen from the name, the policy continues

to pursue competitiveness as the central motivation for dynamic change to society. The policy systematically applies a competitive approach to education, comparing the Slovak education system and pupil results with neighboring and other countries through the use of league tables. It uses the assessments to make recommendations for reforming the curriculum—again calling for the changes to incorporate key competencies, reading, math, natural science, and financial and digital literacy. There is a particular call for entrepreneurship education to be built up as the key to economic development in the era of knowledge society:

> We are researching and drawing up an educational program for entrepreneurship education in primary and secondary schools, which we encourage at all school levels. Teaching will focus not only on the processes involved in setting up and managing companies, but also primarily on fostering skills such as displaying initiative, being enterprising and creative, accepting risks, and being able to plan and manage projects aimed at achieving specific goals (Minerva 2011, pp. 23-24).

We can clearly see that the targeted goal of education is a fully functioning vision of the neoliberal and self-enterprising individual (Peters, 2001).

The early elections of 2012 saw a single-party left-wing social-democratic government take power. Nevertheless, as the government program indicates, the enduring liberal trend in educational policy is firmly engraved upon it and the main principles do not differ from those of preceding governments. Government policy for education rides on a wave of competitiveness, promoting financial education, and bolstering education that has a natural science and technical focus. It repeatedly emphasizes the importance of evaluation tools such as PISA in achieving competitiveness, and education that directly links this with practice is of primary importance. The program promotes cooperation between the public and business sectors in education management in order to achieve the following aims:

> The government supports greater involvement of the business community throughout the education sector as a means of increasing competitiveness and long-term sustainability in a global context (Programové vyhlásenie, 2012, p. 45).

It is symptomatic that this government program also subsumes education within the chapter on knowledge society. Given that this government has not been in power long, it is possible thus far simply to add that this is the first government to have faced a large teachers' strike, therefore we can but wait and see how it reacts in the period that follows.

## Conclusion

At a time of growing unemployment, international tension and entrenching social differences,

> political and intellectual culture has made criticizing neoliberalism its target. This stretches from conservative groups complaining about social disintegration and the trend towards individualization, through communitarian demands strengthened by the responsibilities of local communities, to left-wing intellectuals who fear a borderless and accelerating capitalism (Lemke, 2001, p. 26).

Amongst the authoritative critical sociologists, we find Giddens (1997, p. 29) talking of the "wholesale expansion of a market society" or Bourdieu (1996, p. 176) referring to the "triumph of unstoppable and cynical capitalism" leading to a "withering of the state" and of a supposed "defense of the state" (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 42). The political impact of this weighty criticism along with the social developments outlined above led to social-democratic governments coming to power in various European countries. The former Slovak Minister for Education, social democrat Dušan Čaplovič, has added his voice to this criticism by stressing that there has been an excess of liberalization in Slovak educational development thus far and by his openly rejecting neoliberalism.

Interestingly though, it has not proved possible to decouple neoliberal forms of leadership from forms of governance, and this is clearly also true in Slovakia. As Lemke (2001, p. 26) stated "a change of government has not brought about any significant political change". Rather neoliberal strategies of governance have been adapted to the new political conditions. Central governance no longer minimalizes intervention so that it blends with the market as classical liberalism required, but strategically mobilizes state institutions to promote and manage private capital, or stabilize market relations. Hirsch's (1998) concept of "perpetual neoliberalism" therefore represents the current form of hegemonic liberalism.

Although Slovakia's pathway to perpetual neoliberalism has been uniquely postcommunist and transformative, the convergence with bastions of neoliberalism is self-evident. In terms of a long-term retrospective, Hall argues that a similar thing occurred between the New Labor policies of Tony Blair and the policies of Bill Clinton when a "hybrid New Labor variant of neoliberalism" emerged shifting policy from center-left to center-right (Hall, 2012, pp. 17-18). The focal point of this policy is "managerial marketization" which came to the fore in such a way that "the economy was actively 'liberalized'…, while society was boxed in by legislation, regulation, monitoring, surveillance and the ambiguous 'target' and 'control' cultures." (*ibid.*, p. 18). According to Hall, neither Gordon Brown nor the liberal-democrat coalition of David Cameron strayed from this policy. In the USA, the ascent of perpetual neoliberalism in education can be seen in George Bush Junior's federal program entitled No Child Left Behind, which he introduced after taking up presidential office in 2001. Despite serious reservations being expressed in schools and academic circles, the program was further implemented and developed by democratic candidate Barack Obama. Mathison and Ross (2004, pp. 96-97) referred to this as the "Liberal-Conservative Alliance":

> Ostensibly strange bedfellows, including for instance E. D. Hirsch, Diane Ravitch, Chester Finn, Gary Nash, Bill Clinton, Edward Kennedy, both President Bushes, IBM Chairman Lou Gerstner, the leaders of American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA), forty-nine state departments of education, and nearly all governors (Democratic and Republican), they join to support standards-based reform and it's concomitant 'need' to implement systems of mandated high-stakes testing.

Notwithstanding the hybrid roots and the distinctive historical and cultural conditions in which neoliberalism takes root in countries in various parts of the world, it is true to say that neoliberalism is generally globally well-established and as such is sustained through the activities undertaken along local pathways to perpetuity.

In Slovakia's case our hypothesis that there is an enduring neoliberalism in government programs across the political spectrum holds true. Our analysis has shown that each government program contains certain nuances reflective of the national and international situation at the time. When Slovakia had yet to become a member of the EU, the neoliberalization discourse was influenced more by the personal ideological convictions of members of the right-wing Dzurinda government. The ideology was an Anglo-American version of an individualistic and particularistic liberalism in education. Once Slovakia joined the EU, it began to implement the global discourse on economic competitiveness embodied in the Lisbon Strategy. This discourse propagated superindividual, systemic liberalization strategies alongside extensive central controls (for instance, testing) and extensive bureaucratic reporting (successfulness, effectiveness and so forth). This social democratic variation of neoliberalism dominated in the government programs on education regardless of the different ideological stances of the government representatives. This continuity is evidence of cohesion in education policy discourse across two ideologically opposed governments—the governments of I. Radičová and R. Fico.

The failure to consider these facts presents Slovakia with certain dangers. Passively adopting the global European neoliberal discourse causes a dislocation in Slovak education policy, which is in turn also caused by the fact that education policies have been insufficiently grounded under governments espousing different values. Compared with other areas, education policy has succumbed most easily to globalization discourses and the educational system is therefore being changed without sufficient reflection. Dangers may also arise when education comes into contact with the world of practice, which is often incompatible with this discourse given its fundamentally different historical determination.

This shift away from the specific national and towards the supranational global is also evidenced in this study which has shown how government documents from the late 1990s emphasized the link between education and national prosperity and individual well-being, while in the first half of the 2000s the stress was primarily on international competitiveness. There are now scores of critical analyses on the individually and socially discriminatory, and possibly devastating, consequences of an education system conceived of in this way. The problem is that economic narratives rather than academic analyses take precedence in policy-making in the education sector.

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