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# The Curious Case of Slovakia

## Regime Preferences Thirty Years after the Velvet Revolution

*Zuzana Reptova Novakova*

### Abstract

A singular focus on the formal institutional reforms and economic variables misses the mark when it comes to explaining the decreasing support for liberal democracy in Central and Eastern Europe. This article suggests that over thirty years after the beginning of the “transition to democracy,” a closer look at the conditional factors of social quality can shed a different light on the transformation of societal realities. In particular, it pays attention to the extent to which people are able to participate in social and societal relationships under conditions that enhance their well-being, capacity, and individual potential. Slovakia is chosen as a case study, as it is both representative of some of the wider malaises characteristic of the younger European democracies and as it is a rather interesting example of liberal democracy within the region.

**Keywords:** democracy, participation, regime preference, Slovakia, social quality, societal relationships

While it seems that no society in Europe is immune to the malaises of illiberal challenges to democracy (see, for example, Krastev and Holmes 2020; and Norris and Inglehart 2019), the polities in Central and Eastern Europe deserve particular attention. In their big bang transformations post-1989, liberal democracy seemed to be the only game in town, the only viable regime type to be copied, and a “there-is-no-alternative” kind of scenario for development. In the era of “liberal victory” (infamously coined by Francis Fukuyama), there were no alternatives to liberal political and economic models (Krastev and Holmes 2019). A marriage of convenience between democracy and the free market made both part of the same deal, bearing a promise of freedom, self-realization, meritocracy, and a better life. Now, three decades after the rupture with its totalitarian past, the region is seeing vast societal support for authoritarian populism.

As the region grew richer, more open, and further integrated into the internally borderless European Union (EU), the premise of liberal democracy no longer seemed to be the only game in town. This was especially the case with the four countries that made up the so-called Visegrád Group (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and



Slovakia), which were the guinea pigs of structural adjustment reforms in the 1990s and the success stories of the Europeanization process of the early 2000s. They managed to adopt formerly Western models and values while integrating into European and Euro-Atlantic structures, a sort of “modernization by imitation and integration by assimilation” (Krstev and Holmes 2020). Fast-forward to 2020, and various attempts by authoritarian politicians to get a grip on power seem to enjoy renewed popularity amid voters. And this is despite, or perhaps thanks to, their illiberal rhetoric, which is often openly undemocratic.

When it comes to the rise of authoritarianism, Slovakia presents a useful case study, for it possesses many social and cultural features characteristic of the entire Visegrád region, yet also occupies a particular political position within it. Surrounded by Hungary and Poland with regimes that have an unfettered grip on power, and the Czech Republic, which has witnessed the recent rise of xenophobic populism, the tiny nation of Slovakia has caught the eye of the international media as a hopeful isle of liberal democracy in “Europe’s nationalist hotbed,” a hopeful case in a region that is becoming increasingly characterized by an illiberal turn (Hinshaw 2019; cf. BBC 2019 and Walker 2019). Slovak society has many elements that make it ripe for such a turn, for it shares many of the societal malaises of its regional neighbors: democratic fatigue, widespread acceptance of the penetration of populist illiberal rhetoric into the mainstream, a declining participation rate, and an omnipresent lack of trust. At some point in recent history, the importance of democracy to the public in Slovakia was the lowest among EU member states (European Values Study 2017).

Hence, this article raises a pertinent question: why is it that, three decades after the Velvet Revolution (17 November to 29 December 1989), Slovakia ranks well on the standard indicators employed for evaluating the outcomes of the transition to democracy but has a public that does not seem to share such optimistic appraisal about this liberal political form? Contributing to the debate about democratic backsliding in the “younger” European democracies, this article sets to explore some of the developments in Slovak society through the lens of social quality. Highlighting the links between the malaise with liberal democracy and aspects of social quality (Van der Maesen and Walker 2012) or “decent society” (Abbott et al. 2016), this article moves beyond some of the narrowly institutionalist comparative assumptions of political science, as it zooms in on the context of Slovak society three decades after its big bang transition.

The aim of this article is to briefly explore the Slovak social terrain using the four foundational domains of social quality: (1) socioeconomic security; (2) social cohesion; (3) social inclusion; and (4) social empowerment. The fourth domain is the result of developments in the previous three domains. Locally sourced qualitative studies along with large-scale representative surveys published in the Slovak language provide a useful gateway into elements of this terrain. Due to a lack of space, this article does not aspire to provide an in-depth analysis of this topic. Instead, it provides an overview of tendencies often overseen in the political science literature on transitions and consolidations.

The first section below will explore some of the paradoxes in studying transitions, especially the tendency in literature to ignore “the social,” to limit its scope through narrow definitions, and to compartmentalize any study of sociospatial context. The second section will argue that we ought to define “the social” as the extent to which people are able to participate in societal relationships under conditions that enhance their well-being, capacity, and individual potential. Following two basic tensions concerning human interrelationships, I will suggest four dimensions or conditional factors for participation in societal relationships. Consequently, the remaining sections will introduce some of the core tendencies in each of the foundational factors of social quality that condition lived human experience under a regime in a given sociospatial realm.

## **Some Paradoxes in Studying Transitions, or Why Focus on “the Social?”**

In the literature exploring the success stories of postcommunist transition, much of the focus has been on the economic aspects, on the institutional reforms, and on the consolidation of various formal institutions governing the state and the market. As An and colleagues (2019) put it, the simultaneity of the end of communism in Europe with the “dominance, ideologically and practically, of a particular kind of free market neo-liberalism served, in Polanyian terms, to ‘delink’ the ‘social’ from the economic and the political.” In general, the “social” has received comparatively little attention, perhaps apart from the field of anthropology (e.g., Brković 2017; Hann 2002).

The traditionally accepted duality between “the economic” and “the social” stipulates that the latter is a residual that is not “economic,” or that it is everything that is not “economic.” This duality, within which the externalities of the economic system are deemed “social problems,” underpins the traditional understanding of the “social” and “social policy,” which is characterized by the subordination of social policies—and, by extension, of the “social” field—to dominant economic values and, more specifically, to issues of economic growth (see Van der Maesen and Walker 2012). In Central and Eastern Europe, the social is often equated with the concept of welfare or with social policies, which is only a fraction of what it entails. And even in this limited understanding of the social, the concept has been marginalized both in terms of the attention it receives in the literature and also in “terms of its significance as a discursive field of policy making, which matters” (An et al. 2019: 13). Consequently, questions of building social quality have received little attention, be it in terms of actual policy objectives or in terms of scholarly discussion (Abbott and Wallace 2014).

The first decades of the transition in Central and Eastern Europe were characterized by a shared movement away from postcommunism and toward catching up with the West. Amid the process of democratization and “Westernization by imitation” (Krastev and Holmes 2020), it was widely understood that it was the sociospatial

context in which the reforms were (or were not) embedded that made each country case unique. Nevertheless, theorization in the literature about the European states' respective transitions to democracy concentrated on the speed of institutional reforms or the extent of their successful implementation. The orthodox position held that these two issues were of paramount importance. However, as far as the sociospatial context itself was concerned, it was studied in a highly compartmentalized manner.

As a result, one paradox about (the contemporary outcomes of) the transitions of these states remains unexplained. By most of the conventional rankings, the tiny Central European country of Slovakia has taken a giant leap in just a few decades: it saw an increase in political rights and civic freedoms, and is currently rated as a free country (Freedom House 2020). Overall, it ranks well as a “democracy in consolidation” (#10 of 137); as “highly advanced” in terms of economic transformation (#7 of 137); and it is #17 out of 137 countries in terms of governance (BTI Transformation Index 2020). It also witnessed an increase in its Human Development Index (2020) ranking, moving up to #36 out of 189 countries worldwide. For the last decade, Slovakia has continuously ranked #32 (out of 167) in the Legatum Prosperity Index. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the country was among the fastest-growing economies in the world (OECD Economic Outlook 2019). And Slovakia ranked #35 (out of 149) in the world in quality of life according to the Social Progress Index (2019).

The increase in freedom, quality of life, and economic and human development in Slovakia was not met with an analogous increase in satisfaction among its citizens. Quite paradoxically, the public perception of the way the outcomes of the transition worked out for Slovak citizens did not make a corresponding improvement. A large-scale, representatively sourced survey carried out by one of the nation's biggest institutes for public opinion research indicated that less than half of population subscribes to the belief that after 1989 the “opportunities for talented and hard-working ordinary citizens in the country have increased and we need more democracy” (45 percent). A similar amount of citizens, 42 percent, now believe that the above has not been the case and that “we need to be governed with a stronger hand” (Penno Hartlová et al. 2018).

When asked which form of government they considered better for their country, slightly less than a half of the respondents found “liberal democracy with regular elections” preferable. On the other hand, some 38 percent indicated a clear preference for “having a strong and decisive leader who does not have to bother with [a] parliament or elections” (Hajdu and Klingová 2020). When the question referred directly to what was needed for a successful development of the country, 45 percent were in favor of more democracy, while 42 percent would support a government with a stronger hand (Bútorová 2018). After three decades of “Westernization by imitation” (Krstev and Holmes 2020), there is widespread support in Slovakia for the belief that Western societies and their ways of living threaten local identities and values: 50 percent (Hajdu and Klingová 2020). As many as 58 percent of the respondents indicated that they would trade some of their rights and freedoms for the preservation of their country's tradi-

tional values. Only 36 percent of them indicated that they value liberal democracy,<sup>1</sup> while 30 percent did not consider it a particularly important value (Gyárfášová 2017).

Why is it that three decades after the Velvet Revolution Slovakia ranks well on the indicators standardly employed for evaluating the outcomes of the transition, yet has a general public that does not seem to share such an optimistic appraisal? One school of thought argues that public support for regime type is intrinsically connected with satisfaction with the way democracy works in one's country. So in practice, the popular malaise with liberal democracy reflects how that liberal democracy was put into practice by domestic politicians, rather than reflecting an *a priori* rejection of the normative ideal of democracy (Králiková 2016). A correlation can certainly be made here. Slovak satisfaction with the present state of the economy and their satisfaction with the way democracy works are both below the European average, with the mean being 4.5 and 4.4, respectively, on a scale of 0–10, where 0 represents zero satisfaction and 10 represents total satisfaction, according to the European Quality of Life Survey (2016). The Institute for Public Affairs in Bratislava provided even fewer reasons for optimism: satisfaction with the state of the economy and satisfaction with the current political situation indicated dissatisfaction too (3.0 and 3.2, respectively, on a scale from 1 as very satisfied to 4 as very dissatisfied). Some 81 percent claimed being dissatisfied with the political situation in the country and two-thirds of respondents indicated that in general Slovakia was moving in the wrong direction (Penno Hartlová et al. 2018).

However, would it not be far too simplistic to reduce the malaise with liberal democracy to the perceived lack of it? Surely, there is much more to the widespread dissatisfaction with the state of democracy in Slovakia. Yet the dissatisfaction itself does not explain why voters are deserting the liberal politicians who “managed to secure peace and prosperity on the ashes of communism” (Zielonka and Rupnik 2020).<sup>2</sup> On a conceptual level, cultural factors of regime support have received little attention in research to date, especially in relation to questions of trust, identity, and participation in development. This study of Slovakia in particular was conceived as a contribution to the debate within this niche area of political science. The remaining sections of this article will zoom in on the quality of the “social” within complex social ecosystems and bring into discussion its importance in comprehending societal change, being grounded, of course, in the case study of contemporary Slovakia.

## **Social Quality: The Conditional Factors for Participation in Societal Relationships**

Measuring the successes of a society or even its well-being as a measure of social progress beyond economic indicators (Halpern 2010) remains an approach that is based on methodological individualism.<sup>3</sup> The pitfall is that, like any complex system, society is more than a mere sum of its parts. Beyond a mere aggregate of people in a shared

sociospatial reality, what characterizes a society is the complex networks of relations and ideational structures that are co-shaped via interactions. If relationships are the primary factor shaping the individual and their outlook on life (Harvard Study of Adult Development, 1938–), then by extension it is the relational factor that primarily shapes individual answers to the subjective well-being question.

The extent to which people are able to participate in societal relationships under conditions that enhance their well-being, capacity, and individual potential (Van der Maesen and Walker 2012) is crucial to understanding the quality of the societal circumstances in a given space and time. Participation in societal relationships, in its essence, contributes (albeit incrementally) to shaping societal development over time. The “social” in social or societal relationships refers to economic, political, cultural, legal, welfare, and environmental aspects of society (Van der Maesen and Walker 2012). Along these lines, the shaping of “the social” is a vital part of any societal change, and, perhaps unsurprisingly, participation (and the conditions for this participation to enhance well-being, capacity, and individual potential) lies at the core of the shaping quality of “the social.”<sup>4</sup>

A feature that distinguishes the Slovak polity from those of established democracies is its “participation deficit” (Agh 2010: 76), or a low level of participation in public affairs (Vráblíková 2009). Although the Velvet Revolution in 1989 opened spaces for authentic civic participation, the initial mass mobilization was not followed by the development of a participatory culture.<sup>5</sup> Following the historical experience of semi-mandatory participation in regime-orchestrated activities, it was understood that many used their newly gained rights to abstain from what was perceived as civic and political activities. For several decades following the democratic transition, participation levels in Central and Eastern Europe remained significantly lower than in Western European countries (Hooghe and Quintelier 2014) and a “low-frequency phenomenon” compared to established democracies (Ekman et al. 2016). One example, to illustrate the current state of affairs, is that among Slovak citizens the willingness for regular civic and political participation was lower in 2018 than it was in the first years following the Velvet Revolution. The least popular field concerns any form of participation in the creation of “programs for economic and social development” (Plichtová and Šestaková 2019). To shed light on some of the reasons behind this “participation deficit,” the following sections map some troubling tendencies within the conditional factors of participation in (and through) societal relationships.

Any participation in societal relationships can be depicted via the basic tensions that concern human interrelationships, “the social,” or societal relationships as such.<sup>6</sup> The interplay of two basic tensions delineates the dialectics shaping “the social”: (1) the tension between the transformation of societal complexities and the biographical transformations in an individual’s life; and (2) the tension between a society’s systems/institutions and families/communities (Figure 1). Societal circumstances can be studied as consequences of various processes in and between the four dimensions that are delineated by these two basic tensions.

**Figure 1.** Two Basic Tensions Concerning Human Interrelationships (IASQ 2020)

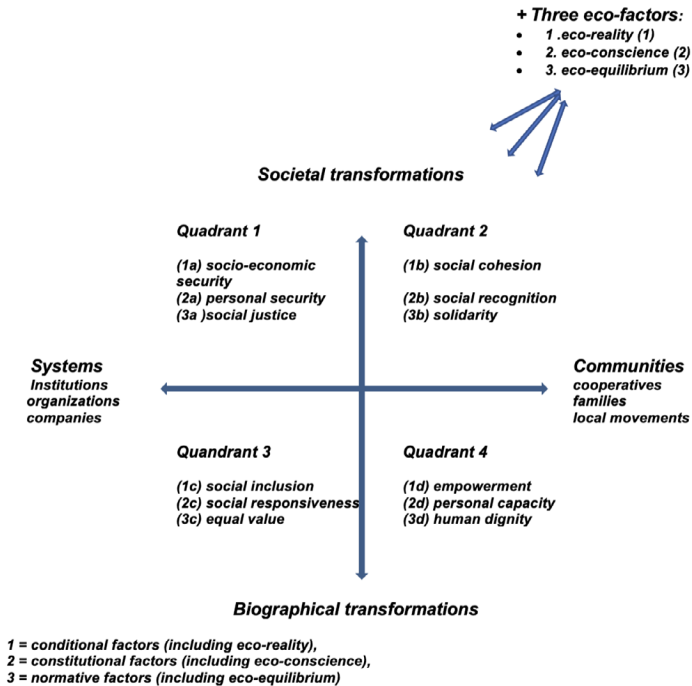


Figure 2 below highlights these four dimensions as they relate to each analytical quadrant in Figure 1, while adding a distinction between (1) the objective conditions of daily life or conditional factors (delineating opportunities and contingencies) pertaining to “the socio-economic conditions people live with; the social cohesion they experience in their communities; social inclusion to realize their civil rights; and the extent of their social empowerment to enable them to play responsible roles in society and in the processes of societal change” (IASQ 2020); and (2) the subjective conditions of life or the constitutional factors (processes). Each of the four dimensions (aka conditional factors) contributes to the concretization of “the social” by enhancing the related constitutional factor: socioeconomic security contributes to the enhancement of basic personal security; social cohesion contributes to the enhancement of social recognition; inclusion contributes to the enhancement of social responsiveness; and empowerment contributes to the enhancement of personal capacity (IASQ 2020; Van der Maesen and Walker 2012).<sup>7</sup>

In other words, before we talk about an enhancement of personal/human security, of social recognition, of responsiveness, or of human capacities in the three decades following the Velvet Revolution, it remains necessary to first explore the developments in the above conditional factors of social quality. This is where this article makes its empirical contribution: it selectively highlights tendencies in the domains of socio-



**Figure 2.** The Social Quality Architecture as an Analytical Framework (IASQ 2020)

<b>1. conditional factors</b> (opportunities + contingencies)	<b>2. constitutional factors</b> (processes)	<b>3. normative factors</b> (orientation)	<b>quadrants</b> (Figure 1)
(1a) socio-economic security	(2a) personal (human) security & resilience	(3a) social justice (equity)	Quadrant 1
(1b) social cohesion	(2b) social recognition & self-worth	(3b) solidarity	Quadrant 2
(1c) social inclusion	(2c) social responsiveness	(3c) equal value	Quadrant 3
(1d) social empowerment	(2d) personal (human) capacity	(3d) human dignity	Quadrant 4
<i>to add:</i> eco-reality	<i>to add:</i> eco-conscience	<i>to add:</i> eco-equilibrium	
<u><b>instruments</b></u> application of <b>indicators</b> for understanding of the changes of the conditional factors	<u><b>instruments</b></u> application of <b>profiles</b> for the qualification of the changes of the constitutional factors	<u><b>instruments</b></u> application of <b>criteria</b> to judge the outcomes of the linking of the changes of the outcomes of the conditional and constitutional factors	

economic security or citizen’s relations with the institutional domain, in social cohesion, in social inclusion, and in social empowerment.

In this vein, the following paragraphs discuss participation in Slovakia in relation to the developments within the conditional factors of social quality. They will look at, in some depth, citizen relations with the formal institutional domain, social cohesion, social inclusion, and social empowerment, all of which influence the (lack of) active participation in shaping the (societal) conditions of life in the country.

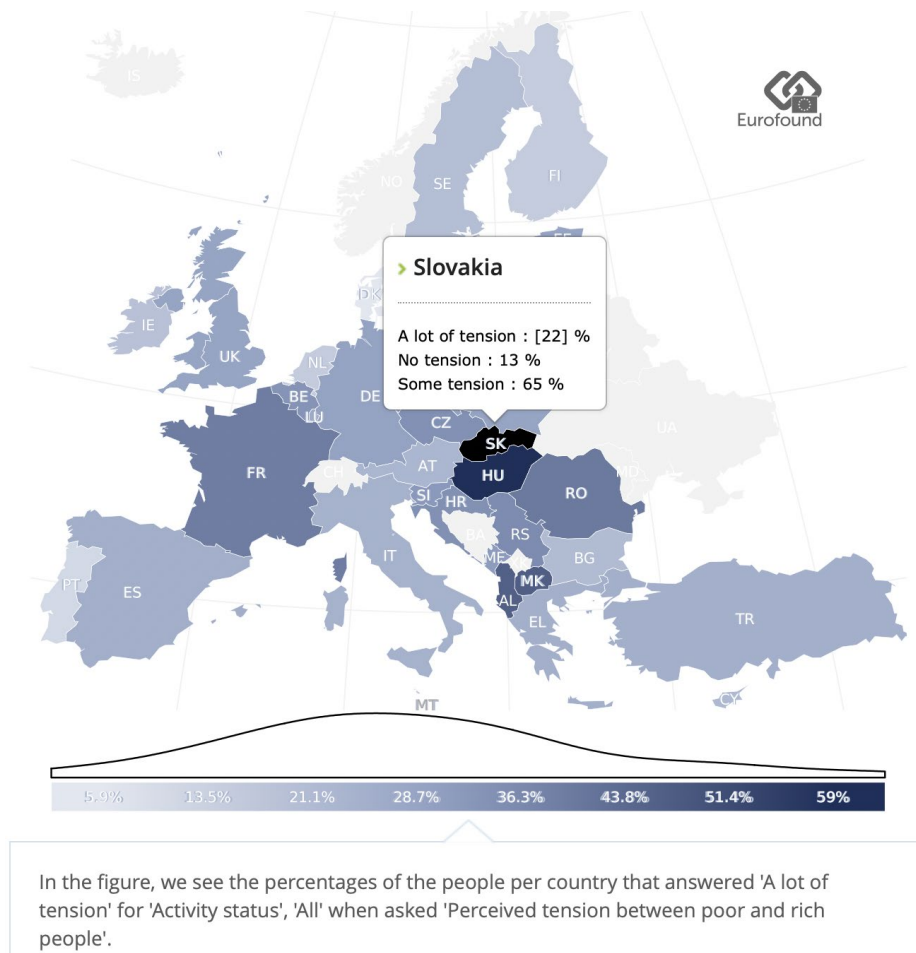
**Relations with the Formal Institutional Domain**

This is the segment delineated by the transformation of societal complexities in relation to the institutional domain; it includes the political system, as well as the institutions, organizations, and companies involved in (democratic) governance. In Slovakia, the “perception of democracy is closely linked to social and economic rights (provision of health care, adequate living standards, job opportunities, social and personal security), while political rights (political participation, minority protection) are considered less important” (Králiková 2016). The access to these (or the quality of these as are currently accessible) has been continuously bent by the perseverance of illiberal socioeconomic structures “whether in the form of oligarchical power concentrations or more diffuse, corrupt networks” (Cianetti et al. 2018: 244). The deficient rule of law in effect in Slovakia compromises the socioeconomic security<sup>8</sup> of the country’s average households in favor of privileged private interests. The belief that oligarchs and financial groups have control over the government in their country was held by 85 percent of the population (Hajdu and Klingová 2020). That is more than in Hungary, Poland,

or the Czech Republic. On a related note, 86 percent of the population believe that particular groups in Slovak society are favored over others, and hence that whoever “holds the power in the government does not matter, since nothing will change” (56 percent) (Hajdu and Klingová 2020).

Consequently, while the economy ranked among the top performers in economic growth (BTI Transformation Index 2020; OECD Economic Outlook 2019), the appreciation of economic developments by the public suggests that Slovak citizens did not reflect this optimistic outlook in any tangible manner. When asked “Are you personally satisfied with current economic situation in your country?” the mean of the answers given oscillated toward serious dissatisfaction (Penno Hartlová et al. 2018). The satisfaction with the state of the economy was continuously below the

**Figure 3.** Tensions in Society (European Quality of Life Survey 2016)



European average, according to the European Quality of Life Survey 2016 (2018). When asked about optimism about the future, Slovaks scored among the three lowest citizen groups in Europe, with 48 percent of population claiming that they were not even mildly optimistic about their future. While the country ranked as #35 in the world in quality of life (Social Progress Index 2019), still as much as 66 percent of the respondents indicated they would trade some of their rights and political freedoms for a better financial situation (Hajdu and Klingová 2020).

Of interest to this socioeconomic (in)security, but also to questions of societal cohesion and inclusiveness, is the perception of tensions in society. Only 13 percent of Slovaks believe that there is no tension between poor and rich people in their society, while 22 percent felt there was a lot of tension and another 65 percent indicated that there was some tension, according to the European Quality of Life Survey 2016 (2018). As a result of the transformation process, inequality in Slovakia has grown exponentially in the 1990s, but eventually became more “stable and lower compared to other transforming countries in the 2000s” (Kahanec et al. 2013). To grasp why many Slovaks felt—and feel—that there is such a strong class tension, it might be useful to look at the various deficiencies in the rule of law in the country. The vast majority of the polity is convinced that oligarchs and financial groups have a stranglehold over the government and that particular group(s) in their society are favored over others. Combined with the prevailing conviction that “who holds the power in the government does not matter, since nothing will change” (Hajdu and Klingová 2020), the figures above speak strongly about the dynamics of social quality—and impact negatively on the levels of citizen involvement in the sociopolitical realm.

### *Social Cohesion*

When some of the resources to cope with aspects of daily life are absent or insufficient in an individual’s life, their access to safety networks plays a role in their well-being. For such networks form and sustain themselves, social cohesion is crucial. As for the acceptance of (non-exclusive) universal institutionalized safety nets, so for the functioning of informal, relationships-based networks. This brings us to the next segment of (the quality of) “the social,” which is delineated by the transformation of societal complexities in relation to the world of communities. The specificity of social cohesion is human engagement as the primary source of developing inter-human conditions, connections, and relations (Van der Maesen and Walker 2012), which then take a myriad of forms in the ecosystem of networks, cooperatives, civil organizations, and nongovernmental organizations. Citizen engagement in public life is also one of the mechanisms of social cohesion (Penno Hartlová et al. 2018). The core domain of social cohesion is trust—trust in people and in institutions. Higher levels of trust correlate with higher participation in the functioning and administration of society, including voluntary engagement and charitable endeavors (Gallo Kriglerová and Holka Chudžiková 2020). Various accounts of theorizing the relationship between trust and

participation are discussed elsewhere in this issue by Nicole Horáková. Interpersonal trust gained in interactions with the wider community provides people with an ontological security (Giddens 1990) that further shapes their interactions with others.

Interpersonal trust within the Slovak population persistently remains at a relatively low level (Klobucky and Mrva 2017), which is a feature characteristic of much of the postcommunist world (Bernhard 2020). When Slovaks were asked about how much other people can be trusted, only 1 percent of respondents indicated that they “usually trust” others, while 60 percent stated that they were cautious or did not trust others (Plichtová and Šestaková 2019). A belief that one cannot be too sure when dealing with people was shared by 79 percent of respondents (Penno Hartlová et al. 2018). In the European Values Study (2017), only 21 percent of Slovak respondents indicated that the majority of people could be trusted. Qualitative research highlighted that in Slovak society interpersonal trust is associated with an intimate feeling that the other will not be a betrayer, and as such trust is given only to people’s closest relations and friends and to those who have already merited trust through previous conduct. All others are subject to caution: there is a sort of presumption of untrustworthiness up to the point till the person can prove that they can be trusted (Gallo Kriglerová and Holka Chudžíková 2020).

As a process through which we acquire, reconsider, and re-establish common rules of functioning, trust also shapes attitudes to institutions. Beyond interpersonal trust, trust in institutions in Slovakia paints a grim picture too. Very few Slovaks have full trust in the core institutions of the state—the government, Parliament, and the judicial system. The government has some level of trust from only one-third of its citizens, out of which only 5 percent “trust fully.” The story is the same with the courts, which attract a similar level of trust. Parliament is fully trusted by only 4 percent of the population, while in total only 32 percent somewhat trust it. Only one-fifth of population has at least some level of trust in the political parties in the country (22 percent). The ombudsman, whose role it is to safeguard citizens’ rights, is “fully trusted” by only 9 percent of the population (Plichtová and Šestaková 2019). People place more trust in the Church, in the Slovakian Army, or in the European Union than they do in the primary democratic institutions of the state (Plichtová and Šestaková 2019). According to research, trust within society is shaped by three factors: (1) what is known as “reflected trustworthiness,” (2) an attitude of “basic trustfulness” deriving from socialization, (3) and a “culture of trust” that is pervasive and “normatively constraining” for each of its members (Sztompka 1997). This “culture of trust” is shaped by the historical experiences of the society (the “tradition of trust”), and by the current structural context (the “trust-inspiring milieu”).

In this vein, Piotr Sztompka (1999) discusses this persisting low level of trust in institutions and links it to the cultural trauma inherited from communist times, in particular to the obedience that communist institutions forced upon citizens. This postcommunist trauma in Central and Eastern Europe is reflected in the following three statements: (1) the reliance on personal networks is much stronger than

institutional trust; (2) this trend is consistently continuous from “the kind of micro-level interpersonal trust that many individuals relied on to negotiate the challenges of day-to-day survival under communism” (Bernhard 2020: 346); and (3) the continued strength of and reliance on personal networks has “complicated the task of building more general and institutional trust networks, making the task of building a democratic political culture in post-communist countries more difficult” (Ibid; cf. Letki 2004; Letki and Evans 2005). A study of citizen participation in public affairs in Slovakia highlighted the persisting impact of the past experience of being used: it makes people feel that things have to be “solved” through personal acquaintances (it is all about who you know) in absence of the ability to participate in decision-making (Gallova Kriglerová et al. 2018).

Further research suggests that the level of trust in society is shaped by functional institutions (Rothstein 2011) and the trust in the public sphere (Horne 2013). A qualitative study in the Slovak context highlighted that corruption, nepotism, and inefficient functioning are the main contributors to the lack of trust in institutions (Gallo Kriglerová and Holka Chudžiková 2020). A more recent study came to a similar conclusion: the state capture by financial groups (or “oligarchs” as they are commonly referred to) is reflected by the low trust in democratic institutions (Hajdu and Klingová 2020).

Apart from the contextual “culture of trust” in society, the presence and strength of other integrative norms and values as well as social networks both play a role in fostering cohesion. The work of Robert Putnam (1993, 2000) develops how participation in civic organizations enhances general social trust. Co-creating social capital, civil society can serve as a space for enhancing interpersonal trust, recognition, and respect. Moreover, members of associations or civic organizations will display higher levels of participation in public affairs and show more sensitivity to societal problems (Macháček 1996). Currently, less than half of the Slovak population trusts civil society organizations (45 percent according to Jana Plichtová and Anna Šestaková [2019]), and it should be remarked that this figure is still higher than the levels of trust granted to the core state institutions of liberal democracy.

*Citizen engagement in public life is also one of the mechanisms of social cohesion* (Penno Hartlová et al. 2018). Despite the high potential of mass mobilization for one-off public demonstrations and thematic marches for a shared cause, the degree to which common actions have been institutionalized has remained low throughout Slovak history. Association in formal organizations remains low: 2 percent to 3 percent of the population are active members of unions, professional associations, or civic associations, and around 1 percent belong to nongovernmental organizations. Active membership is highest in interest-based associations (11 percent) and religious organizations (9 percent). While volunteering as nonmembers or in other support roles is relatively higher for each of the categories, the percentage of those occasional volunteering does not surpass a single digit number in most cases (one exception being volunteering for nongovernmental organizations, which is of interest to 12 percent of

population). More people took part in the work of nongovernmental organizations in 2008 than in 2018 (Plichtová and Šestaková 2019). The associative dimension of civic participation—that is, the relationship between membership in diverse types of societal organizations and civic participation—in Slovakia still remains to be explored (Plichtová and Šestaková 2019; cf. Bútorová and Gyárfášová 2010).

### *Social Inclusion*

Identity is another contributing factor of cohesion, and it has an impact on some of the dynamics of social inclusion/exclusion, as it is shaped by the transformation of societal complexities within the world of communities. Through defining the in-group identity, one can affect the quadrant where the system (regime, institutions) interplays with individual's biographical transformations. A common identity that unites the country on a societal level has in Slovakia been defined predominantly in ethno-nationalist terms. Like in all countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the definition of belonging in Slovakia has been defined in terms of *jus sanguinis* ("right of blood," belonging by bloodline) (Vašečka 2008). Such an understanding is emphasized in the country's constitution, who preamble talks about "we, the Slovak nation . . . together with the members of national minorities and ethnic groups living on the territory of Slovak Republic." Being part of the common identity, that is, of the nation, implies being born as a Slovak. Potentially problematic is the level of inclusiveness, or, said inversely, the exclusion of parts of the population, within the definition of this common identity.

In comparison, in democracies of the Western type the inclination was to define common identity in civic rather than in ethnic terms, so belonging to a nation is defined in terms of *jus soli*, being born in a territory. In Central and Eastern Europe, the non-inclusive ethno-nationalist definition of the in-group feeds into the contemporary support for neo-authoritarian populists, who promote exclusive versions of national and religious communities (Zielonka and Rupnik 2020). An increasingly polarized identity politics (Mesežnikov and Gyárfášová 2018) of playing upon standard pre-existing ideological cleavages (Catholic conservative vs. liberal attitudes) are combined with ethno-nationalist exclusivity (against minorities, migrants, and refugees). And this concerns the entirety of the public domain.

Beyond the formal, institutionalized politics of Slovakia and of other countries in Central and Eastern Europe, there is also a trend regarding the rise of incivility in civil society (Bernhard 2020). Furthermore, the popularity of "alternative" news and the usage of social media as primary news sources (Hajdu and Klingová 2020) contribute to the further polarization of the polity along ideological lines. What remains to be explored in future research is the troubled relationship between this kind of politicization of differences and that of active involvement in the sociopolitical world.

The place of inclusion/exclusion in official discourses is, of course, only one aspect of social inclusion. Social inclusion is full membership in a society (Abbott et al. 2016). Defined inversely, people are socially excluded to the extent they "are denied

human or civil rights on the basis of how they are categorized and treated by others” (Abbott and Sapsford 2019: 1). In the last European Quality of Life Survey (2016), the feeling of being outside of society was shared by 5 percent of Slovak citizens. Domains of inclusion cover being safe and comfortable within one’s community, access to citizenship rights, access to labor markets and to public services (or defined inversely as safety from poverty as a source of social exclusion), and the extent of one’s active involvement in the sociopolitical world (defined inversely as lack of participation in the sociopolitical world) (Abbott et al. 2016).

Twenty years after Slovakia’s transition away from communism, a large-scale survey reflected that only 26 percent of its citizens felt that their equality before law was better than it was before 1989, while 30 percent felt the situation actually deteriorated in this respect (Bútorová and Gyárfášová 2010). Thirty years after the transition, although the country ranks comparatively well when it comes to rights and freedoms in general, only 37 percent of its citizens felt that their rights and civil liberties were sufficiently respected in the country (Penno Hartlová et al. 2018).

### *Social Empowerment*

Another factor of active involvement in the sociopolitical world is social empowerment. It refers to the possibility for people to express their capabilities in actions and “take control of their lives to some degree” (IASQ 2020). The specific purpose of social empowerment is to enable people to function as creative actors in their daily lives (Van der Maesen and Walker 2012). Dimensions of social empowerment include political empowerment (most tangibly expressed in the freedom to dispute government positions), freedom of choice, and belief in the effectiveness of action (in both sociopolitical and socioeconomic terms), as well as base factors for these such as education and access to information.

The protests of 2018 were seen as a sign of social empowerment: the young generation raised in the post-1989 era led massive public protests “For a Decent Slovakia,” and was joined by citizens across the country and across all age groups. The protests, which consisted of regularly scheduled marches and gatherings, were a reaction to the uncovering of a corruption network involving the prime minister: at their peak, more people were in the street than during the Velvet Revolution. The protest movement partially succeeded in bringing down the prime minister along with a few other faces of corruption. It also succeeded in generating momentum ahead of elections: the following local and presidential ballots were dominated by activists connected to the movement. But in 2020, public opinion polls suggested that a belief that “nothing changed” was widespread.

Belief in the effectiveness of action remains low. A striking 83 percent of the population share the conviction that “power is now exclusively in the hands of the politicians and the average person is totally powerless” (52 percent definitely agree, another 31 percent rather agree) (Penno Hartlová et al. 2018). Above half of the polity does



not believe that under the current regime anyone can publicly express their opinion and contribute at least somewhat to solving the nation's problems (51 percent according to Bútorová 2018). In the early years after the Revolution, 37 percent of citizens were open to engaging in some form of political participation beyond elections. By 2018, however, the eagerness to engage dropped down to 24 percent (Plichtová and Sešťaková 2019). The most quoted reasons for not participating are that one's opinion will not be heard (80 percent), that one fears that those in power would cause him or her harm (79 percent), that they do not have the time (80 percent), and that one fears one will not be considered an equal (72 percent) (Plichtová and Sešťaková 2019).

## **Toward an Exploration of Social Quality?**

Over three decades of institutional reform and consolidation brought Slovakia into Europe's club of democracies as well as a club of the most advanced economies (i.e., the OECD). The polity saw improvements in development indicators and life standards. Nevertheless, now thirty years after the Velvet Revolution, Slovakia is not immune to the perceived attractiveness of authoritarian and illiberal tendencies—not by a longshot. There are those who claim that “human nature is not adapted to live in liberal democracy and therefore democracy needs modification” (Balogová 2020).

There is a strong link between the malaises with liberal democracy and the lack of meaningful participation. The transformation post-1989 has widened the space for authentic participation in the development of society, but not all have been consuming the newly gained freedoms in a proactive way. To take stock of the transformation of societal realities beyond the realm of the formal institutional reform of state and economy, this article zoomed in on some of the dimensions in which the transformation of societal realities impacted the conditional factors of social quality.

Many of the troubled aspects related, in their essence, back to two tendencies: (1) conceptually, the lack of attention to “the social,” beyond the narrow domain of social policies—this analytical challenge remains an open invitation for further research—and (2) in empirical terms, the persistence of informal institutions.<sup>10</sup> Most notable among these institutions were the illiberal socioeconomic structures such as the oligarchical grip on power and more diffuse corrupt networks. The perceived tension between poor and rich people in Slovak society is strikingly high, yet little policy effort has been devoted to addressing this issue. The perseveringly low level of trust in society feeds into overreliance on individual networks (nepotism and petty corruption) rather than on formal institutional mechanisms. Apart from the work of the Legislature as a means to counter corruption, little is being done to curb the overreliance on personal networks by, for example, increasing trust in the public domain. In this momentous situation, the polity shares little belief in the effectiveness of individual action. The protest movements “For a Decent Slovakia” in 2018 brought the country into the limelight, but participation went back to its usual lackluster level soon thereafter.



In some way or another, all of these issues relate to deficits in the rule of law and to the need for (re)building trust and rewiring institutions. In social quality scholarship, the rule of law is understood as an underlying normative factor that is required to be able to judge the increase or decrease of the social quality in a certain place and time. As Giovanni Polcini (2017) highlighted in a previous issue of this journal, there is a difference in practice between the rule of law and the rule by law, whereby the latter may be used to exclude some or avoid accountability under the guise of formality, legality, and legitimacy. Sometimes when the rule of law is what people want, the rule by law is what they get.

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## Notes

1. Defined as a regime based on the rule of law, political and civic freedoms, equality, and respect for minorities.
2. Externally, the region has been subject to several external shocks (global financial crisis, sovereign debt crisis within the EU, anxiety about immigration at a time of growing precarity). These shocks have led to democratic backsliding elsewhere too (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019), but the reaction to these shocks has been distinct within the social terrain of the so-called “newer” EU member states, especially in the Visegrád countries. Here, some region-specific experts on democratization increasingly talk about an overall cultural counter-revolution in Central and Eastern Europe (Krstev and Holmes 2020; Zielonka and Rupnik 2020).
3. On using surveys based on subjective well-being questions that in fact “measure only individual states of mind based upon psychological theories, which is not necessarily helpful for measuring the quality of society as a whole” (Abbott and Wallace 2012: 154).
4. Curiosity about how these sets of factors impact upon (and are impacted by) participation is at the core of the analytical framework of social quality (Van der Maesen and Walker 2012); these sets of factors also form the foundational bases of indicators for the Decent Society Index (Abbott et al. 2016).
5. An ambivalent relation of citizens to the notion of active participation in societal development is not specific to Slovakia; rather, it characterizes the whole region of Central and Eastern Europe.
6. Hence, the perspective of social quality recognizes the importance of the “shaping” of “the social” within the constitutive interdependency between the processes of self-realization of people and the formation processes of collective identities.
7. The final set, then, speaks to a related set of normative factors of daily life that highlight ethical orientation, such as (attitudes to) questions of social justice and equity, and solidarity in a given sociospatial polity, which are not of concern here.
8. Socioeconomic security understood as resources to cope with aspects of daily life, including such risks as those related to financial resources, housing, environment, health and care, work, and education (Van der Maesen and Walker 2012).
9. For the constitution of Slovakia, see [https://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/lo00000\\_.html](https://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/lo00000_.html).
10. Which historical institutionalists would link root-wise to the previous regime.

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