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SHAPING QUALITY OF LIFE IN SLOVAKIA AFTER EU ACCESSION²

Abstract

Quality of life is one of the most frequently mentioned issues in today's Europe. It is used as a measuring criterion for assessing the economic development of a society, but has also become synonymous with the challenge to ensure a decent life for all the EU citizens. Quality of life can be applied both to society as a whole and to individual persons, or to specific areas of life. Consumption is an important component of quality of life. From a microeconomic perspective, the level of consumption does not only indicate the degree in which human needs are met. Its structure and level are a significant factor influencing the quality of life. If the quality of life is monitored in terms of consumption, its existential side is evaluated using three spheres, namely the sphere of non-working time, leisure time and cross-cutting areas. The present contribution focuses on the analysis of these spheres and offers an assessment of the quality of life of Slovak households after joining the EU. The aim of the paper is to depict the changes in life quality after joining the EU, as well as to provide a prediction of possible developments in this area.

Key words: quality of life, consumption, model of consumption, quality life model, spheres of quality of life, indicators of life quality

KSZTAŁTOWANIE JAKOŚCI ŻYCIA NA SŁOWACJI PO AKCESJI DO UE

Streszczenie

Pojęcie *jakość życia* ma wiele znaczeń. Jest ono używane przy określaniu poziomu rozwoju gospodarczego danego społeczeństwa, a także jest traktowane jako wyzwanie do podnoszenia poziomu jakości życia, umożliwiające godnie żyć każdemu z obywateli UE. Zjawisko to możemy odnieść do całego społeczeństwa bądź też do konkretnej jednostki lub konkretnego obszaru. Jednym z ważniejszych elementów, decydujących o jakości życia, jest konsumpcja. Z makroekonomicznego punktu widzenia nie tylko ważny jest stopień nasycenia potrzeb człowieka, ale również struktura i poziom związany z ich zaspokojeniem. Celem niniejszego opracowania jest opis jakości życia gospodarstw domowych na Słowacji po wejściu do UE.

Słowa kluczowe: jakość życia, konsumpcja, model konsumpcji, model jakości życia, wskaźniki jakości życia

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² The report is part of scientific project VEGA no. 1/0368/14 (KET NHF) “Heterodox and orthodox approaches in economic theory and possibilities of their use in solving economic problems of today (with emphasis on global economic crisis)”.

Introduction

The current quality of life in Slovak households is the result of a long-term process of creating socio-economic, social, political and other conditions in society. Slovakia is a country that, in the past two decades, has undergone major political and economic changes which have had a significant impact on the quality of life of our residents. As the most significant changes can be regarded the transformation process, entering the EU and entering the EMU.

The transformation of the Slovak economy into a market economy triggered the process of considerable stratification of our society. Although many households have experienced an improvement of their living standards, most of Slovakia's population face a socio-economic situation which means a drastic reduction in the quality of life.

After Slovakia had entered the EU, the quality of life of our households began to be assessed and evaluated in a wider European context, which indicated that Slovak households lagged far behind the developed countries of the EU in terms of their standard of living. The integration process propelled us onto a path of copying the developed countries, where the level of quality of life is founded on the basis of technological innovation and higher economic performance, and is mainly influenced by the material status, which in these countries guarantees a high degree of material security. This trend in Slovakia is not fully implemented; the enhancement of life quality is occurring in a highly inconsistent and non-homogenous manner.

The current quality of life of the majority of Slovak population is a compromise between relatively limited real possibilities and relatively large aspirations and needs. The discrepancies between possibilities and aspirations are indeed getting smaller, which can be assessed as a positive phenomenon, but for the greater part of our population, the structure of consumption and the level of quality of life still lag far behind those of the developed countries.

1. Definition of quality of life

A systematic review of quality of life was conducted in the second half of the previous century, when economists, sociologists and politicians started to show interest in this concept. Snoek attributed the introduction of the notion into professional discussions to Ordwayovi and Osborn, who used the term in 1953 in the context of highlighting the ecological dangers of unlimited economic growth³.

A vital role in research into the concept was played by Galbraith, who treated quality of life as a counterbalance to the mass consumerism of the affluent American society of the 1960s, thus highlighting the importance of this notion⁴. He wrote

³ F. J. Snoek, *Quality of Life: A Closer Look at Measuring Patients' Well-Being*, "Diabetes Spectrum" 2000, Vol. 13, <http://journal.diabetes.org/diabetesspectrum>, retrieved 20.04.2014.

⁴ J. K. Galbraith, *Společnost' hojnosti*, Svoboda, Praha 1967.

about a mass phenomenon which diverts people from activities that might contribute to their development and orients them to meaningless consumption.

At that time, quality of life was used in relation to the criticism of mass consumption but also in relation to the evolution of society, i.e. the anticipated shift from materialist to post-materialist values and a search for the meaning of life which gives priority to self-reflection. According to Rostow, the stage of high mass consumption should be followed by a search for new quality of life⁵.

Although the debate about the meaning and content of the concept in question has a justification in the theoretical and empirical areas, no adequate response to mass consumption has been identified as yet. This does not mean that the problem of mass consumption and its impact on the quality of life in advanced economies does not exist. It has just acquired new forms and is accompanied by the new challenges of today.

Among such challenges is a new concept of consumption, the so-called productive consumption, and its role in meeting the needs of individuals wishing to develop their personal and professional skills. In this context, the productive components of consumption could play an important role in shaping the quality of life in terms of sustainable development of developed countries but also in terms of ensuring a certain level of quality of life for the rest of the world so that the achieved quality of life could become an indicator of a decent life of the entire global population.

With the deepening knowledge about quality of life and its diverse perceptions, numerous definitions of the terms have been created, of which we select several definitions ranging from subjective feelings of experiencing life to understanding the quality of life as a set of objective criteria for the life of an individual or of a social group.

In the broadest meaning, quality of life can be defined as a specific, achieved standard of human life, which takes into account important social values and goals. According to WHO experts, quality of life is defined as “the perception of one’s own position in life in the context of culture and value judgments with regard to life goals, expectations, standards and concerns”⁶. Quality of life is defined as individual perception of one’s own life situation in relation to certain cultures, value systems or expectations.

Quality of life is often characterized as a multidimensional notion, because it captures the material, spiritual, cultural, social, political, family and other aspects of life, and also has its internal dimension. In this context, Massam describes quality of life as a product of interplay between social, health, economic and environmental conditions that affect human and social development⁷.

⁵ W. W. Rostow, *Politics and the Stages of Growth*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1971 citované podľa: “Způsob života společnosti II”, [w:] *Zbornik prispevkov UFAS ČSAV*, Praha 1982.

⁶ WHOQoL, *Measuring quality of life*, World Health Organization, Geneva 1997.

⁷ B. H. Massam, *Quality of life: public planning and private living*, “Progress in Planning” 2002, Vol. 58, No. 3.

Thirion understands quality of life as a result of interrelated conditions which include fair and equal access to available social resources, recognition of human dignity, recognition of diversity, personal and collective autonomy and responsible participation⁸.

According to Tokárová, quality of life can be established and interpreted by means of three groups of indicators (social indicators, economic indicators and indicators of so-called subjective psychological well-being) that apply to the respective sub-domains of quality of life and are connected by economic, socio-psychological, sociological, environmental and other bonds⁹.

Laluha defines quality of life as historically contingent upon the level of life processes in which a person or society reproduces and develops its existence. This view stems from the fact that man is a biosocial entity that has an individual structure of needs and value orientations¹⁰. Since life processes (work, family, leisure activities etc.) of every individual take place in specific circumstances and living conditions, which may be more or less favourable, a very important part is played by an active attitude of an individual.

A significant shift in the opinions regarding the quality of life was brought by the report on the measurement of economic performance and social progress drafted by Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi, which expresses the need for better interpretation of statistical data and indicators of quality of life. Quality of life is defined in terms of those aspects of life that contribute to human prosperity using available economic resources. According to these authors, quality of life depends on objective conditions and the capabilities of people¹¹.

The OECD Compendium of indicators of economic and social progress (2011) also deals with quality of life, saying that it is necessary to distinguish between material conditions and quality of life. Material conditions of life are seen as economic well-being, whereas quality of life is defined as a set of non-financial, non-monetary attributes of individuals that determine their life opportunities and life chances, and its values vary across cultures and contexts.

The definition of life quality presented at the OECD conference in Paris (October 2011) took into account the following eight dimensions: material well-being, health, education, personal activities, political opinion and governance, social relationships and boundaries, environmental conditions, and personal and economic uncertainty.

⁸ S. Thirion, *Social cohesion indicators and the contribution of a solidarity – based economy*, “Trends in Social Cohesion” 2004, No. 12.

⁹ A. Tokárová, *K metodologickým otázkam výskumu a hodnotenia kvality života*, [w:] *Kvalita života v kontexte globalizácie a výkonnej spoločnosti*, Prešov 2005.

¹⁰ I. Laluha, *Kvalita života*, [w:] V. Stanek a kol., *Sociálna politika*, Sprint dva, Bratislava 2008.

¹¹ J. E. Stiglitz, A. Sen, J. O. Fitoussi, *Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress*, 2009, http://www.stiglitz-sen-litoussi.fr/documents/rapport_anglais.pdf, retrieved 20.04.2014.

Eurostat also investigates the dimensions of quality of life, taking into account the following constituent parts of the notion in question: material standard of living, health, education, personal activities, political opinion and ruling power, social connections, environmental conditions, personal insecurity, and economic uncertainty.

Although the views on the dimensions of quality of life seem quite uniform nowadays, the scales and criteria for the evaluation of each dimension in the general model still remain an open issue.

Currently there is no uniform opinion on the content of the concept of quality of life. It is still an abstract and complex concept whose definition requires a multidisciplinary approach and cooperation of several disciplines. Research into quality of life from the point of view of single sciences uses different methods of examination and results in fundamentally different theoretical definitions of that category. The varying approaches to the investigation of the notion have led to a number of interpretations, and therefore the actual content of the term is not particularly clearly and uniformly defined.

The diversity of opinions on the definition of quality of life and different methodological approaches to its quantification stem mainly from the selected points of view in this category. Scientific studies offer different methods of examining the quality of life and its measurement tools. Their selection and use depend on the content of this concept, chosen areas (dimensions), as well as the purpose which the results will serve.

2. Quality of life and consumption

If quality of life is associated with innovation and modernization of the structure of needs, along with the possibility of their satisfaction in society, it means that it is analyzed in terms of consumption. Examining quality of life in the context of consumption has both a historical and intrinsic justification – from the 1960s, quality of life has been associated with consumption.

Quality of life is perceived, on the one hand, as an expression of the desires of man for a better and fairer life, and on the other hand with consumption as its inherent part. Although consumption is an important component and a natural part of life quality, they are not synonymous. There is a very important interaction between quality of life and consumption. The latter does not only concern the degree of needs satisfaction, but its structure and level are an important factors in moulding the quality of life. In order to reach a relatively high quality of life, a balanced relationship between consumption and quality of life should be established. Focusing only on the material side of consumption, reflected by the trend towards meaningless consumerism, can be described as an adverse development.

The basis for the solution of the mentioned relationship should be the achievement of such consumption patterns and quality of life that would contribute to the fulfilment of not merely the reproductive but mainly the developmental needs and human values. This trend in real life activities of our households is not well con-

tained. In certain extreme situations, for example in emergencies, consumption can have a detrimental effect. In general terms, a functional balance between consumption and quality of life is considered to be the desirable state.

The main five components of life quality comprise: the needs, living conditions, social environment, value orientations and life activities¹². A person's needs are a pivotal category: it is the satisfaction of needs that creates impulses for the emergence of new needs of a diverse nature. Meeting the needs is one of the main priorities of human existence, but also of the functioning of the economy. The degree in which people's needs are met testifies to the economic maturity of a society, the standard of living of its individual members, and also reflects the quality of their lives.

In relation to quality of life, consumption is irreplaceable because it reflects the material side of the needs and desires of a person. Comparison of data on the quality of life of households in relation to their consumption creates an image of the existential quality of life. For this purpose, monetary expenditures of households are used, according to the basic spheres of lifestyle, i.e. in division into work time, leisure time and other expenditures¹³.

The structural composition of expenditures on leisure time is dominated by activities that are focused on meeting the basic material and reproductive needs. These consist of expenditure on food and non-alcoholic beverages, alcoholic beverages and tobacco, clothing and footwear, housing, water, gas and electricity, furniture and household equipment as well as health. The second sphere of quality of life is leisure time, generally seen as the time of day when a person focuses on matters of their choice and pursues such activities which contribute to relaxation, self-realization and self-improvement. Here, expenditure patterns consist of recreation and culture, education, hotels, cafes and restaurants. The third sphere of quality of life regards cross-sectional areas that include other activities from overlapping spheres of life, contributing to the modernization of lifestyle. In terms of expenditures, this area comprises expenditures on transport, communications and various services.

Table 1. Cash expenditures of households in Slovakia by spheres of quality of life in %

Quality of life spheres	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Non-working sector	62.8	62.3	61.8	61.7	61.5	62.1	61.9	61.8	61.9
Sphere of leisure time	16.6	17.0	17.3	17.5	17.6	16.8	16.9	16.5	16.5
Cross-sectional areas	20.6	20.7	20.9	20.8	20.9	21.1	21.2	21.7	21.6

Source: collected and calculated from the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, 2013, <http://slovak.statistics.sk/>, retrieved 20.04.2014

¹² I. Lалуha, op. cit.

¹³ V. Holková, I. Láluha, *Nerovnosti kvality života domácností Slovenskej republiky z pohľadu ich spotreby*, "Nová Ekonomika" 2009, č. 4.

The data in Table 1 indicate that the cash expenditures of households Slovak by defined spheres of quality are allocated primarily to non-working time, express a high financial demand of meeting the basic needs. Expenditures on leisure time are very low and have been declining since 2008, while spending on modernization of lifestyle is insufficient. The low level of expenditures on the cross-sectional area suggests limited opportunities of our citizens to improve the standard of their lives.

On the basis of expenditures on those spheres of quality of life, we can distinguish three models of consumer behaviour of our households, namely: economical, luxurious and restorative¹⁴. The majority of Slovak households are characterized by economical patterns of consumption and the resulting reproductive model of quality of life, which is aimed at meeting the basic needs and requirements, is a manifestation of postponed consumer aspirations and lack of personal development of household members. This model of consumption limits the improving of the quality of life in our households, as evidenced by a relatively high proportion of expenditure on leisure time.

To measure quality of life we can use quite a large number of indicators with different explanatory values. The best known and most widely used indicator is the Human Development Index (HDI), which makes it possible to express quality of life in a broader context, to monitor its objective side.

Table 2. Development of HDI in selected countries since 2006

Country	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
EU-28	0.850	0.855	0.858	0.857	0.860	0.862	0.862
Germany	0.905	0.907	0.909	0.914	0.916	0.919	0.920
Slovakia	0.821	0.830	0.833	0.833	0.836	0.838	0.840

Source: *Human Development Report 2013. The Rise of the South: Human Progress in a Diverse World*, United Nations Development Programme, New York 2013

The data in Table 2 show that the quality of life in Slovakia during the studied period increased, but in each year, our country had a lower HDI than the EU-28 average and lags far behind Germany. In the global ranking for 2012, we ranked in the 35th position and Germany in the 5th position.

Another possibility to assess quality of life is offered by the Happy Planet Index (HPI), which involves measuring the effectiveness of the welfare level obtained per unit of environmental impact. It shows the development of a country in the context of real ecological limits. The index contains three separate indicators: ecological footprint, life satisfaction and life expectancy. An increasing value of HPI means that a country is better able to use its limited natural resources to enhance the welfare of its inhabitants. If the well-being of a country is achieved at a high cost to the environment, the HPI value is low.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

Table 3. Development of HPI and its indicators in selected countries in years 2006, 2009 and 2012

Country	HPI			Ecological footprint			Satisfaction with life			Life expectancy		
	2006	2009	2012	2006	2009	2012	2006	2009	2012	2006	2009	2012
EU-28	39.6	42.3	40.9	4.7	4.8	5.1	6.5	6.9	6.2	76.6	77.0	78.3
Germany	43.8	48.1	47.2	4.8	4.2	4.6	7.2	7.2	6.7	78.7	79.1	80.4
Slovakia	35.8	43.5	40.1	3.6	3.3	4.7	5.4	6.1	6.1	74.0	74.2	75.4

Source: Happy Planet Index 2014, <http://www.happyplanetindex.org/>, retrieved 20.04.2014

The assessment of quality of life by means of the HPI shows that Slovakia has a significantly lower value of this index than Germany, and is slightly behind the EU-28 average. Based on these data, we can conclude that our living standards are worse than those in Germany. However, if we take into account the indicator of life satisfaction, we find that in Germany, life satisfaction decreases, whereas Slovakia retains the same level of life satisfaction.

3. Assumptions and starting points of improving the quality of life in Slovakia

One of the trends in changes of life quality in the long run could be the trend observed among the Slovak population to spread desired changes in consumption patterns, which would lead to an improvement in quality of life and overall development of the people, and thus to the development of the spiritual aspect of human life. It seems to be a realistic prospect to create economic conditions that would ensure a dynamic growth of household incomes. If this is attained, the following changes can be expected:

- the reproduction model of quality of life will no longer be dominant; the elements of the development model will gradually become more dominant: the model that applies mainly to the middle and upper part of the middle class;
- social basis of the restorative consumption pattern will be narrower, part of the population will move into the standby consumption model;
- social basis of prestigious and luxury models and consumer activities will broaden.

From the viewpoint of improving quality of life, such changes in consumption patterns should therefore take place that would contribute to the meeting of material and spiritual needs that would, in turn, lead to the development of the creative potential of our citizens, their self-realization and that would boost their well-being and happiness.

The key prerequisite for this vision of the quality of life of the population of the Slovak Republic is, in our opinion, economic growth and increased household incomes, which would lead to the creation of real material conditions for the gradual

transfer of the population from the reproductive model of quality of life and temporary preferences of the consumer trends to the so-called development model of quality of life.

Focusing on the development model of quality of life also assumes:

- changes in value orientations;
- balance between materialist and post-materialist values;
- penetration of technology into everyday activities and extension of the necessary non-working time;
- changes in the scope and content of free time, increased spending on education and culture;
- rational, healthy lifestyle;
- greener quality of life.

The interplay between these elements of quality of life is a motivational impulse for the momentum of the entire society. The Slovak society, despite various current assessments of its condition, is able to become involved in those transformations, because the current potential of life quality for Slovak households creates the pre-conditions. That alone, however, is not sufficient. For the practical realization of the trend of improving quality of life in terms of approaching the standards enjoyed by the citizens of developed EU countries, it is first necessary to substantially increase investment in science and research, to significantly increase investment in all forms of education, to satisfy the growing demand for the development of human resources and human capital in terms of global competition, which requires a comprehensive improvement of the infrastructure that our population needs in their everyday lives.

The aforementioned attempts at improving life quality and the transition from the reproductive to the development model of quality of life are based on the premise that a dynamic economic growth would increase the number of available jobs, lead to improved incomes and reduce social inequalities. In the selection of specific measures of economic and social policies aimed at ensuring the growth of the quality of life of our population, it is important to take into account the current state of the economy, the financial and capital situation of our households, as well as the positive and negative expectations of the future developments of the Slovak economy. Due to the global crisis and its negative impact on the Slovak economy, we can assume that the process of improving the overall quality of life of our households is likely to be slower for a transitional period.

Conclusions

The quality of life of the Slovak society is essentially part of European civilization, where the humanistic traditions of the European model paved the way for multicultural coexistence. We can conclude that it is indeed in tune with the fundamentals of the European model of quality of life that applies and specifies the subtype of the variety, but when compared with the standards of the developed countries of the

EU, the level of the quality of life in Slovakia fails to meet social expectations. This follows from our analysis, according to which the expenses of Slovak households are unacceptably high in the sphere of non-working time. About 61% of total expenditures are spent on non-working time, reflecting the high costs of meeting the basic needs. Our citizens spend only about 16% of their total expenditures on leisure time activities. This means that the majority of Slovak households are located in the reproductive model of quality of life, which is a manifestation of protracted consumer aspirations and lack of personal development of the members of our population. Meeting the needs of everyday life is very time-consuming and physically exhausting, so in the sphere of free time, people are more oriented towards leisure and less intensive forms of spending time.

In the process of improving quality of life, we must consciously strive for orientation of the majority of our households on the development model, focusing on both the material and spiritual needs, in order to satisfy not only the basic needs, but also to improve our compatriots and their lifestyles. In practical terms, this implies a shift in the composition of our households' expenditures in towards a significant reduction in resources spent on non-work time and an increase in expenditures on leisure time, and particularly on cross-sectional areas. Quality of life cannot therefore be merely a reflection of changes in the economy. It should also contribute to the development of human capital and thus to the development of the economy.

Enhancing the quality of life in Slovakia is a challenge that must be associated with the need to settle complex socio-economic problems, both at the micro and macro level. Our policy and practice attaches little attention to this problematic issue, despite the fact that in the EU, quality of life is declared as a criterion value of successful economic and social policies, serves as a target of economic development of a society, and has become a central notion of the new challenge to ensure a decent life for people in the EU.

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