



Weekly Briefing

Slovakia social briefing:
Two days determining the following months
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Only two September days has brought in Slovakia two big topics. On September 2, children returned to school after a break of about four months. On September 3, Slovakia learned the (almost) final verdict in the biggest case of these days - the murder of an investigative journalist. Only two days determined the autumn moods in the society.

The beginning of September also brought the beginning of a new school and academic year. However, this one will be very different from what we have been used to so far. The coronavirus pandemic is also gaining momentum in Slovakia, although at the beginning of the summer holidays it seemed that even after the relaxation of measures, the number of infected is not rapidly rising. The first of September brought a tightening of measures as well as the change in the list of countries that Slovakia considers dangerous. However, 800,000 primary and secondary school pupils entered the schools on the 2nd of September. The pandemic pointed out the shortcomings of education in Slovakia, which were fully manifested.

The transition to online education in the spring has shown that schools are not ready for distance learning. One of the biggest problems was the use of online learning platforms- both by the teachers as well as pupils and students. In some cases, even the school itself does not have access to the full use of these platforms. In addition, this form of teaching pointed to significant social differences between students, as there are still many families in Slovakia who do not have access to the Internet. It is not just about socially excluded communities. The problem simply arises even if the parents remain to work at home and the family, for example with more children, does not have enough computers for the parents to work and the children to learn at the same time. Therefore, the beginning of the school year is celebrated more by the parents, because the working parent has no way to provide care and education for the child during working hours.

The full-time form of teaching is important for children mainly because of the social ties they acquire at school. It has also been shown that children learn more slowly at home and are unable to concentrate and understand the curriculum. In addition, the content of teaching is still full of useless data and information, while there is still a lack of a form that would create more association for children. It has also been shown that schools lack the teaching of practical information. Moreover, to breaking the social ties, the increase in domestic violence was also a very negative phenomenon associated with distance education. Since the children spent most

of their time at home, they could not avoid this violence. Furthermore, due to the pandemic, such families were denied any escape opportunities, as most day centres had to be closed.

The return of children to school is perceived by parents almost exclusively positively, but opinions differ on the use of face masks on children during classes. However, in order to protect health, children must wear a face mask throughout the school, and the exception no longer applies to medical diagnoses such as asthma. Despite the joy of parents and children in the first and second level of education, the situation is slightly different at universities. Slovak students start the winter semester in usual time, but foreign students face restrictions in the form of mandatory tests or quarantine. Student exchange programs such as Erasmus are proving problematic. Many Slovak students are considering traveling abroad due to the deteriorating epidemiological situation and prefer to move their mobilities to the summer semester. In this case, domestic measures are often a decisive factor, which would prevent or limit the student's potential return home if he/she returns from the so-called red (dangerous) country.

To facilitate the functioning of schools and maintain health protection, the Minister of Education introduced the so-called traffic light with three phases. The green phase represents a state where the school has no suspicious or positive students or teachers. School facilities in the green phase will operate in standard mode. The orange phase captures a situation where a school has a suspicious student or employee. Schools follow stricter hygiene measures at this stage. The red phase contains a list of measures in case of several confirmed cases among pupils or staff. In this case, it is already moving to distance education. The measures apply to each school separately, so there is no talk of closing schools across the board. When the children start school, the parents must submit declaration, in which they will answer whether their child has been outside Slovakia since 17 August or has participated in a mass event. Otherwise, the child will not be allowed to start school. Despite well-thought-out epidemiological measures, we will be able to assess the impact of the beginning of school attendance on the development of the pandemic in the third week of teaching at the earliest.

Apart from the discussion on the new school year, September also brought a message that disappointed the whole of Slovakia. After almost a month's adjournment, the criminal court handed down a verdict in the murder of a journalist and his girlfriend. The main suspects in ordering the murder were acquitted. The perpetrators of the murder were sentenced to 25 years in prison for the act. Website Aktuality. sk, for which the journalist worked, informs that the suspects were acquitted based on insufficient evidence, because key evidence can be identified as circumstantial. Therefore, on the basis of circumstantial evidence, it is not possible to confirm the guilt of the suspects.

The acquittal of the accused was based on the application of the principle *in dubio pro reo*, i.e. in doubt in favour of the accused. This rule means that if there are reasonable doubts about the guilt of the defendant after the taking of evidence, which cannot be removed by taking other available evidence, a decision must be made in favour of the defendant and acquitted. The application of the principle *in dubio pro reo* resulting from a provision of the Code of Criminal Procedure is possible only if the doubts which arose in the criminal proceedings about a fact persist even after all available evidence has been taken and evaluated. The court is therefore required to take all the evidence related to the case gathered in the pre-trial proceedings and to settle that evidence in the decision.

On the same day, the highest constitutional officials, the media and society, commented on the verdict. The lawyer of the family of the murdered journalist noted that the court based the judgment in the case of the executor on the testimony of a person whose statement he did not consider credible in the case of proving guilt by the accused client. The Minister of the Interior was also disappointed with the verdict and expressed absolute determination to do everything possible to ensure that the police always have their hands untied for honest work.

The judgment in the case provoked contradictory reactions in the society as well. Several find it controversial that two representatives of the Senate overlooked the president of the Senate, who studied the whole documentation and therefore had the most comprehensive information on the case. However, after the verdict was handed down, several public officials called on the society to respect the Senate's decision. They drew attention to respect for the court's decision and called for the work of the judges who took part in the case to be trusted.

Transparency International considers the judgment to be a key test of the Slovak judiciary. According to the organization, justice either failed fatally when, despite the series of (albeit indirect) evidence it gathered, or vice versa - despite strong public pressure, it did not succumb to misrepresentations and delivered a fair verdict. Anyway, neither the public, nor the parents of the victims got to know, who ordered the murder. However, the decision of the court of first instance is not final. The prosecutor of the Office of the Special Prosecutor's Office lodged an appeal against the judgment of the Senate of the Specialized Criminal Court in Pezinok, and complaints were also lodged by the victims' representatives.

In the shadow of the events of the new school year and the verdict in the biggest case of recent years, there is a debate about the state of culture and the effects of the crisis not only on artists, but also on cultural workers. In its open letter, the Association of Cultural Institutions of Slovak Towns and Municipalities called on the Government of the Slovak Republic to

provide urgent assistance to employees of local and regional culture. Local and regional culture determines most of the cultural offer in the Slovak Republic. As an example, most single-screen cinemas are operated by local culture houses. They participate in the creation of spaces for theatrical performances, they ensure the role of galleries and theatre stands. Among other things, they perform cultural and educational activities. The association has long pointed to the government's lack of interest in local culture, and at the time of the coronation crisis, this disinterest can be fatal. The association therefore demands that the measures prepared by the government for the private sector also apply to workers in the local culture. Namely, it is, for example, the possibility of obtaining an 80% contribution to employees' wages. The summer has also brought about a relaxation of measures for the cultural sector, but the key will be autumn, which will show whether the measures will be tightened again.