Current Problems of Social Capital, Civil Society and Subjective Well-Being in Slovak Republic

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Abstract: The paper introduces the concept of social capital and deals with the basic relationships within this concept. There has been considerable and increasing interest in social capital theory in recent years, evidenced by its application to various disciplines and numerous subject areas. Existing studies have suggested that social capital has considerable benefits for a range of economic and sociological outcomes. These purported benefits and the concept behind social capital, are not new but rooted in the work of early economic and sociologic thinkers. Social capital refers to connections among individuals - social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. Social capital draws attention to the fact that civic foundation is most effective when embedded in a network of reciprocal social relations. Interaction enables people to build communities and thus form a social structure. A sense of belonging and a personal experience of social networks (and the relationships of trust and tolerance, which result from it) can be a great help for people. The paper further deals with the current problems of civil society in Slovak Republic and illustrates the state of the society using another valuable indicator - subjective well-being.

Key words: Social capital • Civil society • Volunteering • Community • Subjective well-being

INTRODUCTION

In recent years we are experiencing a growth of interest in studying the theory of social capital, a fact that is demonstrated by the use of this term in various areas and scientific fields. This interest stems from the very nature of this concept that integrates sociology and economics and combines these disciplines with a wide range of ideas, including civil traditions, civic engagement and social cohesion. Existing studies suggest that social capital has significant benefits for a variety of economic and sociological outcomes. These advantages of the concept of social capital are not new, but have their roots in the early work of economic and sociological thinkers. Claridge (2004) states that the list of authors who are responsible for the popularity of social capital issues includes Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman and Robert Putnam [1, 2, 3].

The Concept of Social Capital: Robert Putnam describes social capital as a set of features of social organizations, such as trust, norms and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions [4]. Social capital is seen as a win-win for the individual and the community. According to Bauman the concept of social capital can be understood as access to people in charge who have the items and services required by the individual [5].

The term "social capital" has been around for several decades and is found in the works of several authors. One of the first definitions of the social capital concept was provided by Pierre Bourdieu (1998). He refers to social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintances and recognition" [6, 7]. His treatment of this concept is instrumental, focusing on the benefits to individuals through participation in the group and sociability with intentional structures in order to create this resource.

The concept of social capital is significant also within the field of social work. For example, Healy and Hampshire (2002) introduce a synergy model of social capital formation that incorporates a dual focus on local
community networks and the role of the institutions of government, non-government agencies and business in the creation of social capital. They are thus trying to apply this model for social work practice [8].

Emphasis on the word "capital" in its definition stresses Lin (2001) when social capital is defined as an investment in social relations with the expected return on the marketplace” [9], said the market chosen for analysis may be economic, political, labor or community. Social capital, or resources accessed through connections and relations, is therefore critical (along with human capital, or what a person or organization actually possesses) in achieving goals for individuals, social groups, organizations and communities.

Similarly, Cox (in: Bullen, Onyx, 1995) differentiates between the financial, physical, human and social capital, stating that: “There has been too little attention paid to social capital. Social capital refers to the processes between people, which establish networks, norms, social trust and facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit (…) Social capital is also appropriate because it can be measured and quantified so we can distribute its benefits and avoid its losses” [10]. These processes are also known in the Anglo-Saxon literature as “social fabric” or “social glue,” but one can also use the term “capital” because it invests the concept with the reflected status from other forms of capital. R. Putnam introduces this idea: “Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to the properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called “civic virtue.” The difference is that “social capital” calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a sense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital” [4].

In other words, interaction enables people to build communities, to commit themselves to each other and to knit the social fabric. A sense of belonging and the concrete experience of social networks (and the relationships of trust and tolerance that can be involved) can, it is argued, bring great benefits to people [11]. These processes have been observed by French historian and politician Alexis de Tocqueville, whose book *Democracy in America* is considered a classic work of modern historiography and political science. In this work, Tocqueville described a phenomena he called “habits of the heart” where people watched out for each other for no other apparent reason than what is good for you is good for me [12]. Tocqueville argues that nothing is for Europeans traveling over the United States more surprising, than the absence of what we call government or administration. He further states, that the hand that direct social mechanism is invisible [13]. People maintained strong family ties; families, communities and voluntary associations were imbued with spiritual and moral values of their members. Through these ties Americans were not only able to create an atmosphere of closeness and interdependence, but also to cope with many problems that are solved by the government today [14]. American sociologists successor to Tocqueville discovered a wide range of empirical evidence that the quality of public life and social institutions are actually strongly influenced by norms and networks of civic engagement [15]. Researchers in areas such as education, urban poverty, unemployment, fight against crime and drug abuse and even health have discovered that successful outcomes are more likely in civic community involvement. In these areas, the application of nationwide solutions may not be the socially advantageous. People in the region who cope with the particular problem (community members) can create different steps of planning and applying specific solutions [16]. Sociologists proposed as a solution the concept of already defined social capital.

Robert Putnam focused on the research of social capital in American society. In the first phase of exploration he began with the following thesis: The quality of public life and the performance of social institutions (and not only in America) are…powerfully influenced by norms and networks of civic engagement” [11]. Putnam demonstrated on a range of indicators of civic engagement including voting, political participation, newspaper readership and participation in local associations that there were serious grounds for concern. It appeared that America’s social capital was in decline. Important for the American agenda should be a question of how to reverse these negative trends in social connections, thus restoring civic engagement and civic trust [11]. This problem is also illustrated by the simple fact that since the sixties there was a relatively minor number of voluntary organizations established and many of the nearly 40 nationwide volunteer federations, which flourished in the mid-twentieth century have ceased to exist or had a rapid loss of membership [17]. Spontaneity and human approach was largely replaced bureaucracy [14].
Putnam went on and followed up with a comprehensive exploration of a substantial array of data sources. For the first time in civic engagement and social connectedness he has been able to prove, that for example, in the last three decades of the twentieth century there has been significant progress in three areas, namely in the field of political and civic engagement, informal social ties and areas of tolerance and trust [15]. He went on to examine the possible reasons for this decline. Crucially, he was able to demonstrate that some favorite candidates for blame could not be regarded as significant. Residential mobility had actually been declining for the last half of the century. Time pressure, especially on two-career families, could only be a marginal candidate. The success of two-career families is ultimately a result of the capabilities of couples that are not quite common in the population [18]. Nevertheless, we can already identify some known issues in particular: changes in family structure (more and more people living alone - are possible element common example of how civic engagement is not well designed for single people and childless) or electronic entertainment (in particular television profoundly privatized leisure time). The time we spend watching television is a direct drain upon involvement in groups and social capital building activities [4].

Studies of social capital and civic engagement serve as one of the starting point when examining volunteering. Volunteering is generally considered as a contribution to social capital. There are studies by different authors that demonstrate that volunteering is essential for social capital, because it creates social networks outside the family [19].

Building on Putnam's findings questions arise when evaluating the decline of social capital in two areas - family environment and electronic entertainment:

If we study changes in the family structure, as one of the ways to resolve these could serve theresults of studies that show, that intermediaries for volunteering is also the fact that the volunteer has family and friends who support volunteering as a meaningful activity [20].

In the context of electronic entertainment it is interesting to examine the example of E-volunteering. This refers to online volunteering, which allows people to carry out any voluntary activities from home or work using advanced technological means. This type of volunteering reduces the amount of time when traveling to an activity and allows flexibility and also reduces the difficulties associated with their travel costs especially in rural areas. Thus, E-volunteering can eliminate some of the barriers volunteer are facing [21]. Rochester and Hutchison (2002) describe specific experience as a part of so-called Dark Horse Venture: Inside Out Projects where one of the projects brought together older people and school children by e-mail. The older people developed skills in using the computer and the children learned about recent social history. The children enjoyed reading what the older people wrote and wanted to maintain contact with them. They also felt that they "understood old people better" since taking part in the project and valued them more as a group within the local community [22]. Is it therefore possible that the E-volunteering can eliminate the decline of social capital that Putnam documented in the form of the development of electronic entertainment? It is questionable as several studies indicate that the positive effects of volunteering seem to be strongest in the performance of such activities where meaningful face-to-face interactions between the client and the volunteer appear [20].

The State of Civil Society and Subjective Well-being in Slovak Republic: Already described, social capital is closely linked to civil society. An ideal civil society can be described as an open, democratic social market society with no place of personal authority, totalitarian modes, violence over people and where full respect of law and moral exists, principles of humanity and justice are exercised by every person [23]. Slovak Republic copes with many problems that are common for most of post-totalitarian countries. Community involvement and strong social ties are common in Western countries from a historical perspective and in post-communist countries this simply is not the case [24]. Under the communist regime the public sector and state were identical terms where the State dominated and interfered into all aspects of society [25].

After the fall of communism, new freedom and opportunities for civic activism and association have opened and new activities started to flourish. New actors – active citizens and their structures – nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other independent bodies – started to play an increasing role in the Slovak society. New sphere of societal life – civil society – has been gaining in its importance [26].

For Slovakia’s civil society, the period 1993 – 1998 can be seen as one of years spent learning, gaining experience and building up the sector. Foreign funding aimed primarily at the building of civil society in Slovakia was made available [27]. But it was also an era of autocratic shift in the governing of the country. Slovak
civil society was therefore shaken from its complacency to mobilize against this new threat. Slovak NGOs and Slovak civil society had to unite and fight against principles of autocracy [28].

During the second period (1998 – 2004) the domestic political situation had improved significantly due to the change of government. Consequently, Slovakia found itself back on track towards the EU and became an OECD member. Slovakia transformed itself from recipient to donor.


Many authors point out that totalitarian regimes cancelled the separation of the society from state, subjugated the civil society to the state and excluded the validity of many rights and freedoms existing before the state and being independent on it [29]. In this extreme form of political society, the societal organizations were not the autonomous expression of interests but the additional tool of their amelioration and supervision. The restoration of the autonomy of the individual and civil society has become the main task in preventing the expansionism of the state, though it does not express that such a danger is connected only with state, because its source also exists in a civil society. State can then only be used as a kind of power instrument. Therefore the restoration of civil society also has this qualitative dimension—it requires the restoration of democratic citizenship and civil virtues [30]. In civil society a freely acting individual is dependable on the results of his/her work and exchanging them by his/her will [31].

Some see the evolution of Slovakia in this process as successful, stating that the creation of a democratic civil society, built upon involvement of a relatively large group of civic activists and strong and politically independent civic communities and associations, is what is now known as the Slovak story. And in this way, the Slovak Republic as a democratic state – from your perspective, a small country in the center of Europe – became a success story not only in Europe [32].

However, civil society in Slovakia faces several constraints and challenges and lacks a supportive legal and fiscal environment. The economic and financial crisis continues to hit the sector hard [33]. A look on empirical data shows many difficulties and obstacles. In his research on civil society M. M. Howard presents empirical findings that constitute the crucial “baseline,” a comparative measure of participation in voluntary organizations across a wide set of countries. The results show that post-communist countries are almost exclusively grouped at the lowest levels of organizational membership. Moreover levels of membership in post-communist countries have declined significantly, especially when compared to those in the post-authoritarian countries. With the partial exception of labor unions, participation in voluntary organizations is much lower in post-communist countries than in the older democracies and the post-authoritarian countries [34]. People may have the idea that only activities that bring material benefits, or rewards, can be considered meaningful [19]. The involvement outside personal interests is thus low. However, the trend in a post-modern world is just the opposite, citizens should be involved in public interest. Social and political networks should be organized horizontally, not hierarchically. Civil society cannot be “instituted” overnight “from above” [35]. To illustrate this phenomenon Putnam’s example of so-called „megachurches“ can be used. These are theological institutions, but religion is not the one and only factor linking their members. The strong ties are based not on theology, but on the emotional bonds to others in small groups. Most of these people are looking for a meaning in their lives, but they also search for friends. The Church therefore operates on a basis of thousands of small groups [4]. And such structure could be used to revive many other organizations and thus to stimulate volunteering not only “from above”, but also in a “bottom-up” direction [36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42].

The important task is to strengthen the civic solidarity, civic participation and integrity. In this context, volunteering is a fundamental phenomenon and its importance in the globalized society of the third millennium will only increase. Volunteering helps the civil society to eliminate negative phenomena at the individual and societal level [43]. The reality of the connection between social inclusion and society is different with specific target groups. From the evolution perspective are the conditions on political level comparable with other European countries [44, 45, 46].

Another good indicator of a healthy society is subjective well-being. The field of subjective well-being (SWB) comprises the scientific analysis of how people evaluate their lives—both at the moment and for longer periods such as for the past year. These evaluations
include people’s emotional reactions to events, their moods and judgments they form about their life satisfaction, fulfillment and satisfaction with domains such as marriage and work [47]. Researchers nowadays are less interested in simply describing the demographic characteristics that correlate with subjective well-being, instead they focus on understanding the processes that underlie happiness [48]. In 2013 there are not enough specific empirical data on subjective well-being available in Slovakia except studies about social disparity or life environment [49]. Considering this current unavailability of specific data on a regional level, we can illustrate the state of subjective wellbeing in Slovak Republic using the Better Life Index studies carried out by OECD for every member state.

Happiness or subjective well-being can be measured in terms of life satisfaction, the presence of positive experiences and feelings and the absence of negative experiences and feelings. Such measures, while subjective, are a useful complement to objective data to compare the quality of life across countries. Life satisfaction measures how people evaluate their life as a whole rather than their current feelings. It captures a reflective assessment of which life circumstances and conditions are important for subjective well-being. When asked to rate their general satisfaction with life on a scale from 0 to 10, Slovaks gave it a 5.9 grade, lower than the OECD average of 6.6. There is little difference in life satisfaction levels between men and women across OECD countries. This is true in the Slovak Republic, where men gave their life a 6.0 grade and women 5.9. Education levels do, however, strongly influence subjective well-being. Whereas people who have only completed primary education in the Slovak Republic have a life satisfaction level of 5.6, this score reaches 6.7 for people with tertiary education. Happiness, or subjective well-being, is also defined as the presence of positive experiences and feelings and/or the absence of negative experiences and feelings. In the Slovak Republic 75% of people reported having more positive experiences in an average day (feelings of rest, pride in accomplishment, enjoyment, etc.) than negative ones (pain, worry, sadness, boredom, etc.). This figure is lower than the OECD average of 80% [50].

**CONCLUSION**

The concept of civil society has played a central role in the recent global debate about the preconditions for democracy and democratization. It is evident that there had been a fundamental shift over the last three decades in such topics as civic engagement, informal social ties, tolerance and trust etc. Some authors argue that the emergence of a global cosmopolitan society will be linked to the revival of ideas and practices of civic culture. In a promise of a global civil society alternative visions can be produced and exchanged. This could be an answer to Robert Putnam’s discussion about social capital and civic engagement.

**REFERENCES**