

Summary Evaluation Report

Findings from the First Qualitative Survey of the Project:

Tearing the Myths about Socialism and the Welfare State

(Bratislava, February 2018)

The first qualitative survey conducted as a part of the *Tearing the Myths about Socialism and the Welfare State* project identified associations that Slovak people attach to the era of socialism of 1948 to 1989. When asked to talk about socialism spontaneously, people mostly produced positive associations. Many of them, especially young people, would however not like to return to the socialism before November 1989.

Conducted by the research agency FOCUS in January 2018, the survey is a part of the more extensive research project titled *Tearing the Myths about Socialism and the Welfare State*. The project is conducted by The Conservative Institute of M. R. Štefánik with the support of The John Templeton Foundation. Results will be used as the background material for a complex study on the Slovak experience with socialism from 1948 to 1989 and two smaller studies: about contemporary welfare state and about socialism myths transfer into the present welfare state. The objective of this survey was to identify associations with socialism as well as to identify how participants see the role of the state in the society.

The FOCUS agency ran four focus groups with four different age groups: 1. Secondary School Students (15 – 19 years), 2. Young People (20 – 35 years), 3. Middle Aged (40 – 55 years), 4. Senior People (56 – 70 years). While the former two groups have had no first-hand experience with living in socialism, the third group had some experience with this system in their childhood or youth, and the oldest group had lived in socialism for as much as one half of their lives.

Group discussions with 31 participants in these four age groups were conducted in January 2018 in the cities of Banská Bystrica and Ružomberok. Any survey using the method of group interviews (Focus Groups) is not representative in its nature. For this reason, it is not possible to generalize the findings to the entire population. It is however possible to use qualitative methods to analyse opinions and experience of participants, and identify spontaneous reactions to what other participants think.

Moderated discussions had three major parts: how participants see the role of the state; the general perception of socialism; and evaluating specific statements about socialism.

How Participants See the State

When discussing the role of the state, a clear majority of participants expressed their beliefs that the healthcare should be freely available to all, and managed by the state. Participants clearly dismissed the idea of significantly reducing health insurance payments and having patients co-pay when undergoing treatment for common ailments.

In addition, there was also strong support for the statement that the state is responsible for providing education to all, from elementary to college/university level. Education should be completely free, according to the prevailing opinion.

In addition, most of the participants believed that pensions should be managed by the state and the present model of pension plans is acceptable. Participants also supported the idea that the state should define the minimum wage. Increasing the minimum wage significantly would however lead to negative impact, most of the participants felt. They expressed opinion that the state should support entrepreneurship and thus create more jobs.

On the other hand, most of the participants do not agree with the assistance to the needy in general, they prefer direct and differentiated approach. Participants had different notions of the role of an individual within the society; the survey did not identify any similarities or patterns. Roles of individuals included compliance with laws and regulations, providing for the family, and helping others.

General Perception of Socialism

The topic was focused on the perception of socialism in general. Participants were asked to freely respond to the question, "What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear the word socialism?". Participants associated socialism mostly with jobs, and the right to or the obligation to work. Further answers that resonated strongly included social welfare and easier access to housing.

According to the prevailing opinion socialism provided social guarantees; and the education and healthcare system also functioned better than today. What resonated strongly was the opinion that human relationships were better during socialism, the society was more coherent, people were less envious of each other.

Negative aspects of the socialist system included limited possibilities to travel, censorship, limited freedoms, or problems related to the distribution of consumer goods.

Participants were given the choice whether they would prefer to live in socialism or in the present day. Answers greatly depended on the age of participants. While younger age groups (secondary school students and young adults up to 35 years) were clearly in favour of the present social system, opinions were more diverse with higher age. The middle-aged group was divided on the topic, and a majority of the older group would prefer living in socialism.

Reasons for preferring the socialist system by elderly participants mostly included economic benefits: more social security (availability of jobs), better healthcare, economic self-sufficiency of the nation, higher quality of groceries, etc. Positive emotions resonated quite strongly in this regard: the feeling of happiness, less stress, less concerns about what the future may bring.

Younger participants would not change their present life for living in socialism although some appreciated the benefits provided by the former regime – especially job security, better healthcare, better human relations. Their reasoning was mostly associated with the feeling of freedom (mostly the freedom of speech, the freedom to travel, and the chance to have control over one's life or to change the things to the better. A part of the youngest group also admitted they could not imagine living in socialism.

Analysis of Responses to Specific Statements about Socialism

As a part of the third topic the participants were asked to provide comments on specific statements that reflected positive perception of socialism, and were formulated either based on the propaganda of the former regime, or based on the myths people still have about that era.

Participants agreed with most of such statements. Out of 16 statements that talked about socialism in the positive light, focus group participants agreed with 13 while disagreed only with three (please see Chart 1 and Figure 1 attached).

In keeping with findings from spontaneous questions, what resonated was the opinion that in socialism there were enough jobs for everyone, and everyone was guaranteed to have a job. Participants also clearly agreed with statements that socialist products were of higher quality and durability, that groceries were more healthful because they contained less additives as they do today, and people used to help one another. These statements were accepted by all age groups.

They were less likely to agree with the notion that socialism led people to more moral behaviour, the healthcare was of higher quality, and people lived longer. The prevailing opinion was that socialism also offered more social justice, state ownership of enterprises prevented profits to flow into the hands of individuals, socialism was an economically sustainable system, and costs of living were lower as they are today.

On the other hand, participants tended to refuse the statement that socialism was a free regime and human rights were observed. Further statements that were met with disagreement were the one claiming that the socialist regime took better care of the environment, and that elections were free and democratic. Such statements were met with different reactions by the participants, and they responded differently across age groups (please see Figure 2 attached).

Distribution of participant reactions to individual statements is shown in the chart (please see the Annex).

About the project

The qualitative survey conducted by FOCUS was a part of the “Tearing the Myths about Socialism and the Welfare State” project run by The Conservative Institute of M. R. Štefánik supported by The John Templeton Foundation.

The objective of the project is to confront myths about socialism and the welfare state that linger in the consciousness of people in Slovakia with reality. The project will include a representative public opinion poll, and a study focused on in-depth analysis of the socialist society in Czechoslovakia over the years 1948 to 1989. The project will also include further research, analyses, discussions, and educational activities.

This release was created based on The FOCUS Agency's Final Report from Qualitative Survey - Focus Groups (January 2018) by:

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