

THE ISSUE OF THE SLOVAK POPULATION AGING

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Abstract

The demographic development in the Member States of the European Union is not favourable. The better situation is not even in the case of Slovakia. The problem of population aging is mainly discussed and dealt by demographers, statisticians and sociologists. These experts explore the issue especially from a theoretical point of view and try to predict possible future demographic development. Their results are further explored and processed by the experts in the field of social work, social services and social policy whose job is to look for possible outcomes and provide the necessary help and assistance to a vulnerable group of the population - the seniors. We find it necessary to contribute to the study of aging population in Slovakia. This idea is followed by our interest in exploring the current situation of the aging of the Slovak population, as the experts working and studying in the field of social policy. The submitted paper focuses on assessment and evaluation of the current state of the demographic development with a particular focus on the situation in the group of seniors. It is a threatened group of individuals for whom it is necessary to create such a social policy that aims to ensure their physical, mental, spiritual and other needs in order to create the conditions for the dignified life in their autumn years.

Key words: population aging, demographic development, seniors, social services, social policy

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Introduction and literature review

One of the most significant social problems faced today is an ageing population, with a significant socioeconomic impact on all of society. The demographic curve in Slovakia has for some time been unfavourable, similar to other member states of the European Union and globally. There are many factors behind this, first in particular a gradual decline in the number of births starting in the mid-1980s, which has become more marked in recent years, but also socio-

political changes and other social conditions appearing over the past two decades that have not always created favourable conditions for young people to start families. Further interventions in the existing system have likewise contributed toward an ageing population. Higher-quality healthcare has contributed toward an increase in life expectancy and as such a rise in the number of the elderly. These and other reasons have driven action such as the ongoing raising of the retirement age because the productive population is not sufficiently high enough to finance social security for seniors. Many other issues sketched out are closely associated with an ageing population. This paper discusses what underlies it, emphasising the situations senior citizens face today.

One of the origins of regional differences impacting socioeconomic development is a decline in populations and their ageing (Špirková, Zúbková, Stehlíková, 2015). An ageing population is a serious social and economic phenomenon which more experts across the entire social spectrum need to address. The issue is being researched by sociologists, demographers and also economists, political scientists, experts in social work and social services, and by consultants. Long-term economic and social aspects of an ageing population have also been discussed, such as by Kačerová and Mládek (2012).

Population figures have seen a long-term negative trend automatically causing the population to age. Bočáková and Kubíčková (2015) write about the necessity of recognising not just the economic aspects of an ageing population, but the social and health aspects, too. The economic impact comes from a lower accumulation of resources to finance retirement pensions, while the social impact results from the need to provide the elderly with social care and access to health care. Korauš (2003) points out that providing social security for the older generation is going to put increasing pressure on the Slovak Republic's social insurance scheme and, unless the population can contribute toward commercial insurance, it will not be possible to cover retirement pensions for seniors. The older population faces, according to Dávideková (2010), increased healthcare demands caused by various diseases associated with senior citizens at certain health stages which require long-term care. This care is provided through social services at different facilities. Pavelková (2013) suggests the importance of thinking, in addition to professional assistance, of about maintaining a high level of humanity and ethics when working with the elderly. Mura and Machyniak (2014) are also inclined to take this approach, adding that

a sense of ethics has to be present in all stakeholders among the public authorities involved in caring for older generations in the population.

An ageing population brings an increasing number of elderly people whom national government and regional self-governments need to look after. This is a challenging task that the national authorities have delegated to regional and especially local governments. Regional and local authorities are required, among other things, to participate in senior citizen care (Mura, Buleca, Horváth, Machyniak, Šebik, 2014) and, for this reason, to draft a Social Development Plan which, as Bočáková (2016) mentions, defines competences and clearly establishes roles in caring for an ageing population. On the other hand, an issue surfaces about whether the delegation of such competences to local government can be possibly ensured under these conditions (Buleca, Mura, 2014).

Care for an ageing population requires social services to be provided to a selected target group composed of the elderly. It is a demanding and especially quite sensitive area in social and family life. The national government has transferred eldercare to individual local governments as part of public administration reforms, putting them in a challenging situation. Currently, there is a growing demand from seniors and their family members for social service facilities, which remain scarce despite the rise of many private establishments. Thus, social services are providing elder assistance at their current stage in life. Apart from the legal definition of the relationship between the elderly and their environment, care and employment (Švec, 2011), ethical values have to play an important role in caring for an ageing population (Dávideková, 2008).

1 Objective, Material and Methods

The phenomenon of an ageing population undoubtedly deserves attention from an interdisciplinary team of experts endeavouring to look at the causes of the situation and, most of all, to outline possible solutions and seeking a way out of it.

This paper aims to evaluate the current situation of an ageing population in Slovakia, focusing specifically on the elderly. When drafting the paper, we relied on data available from the statistical database managed by the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic. Accordingly, secondary professional materials and literary references were also used. In addition to data from the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, it was also necessary to focus on references whose

contents discuss ageing populations, targeting the elderly as a group. We drew not only from book sources, but also from scientific literature registered at science databases.

Our methodological grasp of the studied subject was in line with the stated objective as well as the theme on which this paper focuses. In preparing it, we used research found in the references, basic scientific methods where we proceeded inductively and deductively with analysis and synthesis, and through publicly available, free geographic software designed for demographic analysis. Using an interactive geographic map and other graphical tools, we have attempted to illustrate the current status of the issue at hand.

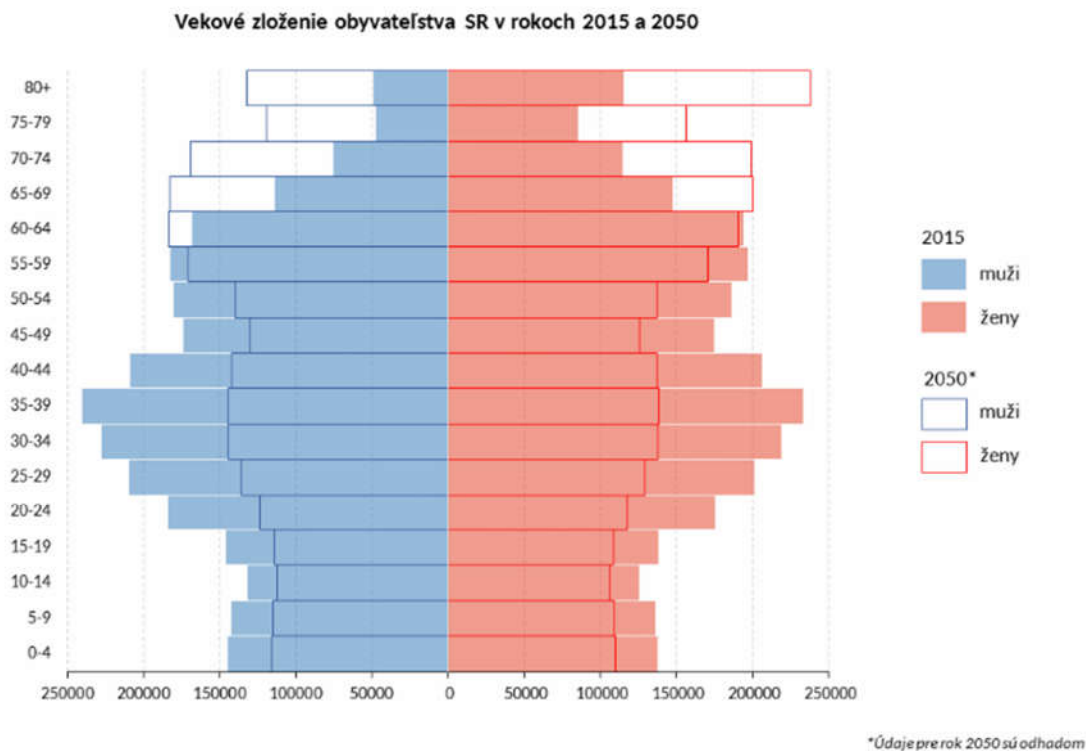
2 Results and Discussion

This section of the paper presents results that were obtained from secondary research conducted of the ageing population within the Slovak Republic. To obtain the data, the database kept by the Slovak Republic Statistical Office was utilised alongside two publicly available software packages.

The first software package, produced by Peter Farárik, allowed us to construct an age tree for the Slovak Republic's population. 2015 data was considered the baseline, with demographic software used to project the population in 2050. The age tree produced by the data and projection provides an illustration of Slovakia's overall population. The results are shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1 shows Slovakia's population composition broken down in two ways. The first relates to gender, with the population composition represented by a solid blue bar for men and a solid red bar for women. The figure also indicates population by age range, with four-year intervals starting from birth to age 80 and over.

Fig. 1: Overall age of the population in the Slovak Republic in 2015 and projected to 2050



Source: Interactive software written by Peter Farárik and publicly available at <https://www.arcgis.com/apps/MapJournal/index.html?appid=e9f38d81b1344d5e8d595b246c182983>

An analysis of the base year 2015 shows among men for 35-39 years of age to be the largest population segment, followed by 30-34 and then 40-44. After these ages, the next highest level seen among men is those 25-29 years in age with a slight bulge evident at 55-59 years of age. Among women the situation is very similar, with the largest group being the younger middle-aged population represented by the 35-39 age group, while at two other places the situation is identical with that of men. Additionally, a certain difference is evident in the fourth and subsequent places among women in the 55-59 and 60-64 age groups. It implies that, in the case of women, the elderly appear after the most numerous categories in the sequence. But the overall age composition indicates that the female population is experiencing less of the overall ageing impact than the male population.

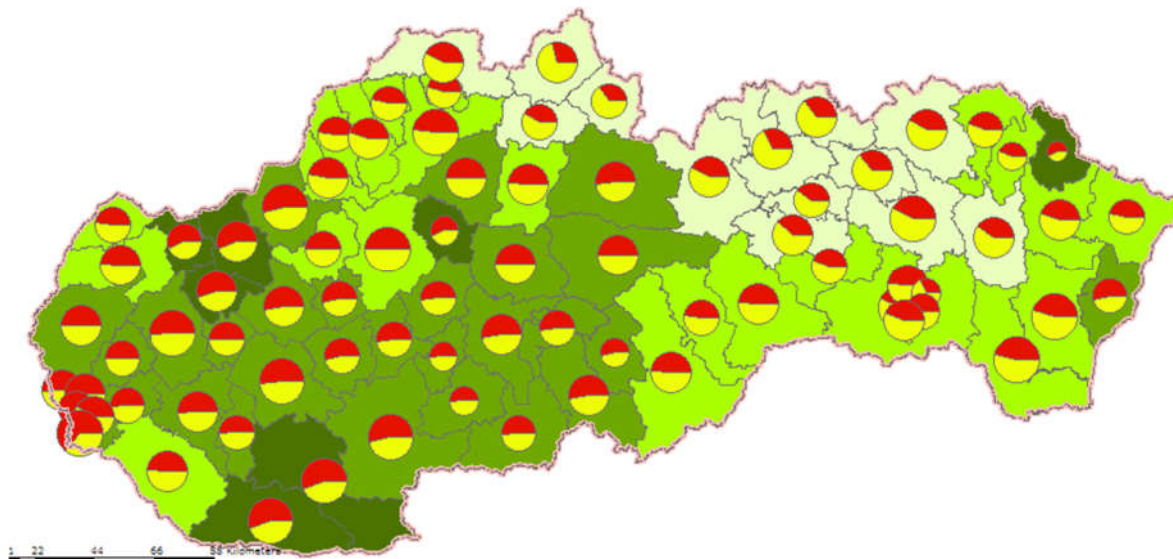
Using the baseline date of 2015, the population and age composition of the Slovak Republic population was projected using demographic software. In Figure 1, these fields are again coloured blue for men and red for women. These bars differ from those used to illustrate the baseline year 2015 in that the forecast data is shown in outlines of the respective colour.

An analysis of projections to 2050 shows a relatively more striking shift in the most numerous age groups in the population, trending toward increasing numbers of the elderly and very elderly. The most numerous age segment seen for men is for those between 60 and 64 years of age, followed closely by the 65-69 and 70-74 age intervals. This trend continues with the upper middle age group above 55 years of age appearing next largest. Indeed, the smallest group in terms of numbers is the age segments from 10 to 25 years, the advent of the young male generation. This situation will cause an even greater fall in the generation and accumulation of the necessary financial resources to cover social security for the elderly. In the case of women, the forecast for 2050 shows them facing an even more critical situation. The most elderly age group of 80 and above is going to be the most numerous, followed by women aged 70-74 and the third most numerous being those aged 65-69. These groups are followed immediately afterward by higher middle-aged to younger seniors at the age intervals of 55-59 and 60-64 years. The situation for women is even starker from the bulge at higher ages, putting even more pressure on social security and retirement pensions to cover older women. The situation among younger generations of women and men appear to be identical. As has already been mentioned in the reference literature, there is a question whether the current (two-pillar) compulsory social insurance system will enable Slovakia's government social insurance scheme to be able to pay retirement pensions alongside commercial insurance companies.

The next part of our assessment of ageing among Slovakia's population will look at this problem through the lens of a population again map showing the different micro-regions in Slovakia, considered here to be the districts of the Slovak Republic.

For the sake of clarity, the index reflects the ratio of people of retirement age (65 and over) to the number of pre-reproductive age people (0-14). Attention should be drawn to the change in the methodology used by the Slovak Republic Statistical Office starting in 2010, where men 60 years of age and over and women 55 years of age and over were counted as retirement age. Ageing indices for Slovakia's population are illustrated in Figure 2.

Fig. 2: Population ageing map of the Slovak Republic by district



Source: Geoenviportal.sk, publicly available interactive geographic software written by Jozef Mládek and Silvia Pavlíková

Additional information is provided below to explain the data shown in Figure 2. Red indicates the working age population and yellow the retirement age population. Ageing index values are presented in percentages. Individual districts of the Slovak Republic are coloured in shades of green, while districts whose ageing population index is less than 80% are pale-coloured. Districts shaded in light green have an ageing population index between 80% and 100%. Olive green indicates districts whose population ageing index above 100% up to 120%, while solid green districts have a population ageing index greater than 120%.

Figure 2 clearly shows at first glance that districts exist in Slovakia where the ageing index is generally high and, in terms of future reproduction, the situation is quite unfavourable. There are seven districts in total whose ageing index has reached a figure greater than 120%. These include Hlohovec in Trnava Region and, in Trenčín District, Myjava and Nové Mesto nad Váhom (the two latter districts are poorer, mountainous regions whose natural conditions and underdeveloped infrastructure hardly motivate younger generations to remain, work and reproduce). In Nitra Region a similar situation exists in the districts of Komárno and Nové Zámky, where the high ageing index reflects especially structural changes in the region's economy, and in the case of Komárno District also unfinished infrastructure. For these reasons,

the young generation has no interest in living in these districts and starting a family. A very similar situation occurs in Medzilaborce District in Prešov Region, where again lack of work and incomplete infrastructure are the most limiting factors driving the young generation to migrate to another region to establish a family, while in the regions they have left behind only the upper middle-age and older generations remain.

On the other hand, the lowest ageing index values can be found at districts in northern Slovakia. These are the districts of Čadca, Námestovo and Tvrdošín in Žilina Region and in the districts of Poprad, Kežmarok, Stará Ľubovňa, Spišská Nová Ves, Levoča, Prešov and Sabinov in Prešov Region. Although natural conditions make life in these districts difficult, much of the population in these districts is highly religious. The people are strongly devout and for young people both starting and maintaining large families are considered to be their Christian duty. In the case of Žilina District's northern districts, both electrical engineering and tourism are developing as industries helping the population to secure livelihoods. Prešov Region is another part of Slovakia with demanding natural conditions, yet tourism here is well-developed. Its two major cities, Poprad and Prešov, also provide good job opportunities for those not employed in tourism. Religion plays an important role among the population in these districts, so the population is strongly devout and starting a family and family values are of vital importance in their lives.

Conclusion

The problem of an ageing population is a comprehensive and major problem for today's society. The consequences of a declining birth rate and natural reproduction among Slovakia's population coupled with the increasing number of senior citizens in the country cannot be underestimated. Action can only be taken after carefully analysing the current situation and the possible impact of day-to-day decision making. Qualified experts believe the issue of the ageing of the population in Slovakia will be fully evident around 2020, when the population ageing index is expected to accelerate. This article addresses the issue within an interdisciplinary light discussing the position of the elderly. As an increasing share of the population reaches retirement age, securing care for senior citizens also has to increase in direct proportion.

The secondary analysis carried out by us leads to several conclusions:

- In future, Slovakia's population will not age equally in terms of gender distribution. While the largest age group for men will be 65-69, for women it will be over 80.
- Slovakia's population will not age equally in each region. Regional differences already exist in this context. The economically active working age population is concentrated in urban communities, especially larger cities (such as Bratislava and cities of over 50,000 people). On the other hand, the elderly are concentrated in the rather more peaceful environment of Slovakia's rural regions.
- The population ageing index is highest in the districts of Hlohovec, Myjava, Nové Mesto nad Váhom (poorer, hilly regions in the last two cases), Komárno, Nové Zámky and Medzilaborce. At the other end of the scale, the lowest population ageing values are seen in the northern districts of Slovakia such as Čadca, Námestovo, Tvrdošín, Poprad, Kežmarok, Stará Ľubovňa, Spišská Nová Ves, Prešov, Levoča and Sabinov.
- Experts expect two major demographic waves in the future, with the first to take place around 2020 and the second about 25-30 years later. Technical measures need to be taken with regard to these significant breakdowns in the working population and a significant increase in the retirement age population in order to minimise the impact of these demographic waves on the target population's social and financial security.
- In addition to accumulating financial coverage for old age retirement pensions, the issue of healthcare and social services for this group needs to be addressed. In future, it will be necessary to expand not only the amount of beds for chronically ill patients at long-term, post-surgery and palliative care departments, but also the number for acute illnesses at geriatric and internal medicine departments. The high demand for social services among seniors will only grow in future, so the emergence of new social services facilities and the provision of qualified staff is a highly topical issue today.
- What could motivate younger generations could be the introduction of government measures to encourage the establishment of families and the raising of several children. In this context, some local governments are already taking the initiative to provide services for young families (children's nurseries, kindergartens, babysitters and construction of residential units for rent). Such steps strive to mitigate widening gap

between the working and retirement age populations and to provide security to future generations in the community.

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