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On the Transformation of Thinking on Personal Responsibility Towards Requirements of Environmental Ethics in Slovakia

O transformacji myślenia na Słowacji na temat osobistej odpowiedzialności w odniesieniu do wymagań etyki środowiskowej

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Abstract: The main purpose of this paper is to confirm a remarkable transformation in contemporary thinking on responsibility for the environment in Slovakia, since the Velvet Revolution (1989). Terminology is derived from Guardini's educational, environmental ethics of responsibility, and actualised via Bauman-Lipovetsky's critics of the post-modern way of thinking. Comparisons of the situation in thinking on responsibility for the environment, before and after the Velvet revolution, are based on an analysis of findings of various inter-disciplinary research-projects, argued via enviro-criminal cases mentioned in the Slovak media, existentially verified by the author herself, as a living witness, and fostered by appropriate Slovak legislation. The main findings of the paper are as follows: liquidity of thinking on responsibility for the environment was confirmed; transformation of the Slovak mentality is remarkable – there are still enough people, who transfer responsibility, to be taken by "competent ones" (*Homo Sovieticus* mentality); however, many influencers and volunteers, also politicians, are pro-environment engaged in various public projects ('The Man of the Velvet Revolution mentality'); people are more aware of their environmental rights and duties, and feel more invited to take personal responsibility for the environment. Conclusion: Slovaks are interested in pro-environmental projects, if it pays off, and if they do not feel alone in pro-environmental efforts.

Keywords: environmental ethics, transformation of thinking, responsibility, enviro-criminal cases, Slovakia

Streszczenie: Głównym celem artykułu jest potwierdzenie niezwyklej przemiany we współczesnym myśleniu o odpowiedzialności za środowisko od czasów Aksamitnej Rewolucji na Słowacji (1989). Użyta tu terminologia odwołuje się do edukacyjnej etyki odpowiedzialności środowiskowej Guardiniego oraz do krytyków postmodernistycznego sposobu myślenia Baumana-Lipovetsky'ego. Porównanie myślenia o odpowiedzialności za środowisko przed i po Aksamitnej Rewolucji opiera się na analizie wyników różnych interdyscyplinarnych projektów badawczych, potwierdzonych doniesieniami w słowackich mediach na temat przestępstw przeciwko środowisku, weryfikowanych osobiście przez autorkę w ramach regulacji prawnych Słowacji. Główne ustalenia artykułu są następujące: potwierdza się opinia na temat płynności myślenia o odpowiedzialności za środowisko; przemiana mentalności słowackiej jest godna uwagi – niestety wciąż jest jeszcze dużo osób, które przenoszą odpowiedzialność na tzw. „kompetentnych” (mentalność *Homo Sovieticus*); jednak wielu influencerów, wolontariuszy i polityków jest zaangażowanych w pro-ekologiczne projekty (mentalność człowieka Aksamitnej Rewolucji); ludzie są bardziej świadomi swoich praw i obowiązków związanych z ochroną środowiska i czują się bardziej zaproszeni do wzięcia osobistej odpowiedzialności za środowisko. Wniosek: Słowacy są zainteresowani projektami pro-środowiskowymi, jeśli widzą w tym korzyść i nie czują się osamotnieni w działaniach pro-środowiskowych.

Słowa kluczowe: etyka środowiskowa, zmiana myślenia, odpowiedzialność, przestępstwa przeciw środowisku naturalnemu, Słowacja

Introduction

It cannot be denied that the new challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic crisis require new ethical solutions to answer the demands of the society, nature, and personal conscience and no evasion of personal responsibility. The past principles of the Ethics of Responsibility need to be rethought and reformulated before they can be applied to contemporary problems related with the situation of menace to human dignity¹. The postmodern influence of liquid evil (Bauman-Donskis 2018) upon human thinking, decision taking and acting may be seen in the devastation of basic comprehension of ethical principles and of dialogic relations² not only in Slovakia but all over the world.

Nowadays, human common sense is continuously deconstructed and is hidden in a foggy shadow of misunderstanding towards the notion and requirements of responsibility, however, fostered by excuses and various types of evasion of responsibility. In such conditions, it is important not only to speak or to write about responsibility but to keep living a responsible dialogical life in dialogic relations. Isolation, globalisation, and lack of common sense, wisdom, humility, and of human dignity may cause deprivation of humanity and destruction of sensibility for such values as relations, solidarity, and community. Because of that

1 The situation of menace to human dignity in Slovakia has already been analysed in the following papers: Vadíková 2020a; 2020b; 2020c; 2020d; 2021.

2 The notion of dialogic relationships is used here after Guardini's description of the dialogic person (Guardini 1950; 1993). It means a nest of interpersonal relations, which roots deep in the heart of the dialogic person, and out there (metaphorically) they are rooted as arrows into human hearts via their dialogic relationships and out there into the Love of God (Vadíková 2019, 31-33).

– we decided on the topic of this paper. In its beginning, we will introduce its terminology and methodology. Next, we will compare the situation of responding to the demands of environmental ethics in Slovakia before and after the Velvet Revolution (1989). We plan to use the findings of previous projects³ to support our argumentation via references to concrete enviro-criminal cases reported in the Slovak media with the view to confirming that despite manifestations of liquid evil affecting various areas of life in Slovakia, there are still enough brave people in that country who are able and willing to take personal responsibility for the environment. Those are people who take to the heart the appeal and feel bound by the sense of transgenerational responsibility⁴ for the environment.

1. Terminology and methodology of the paper

The main pillars of the terminology and methodology of the paper are based on 1) Guardini's educational environmental ethics (Guardini 2018) and his prophetic visions of transformation of humanity, culture and

3 Projects: 1. Trnava University interdisciplinary research-project: KEGA 008TTU-4/2019 – 2021 titled *Prenos osobnej zodpovednosti ako ty modernej výhovorky a jej postmoderné riešenie* [Transfer of Personal Responsibility as a Modern Type of Evasion and its Postmodern Solution] – see quoted publications: Vadíková and Krištof 2020; Vadíková 2020e; Krištof and Sámellová and Vadíková 2021; 2) interdisciplinary project of the Conservative Institute of M.R. Štefánik in Bratislava (SR) titled *Búranie mýtov o socializme a sociálnom štáte*. [Debunking Myths about Socialism and the Welfare State.] – see quoted publication: (Gonda and Zajac 2020).

4 The notion of transgenerational responsibility is used as an expression of the power of moral law, which keeps binding mankind since its beginning to respond personally to the call of good (Krištof, Sámellová and Vadíková 2021, 38-46).

relation to nature in 1950 (Guardini 2019); 2) critics of postmodern lifestyle (Bauman 2004; 2013; 2020; Lipovetsky 1998; 1999); 3) Bauman-Donskis's definition of the liquid evil (Bauman and Donskis 2018); 4) interdisciplinary analysis of the Slovak postmodern lifestyle and its ethical consequences (Vadíková and Krištof 2020; Vadíková 2020e; Krištof and Sámelová and Vadíková 2021); 5) Kobylinski's (2020) analysis of the *Homo Sovieticus* mentality; 6) interdisciplinary research on consequences derived from socialist approach towards the environment in Slovakia before the Velvet Revolution (Kazda and Potočár 2020).

Guardini's warnings (2019) that there is coming a time of no-human, no-nature, no-culture era, where man shall lose his face (identity), heart (wisdom), stability (sense of justice), clarity of sight (sociability), impressibility to what is right and wrong (morality) – it reminds of Bauman's interpretation of liquid relations (Bauman 2004; 2013; 2020) and Bauman-Donskis' definition of liquid evil (2018). Guardini's prophetic warning comes to reality in Lipovetsky's description of consumeristic narcissus (Lipovetsky 1998; 1999), who is lost in overpopulated isolation and forlorn in loneliness, but deeply in love with his own distorted image of the fashion miracle of mediocrity (Lipovetsky 2002).

Guardini's notion of responsibility for the dialogically God-given world (2011) points to the connection between the power and the responsibility in care for the environment. That is why the notion of responsibility for the environment in this paper should be understood as an autonomous response of a dialogical person towards the demands of such an environmental ethics, which is free from the onus of contemporary liquidity of relationships, values, principles, thinking caused by consumerism, isolationism, narcissism, relativism, lack of common sense for solidarity, fairness, equity, order, sacrifice, fast or self-renunciation. It should mean a personal response to the call by name in dialogic of relation – to God's call,

which can be heard in conscience as the call towards good (Guardini 1999).

The methodology of the paper consists of heuristics and a diachronic comparison of the thinking on responsibility for the environment before and after the Velvet Revolution in Slovakia. A comparison of the mentality of *Homo Sovieticus* and the Man of the Velvet Revolution will be used to analyse differences in their thinking on responsibility. Via analysis of an enviro-criminal case published in the Slovak media, we plan to prove a hypothesis that Slovaks are becoming more independent of the government and more personally responsible towards the environment and starting to care for it as given into their personal care. They await justice and rectification on the side of the government or the so called "competent ones"; however, they are open to dialogue and committed to the environment more than before. The main aim of the paper is to confirm the value of taking personal responsibility for the environment by each citizen instead of passing responsibility to the government or institutions.

2. Responsibility for the environment in Slovak mentality before and after the Velvet Revolution

Citizens of the former Soviet Union countries (of Slovakia as well) were living unaware of the menace of indoctrination – in the conviction that all of the information served in the media was true (Kuhn, Potočár, Zajac and Gonda 2020, 13-24). Slovaks still live believing in myths (Gonda and Zajac 2020). No wonder – they have been kept naive by the propaganda to stay blind and deaf towards any warnings for over 40 years. Because of that, they were unprepared for such a huge amount of freedom at once. It should be stressed that the miracle of the Velvet Revolution worked as a shock – it was a boundary situation (Jaspers 2016).

The revolutionary jump into a new era of challenges to live your own life on your own seemed to Slovaks borderless, endless. It was just like a reality show of a natural

psychological reaction towards a radical change of lifestyle without any time to transform the used way of thinking or understand the new situation or without the possibility to prepare oneself. The break of absolute subjection into total responsibility was such a serious and acute event, as a radical awakening in a diametrically different world to be lived in.

The consequences of the Velvet Revolution for all citizens of post-communist countries may be characterised as an enormous jump into something like liquid sand (no solid soil was underfoot). People were unprepared but full of hope and trust. The Velvet Revolution was like an earthquake for all stable habits, principles, and ways of life. It seemed to interrupt and ruin all relations made by the propaganda to make space to create other types of relationships.

There were only a few intellectuals in Slovakia, who had been aware of the consequences issuing from the ideological disbalance, indoctrinational confusion sophisticatedly implemented into public thinking and meaning. Intellectuals of the Revolution had a prophetic disposition to clearly identify the vision of continuously coming warnings of the misuse of the victory of freedom (Václav Havel, Ján Korec, František Mikloško, and others), however, they were misunderstood, ridiculed, termed as “romantic idealists”. Why? Because they spoke about taking personal responsibility to think, speak, decide, and act, instead of waiting for an institution to do it instead of them.

Regarding the demands of environmental ethics, it seems that the Man of the Velvet Revolution keeps thinking about responsibility towards the environment just like the so-called *Homo Sovieticus*. According to Kobylinski's analysis (2020, 102-106) of the post-soviet way of thinking on responsibility: in the new communist world it was expected that all responsibilities should be taken over by various social and state-run organisations. People were exposed to constant propaganda – the “truth” readily fabricated by the government. People lived

in various types of reality – a private one, a governmental one and, if there were not too lazy to look for the truth, in a reality moderated by their own knowledge, wisdom, or just common sense. This situation caused an expected reaction – permanent fear of making a mistake, concealing one's thoughts and opinions, keeping them in their private sphere as a treasure, and attempting to get lost in the crowd or to be invisible in the system of everlasting control of the regime. As Kobylinski (2020, 102-106) concludes – the *Homo Sovieticus* is not able to think, decide and act autonomously.

Is the Man of the Velvet Revolution comparable to the *Homo Sovieticus*? Taking into account the results of various studies⁵, after the Velvet Revolution, there were a lot of people just like the *Homo Sovieticus* pining after the loss of the illusionary advantages of the system. Nowadays – more than 30 years after the revolution, in comparison with the above-mentioned results, there are still some people pining after the past. They seem to miss the comfort of having a “Big Brother”-like institution of the state keeping an eye on them and on everything (Orwell 2013).

How did the communist regime care for the environment in Slovakia? Regarding the propaganda of taking over all the responsibility for the environment by the government, there had been some efforts to educate scholars on how the environment should have been treated.⁶

5 See published results (Kazda and Potočár 2020; Vadíková and Krištof 2020, Krištof, Sámelová and Vadíková 2021).

6 I personally remember the time of my childhood in the late 1980-s when there was a plan to introduce a kind of periodical cleaning of streets in bigger towns by school-children to educate them how to take care for the environment. Popular educational activities included seasonal hand-picking of the fruits of the apple rose (*Rosa Villosa*), medicinal herbs, or collecting of paper. However, nobody was aware of the environmental burden around the landfills or warned about the dangers of collecting fruits and herbs near roadways or in the centre of the city (heavy metals).

A conviction that such is the “appropriate” approach toward the environment is still alive in contemporary Slovak public understanding of ecology. As results of Kazda and Potočár’s research (2020) show – 54% of Slovaks still believe that the Soviet regime cared more for the environment, and that factories were discharging less harmful pollutants or that air and water were much cleaner. There are still about 71% of Slovaks, who are convinced that foodstuffs in markets were safer and healthier than today.

Notwithstanding the consequences, attempts were made to publish interdisciplinary warnings on the situation of the environment, however, they were immediately punished and denied (Budaj 2017): “Random measurement of air condition show the overrun of the highest allowed concentration of hydrogen sulphide for 52% of sample data” (Budaj et al. 1987).⁷

It must be stated that the approach towards the environment was reckless and lax in the Soviet Union. It was not only based on disinformation, lack of education, and absence of a warning system. For example – municipal waste... Nowadays, all around Slovakia – there are still a lot of “green hills” – junkyards. As Kazda and Potočár (2020) in their research indicate – in 1978 there was only one incinerator in Bratislava in Slovakia. The recycling of special stuff – such as a glass or paper, was partially solved by a system of planned and controlled collections (just later by some kind of repurchase). The results – environmental ballasts are spread around Slovakia into more than 2023 locations.

Another example is the case of the environmental burden connected within the storage of a former chemical factory in Bratislava. As Kazda and Potočár (2020) indicate – from 1966 until 1980 more than 90.000 m³ of toxic waste had been cumulated without any leak-proof system.

Nowadays, citizens of Bratislava are still not allowed to use rich drinking underground water reservoirs because of their high contamination. Another type of such “heritage” of socialism are the well-hidden and forgotten storages of pesticides, fuel, fertilizers, or of other types of dangerous substances. Moreover, the massive land contamination in areas of the Soviet Army camps should be mentioned as a very special type of environmental burden (Noviny.sk 2018). The land had been devastated and contaminated since in the invasion of the Soviet Army into the Czechoslovak Republic in 1968.

All of the facts mentioned above were not allowed to be published. Propaganda continuously propagated legends and made people believe that the state had everything under control. Citizens were paralysed and kept living in sweet ignorance.

Despite the situation, there were still responsible and engaged people in Slovakia after the Velvet Revolution. They acted behind the political scenes, were not publicly known, worked hard to change people’s way of thinking, the economy, and the social system in their country, however, they were persecuted not only by a grey cloud of another regime (e.g., meciarism), but also by Bauman-Donski’s magmatic liquid evil. All such effort was also unpaid and affected the needs of their families and their professional careers. The evil lied in underestimating people’s goodwill to change the post-communist thinking. It was hidden behind the extenuation of the wise efforts to face the demands of personal responsibility. It was demonstrated by ridiculing personal efforts, labour, and engagement undertaken individually and not by the state, the government or the so called “competent ones”. All efforts of personally responsible people, citizens, workers, farmers, and all of the representatives of the so-called helping professions (doctors, nurses, teachers, social workers, etc.) were dismissed, just because they were able to sacrifice their comfort, health, family lives to create conditions for the establishment of democracy, justice,

⁷ As a citizen of Bratislava I may confirm that I was not aware of it. In the case of the nuclear powerplant Černobyl’ (Ukraine) in 1986 – it was a similar situation.

and freedom. All of those pillars – fostering of interpersonal relations, sacrifice, and evaluating of non-profit efforts to change society were underestimated and marked as dangerous or suspicious. Despite the fact that they all were heroes responsible enough to keep fighting against the liquid evil and to make the transformation in thinking on responsibility in Slovakia. They listened to the call of good deep in their consciences – the call of transgenerational responsibility towards moral law.

3. Responsibility for the environment in Slovakia today

Nowadays, the Slovak Government tries to foster changes within environmental politics. However, from 1998 to 2019, the Party of Greens (Teraz.sk 2016) had no members in the national parliament. In 2019, a new “green” president of the Slovak Republic was elected – Zuzana Čaputová (BBC.com 2019). Before her political career, she was engaged as a lawyer in the pro-environment activities of the VIA IURIS (Vialuris.sk 2022). Because of her professional engagement in the case “landfill Pezinok“ (Odpady-Portal.sk 2013) she won the Goldman Environmental Prize in 2016 (Johnson 2016). She is aware of the former corruptive approach toward the demands of environmental ethics in various fields of the economic, social, and political spheres. That is why, she feels obliged to care more for nature and to foster all efforts to protect it openly and consequently (Čaputová and Gyarfáš 2011; Čaputová 2012). In 2019, she was delegated as the Environment Ambassador in Slovakia (Postoj 2019).

Ján Budaj is another contemporary pro-environment politician in Slovakia. In 1970-ties, he co-published the above-mentioned study on the environmental crisis in Slovakia in the Bulletin *Bratislava/Nahlas* (1987). He was one of the initiators of the Velvet Revolution in Slovakia. Nowadays, he is the Minister of Environment and is personally engaged in the environmental revitalisation of Slovakia. He was nominated as the chairman of the UNEA bureau

to prepare the Environmental Assembly UNEA6 by OSN Environmental Assembly (MŽP SR 2022).

Two Slovak politicians: Martin Hojsík and Michal Wiezik, are actively pro-environmentally engaged in the EU parliament (Europa.eu 2022a; 2022b). Michal Wiezik is a member of the Committee on the Environment, Public Health, and Food Safety and of the Committee on Budgetary Control in the EU Parliament. Martin Hojsík is a member of the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety, Committee on Industry, Research and Energy in the EU Parliament.

There are also pro-environment initiatives by various state institutions. The Slovak National Employment Agency (Upsvr.gov.sk 2013) provides an interesting “green” program to teach employees how to work, the so-called “activation works” (mowing grass; garbage, trash, lopping collections; etc.). There is also a new governmental institution established to protect responsible citizens, who are aware of some kind of anti-environmental behaviour or activities and had been on strike before or signed petitions – the Whistleblower Protection Office. It provides legal advice and assistance to people who report actions with a negative impact on society (Oznamovatelia.sk 2022). There is also the Institute for environmental policy, which works as an analytical unit of the Ministry of the Environment of the Slovak Republic. It was established in 2016 (Potočár 2022). The mission of IEP is to provide high-quality and reliable environmental analysis and forecasts for the Slovak Government and the public. It has also coordinated and prepared the National Strategy of the Environmental Policy of the Slovak Republic until 2030: Greener Slovakia (MŽP SR 2019b; 2019a).

Public interest in greener Slovakia is growing very slowly. People expect the government to solve environmental burdens, introduce changes in law, and impose a system of sanctions. Personal engagement is continuously propagated by non-profit

organisations, universities (Uniba.sk 2019), influencers (Ecotour.sk 2022), and small groups of citizens. At least some volunteers respond to the calls. There are organised garbage or plastic material collections in cities, by rivers, in protected landscapes areas, tams, and mountain lakes (Enviro.sk 2019). There are organised pro-environment activities such as “frog-moving-transport” (Zilinskyvecernik.sk 2019), migratory birds counting (Balciarová 2016), city-neighbourhood gardens, city apiaries (Sabolová 2014).

At first sight, the transformation in thinking on responsibility for the environment has changed – there seems to exist some cooperation between government and citizens; however, they are volunteers, who really care. In the last chapter, we are going to demonstrate it on the example of a real case and draw the conclusions.

4. An example of the transformation of thinking on responsibility for the environment in Slovakia: the case of Swallow’s Tragedy

The era of blocks of flats was very destructive for all types of swallows – people did not like nests just behind their windows especially because of the mess. They used to prevent birds from settling there and even to ruin their nests. Nowadays, all types of swallows belong to the category of protected animals in Slovakia (Act 2021).

In 2016, the bridge Most SNP in Bratislava was reconstructed. The bridge is built over the river Danube. The place is inhabited by one of the most plentiful swallow colonies (*Delichon urbicum*)⁸ (more than 120 nests) in Slovakia. It has been monitored and cared for by international Bird-rescue volunteers and an international team of ornithologists for years. One day – because of the reconstruction, more than 66 swallow nests were devastated in their reproductive time (Pravda.sk 2016b). Then, suddenly, the first

aid came – a rescue action: plenty of firkins were given with water and clay to help swallows to rebuilt new nests there (Pravda.sk 2016a). The very next year (2017), just at their previous posts, more than 60 new plastic nests were installed to foster the swallow colony in Bratislava at the location of Most SNP (Teraz.sk 2017).

The case shows changes in thinking on responsibility for the environment in various ways: 1) Just after the incident – there was nobody to take responsibility for the incident (Sunday – no workers at work; nobody on the phone) and nobody to draw the consequences. However, there was somebody behind, who cared, who did call the police, who informed about it – some responsible unknown, anonymous; 2) Witnesses were so shocked that they were paralysed to do anything (*Homo Sovieticus* mentality). Some of them came up with stories (evasion): “We were convinced that no swallows were there! Have they not moved swallows elsewhere? Why do you ask us? Where are those, who are responsible for it? Where are competent people? Who is competent? We are not in charge to do anything!” 3) at some point, people were mobilised into the action to avoid larger damage to the colony – those with firkins full of water and clay: it was the dialogical cooperation, people responded to the call of good; 4) objective consequences (state/law/government) came later (the penalty towards the construction company); 5) the final solution was dialogical cooperation of competent persons, volunteers and experts, who were willing to take over the responsibility.

The case shows the importance of dialogical cooperation from the beginning of the process of problem-solving. It also confirms that Slovaks are aware of the demands of environmental ethics and their thinking on responsibility for the environment is changing. However, the heritage of the 40 years long indoctrination by fabricated myths and disinformation needs a solid counterweight – education on environmental ethics, well-informed public,

8 The swallow *Delichon urbicum* has a white rump. In Slovak language it called ‘Beloritka’ what means “a white rump”.

just governmental instruments, and enough courage to fight personally for values at least of the Velvet Revolution and human dignity.

Conclusions

The paper refers to the transformation of thinking on responsibility towards the environment in Slovakia. The *Homo Sovieticus* mentality is slowly changing. People are becoming more informed, and they are warned about environmental burdens. They are aware of the fact that there should be dialogical cooperation among governmental institutions, non-profit organizations, and volunteers. Slovaks begin to gain better understanding of contemporary challenges and learn to listen to them because they are taught to care for the environment from early childhood and are continuously educated to prevent any harm to nature. It is true that the heritage of the past – various types of environmental burden are a big challenge to solve in coming years. Contemporary environmental situation requires keeping international interdisciplinary dialogue to decide on appropriate priorities and needs of the environment for a healthier Slovakia, Europe, and the world. Providing personal response to the demands of environmental ethics means being a moral person.

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