

LEGITIMACY OF ACTIVATION WORK IN ACTIVE LABOUR MARKET POLICY IN SLOVAKIA

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Abstract

The text summarises the findings of field research carried out in Slovakia aimed at understanding the reasons for the low impact of activation work on increasing the employment of programme participants. The research was conducted in the context of a legislative change that significantly limited the opportunities for participation in activation work, with the expectation of the legislators being that activation work participants would seamlessly move into the labour market, which suffers from a significant shortage of labour force.

The findings note the weak link between the activation programme and other active labour market policy measures, the absence of support programmes aimed at increasing the human and social capital of programme participants necessary for their successful entry and retention in the labour market. There is also the problem of incorrectly formulated expectations from the activation programme and failure to take into account the specific needs of programme participants, who often face variety of structural barriers and statistical discrimination in achieving their goals.

The findings also argue in favour of an activation programme, as it often represents the only opportunity for participation in active labour market policies for a large group of people who are distant from the labour market, including a large group of young people. However, in order to achieve better results, the implementation of the programme needs to be substantially reviewed and implemented in conjunction with other support measures.

Keywords

Activation of the long-term unemployed, active labour market policies, support programmes, young people

I. Introduction

For people who do not have sufficient human and/or social capital to successfully enter and remain in the labour market, active labour market policies have an important role to play. It is the main instrument for helping people outside the labour market to fully integrate into the labour market. In

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Slovakia, this is implemented through the labour, social affairs and family offices without significant involvement of non-public service providers.

Compared to other countries, Slovakia has long been one of the EU countries with the highest share of long-term unemployed in the total number of unemployed. By the end of 2022, the share reached 44%. Due to the long-term unfavourable situation, public employment services pay quite a lot of attention to the issue of long-term unemployed jobseekers, as evidenced by the adoption of several strategic documents (MoLSAF, 2022)

Nevertheless, measures that would target the most disadvantaged groups of jobseekers, i.e. in particular jobseekers who have been out of the labour market for a long time and do not have sufficient work capacities, are often absent. The measure that people with low levels of education, work and social skills reach most often is the activation programme through smaller municipal services. However, this has shown little positive impact on increasing the employment of programme participants and has been significantly reduced with effect from 1.4.2023 on the basis of the amendment to Act 417/2013 Coll. on Assistance in Material Need. This amendment abolished one of the ways in which the state paid activation allowance to the unemployed for performing activation work. In practice, this means that the activation allowance is not paid for the performance of activation work carried out under the Municipal Act, which de facto means the termination of the performance of activation work under the Municipal Act. On the other hand, it also means a dramatic decrease in the number of participants in activation work.

Given the low impact of activation work on increasing the employment of programme participants, the reform effort can be seen as a step in the right direction. However, the steps taken show signs of abolishing the programme rather than reforming it, and the question remains whether the low impact of activation was due to the logic of the programme itself or to the wrong motivation of the stakeholders and the absence of other support services that should have accompanied the implementation of activation.

Context of activation work in Slovakia

The activation programme in the form of smaller municipal services (hereafter referred to as activation through SMS) has been implemented in Slovakia with various variations since 2004 and is intended for the long-term unemployed living in a household whose members are recipients of benefits in material need. The focus of the programme is the link between employment services and

the system of material need, which excludes long-term unemployed jobseekers who are not in a situation of material need from the activation programme.

As one of the authors of the legislative norm treating activation through small municipal services from 2004 remarked during the interviews conducted, "activation work was seen as a specific measure to fill the gap between the social system and the labour market, and the aim of the measure was to create an instrument through which individuals who are long-term unemployed, who are not of interest to mainstream employers and who are without work habits could acquire these habits and move further into the labour market". The legislators sought to create a measure that, without any commitment from employers, would create a low-threshold environment for people far from the labour market within which they could acquire work habits and strengthen their basic skills.

Activation through SMS shall be performed continuously by the participant for a maximum of six months, with the possibility of repeating the activation for a maximum of six additional months, for a maximum of 20 hours per week. For the performance of the activities, the participant receives the so-called activation allowance, the monthly amount of which from 1.10.2023 is EUR 86,80.

One of the problems of activation work through the SMS was its "three-track" nature, which caused significant opacity in the performance of activation work.

Between June 2014 and April 2023, activation through the SMS was possible under three different models:

- Activation through the SMS implemented in accordance with Act 369/1990 Coll on municipal government¹ in the scope of 20 hours per week, for the performance of activation the participant receives activation allowance (this was abolished as of 1.4.2023)
- Activation through SMS implemented in accordance with Act 5/2004 on Employment Services² in the scope of 20 hours per week, for the performance of activation the participant receives an activation allowance
- Activation as compulsory work of the basic benefit in material need implemented in accordance with Act 417/2013 Coll. on assistance in material need in the scope of 8 hours per week, while the participant is not entitled to payment of the activation allowance, but for not working the mandatory 8 hours, the basic benefit in material need is reduced. This legislation, which came into force in June 2014, has been significantly criticised by human rights

¹ §12, paragraph 3, point (b), points 5 and 6

²§52 "Allowance for activation activity in the form of smaller municipal services for the municipality or in the form of smaller services for the regional municipality"

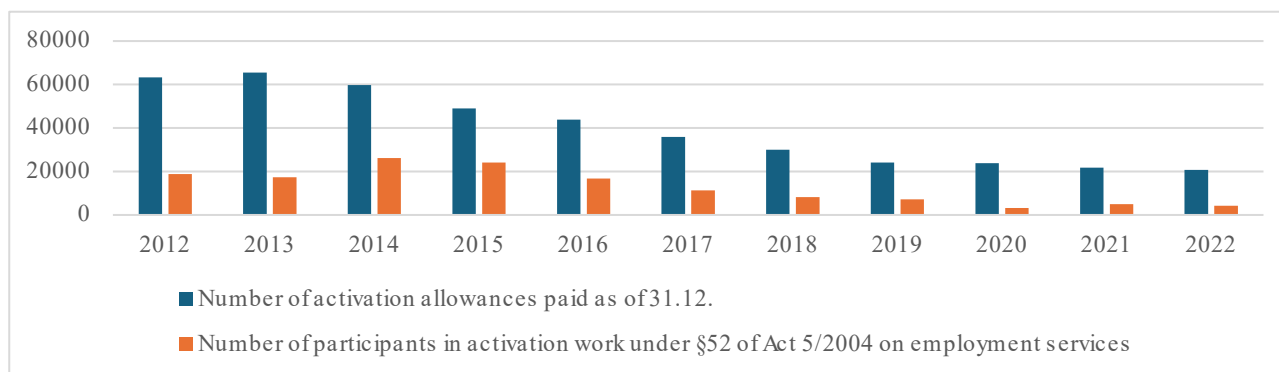
organisations, among other reasons because it has created a situation where two people involved in the performance of smaller municipal services work under different conditions - one voluntarily, with a financial incentive to receive the activation allowance, the other compulsorily, under the threat of losing the basic benefit (Lajčáková et al., 2017). However, this type of activation is not discussed further in this paper; it is presented mainly for the purpose of complete information.

In the first two cases, the participant is included in the activation programme voluntarily and regardless of the type of participation, the amount of the financial remuneration is identical.

However, conditions for participation in activation work carried out under the Act on municipal government were subtly simpler¹ and the performance of activation in the form of SMS carried out under the Act on municipal government was subject to almost no control or coordination by superior authorities.

The number of participants in activation work in the form of small-scale municipal services classified under the Act on municipal government was therefore substantially higher than the number of participants classified under the Employment Services Act.

Figure 1: Number of all recipients of the activation allowance in relation to recipients on the basis of activation under §52 of the Employment Services Act²



Source: authors' calculations based on data from the Labour, Social Affairs and Family Office of the Slovak Republic

¹ E.g., in the context of enforcement under the Act on municipal government, a participant does not have to be registered as long-term unemployed in the register of jobseekers (in the case of activation carried out under the Employment Services Act, long-term employment is required), it is sufficient if s/he is in receipt of a benefit in material need. In the context of performance under the Act on municipal government, the scope of working time can be set at 10-20 hours per week, whereas under the Employment Services Act it is strictly 20 hours per week. The duration of performance under the Act on municipal government is set at 18 months, whereas under the Employment Services Act the basic period is set at 6 months, although this can be extended to 18 months.

² Given the fact that the reasons for payment of activation allowance other than participation in activation in the form of SMS are only marginal in Slovakia, the difference between the total number of recipients of activation allowance and the number of recipients due to the performance of activation under §52 of the Employment Services Act, can be understood as a difference in the number of participants performing activation in the form of SMS under the Municipal Act and under the Employment Services Act.

In the wording of §52 of Act 5/2004 on employment services, smaller municipal services are defined as "a form of activation activity of a long-term unemployed citizen in material need by performing works that are intended for the creation, protection, maintenance and improvement of the environment in the municipality, improvement of economic conditions, social conditions and cultural conditions of the inhabitants of the municipality, care for the protection and preservation of cultural heritage, support for education, development and provision of social services and other activities in the social field, development and protection of spiritual and cultural values, supplementary education of children and youth, and for the development and support of community activities'. In practice, however, supply is usually limited to unskilled activities such as cleaning and landscaping (sweeping, watering, snow clearing, etc.), supplementary work in the maintenance of buildings and grounds (e.g. excavation, cleaning, etc.), or waste treatment and disposal.

In terms of the main characteristics of programme participants, it can be argued that participants with lower educational attainment (ISCED level 2 and below), participants with lower levels of previous work experience, longer duration of registration in the register of jobseekers and higher likelihood of having children in the household are more likely to be included in the activation programme in the form of SMS compared to other measures.

Differences exist even in the comparison between participants who were enrolled in the program versus participants who meet the eligibility criteria and could have been enrolled in the program.

Table 1: Characteristics of enrolled participants in the SMS activation program

Characteristics	Included participants	Not-included but eligible participants
Previous employment	1.83%	7.39%
Length of registered unemployment	1018.18 days	686.32 days
Children in the household	26.2%	14.95%
Basic education	44.51%	19.93%
Driving licence	11.85%	44.1%

Source: Dulíková et al, 2022

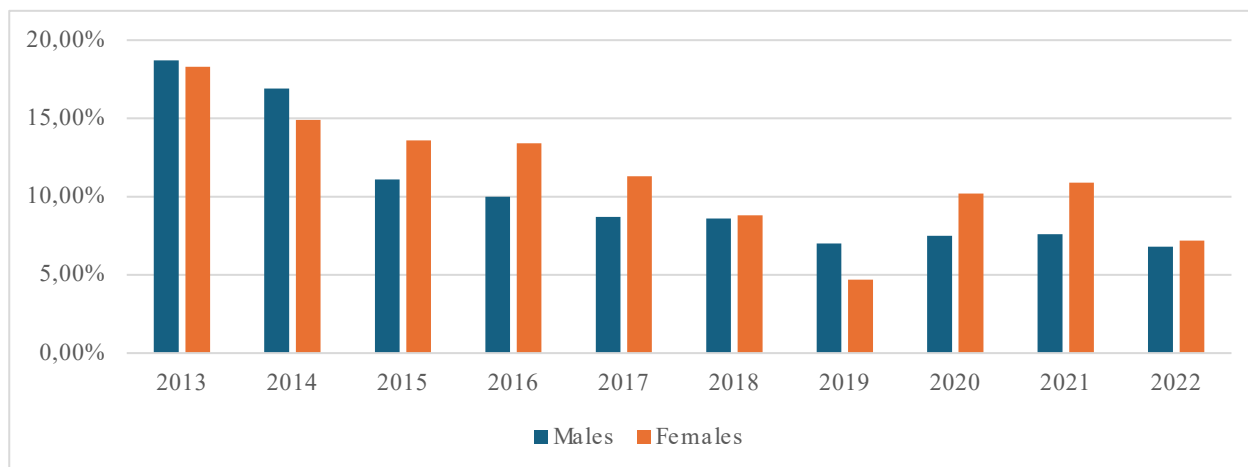
Ethnicity is also a significant factor. Roma ethnicity increases the likelihood of engaging in activation work by up to seven times compared to a non-Roma with the same characteristics (Kurekova et al,2013). The activation program in the form of SMS is strongly stigmatized towards ethnic homogeneity.

Young people in the activation system - untapped potential

A separate category of jobseekers consists of young people, to whom significant attention is paid in active labour market policy, reinforced by a non-insignificant financial allocation.

The number of jobseekers aged up to 29 was declining until 2019, but the positive trend was reversed by the onset of the COVID 19 pandemic. Despite this, the youth unemployment rate in Slovakia in 2022 remained below the average for European Union countries.

For the purposes of employment services, a young person is defined as 15-29 years of age. In terms of social (family) policy, the payment of parental benefits is capped at age 25 (unless the dependency condition is reached earlier). Thus, the group of young people aged 25-29 constitutes a separate sub-category of young people who are no longer covered by family benefits and usually also by active labour market policy measures for graduates or early-school leavers, and this sub-category is often left out of support measures for young people.

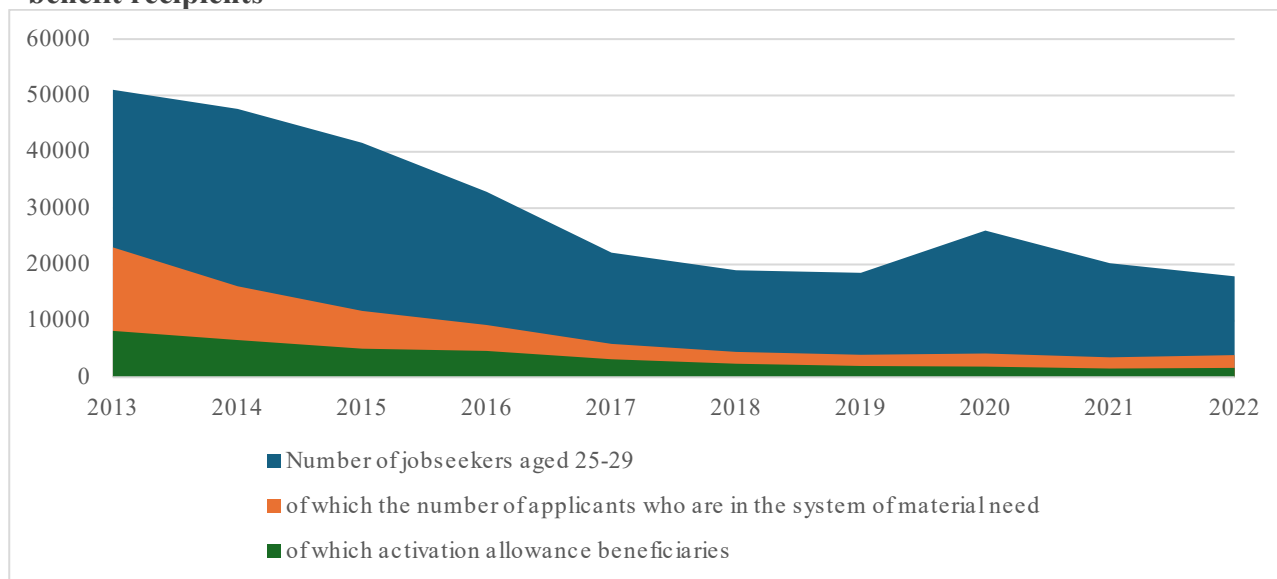
Figure 2: Youth unemployment rate in Slovakia, age 25-29, by sex

Source: Eurostat YTH_EMPL_110

According to the data of the Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, as of 31 December 2022, 17 928 jobseekers aged 25-29 years were registered in the register of jobseekers, which represents about 10% of all registered jobseekers, while this group of jobseekers represented about 11% of all participants in active labour market measures.

Part of this group is made up of young people for whom registration in the jobseeker's register is an insignificant episode in the transition from one job to the next, and this group does not represent a significant problem for public policies. The reverse is true for young people who are unemployed for long periods and face poverty, often generational. This group of young people is relatively easy to identify through the social policy measures addressing the most vulnerable groups (material need system), as they are among the recipients of material need benefits.

Figure 3: Registered unemployment of people aged 25-29 and the share of material need benefit recipients



Source: authors' calculations based on data from the Labour, Social Affairs and Family Office of the Slovak Republic

As of 31.12.2022, there were 6 668 persons aged 25-29 in Slovakia who were in receipt of a benefit in material need, which is about 10% of all recipients of the benefit in material need in Slovakia at that date. 3 917 of them were registered in the register of jobseekers, which is almost 22% of all registered jobseekers aged 25-29.

From a public policy perspective, the greatest risk is posed by young people who are in receipt of a benefit in material need (they are themselves in receipt of material need benefit or live in a shared household with a recipient of material need benefit) and are not registered on the register of jobseekers. These are young people who are unable to remain on the register. This is often due to an extremely low level of social skills, but also to frequent participation in the informal labour market and the consequent inability to comply with the basic principles of cooperation with the labour office. With the adoption of the amendment to the law on material need assistance, they have lost the possibility of participating in activation, which risks falling deeper into poverty and losing at least basic contact with support services.

The conducted field research suggests that the offer of active labour market policy measures for young people who possess the expected range of human and social capital is quite functional and in standard 1 times (i.e. not e.g. during the Covid pandemic¹⁹) they have a real chance to receive active labour market policy support, e.g. in the form of placement in a subsidised job. However, the opposite situation can be observed for young people with low levels of education or social and human capital, for whom active labour market policies often fail.

The field research indicates that for this group of young people, a large part of whom come from marginalised Roma communities, the most accessible and often the only available active labour market policy measure is the activation programme through small municipal services for the municipality or region (referred to as activation through SMS), therefore maintaining and improving this programme is important for them.

Young people aged 25-29 in 2022 accounted for approximately 10% of all activation programme participants. The underlying motivation for this group to participate in the programme is not fundamentally different from that of other age groups and relates mainly to the desire to increase household income through the activation allowance. A specific characteristic of this age group is the care of young children, as they are often young parents. Thus, a large proportion of participants aged 25-29 also perceive participation in activation work as a suitable solution to increase their income in combination with childcare and family responsibilities. This type of motivation is particularly relevant for women, mothers of young children, who strongly prefer to work in their own municipality, without the need to commute to work.

Previous research on the impacts of the SMS activation programme

Act 5/2004 Coll. on employment services (§52) defines the activation activity as "support for the maintenance of work habits and the development of skills of a long-term unemployed citizen in material need". The law does not explicitly mention the objectives aimed at increasing employment in the context of the activation programme in the form of SMS, but it can be argued that it implicitly expects it. This is evidenced by the list of evaluations carried out in the past, which view the programme mainly through the prism of increasing employment and the entry of programme participants into the labour market.

The topic of assessing the impact and effectiveness of an activation programme in the form of an SMS has been addressed by several studies in the past. Most of them considered the SMS activation programme as one of the active labour market policy measures (Havran, 2011; Štefánik et al., 2014; Hidas et al, 2016; Karasová et al. 2019, Petráš, 2020; Štefánik et al., 2022; Dulíková et al.,2022), some of them dealt exclusively with the topic of activation work (Kureková et al. 2013; Ravász, 2019; Petráš, 2020).

Most of the conducted works assessed the impacts of activation through statistical evaluation methods and several of them identified zero, even negative, impact of activation through SMS on employment (Havran, 2011; Štefánek et al, 2014; Hidas et al, 2016; Karasová et al. 2017).

In the evaluations that were carried out later and were carried out on samples from a later period, an effect, albeit very low, is beginning to emerge (Petráš, 2020; Štefánek et al., 2022; Dulíková et al., 2022). The results of a counterfactual analysis conducted by the Social Policy Institute (Petráš, 2020) suggest that participation in an activation programme through SMS increases the labour market participation rate of participants by 1 to 2 percentage points compared to non-participants. 12 to 18 months after participation, the labour market participation rate of participants is around 10%, while the labour market participation rate of non-participants is around 8.5%. Positive impacts are particularly relevant for the group of participants who participated in SMS activation for a shorter period of time and for participants who also perform more skilled activities compared to others (e.g. operating a machine, such as a lawn mower, etc.).

However, the studies cited above have done little to hypothesise about the impact of the wider labour market context, the growing shortage of available labour, the rise in the minimum wage and the widening gap between benefit and minimum wage income, or the impact of the structural barriers that activation programme participants face in potentially entering and staying in the labour market.

The foreign literature also points out that, in addition to the external factors mentioned above, the positive impact of participation in activation programmes is mainly conditioned by the intensity of the individual support and counselling provided, combined with innovative measures based on the individual needs of the particular individual (Gorter and Kalb, 1996; Scharle, 2012; Knuth, Stegmann and Zink, 2014; Maksim and Wiśniewski, 2019), which are based on an in-depth assessment of individual capacity conducted in collaboration with the activated person (Maksim and Wojdyło, 2019). The importance of other support services in the implementation of activation was also highlighted by Mýtina-Kureková (2013) in her research.

The positive impact of increased contact with support services and counselling during the activation period is also demonstrated by experiments carried out in e.g. Denmark or the UK. These have identified participation in counselling programmes as a mandatory part of the activation programme (Rosholm, 2008; Graversen and van Ours, 2009).

While the impact of activation from the employers' perspective has not received significant attention, research conducted in the Czech Republic finds that participation in an activation programme has a statistically significant impact on employers' perceptions of filling low-skilled blue-collar positions,

especially for men. The impact decreases proportionally with the level of qualifications required, so in the case of skilled blue-collar positions, the impact is lower, if still noticeable (Vyhliđal, 2022).

Hypotheses

The main reason for the low level of positive impact of the activation programme in the form of smaller municipal services is not in the programme itself but in the absence of support measures that should accompany the implementation of the activation programme and in its anchoring in the broader context of active labour market policy. The problem is also the sparse network of social services aimed at removing the barriers that prevent individuals from entering and staying in the labour market.

II. Data sources and research methods

The literature review conducted on activation research indicates that the research to date undertaken in Slovakia has mainly focused on assessing the impact of activation work on the employment of programme participants. The research carried out has primarily used statistical evaluation methods and has done little to address the qualitative aspects of the programmes evaluated and to identify the reasons for the low impact on employment growth.

The aim of the present study is to offer qualitative findings and to interpret them in the broader context of active labour market policy implemented in Slovakia. The data were collected through a series of semi-structured interviews with several types of stakeholders. These were representatives of local municipalities implementing the SMS activation programme, representatives of NGOs active in the communities where the SMS activation programme is implemented, representatives of local labour offices and policy makers. Interviews were also conducted with the participants of the SMS activation themselves.

The interviews were carried out in a total of six locations (two locations in the district of Keřmarok, one location in the district of Revúca, one location in the district of Lučenec, one location in the district of Rimavská Sobota and one location in the district of Spiřská Nová Ves). A total of 14 interviews were conducted with representatives of organisations (local government, NGOs, labour offices), 2 with other stakeholders and 19 interviews with the SMS activation programme participants themselves.

The interviews with the SMS activation programme participants usually lasted no longer than 30 minutes and were informal, through which the experience of involvement in the activation programme as well as personal motivations and ambitions were discussed. 17 out of the total of 19

interviewees were aged 25-29 years and 12 out of the total number were women. The emphasis on the involvement of respondents aged 25-29 was mainly conditioned by the specific situation of this age group of participants, in the context of policies aimed at promoting youth employment, which is outlined in the previous chapters. The field research was conducted during the months of February and March 2023.

An important source of information was also an extensive desk-research of previous research on the topic of active labour market policy, previous evaluations of activation programmes in Slovakia and social policy in Slovakia

In order to better understand the evolution of activation work, a descriptive analysis of the programme and programme participants in a year-on-year comparison was also conducted, which drew on data collected by the Central Office of Labour Social Affairs and Family within the Employment Services Information System (COLSAF,2014 - COLSAF, 2022).

III. Results

Based on the analysis of the situation in Slovakia, it can be concluded that the Slovak environment is dominated by the so-called "work-first" model of activation, which is based on the values of the liberal economy and relies on the absorptive capacity of the labour market (Barbier 2005, Bruttel and Sol 2006, Dingeldey 2007), while approaches based on strengthening the human capital of the participant through counselling and education lag behind. This claim can be illustrated by the structure of active labour market policy expenditure, which is disproportionately dominated by expenditure on employment support through subsidising the wage of a worker with a specific employer (in 2021, expenditure on these measures represented 67% of the total budget allocated to the implementation of active labour market policy, compared to an EU average of 44%, while expenditure on upskilling/reskilling represented only 3% of the total budget, compared to an EU average of 28%) (EU, 2023).

The presence of about 90 000 vacancies in Slovakia was also the main argument for the aforementioned amendment to the Act on material need assistance, which came into force on 1 April 2023 and which brought a dramatic reduction in the number of participants in activation work. On the basis of publicly available data from the Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic, it is possible to observe that in a year-on-year comparison there was a decrease from 21 617 participants in 2022 (October 2022) to 528 participants in 2023 (October 2023). In defending the amendment, which was adopted without any expert discussion, policy makers argued

that participants remain in the system by choice without actively seeking a job (ColSAF, 2023) and see participation in activation work as an alternative to full-time employment. Based on later interviews with policy makers, the above reasoning completely ignored the regional presence of job vacancies and activation programme participants, as well as employers' demands and programme participants' capacities.

On the other hand, the argument about the perception of activation work as a suitable substitute for a job can be seen as partly true based on the findings from the field and is particularly relevant for young women who are caring for young children, many of whom are very interested in engaging in activation work in the form of SMS. They perceive participation in the SMS activation programme and the subsequent income from the activation allowance as a suitable alternative to increase their income without having to travel for work. However, this finding needs to be seen in context and it should be noted that these situations occur mainly in localities without the presence of suitable jobs. Activation programmes are more likely to be implemented in regions with a lack of available jobs, so activation programme participants often have no other option than to participate at least symbolically in the labour market and increase their income than through an activation programme.

Participants in the field research clearly declare their interest in increasing their income compared to the income from the activation allowance and understand that the way to increase their income is to participate in the labour market. Activation participants would like to take up employment, but for many it is a prerequisite that the work is directly in the village or in an environment they are familiar with.

The willingness of participants to commute even a few kilometres for work is often at a very low level, which makes them able to refuse a real job offer, preferring to stay on activation programmes and remain in a situation of material need. The reasons for such decisions can be interpreted mainly as fear of the new situation, poor interaction with the environment outside their own community/village as well as mistrust of the possibility to succeed. As one respondent commented, "I was offered a job in the district town, I wanted it, but I didn't know if they would pay and if it would be good, and if it wasn't good I would lose my benefit, so I decided to stay. Although I would like to have a job and more money, but I'd rather be here."

In the environment in which SMS activation programme participants operate, negative experiences of the working environment are relatively common, so the decision to prioritise staying on an activation programme at the expense of progression to the labour market can often be conditioned by very rational thinking.

The ability to accept a job offer outside the municipality is often also conditioned by the low level of transport services in many municipalities, travelling for work is simply not possible as there are no suitable transport links, a problem often pointed out by a number of respondents, especially those living in locations far from the municipality or in municipalities located in the least developed districts, where the level of transport services is often at a very low level.

One of the main characteristics of activation through SMS is significant ethnic homogeneity. This is not confirmed statistically, as the Labour, Social Affairs and Family Offices do not collect data of an ethnic nature, however, given the field research as well as the interviews carried out, it is evident and it is unambiguous that people from marginalised Roma communities are most often included in the performance of activation in the form of SMS.

This observation was also confirmed by interviews with representatives of employment offices, where the workers themselves stated that one of the few measures they offer to young people from the MRC is participation in activation in the form of SMS. This practice is not necessarily conditioned by the racist attitudes of a particular labour office employee and a programmatic lack of interest in the integration of people from the MRC, but the absence of other appropriate measures that reflect the capacities, needs and specific situation of people from the MRC plays a significant role. As one respondent from a public employment services background noted "we don't even have much to offer them".

While the public employment services pay a great deal of attention to reducing long-term unemployment, the dominant role is played by measures aimed at providing a subsidy for the cost of the work of a disadvantaged employee. However, their frequent problem regarding activation participants is their poor responsiveness on the side of the target group and the frequent mismatch between supply and demand. In addition to subsidising the total cost of the disadvantaged worker's work, employers expect the candidate to be ready for work, which activation participants rarely fulfil. The situation is even more striking for young people, who, unlike older participants, usually have no previous work experience and, due to their low level of social skills, often lack the capacity to meet employers' expectations. Therefore, even in view of the high level of statistical discrimination, employers active on the open labour market are still rather cautious about employing activation participants and, according to several respondents, are open to employing these people, especially in cases of a personal reference from the municipality where the activation is carried out or a reference from an NGO that provides additional support. As one of the research participants from the NGO

environment noted, "given the current labour shortage, the biggest problem at the moment is not to get people into the labour market, but to keep them in the work. People tend to leave work after a few days, which causes big problems for employers, so it is likely for employers not to want to employ this group. They need a huge support from us in order to stay."

The experience of several programmes implemented in Slovakia demonstrates that systematic support provided both before and after the entry into employment in the activation process plays a key role and can overcome the identified concerns of employers.

On the basis of the conducted field research, it can be stated that the activation programme through the SMS is typical for the so-called parking effect, where the jobseeker is placed in an easily accessible measure (in this case it is an activation programme), where s/he stays for the longest possible time without being a subject of any further support from the labour office. An obstacle to the provision of additional support is the setting of the active labour market policy itself, which significantly limits the possibilities of combining individual labour market measures. The element of a kind of sequence in which the participant in activation in the form of SMS has the opportunity to gradually and at his/her own pace reach the level of a full-fledged labour market participant is significantly absent. As one respondent to the field research noted, "you either take part in activation work, which is done in such a way that you don't learn many things, or you are an employee where you are supposed to know everything already. There is nothing in between."

The Employment Services Act, which regulates the implementation of active labour market policies, in its original as well as in later versions does list measures, the gradual implementation of which could successfully lead a participant to the labour market through SMS, but this sequence is almost never implemented in practice. For various, and often highly objective, reasons, labour offices do not have the real capacity to provide or ensure long-term accompaniment of the client, through which they would be able to take him or her through the process from participation in the activation programme to successful placement on the labour market. Participants in activation programmes most often do not receive any additional support to improve their situation. None of the research respondents reported being a participant of any support measures implemented by the labour office; their only contact with the labour office concerns the mandatory reporting and submission of various types of certificates and documents related to the entitlement to the material need benefit.

In the context of long-term registered jobseekers, i.e. the category to which all participants of the activation programme through the SMS¹ belong, the labour offices are even obliged to create individual development plans, to strive for the implementation of the so-called case-management and to provide support to the clients in the long term. However, according to several respondents, including long-term unemployed activation participants, individual development plans are often implemented formally and without real client participation.

According to the respondents of the research, the reasons for this can be found in the low capacity of the labour offices, the weak commitment of the local governments and the weak motivation on the part of the participants. However, practice shows that the issue of weak motivation on the part of participants can only be overcome by their massive support, which, however, requires significant human as well as financial investments.

Local government plays a key role in activation programmes, as it is the most dominant² entity entitled to carry out activation through the SMS under the Employment Services Act.

However, based on the research carried out, it can be concluded that the implementation of activation work often represents a major challenge for municipalities. However, this is often conditioned by a mismatch between the expectations of the local government and the actual capacities of the participants as well as the weak, often zero, capacity of the local government to provide any additional support to the participants. The conducted research once again points out that the local government often perceives the activation programme as an opportunity to substitute paid work, which has been widely criticised in the past (Mýtina-Kureková et al, 2013; COM, 2014), and expects the programme participants to be ready and able to join the work process smoothly and to perform fully. However, activation programme participants are most often unable to meet these expectations, which creates conflict at the municipal level. In order to meet expectations, the municipality must allocate sufficient staff capacity to coordinate activation work in the municipality. It is not rare to hear statements from the municipality like "it cost us more to do it than we would have paid for it" or "it is so difficult to organise activation work that we are considering the possibility of stopping it. Even at the risk that people will lose their income from the activation allowance and the situation in the settlement will get worse".

¹ Implemented according to the Employment Services Act

² under the Employment Services Act, activation in the form of smaller municipal services can also be carried out by local government and its subordinate organisations, but the extent of involvement of regional government is marginal

The issue of the risk of substitution of paid work by the work of the activation programme participants is evident in periods of reduction in the number of activation participants. The situation can be illustrated by the statement of one of the respondents from the labour office "the mayor called me and shouted that why are we sending him only women, that he needs to shovel the snow and the women can't do that, let's send strong men. Because the municipality doesn't have the money to pay for the shovelling".

Programme participants are often involved in activities such as cleaning the village/town, landscaping public green spaces and public areas, various excavation works or minor construction works, which are normally the subject of paid work supplied by external companies. SMS activation programmes are also often implemented in the municipality only in situations where the municipality needs to provide activities that would otherwise have to be delivered by a contractor for proper financial remuneration, and the municipality often exploits the lack of available jobs, which often forces many people to accept participation in an activation programme, even if they would prefer paid employment (e.g. the municipality is implementing the construction of a sewerage system, while less demanding work such as excavation is provided by the municipality through SMS activation programme participants). Based on the above, it can be argued that the activation programme is often perceived by municipalities as an opportunity to provide various activities without any personal support or guidance to the participants.

Among the impacts that the activation programme brings, the impact on local community relations should certainly be considered. Given the dominant position of the local government in the implementation of the programme as well as in the selection of programme participants, it is not uncommon to identify practices in the field where the local government through the SMS activation programme manipulates the fulfilment of the obligations of citizens in material need towards the municipality. These are situations where a person is included in the SMS activation programme only if he/she has paid all the debts to the municipality (garbage fee, dog fee, etc.) or is loyal to the municipality's management. Several testimonies from programme participants suggested that selection is also conditional on personal relationships, i.e. if the mayor has a negative relationship with a particular household, then its members are highly likely to be non-included, which has a direct impact on the household budget. These situations were not identified to the extent of standard behaviour; rather, this was anecdotal information, but nevertheless similar situations need to be addressed.

This practice again confirms the misunderstanding of the activation programme on the part of the local government, which significantly affects the formulation of expectations placed on the activation

programme consequently influencing the perception of the evaluation of the success of the programme.

IV. Conclusions and recommendations for further research

Given the structure of active labour market policy and the limited availability of quality social services, activation in the form of SMS currently represents almost the only active labour market policy measure that programme participants, with an emphasis on young people aged 25-29, can realistically reach and that is realistically offered to them.

It should also be understood that activation programmes are more likely to be implemented in regions with a shortage of available jobs, so activation programme participants often have no other option to increase their income than through an activation programme.

However, the problem is not only the absence of active labour market policy measures that would address the needs and capacities of low-skilled and long-term unemployed jobseekers, who often live in localities with low levels of transport services and a lack of available jobs, but also the possibility of combining and sequencing individual active labour market measures.

Another significant problem is the sparse network of support organisations and services capable of removing barriers to entry and retention of activation participants in the open labour market in a qualified and systematic way, despite the fact that these organisations have repeatedly demonstrated their positive impact and are perceived as essential also by employers, who often cooperate with them relating the employment of vulnerable jobseekers.

The success of an activation participant in the next work trajectory and the likelihood of moving into the labour market is significantly determined by the context of the specific location, the availability of job opportunities, transport services, as well as the nature of the work carried out during the activation programme. However, in order for participants to be able to carry out more sophisticated activities, they need to be provided with the necessary support, which is currently largely absent, whether on the part of labour offices, social affairs or local authorities. Organisations that could have the necessary professional capacities are often left out of the support system and their staff and financial capacities are significantly undersized.

Often misunderstanding of the objectives of the programme and the resulting incorrect formulation of expectations on the part of the actors involved, especially local municipality and policy makers, also plays an important role in assessing the impact of the activation programme. The incorrectly formulated expectations on the part of policy makers consequently lead to efforts to restrict the

activation programme without providing a realistic alternative, as evidenced by the amendment to the Act on material need effective from April 2023.

In order to avoid similar steps in the future, it is necessary to accumulate more qualitative information defending the legitimacy of the activation programme and to place this in the context of international knowledge on the implementation of activation programmes, the current situation and needs of the labour market, the context of the regions where the activation programme is most often implemented and the gender context, which certainly influences the success of the programme.

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