

Social protection in turbulent times: challenges for (not only) Czech society built on the foundations of human rights

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The Czech Republic, as well Europe and the entire world, currently face challenges not seen in this region for generations or completely unprecedented. These challenges include climate change which has created (and will continue to create) millions of so-called climate refugees; an enormous growth in populism and a culture of disinformation (some authors use the expression post-truth world), which threatens to further divide society and increase violence; as well as the growth in social pathologies and social exclusion; an energy crisis that will first impact the poorest and most vulnerable households; and the pandemic that has placed an enormous strain on healthcare systems and could soon be succeeded by another similar pandemic.

The Centre for Constitutionalism and Human Rights is being created at a time when there is immense uncertainty in the life of almost every citizen of our country, which would seem to suggest that the question of human rights (let alone constitutionalism) is unnecessary as there are more pressing problems such as those as outlined above. Yet if we are to effectively cope with these problems and not merely adopt ad hoc solutions (the truth being that PR agencies of populist parties and movements will always come up with more popular ad hoc solutions anyway), we need to search for long-term solutions embedding the concept of human rights, and in particular social rights.

In the following lines I will attempt to present a few thoughts on the issues that will have to be addressed in the near future if Czech society, as a developed EU country, is to succeed in an increasingly turbulent world in the coming decades.

Challenge 1 – Demographic Development

Over the last decades, all European societies have seen their populations ageing. It is, in a way, a positive phenomenon as life expectancy is increasing, and thanks to cutting-edge medicine it is possible to save very fragile lives. It means that in Czech society, like in other countries, the number of elderly pensioners is growing, and these pensioners are often active and self-reliant until a very old age. At the same time, the number of persons with poor health requiring nursing care is growing as well. Thus demand will grow for long-term care, chronic disease care, and geriatrics.

The Covid-19 epidemic has shown that the Czech healthcare and social services system does not function as it should in the 21st century, and that the necessary link was never established between healthcare and social services to create a comprehensive model of long-term care which seems indispensable at this time.

With respect to social protection, the following issues need to be addressed:

- Pension reform: Instead of ad hoc solutions, designing the whole pension system so as to make it financially sustainable;
- Overhaul of the healthcare system: All stakeholders should see healthcare services as services which have a strong social dimension and which in many respects impact the social area. The demographic development places high demands primarily on the quality of chronic disease care. At present, the Czech healthcare system (in particular hospital care) provides excellent acute care in hospitals, but little provision is made for good quality after-care after discharge. Very insufficient provision is made for physiotherapy and other forms of rehabilitation. The care for in-patients is not always satisfactory. Hospital social work (encompassing all meanings of these words) is either unsatisfactory or completely lacking. Without good quality after-care combined with physiotherapy and good quality social work, the money spent on acute care is often wasted.
- Maximum support for rehabilitation, good quality after-care and social work: At present these aspects tend to be underrated in the Czech social system. This can change only if the whole paradigm is overhauled. It has already happened in the case of persons with disabilities where modern rules (in particular the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities) were gradually introduced and the central position was given to a person, rather than to a disability. In the same vein, with respect to elderly persons, it would be desirable to focus on a person holding fundamental rights, including the right to dignity and social rights. It is necessary to create a comprehensive social protection model in which specific tools will be activated according to the needs of a client. A step in the right direction in this respect is the long-awaited Convention on the Rights of Older People which should be adopted by the UN. The Czech social protection system should be responsive to this trend, not only because the Czech population is one of the oldest in Europe.
- Modernization of social services: Czech social services predominantly take the form of residential services, often offered in large nursing homes. Modern approaches increasingly prefer a large variety of services (healthcare and social services) in the client's natural environment, in order to maintain his or her self-reliance for as long as possible. If highly specialised healthcare and social care are required, community-type residential homes should be preferred in order to maintain a cosy atmosphere and individual approach and to avoid a sterile environment.
- Support for informal carers: If family members or other close persons decide to care for their relative, at present they are undertaking an almost heroic task, and many people find this prospect rather daunting. Indeed, the Czech social system is not very accommodating towards informal carers. Carers' allowances are insufficient to reasonably cover their loss of earnings and the high costs of healthcare and rehabilitation services provided at home which could provide great relief to the carers; furthermore such services are not available at all in many regions, or only to a very limited extent. In this area, there is little awareness of available options, both as regards informal carers themselves (the system is not user-friendly and it is very difficult to quickly find appropriate support) and doctors, healthcare providers, insurance companies, social services, etc.

Challenge 2 - Migration

The war in Ukraine, as well as continuing climate change, clearly show that migration is growing and will continue to grow; consequently, resources should no longer be wasted trying to stop it, but rather we should make efforts to successfully cope with it and adapt (among other things) the social protection systems.

Therefore, the social protection systems should focus on the following areas:

- Good quality social services to facilitate the integration of migrants: The wave of migration from Ukraine revealed shortcomings of the Czech social integration system, in particular the missing comprehensive strategy of social integration; the insufficient capacities had to be supplemented by Czech civil society.
- Opening the labour market to persons from third countries: In many European countries, it is thanks to these persons that long-term care for the elderly and others is provided. Economic studies show that the countries which have opened up to controlled migration are economically more robust and resilient than closed economic systems.
- Ensuring that third-country citizens have access to the Czech health insurance system so that persons working in the Czech Republic (who have not received permanent residence yet) do not have to be insured via private insurance schemes which do not cover numerous healthcare services.

Challenge 3 – Digitalization

Many changes have occurred with respect to digitalization and the restructuring of the economy and educational systems, leading to considerable transformations and transfers of jobs on the labour market, in particular as regards low-skilled workers and traditional industries. Moreover, new jobs will emerge beyond the current working arrangements and social protection schemes. At the same time, it has already become obvious that the current use of digital technology can have a negative impact on mental and physical health, and gives rise to more stressful situations.

In this respect, the following areas of social protection need to be addressed:

- Modernization of employment services and the whole system of active employment policy to allow for new working arrangements which emerge thanks to new digital technology;
- Modernization of the social security system to prevent, for example, persons working via digital platforms from being excluded from the mandatory social security system;
- Modernization of healthcare and social services to make them more responsive to potential social exclusion caused by the excessive use of digital technologies; for example, to detect and treat digital addiction;
- Modernization of social services to help their clients navigate safely in cyberspace. It could be called “digital social integration”.

Challenge 4 – (Not only energy) Poverty

The pandemic has shown that elderly citizens deal with many problems which have long been ignored. The global energy crisis has put a spotlight on poverty and social exclusion, issues which have been neglected for many years. Due to the unprecedented economic crisis we are currently facing, it is obvious that Czech society will have very limited resources to cover the enormous costs, even for middle-class citizens.

In this respect, the following areas of social protection need to be addressed:

- Structural changes in the state social support system and assistance in material need: It is clear that in the near future both systems will require greater funding from the state budget than in the past, even if no changes were made. Thanks to lower incomes, a greater number of households will qualify for means-tested benefits, and means-tested benefits will probably be claimed by persons who have not applied for them so far. At the same time, it is necessary to make some structural changes in both systems so that the benefits do not have to be increased ad hoc. Related to this is the need to modernize family policy to take account of new family arrangements and single-earner families. Furthermore, the new needs of families should be reflected in the employment system and the education system (in particular pre-school education), and in the childcare system which is still insufficient in particular as regards very small children.
- Carefully planned and effective prevention of energy poverty: It is necessary to ensure that as few families as possible are affected by energy poverty. This requires a robust prevention system which will not be limited to social security tools. Nevertheless, social services can play a key role in counselling and social prevention.
- Modern concept of social housing: The Czech Republic still owes its citizens a comprehensive concept of social housing. Instead, for many years, socially disadvantaged areas have been growing in the country and the poverty industry has flourished. Yet in the long term, socially disadvantaged areas and lagging regions pose a potential threat for social cohesion in the Czech Republic.
- Good quality social field work: Primarily in socially disadvantaged areas, but also for example in large cities, good quality field work is in relatively short supply. Experience shows that once a certain “degree” of social exclusion has been reached, the person in need is no longer able or willing to contact healthcare or social services on his/her own. Yet if such services are supported, they can help prevent socially pathological phenomena which – if unchecked – can be a great burden for society.

We could mention even more challenges and we could certainly add other areas that need to be addressed with respect to future modern and robust social protection systems. But we presume that the items listed make it sufficiently clear that the Centre for Constitutionalism and Human Rights will have plenty of tasks to deal with and plenty of questions to raise and to answer. All the issues discussed above have to do with human rights, and human rights must be taken into consideration when implementing meaningful social reforms which will soon be crucial in every European society.