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COMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

Twenty-ninth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE FIRST PART (PUBLIC)* OF THE 32nd MEETING

Held at the Palais Wilson, Geneva,
on Wednesday, 13 November 2002, at 10 a.m.

Chairperson: Ms. BONOAN-DANDAN

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The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS (agenda item 6) (continued)

- (a) REPORTS SUBMITTED BY STATES PARTIES IN ACCORDANCE WITH ARTICLES 16 AND 17 OF THE COVENANT (continued)

Initial report of Slovakia (continued) (E/1990/5/Add.49;
E/C.12/Q/SLOVAKREP/1; HRI/CORE/1/Add.120; HR/CESR/NONE/2002/1)

1. At the invitation of the Chairperson, the members of the delegation of Slovakia took places at the Committee table.

Articles 13 to 15 of the Covenant (continued)

2. Mr. CEAUSU, referring to the right to education, said that, according to information available to the Committee, Roma children seemed to be subject to various forms of discrimination such as classroom segregation and inclusion with children who had learning difficulties. Such segregation would surely hinder any social integration at a later stage. The Committee would appreciate information in that regard, as well as on school enrolment and dropout rates, literacy levels and projects to help overcome educational disadvantages, including special and vocational training at higher levels. The Committee would also like to know whether higher education was open to all or subject to barriers such as competitive entrance examinations. It would welcome details of costs and systems of grants. Information about the availability and quality of private higher education facilities would also be welcome.

3. Mr. WIMER ZAMBRANO asked how the Slovak authorities dealt with the problem of national minority citizens regarding access to university education, whether there were programmes for remote learning - for example, through radio and television broadcasts - and whether access to public education was ensured for children of foreign workers.

4. Mr. HUNT wondered why, according to the reply to question 32 of the list of issues, figures for the current school dropout rate were not analysed according to sex, since it was important to know, for example, whether girls faced any particular problems in education. The lack of attention to that matter was incompatible with articles 2 and 3 of the Covenant.

5. Mr. GRISSA asked whether there was a refugee situation in Slovakia as in other countries of the former communist bloc and whether refugees were guaranteed equal treatment with other citizens, including the right to education.

6. The CHAIRPERSON, referring to article 15 of the Covenant, said that the list of cultural facilities mentioned in the report was impressive, but she wished to know what was done to ensure universal enjoyment of those facilities, what steps were taken to promote inter-cultural tolerance and plurality and whether there were any obstacles in that regard.

7. Mr. PETÓCZ (Slovakia) said he hoped that his delegation's dialogue with the Committee at the previous meetings had not given rise to any difficulties as a result of possible misunderstanding of the Committee's procedures and reiterated the delegation's desire to reply to all the questions and comments raised. At the same time, he asked for the Committee's help because it was difficult to respond promptly to questions that were sometimes excursive and called for answers that should be self-evident, since the Constitution and current legislation guaranteed respect for the provisions of the Covenant and Slovakia was closely involved with international standard-setting, such as the work of the ILO and the acquis communautaire of the European Union.

8. Mrs. ONDRASOVA (Slovakia), referring to the right to education, said that a new law would make education at the university level accessible to all within the next few years; the new legislation would, inter alia, facilitate life-long education and provide for increased financing, including further funding for the education of national minorities and the disadvantaged. At the secondary level, funding which currently represented roughly 3.5 per cent of GDP was expected to rise to the European Union level of 6.5 per cent in the next 15 years. Education legislation had been amended to provide for children of pre-primary school age and would introduce measures, including the recruitment of Roma teaching staff, to foster school attendance by Roma children, as well as means to enhance employment opportunities for the Roma community.

9. The children of all foreigners, from permanent residents and permit-holders to asylum-seekers, had the same educational rights as Slovak children. The only problems stemmed from ignorance of the Slovak language, for which special courses were established wherever necessary. At the secondary education level, it was expected that the current reforms would do away with the competitive entrance barrier.

10. Apart from education in the national language, education was available in Hungarian, in a number of State, private and religious schools, including some at the secondary level, as well as in a special school for the mentally handicapped; in Ukrainian, at the primary and secondary levels; and in German, in six primary schools. Ruthenian was also taught in some schools, but as a subject in itself, the main curriculum being in Slovak. In addition, the curricula at some teacher-training colleges were in Hungarian, German or Ukrainian, as well as in Roma in areas with a high Roma population density. It should be stressed that all the educational advances stemming from new legislation would apply to minority language teaching, too. A multicultural programme was being introduced, with European Union assistance, which would include the teaching of the Slovak language in minority language schools and as part of a special accelerated junior school curriculum for Roma pupils. Steps would also be taken to coordinate existing programmes in relevant fields.

11. School attendance and dropout figures were matters of concern and were being carefully monitored. The national compulsory school period was 10 years, the first 9 being at primary level and the tenth at the level of the first secondary year. Figures for one academic year showed that roughly 3,000 pupils, some 1,900 of them Roma, had failed to complete the tenth year.

12. Although no data was available disaggregated by sex on the school dropout rate, she said that the Government did have other data that might be of interest to the Committee. For example, the overall school dropout rate was just over 2 per cent and over half of all dropouts

came from disadvantaged families. Approximately 5 per cent of pupils in the first year of primary school were underachievers and 70 per cent of those children came from the Roma minority. Currently, very few Roma children received pre-school education, and that made it difficult for them to settle into primary schools. The Government had therefore developed a long-term strategy to encourage Roma families to send their children to school. The strategy had had some positive results; for example, the European Union was funding a project aimed at encouraging the Roma to enrol their children in pre-school education by providing kindergartens free of charge which mothers could attend with their children. According to the law, all children were provided with free school meals. Statistics indicated that 66 per cent of children attending pre-school education went on to complete the 10 years of compulsory education. The Ministry of Education had recently devoted 10 million Slovak koruna to a programme that aimed to raise the Roma school enrolment rate and to provide jobs by employing Roma classroom assistants. Usually, Roma children had a poor knowledge of the Slovak language when they started school, so providing classroom assistants who spoke their own language was very important and helped to improve the relationship between schools and families.

13. The CHAIRPERSON invited the members of the Committee to ask follow-up questions.

14. Mr. AHMED said he realized that the State party was making an effort under the circumstances to implement the provisions of article 15 of the Covenant. In recent years, the Government had continued to finance cultural and educational broadcasting and publishing activities for the major national minorities, albeit at greatly reduced levels. It was undoubtedly difficult to address the problems emanating from the existence of so many different cultures and to tackle the questions of assimilation and integration.

15. The Act on the use of minority languages had been adopted in 1999, allowing for the use of minority languages in official activities in areas where a minority group constituted at least 20 per cent of the population. It was unclear whether that provision would apply to Roma populations, given that they were always on the move, making it difficult to establish at any given time whether or not they constituted 20 per cent of an area's population. Members of the Hungarian Coalition Party had voted against the draft Act, as they had felt that there was no guarantee that its provisions would take precedence over the 1996 Act on the State language, which enforced the strict use of Slovak and prohibited the use of minority languages, despite the fact the Constitution provided minorities with the right to develop their own culture, receive information and education in their own mother tongue and to participate in decision-making in matters affecting them. Under the 1996 Act, it was forbidden to produce official documents, including academic certificates, in a language other than Slovak and citizens were not allowed to communicate among themselves in any other language; a Hungarian-speaking police officer was therefore forced to use the Slovak language when communicating with Hungarian-speaking citizens, illustrating how illogical the application of the law was. He would be interested to know whether the situation had changed and whether the State party had established a time frame for integration. In the delegation's view, what degree of tolerance was necessary?

16. Mr. KOLOSOV said there was no doubt that instilling tolerance took time, particularly in a country where several minorities coexisted. Legal provisions alone were not enough to resolve the situation; people had to be made aware of their rights. It would be interesting to know whether any programmes had been introduced to achieve mutual awareness and to instil

tolerance among the different ethnic groups from an early age. He welcomed the fact that money was being made available to encourage people to take part in the cultural life of the country, but it would be useful to know, in relative terms, how much it cost to buy a cinema ticket or to subscribe to a magazine, for example. Were prices prohibitive? Could the average retired person, for example, afford to go to the cinema?

17. Mr. WIMER ZAMBRANO said he would like further information about the role of radio and television in terms of education and raising cultural awareness. Were there any special channels or time slots allocated to broadcasting educational and cultural programmes?

18. Mr. HUNT asked the representative of the Slovakian Ministry of Education whether she was of the view that it would be helpful to have educational data disaggregated by sex, in view of the State party's obligations under articles 2 and 3 of the Covenant. He pointed out that the Committee, in its General Comment No. 13 on the right to education, had requested States parties to obtain educational data disaggregated by the prohibited grounds of discrimination.

19. Mr. PETÓCZ (Slovakia) said that the parents of at least five children had to submit a request before a special class for a minority group could be created. The same rule applied to Slovaks living in areas where there was an ethnic Hungarian majority.

20. All national minorities had access to higher education, although there were some factors that meant that certain minorities were under-represented; for example, many people from the Hungarian national minority lived in rural areas, thus making it difficult for them to enrol in higher education establishments. The percentage of the Roma population in higher education was very low. The Government was aware that much needed to be done in order to improve the situation. Under the Constitution, the Roma were a national minority, so they could ask for their own educational establishment providing education in the Roma language if they so wished, as the Hungarian minority had done. The Government had adopted a decision in October 2002 to create an independent Hungarian-language university in Slovakia. However, he was of the view that the Roma did not want separate schools. In addition, efforts to standardize the Roma language had met with little success.

21. In reply to a question on whether the Slovak public radio and television stations broadcast programmes in minority languages, he said that one radio station broadcast programmes for six to eight hours a day in Hungarian and a television channel showed about two hours of programmes each week in all of the minority languages.

22. Replying to a question by Mr. Ahmed, he said that the 1996 Act on the State language had been adopted by the previous Government and had caused many problems in the mid-1990s. However, one of the first measures taken by the new Government in 1998 had been to abolish the rule stating that academic certificates had to be produced in the Slovak language. A new draft Act on the use of minority languages had been adopted in 1999, to counterbalance the Act on the State language, so the situation had improved. He pointed out that the Hungarian Coalition Party had not voted against the Act, but had abstained from voting because not all the provisions it had requested had been incorporated.

23. There were no problems in the relationship between the Slovaks and the Hungarian national minority. The Roma coexisted with the majority population, but were not integrated into society. They had no self-organized structures allowing them to cooperate and to maintain a partnership with the Government. Currently, all problems were solved locally by each individual Roma community. The Roma population needed to decide whether it wished to adopt the status of a national minority so that it could enjoy the rights that came with the status. Currently, the social situation of the Roma was extremely poor. The issue of education was critical.

24. Ms. ONDRASOVA (Slovakia) said that, in addition to allowing bilingual school certificates, the Government ensured that all bilingual schools provided materials in both languages. In reply to a question by Mr. Kolosov, she said that human rights education had been integrated into the curricula even at the pre-school level in an attempt to instil tolerance. However, the whole process would take time. In reply to Mr. Hunt's question about disaggregating data on school dropouts by sex, she agreed that it could be useful, particularly when addressing the problem of teenage pregnancies among the Roma. With regard to the issue of the use of minority languages, she pointed out that the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages had entered into force in Slovakia in January 2002. The Ministry of Education had put aside some funds for the standardization of the Roma language; a manual containing Roma grammar had been published and was to be distributed in schools along with other educational material in different Roma dialects.

25. Mr. LIPTAY (Slovakia) said that, in the area of culture, the Government made an effort carefully to balance social and economic needs against cultural ones in preparing the budget. The Government and the Parliament were well aware that expenditures on culture were not wasted money. After 1989, culture had been the first sector to undergo denationalization and cultural matters had been turned over to the regional and municipal authorities. In 2001 and 2002, less than 1 per cent of the State budget had been allocated directly for culture. Slovakia did not wish, however, to relinquish control over such important institutions as the Slovak National Theatre, the Slovak National Museum and the Slovak National Library, which would continue to be centralized. It was taking steps to protect its cultural heritage, in accordance with agreements with UNESCO.

26. After 1990, the Government had underestimated the importance of statistical information and had unfortunately severed important local links. As a result, there was little data on investments in culture at the local and regional levels. The Ministries had, however, been collecting and monitoring data on cultural participation and had detailed figures on, for example, the number of people who visited museums and galleries and the number of books that were published.

27. It was true that the supply of culture was greater than demand. Many people expected to see new films on television, rather than in the cinema; that did not mean that the cinema was less attractive. Prices were perhaps sometimes too high: that was an unavoidable element of a market economy. Opera tickets might be too high for most Slovaks; the opera was, however, a highly specialized event. The Government was endeavouring to organize cultural events at a lower price for retirees, for example. Magazine subscriptions had dropped because some families could not afford them. The Government was working to set up a network of modern, accessible libraries, with a wide selection of publications, as well as Internet access and materials

available on CD-ROM and video. Public libraries were currently handling 40 million loans, or 8 loans per capita yearly; that figure included libraries run by the State and by the municipalities, but did not include school libraries.

28. The Government had adopted measures to increase the access of disabled persons to culture and cultural institutions, including wheelchair access to galleries, theatres and museums. It had also developed a special library for the blind and visually impaired. Located in northern Slovakia, it provided a wide selection of materials in Braille, with a mail service for visually impaired persons living in other parts of the country.

29. The Act on the State language focused on monitoring the quality of the official language, as used by the media and publishing houses, for example. Such monitoring was carried out by the Language Council and by experts from the Scientific Language Institute, in cooperation with the universities. It had been amended and no longer provided for penalties or in any way coerced citizens into using standardized language.

30. In the past, the State had owned Slovakia's cultural heritage. Some of that property had been privatized, some had been returned to previous owners and some had been transferred to the municipalities. The public still had access to cultural sites, however, which included castles, monuments, museums, galleries and libraries. Owing to funding problems, some were open only part of the time. Also owing to a lack of funds, many institutions, such as museums, galleries and libraries, were unable to add new items to their collections. That was a transitional situation; the Government was developing a system of multi-source funding, in connection with the general fiscal reform, which, it hoped, would solve that problem. Certain institutions would be privately owned; State grants would be available to supplement their budgets.

31. The Government had also devised a system of special-purpose cultural transfers, for assistance to private persons, institutions and the Church. Property formerly belonging to the Church had been returned to it. Unfortunately, such property had been heavily damaged and the State was reimbursing the cost of the repairs.

32. Mr. PETÓCZ (Slovakia) said that the current level of cultural diversity was unprecedented in Slovakia's history. It was meaningless to speak of obstacles to the resurgence of its cultural heritage: before the transition, there had been, for example, one publishing house; now there were dozens. It could not be said that there had been a decrease in access to cultural rights in recent years.

33. Mr. MARCHAN ROMERO said that the question had related to funds for access to culture. It was clear that funds for culture had previously been provided solely by the State. After the transition, cultural institutions had had to pay their own way and that meant lower salaries and, in general, lower participation.

34. Mr. LIPTAY (Slovakia) said that, when cultural institutions had been denationalized, that had also spurred the development of cultural life at the local level. Theatre troupes, chamber orchestras, ballet companies and choral groups were flourishing, since they could now freely make artistic choices. Performers from Slovakia had been participating in international festivals, with some success. Persons with lower incomes perhaps did not attend premieres; but they could

buy tickets to subsequent, cheaper performances. In addition, through satellite and cable television, Slovaks had access to many news and other programmes from abroad. Cinema-going had dropped because many people preferred to view videos in their homes. Cultural supply was now greater than demand and culture seekers were perhaps less active in their pursuit of experience. Perhaps not all Slovaks could go to the opera, but, then again, opera did have a rarefied audience. Although magazine subscriptions had dropped, Internet use had increased. The Government had heard no complaints about the lack of access to culture.

35. Mr. OLEXA (Slovakia) said that there had been a significant increase in real salaries in the previous year. Some changes had occurred in the structure of household expenditures; in that regard, Slovakia was drawing closer to the European norm. Housing was more costly than before. The costs of education and cultural life were relatively stable, however, and households spent, on average, 8 per cent of their income on culture.

36. Mr. CEAUSU said he had understood that a gradual reform of higher education was taking place, with the goal of providing such education to all within five years. More information would be welcome.

37. Ms. ONDRASOVA (Slovakia) said that the Government was aware of the fundamental role of higher education in the achievement of sustainable development and had undertaken a plan to bring its system up to educational standards within the next several years. Private universities now existed and they set their own criteria for admission. In general, in order to enter the university, it was necessary for a student to have successfully completed his secondary school education. She would provide detailed information on the educational reform subsequently, in writing.

38. Mr. PETÓCZ (Slovakia) said that all universities must be accredited by the Government and each determined its own criteria for accepting students. In principle, universities were free to all.

39. In conclusion, he said that the consideration of the report had been an educational experience for him and for all members of his delegation. The Covenant was one of the most complex of the human rights instruments and the preparation of the report had therefore represented a challenge and given rise to a number of problems. In any event, he believed that the Committee had been given a detailed picture of the implementation of economic, social and cultural rights in Slovakia and he looked forward to the continuation of that fruitful exchange.

The public part of the meeting rose at 11.55 a.m.