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Labor Market Policy in the Slovak Republic and Hungary during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: The first and second waves of the COVID-19 pandemic have serious impacts on the economies, social systems and labor markets of individual European countries. Although, not all the countries were equally affected by the pandemic, the EU members applied similar economic measures to combat the effect of COVID-19. In Hungary and Slovakia, the financial aid was directed particularly to employers and employees affected by the emergency situation. The aim of the article is to present the implemented public intervention to offset the negative effects of coronavirus pandemic, compare the effectiveness of the national strategies of the Slovak Republic and Hungary on the labor market and their success to cope with the pandemic. The results show that the measures taken by the Slovak government were not nearly as effective as those which were introduced by its southern neighbor. Furthermore, we can state that the number of unemployed people has increased significantly in the service sector.

Keywords: COVID-19; EU funds; unemployment rate; Hungary; Slovak Republic

JEL Classification: E24; J08; O11

1. Introduction

The first noticeable signs of the COVID-19 pandemic appeared in Europe in March 2020. Most of European countries were unprepared to face the effects of the global epidemic situation. Coping with the socio-economic impacts of coronavirus crisis was particularly difficult for the Lagging Regions of the EU.

There are two basic types of Lagging Regions in the EU: low-growth regions and low-income regions. The low-growth regions are less developed and transition regions with GDP per capita (PPS per inhabitant) below the EU average in 2013. This means all the less developed regions in Greece, Italy, Portugal or Spain. The low-income regions include regions with GDP per capita below 50% of the EU average in 2013. The second group covers several less developed regions of Bulgaria, Romania and regions in the Visegrad Group countries (V4) i.e., the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and the Slovak Republic (IBRD, 2019). "The inequalities may persist and even increase if left unaddressed during pandemics (Wade, 2020) leading to stark COVID-19-related health and economic disparities." (Antipova, 2021)

In this article, we will deal with the evaluation of effectiveness of the implemented anti-pandemic measures in Slovak Republic and Hungary, so in two V4 countries. We will also evaluate consequences of the COVID-19 crisis on the labor market of these EU member states. The choice of studied countries was intentional, because both of them experienced controversial developments during the years 2020 and 2021.

In March 2020, the Government of the Slovak Republic introduced several anti-pandemic measures to mitigate negative social and economic impacts of COVID-19. In Slovakia, the package of protective measures was co-financed by the European Social Fund (ESF). The different types of support measures were implemented as a part of the Regional Operational Programme of the country. First, a "pandemic nursing benefit" was introduced, which was a special allowance to care for a family member in an unusual situation. A "pandemic sickness benefit" was also created and it was determined for sickness-insured people who were recognized as incapable for work due to quarantine measures or isolation. On March 31, 2020, the "First-Aid" package of economic measures was approved. The purpose of the measures was to help employees, businesses (especially large and micro enterprises) and self-employed during the months of nationwide lockdown. The package of measures was co-financed by European Social Fund. In November 2020, the "First Aid Plus" scheme was launched, which extended the original set of economic measures (Buchel et. al., 2020).

Table 1. "First Aid" Schemes in Slovak Republic (Buchel et al., 2020)

<table>
<tr><th>Scheme</th><th>Eligible Claimant</th><th>Target Group</th><th>Conditions</th><th>Contribution</th></tr>
<tr><td>1</td><td>Employer or self-employed as employer</td><td>Employee</td><td>Employers who were forced to shut down their operations based on the measures of the Slovak Public Health Authority; employers with furloughed workers.</td><td>80% of the employee's average salary (max. €1,100)</td></tr>
<tr><td>2</td><td>Self-employed person</td><td>Self-employed person</td><td>Drop in revenues of at least 20% [10%]</td><td>From €180 [€90] to €540 [€270], depending on the extent of revenue drop</td></tr>
<tr><td>3A</td><td rowspan="2">Employer or self-employed as employer</td><td rowspan="2">Employee</td><td>Activity affected by economic slowdown; employers with furloughed workers</td><td>Up to 80% of the employee's average salary (max. €880)</td></tr>
<tr><td>3B</td><td>Employers that recorded a drop in revenues of at least 20% [10%]</td><td>From €180 [€90] to €540 [€270] per worker, depending on the extent of revenue drop, up to 80% of the average employee's wage</td></tr>
<tr><td>4A</td><td>Self-employed person</td><td>Self-employed person</td><td rowspan="2">- - - - -</td><td rowspan="2">Flat contribution of €210 [€105]</td></tr>
<tr><td>4B</td><td>Single-member private LLC.</td><td>Single-member private LLC.</td></tr>
</table>

Unlike other countries, Hungary didn´t want to ask for external help to solve the problems caused by COVID-19. For this reason, the Hungarian government was looking for solutions, which could be implemented primarily from its own resources. The basic emergency economic protecting measures were the following.

1. The obligation to pay capital and interest on loans taken out by private individuals and businesses were suspended until the end of 2020. The condition was that the loans had to be taken out before March 18, 2020. The moratorium on payments applied to all credit agreements, loan agreements and financial leasing contract. The amount of the original

installment of the previously taken loan couldn´t increase. The APR (annual percentage rate) of new consumer loans were maximized at the central bank prime rate plus 5 percent. It was valid for loans taken out from March 19, 2020. Short-term business loans were extended until June 2020 (PwC, 2020).

2. Economic stimulus measures were introduced in the sectors already affected by the coronavirus pandemic, mainly in tourism and hospitality, media and cultural services, sports and passenger transport. The economic stimulus measures included the following. Companies (employers) operating in these areas were exempted from paying contribution in full. Also, employee´s contributions were significantly reduced by June 30, 2020. They essentially didn´t have to pay pension contributions, and health insurance contributions were reduced to the statutory minimum (it means 4% health insurance contributions in kind). Their employees could also receive tax discount.
3. Until the end of June 2020, small entrepreneurs were exempted from paying the itemized tax on low-tax enterprises. The government has granted a deferral of small businesses´ pre-March tax arrears. Executions for tax arrears were suspended and it was enough to pay the outstanding tax arrears after the end of the emergency situation.
4. The home child care fees, the childcare allowance and childcare allowance benefits were extended for the duration of the emergency.
5. According to another measure commercial lease agreements couldn´t be terminated and rents couldn´t be raised.
6. Jobseekers have become eligible for an interest-free adult student loan. The state took over 95% of the tuition fees for IT trainings. The government also made employment rules more flexible (Koronavirus, 2020a).

The aim of the present study is to outline the impact of the listed measures on the Slovak and Hungarian labor markets, and to illustrate the economic effects and consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Methodology

In the work titled "Labor Market Policy in the Slovak Republic and Hungary during the COVID-19 Pandemic" we compare two Central European countries, concretely Hungary and Slovakia. The effectiveness of the anti-pandemic measures can be evaluated through the unemployment situation and the number of operating companies. To illustrate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the labor market of the Slovak Republic and Hungary, the development of the unemployment rate of these states was analyzed. We have collected information from the data collections of the FinStat, the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, the Hungarian Central Statistical Office, the Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family and the Eurostat. The collected data is about the unemployment rate in the mentioned two countries, number of unemployed populations according to the level of their education, regions and the sectors where they previously worked, populations' data and about the number of closed economic entities. Moreover, we need to mention that we have analyzed the collected data during the time period 2015 and 2020. Our main goal was to

analyze and check what kind of effects did the coronavirus had on the unemployment rate in the studied countries. So, we think this 5-year period can perfectly show us the difference between the 2 periods, the years before the pandemic and the years after the virus′ appearance.

In our work we have used quantitative even qualitative methods. As qualitative method, we have studied the literature of other specialists around Europe. Also, we have collected what kind of reactions and support the studied countries provide to their population in case to help them in the difficult times. After processing the relevant domestic and foreign literature sources, we used comparative research method and descriptive statistical methods to process data. The following indicators of descriptive statistics were used: mean, standard deviation. Moreover, we have used Difference-in-Differences method, with which we demonstrate the changes in unemployment rate during the analyzed time period in Hungary and Slovakia. Due to this method, we confirmed the stated hypotheses correctness.

3. Results

In our research paper we study the unemployment rate change in Slovakia and Hungary as a reaction for the pandemic caused by COVID-19 or the so-called coronavirus. On the following pages we are going to study 2 statements, whether they are correct or not. The following statements are:

S1: The unemployment rate has shown a significant rise after the appearance of the COVID-19 virus and the it followed pandemic in 2019. Moreover, the unemployment rate increased (2020-2021) or decreased (2015-2019) more significantly in Slovakia compared to the other analyzed country, Hungary.

S2: In the tertiary sector, concretely in accommodation and food services the number of unemployed people has increased by an important percentage after the appearance of the virus in Slovakia and Hungary.

3.1. The Analyzed Countries

Slovakia is situated in Central Europe, with population of 5.4 million people. Slovakia was established in 1993, so we can say it is a relatively new country. Slovakia is part of the European Union from 2004 and of the Eurozone from 2009. These two facts have influenced the country′s economy in a significant way. Slovakia became more attractive in the eyes of the investors because of the convenient location, relatively cheap workforce, high educational level and the usage of Euro. The coronavirus or the COVID-19 has appeared in the Slovak Republic on 6th March 2020. Since this moment the life of the country′s population has changed rapidly (Public Health Office of the Slovak Republic, 2020).

Hungary is Slovakia′s neighboring country from the south. Its population is 10 million people, so we can state it′s almost the double of Slovakia′s. Hungary has become the part of the European Union in the same time as Slovakia in 2004. However, in Hungary the national currency is the Hungarian Forint. In Hungary, the first COVID-19 infected patient was registered on the 4th March 2020 (Koronavirus, 2020b).

"The impact of the pandemic is especially a forced constraint in the business sector and a reduction in consumer demand. Due to the above factors, employers began to compensate for cost reductions through mass redundancies in their companies. According to a report prepared by the Institute of Social Policy of the Slovak Republic, the month-on-month comparison of unemployment shows that only in August 2020 a slight decrease in the unemployment rate was recorded." (Svabova et al., 2021)

3.2. Unemployment

The unemployment rate during the analyzed time period in Slovakia and Hungary has shown a very similar trend. Comparing the data on the unemployment rate in the selected countries, the results were as follows. In the last decade a stabile decline of the unemployment rate was observed in Slovakia and Hungary. However, year 2020 has brought a change. At the outset of the epidemic the percentage of people without work increased. In 2020 in Slovakia the unemployment rate has increased by 0.9% compared to the previous year and in Hungary by 0.8% (Figure 1).

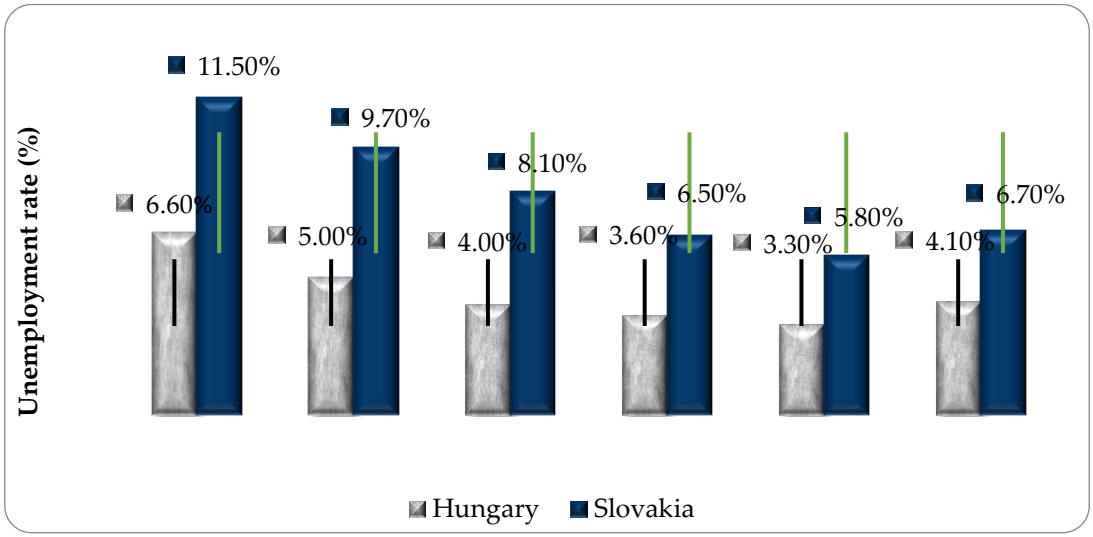

Figure 1. Unemployment Rate – Slovakia, Hungary (Eurostat, 2021)

The standard deviation calculated from the data on unemployment rates between 2015 and 2020 was 1.103% (Hungary) and 1.996% (Slovak Republic). The number of unemployed has risen up intensively in Slovakia during the pandemic. This suggests that anti-covid measures which aim was to stabilize the Slovak labor market were less successful. However, it is important to mention that the data on the unemployment rate in Hungary were lower even before the epidemic. We can say that statement no.1 was correct, since can observe a remarkable rise after 2019 and unemployment increased more significantly in Slovak economy.

Table 2. presents us the changes in unemployment rate in the analyzed time periods with the help of Difference-in-Differences method. Thanks to this method we can observe again that the unemployment rate in the analyzed countries has decreased till 2019. However, in 2020, after the appearance of the COVID-19 virus in Europe the unemployment rate has

started to increase. What is extremely interesting for us, that in Slovakia the unemployment rate has always decreased (2016-2019) and increased (2020-2021) with a significantly higher rate than in Hungary.

Table 2. Difference-in-Differences Slovakia, Hungary (HCSO, 2021c; STATdat, 2021b).

Year	Figures (%)	Slovakia	Hungary
2016	before	11.5	6.60
	after	9.70	5.00
	difference	*-1.80*	*-1.60*
2017	before	9.70	5.00
	after	8.10	4.00
	difference	*-1.60*	*-1.00*
2018	before	8.10	4.00
	after	6.60	3.60
	difference	*-1.50*	*-0.40*
2019	before	6.60	3.60
	after	5.80	3.30
	difference	*-0.80*	*-0.30*
2020	before	5.80	3.30
	after	6.70	4.10
	difference	*0.90*	*0.80*
2021	before	6.70	4.10
	after	6.80	4.10
	difference	*0.10*	*0.00*

According to Figure 2, we can see how the number of unemployed population (per 1,000 people) has changed in the selected sectors. What is extremely interesting for us, the unemployment rate in the service sector has increase after 2020 (72.0) to 96.4, what could be caused by the strict state lockdowns, restrictions in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. The population of the EU was not allowed to use some services and go to the street. This regulation has slowed down the national, as well the international economy. In Hungary, the number of unemployment population has doubled in the sector of accommodation and food services from 8.6 to 16.0. In the sector of accommodation and food service, the number of unemployed people has not increased steadily in comparison of the regions of the Slovak republic. At the end of 2020, in the accommodation and food service sector the highest unemployment rate has been reached in districts of Nitra, Trenčín, Trnava, Bratislava and Košice. Therefore, the mentioned districts have been more affected by anti-pandemic measures. The density of unemployed people in the analyzed sector calculated with Dual Indicator was 1.31. This means that the average amount of unemployed population in the regions with high unemployment rate in the accommodation and food services is almost one and a half times higher than in the regions with a low unemployment rate. What is very interesting the unemployment has been rising even in the industrial sector. While in 2019, 42 people were unemployed from 1,000 in 2020 their number has increased, and 57.6 lost their jobs. It was not very different even in the car industrial sector neither. In 2018, it has been 4.0 while in 2020 it has reached even 6.1 per 1,000 people.

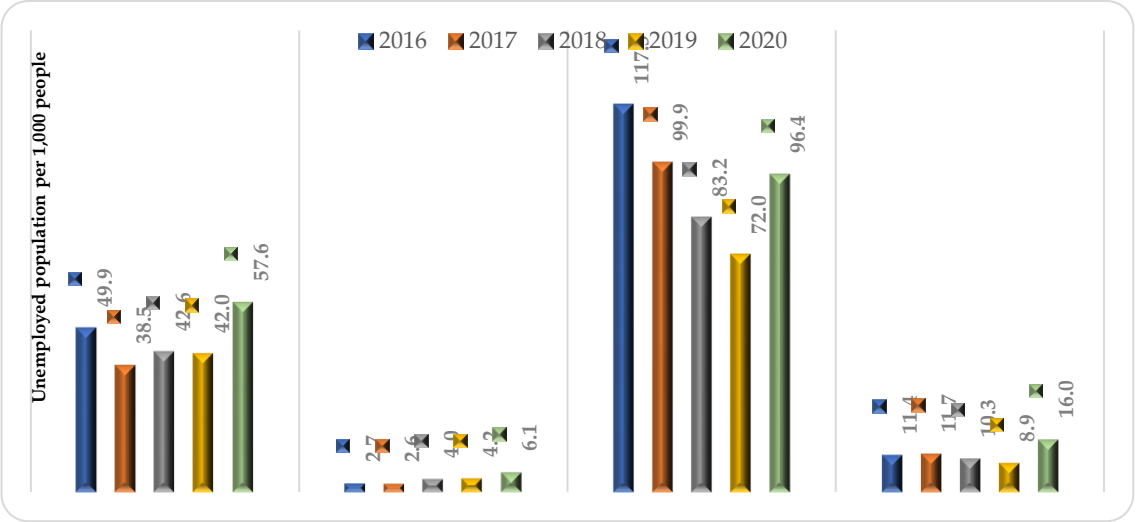

Figure 2. Unemployment in Sectors – Hungary (HCSO, 2021c)

We have analyzed the same sectors even in Slovakia (Figure 3). In Slovakia, the studied two sectors in the first years showed a declining tendency in the number of unemployed people. However, as in the case of Hungary even here, in Slovakia we can observe a significant rise in the year 2020, when the COVID-19 virus has appeared in the country. In 2019, 34.4 people were unemployed in the industrial sector and in the next year it has reached even 45.6 people from 1,000. A lot people had to lose their jobs in the industrial sector, since the process of production has been minimalized or even stopped. In the sector of accommodation and services in 2019, 6.5 people got unemployed from 1,000, while in 2020 it has risen to 12. Hotels, restaurants and bar were closed for longer weeks and months, what has caused very high losses in the annual income and profit.

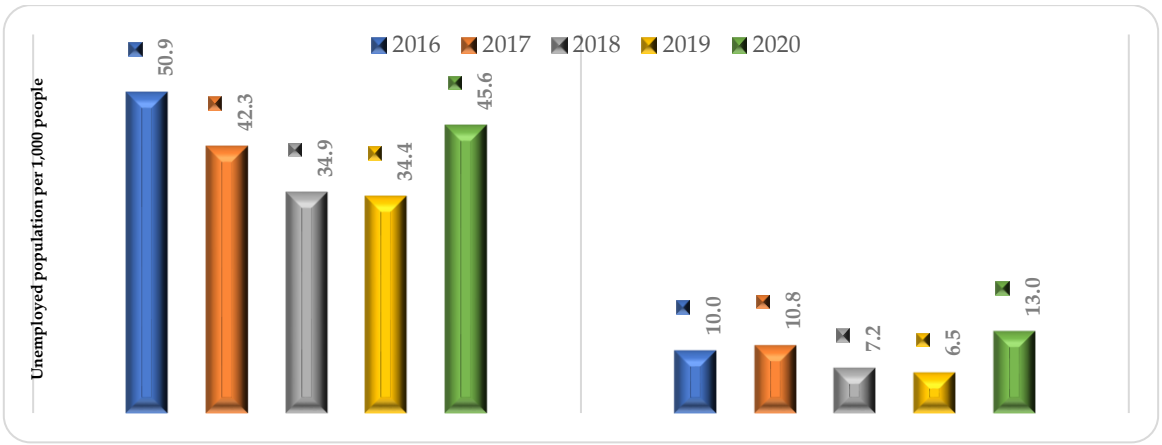

Figure 3. Unemployment in Sectors- Slovakia (STATdat, 2021b)

Moreover, due to the mentioned damages companies had to minimalize the number of their stuff as well. This has caused a rise in the country´s annual unemployment rate.

We can say, that the second statement (In the tertiary sector, concretely in accommodation and food services the number of unemployed people has increased by an important percentage after the appearance of the virus in Slovakia and Hungary.) was correct

as well. In 2020, we could observe a significant rise compared to the previous year in the case of Hungary and Slovakia as well.

4. Discussion

The COVID-19 epidemic caused a severe global economic crisis. In Hungary and Slovakia, the negative effects of the pandemic included declining GDP and FDI flows, a rapid increase in the number of unemployed, the almost complete cessation of the tourism and gastronomy sector, and supply chain slowdown in several industries.

According to a study conducted by Svabova et al. (2021), the Slovak economy was very strongly affected by the consequences of the pandemic. The positive development on the labor market was disrupted in March, 2020. The study (Svabova et al., 2021) showed that the number of unemployed people increased by on average 2,875 people (16.19%) monthly, covering the period of the years 2013-2020. Also, there was a monthly increase in the number of all available jobseekers in Slovakia. Data of the Slovak Statistical Office show that the number of registered job applicants in 2020 in Slovakia increased by 37.40% compared to 2019 (STATdat, 2021). Data of FinStat showed that more than 16,000 companies closed down at the end of 2020 due to the epidemic (FinStat, 2021). As Štalmachová et al. (2021) suggested the economic downturn and high unemployment ranked the Slovak Republic among the worst affected countries in European Union.

Túróczi et al. (2020) explained, the coronavirus reached the Hungarian economy in a stable financial situation and in a growth phase. The economy was in remarkably good condition, close to full employment. The public debt generally declined, the competitiveness of the national economy improved and the investment rate was high (Túróczi et al., 2020). However, the epidemic has changed the situation. The unemployment rate increased by 0.8 percentage point compared to the corresponding period last year. The growth of unemployment continued in the first quarter of 2021. The unemployment rate according to the Central Statistical Office of Hungary was higher by 0.9 percentage point year-on-year (HCSO, 2021a). In 2019, the total number of ceased corporations was 101,737. In 2020, business closures across Hungary were increasing as a result of the coronavirus. The number of ceased corporations increased by 9,377 (HCSO, 2021b). Tóth et al. (2021) in their survey proved that the pandemic has triggered harmful labor market processes. The number of employees decreased in almost all sectors of the Hungarian economy and in the economy of the EU, too. The study also showed that some areas were severely affected. The coronavirus pandemic caused decline in consumption and generated high inflation, which primarily affected sectors that require physical interaction (e.g., wholesale and retail trade, transport, tourism, sector of accommodation and food service activities). Businesses operating in these sectors laid-off a significant portion of their workers, causing a large rise in unemployment (Tóth et al., 2021). Although, the situation was similar in Hungary and Slovakia, the Hungarian economy was less affected by the epidemic. For example, the unemployment rate rose in both countries, however the growth dynamics was slower in Hungary than in Slovakia. Based on the results of the study, the measures taken by the Slovak government were not nearly as effective as those which were introduced by its southern neighbor.

As Goreczky (2020) suggested although no one is fully aware of all the consequences of the pandemic yet, it is important to outline some basic lessons and connections that are already known. This information can serve as a guide of reference for decision-makers in individual countries in a similarly complex global situation. Túróczi et al. (2020) explained, supporting and protecting businesses will be even more important. The future of national economies depends primarily on the innovative products, services, processes and systems created by enterprising persons (Túróczi et al., 2020). During the pandemic, the interests of companies and workers seemed to be conflicting, but in reality, they both struggled with existential concerns. On the other hand, even in times of crisis, we should not forget the importance of employees. Hajduová and Sebestyén (2021) showed that the employees play a very important role in achieving company growth. They are considered to be a decisive factor of success in this area. The role of managers is also being enhanced, as they must be able to provide appropriate incentives for workers even in time of crisis (Hajduová & Sebestyén, 2021).

Finally, the coronavirus epidemic has not only caused damage but also offers a chance to rethink the economic ambitions for the near future. In the future we would like to continue our research about the problematic of the rising unemployment rate after the appearance of COVID-19 pandemic, since we perfectly know, that it is a very actual and important issue. Concretely, we would like to concentrate on the diversity of the unemployment rate in various regions of the analyzed countries, on the educational level of the unemployed and employed people and on the most sectors, which were the most influenced by the happenings. Finally, we cannot forget about financial support provided by the EU of from national funds. We will analyze their placement, implementation and long-term sustainability.

Conflict of interest: none

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