

THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC AND THE LABOR MARKET IN THE DIMENSIONS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to evaluate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the labor market in the context of the development of selected socio-economic determinants. The observed period in the conditions of the Slovak Republic is the period of 2016-2021. In terms of methodology, we have applied mixed research: qualitative in combination with a quantitative type of research. We performed an analysis of secondary data obtained through the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (SO SR). The evaluation paper is based on the following determinants: the development of the average number of jobseekers, the average number of jobseekers receiving unemployment benefits, as well as the volume of unemployment benefits paid during the period under review. The analysis concluded that the increase in unemployment in the Slovak Republic is directly proportional to the consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, including an increase in public spending, which the state seeks to alleviate the problems within individual aid schemes. In the article, we outlined the most endangered sectors, including the possibility of drawing assistance from central state administration bodies.

Keywords

Unemployment, Social Policy, Employment, COVID-19, Slovak Republic

I. Introduction

Society is a fragile space in which several factors operate, which can lead to various social risks affecting the social health of society as a whole (Bora, 2007). Society is a dynamic space that is constantly evolving with both positive and negative impacts on citizens.

The process of the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, together with its aftermath around the world, can be described as the current global crisis facing the whole world. These impacts were subsequently reflected in several areas of social policy, influencing the policy of health care, employment, social protection, or the search for tools to minimize the spread of socio-pathological phenomena in society (Whitehead et al., 2021).

The severity and speed of the spread of SARS-CoV-2 in the world in early 2020 contributed to the World Health Organization (WHO) declaring a public health threat of international concern in January 2020, followed by the spread of the infection as a pandemic from 11 March 2020 (Trojanek et al., 2020; Tomer et al., 2021). Lybarger, et al., (2020) further point out that, in addition to significant loss of life, declining production in several countries is contributing to a deep recession in the world economy, forcing countries around the world to respond by increasing public spending to minimize the effects on society (Blustein, et al., 2020). The pandemic situation significantly affected the corporate level not only of large companies, but even more significantly the level of small, medium or family businesses, for which the inability to continue doing business due to anti-trafficking measures first meant a decline and unfortunately only decline (Mura, 2020a).

In the conditions of the Slovak Republic (SR), the given impacts have already significantly influenced not only business entities, but also all entities within economic life (employees, self-employed

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persons - SZČO, financial institutions, etc.) (Blahušiaková, Ondrušová, 2020). Forced restrictions on business activity, as well as a decline in consumer demand from customers, have led to many employers being forced to reduce their costs, which in many cases has already been reflected in the redundancy process (Bečka, 2020; Csikósová, 2021). At the beginning of the pandemic, the state reacted with forced restrictions on the activities of business entities, which seriously affected their functioning, later the state administration bodies, with the deepening pandemic situation, completely closed several areas of the economy. The unfavorable pandemic situation in Slovakia has negatively affected both employers and employees in the areas of gastronomy, industry, tourism and culture.

This unfavorable phenomenon also manifested itself in the following period, as the third wave of the pandemic gradually broke out in the world. Measures and assistance from the state must be maintained for as long as possible, because without state aid there will be a massive closure of small and medium-sized enterprises, in all sectors. It was unsustainable for the employer to continue the business, because the economic cycle worked well enough. Vojtech and Srebalová (2021) state that the pandemic of the new coronavirus causing COVID-19 poses a global threat to health with a direct impact on the economy. As the viruses know no borders, the governments of the affected countries have had to take tough measures to slow the spread of COVID-19. Hrnčárik (2021) also states that the COVID-19 pandemic brought changes that the world has not yet experienced and was not ready for.

The negative trend of reducing production and the supply of services, accompanied by an increase in unemployment in several sectors, thus represent an important factor to which it is important from the point of view of social policy to pay due attention. Quick and effective measures can significantly help prevent the emergence of social tension in society (Halásková, Slovák, 2016). Unemployment is directly linked to the development of several key macroeconomic indicators. They researched in the V4 region, e.g. Mura et al. (2020b).

Furthermore, it is important to take into account regional differentiations, which affect the extent of the need and support of the population (e.g. in connection with the development of unemployment, the index of regional development, etc.). Sjoquist and Wheeler (2020) who examined the above-mentioned differences and developments in unemployment (including the payment of benefits) between countries in the United States also support this view.

II. Aim and Methodology

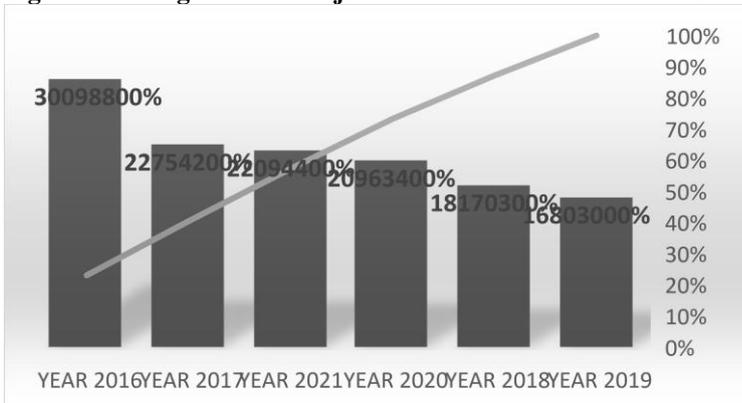
The aim of this paper is to evaluate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the labor market in the context of the development of selected socio-economic determinants. The partial objectives are partial assessments of the development of the set macroeconomic indicators. The observed period in the conditions of the Slovak Republic is the period of 2016-2021. In terms of methodology, we applied a mixed type of research: qualitative and quantitative. The qualitative methods were observation and logical methods. Quantitative research can be detected in the analysis of secondary data obtained through the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic. We gradually analyzed the development of the average number of jobseekers, the average number of jobseekers receiving unemployment benefits, as well as the volume of paid unemployment benefits during the period under review. During the evaluation, we relied on descriptive statistics and on the basis of the data, we constructed a histogram indicating the development curve. We also evaluated the employment index in selected industries and looked for a possible connection with the presented graphs. In the results and discussion section, we further evaluated not only the scope of measures to maintain employment and assistance to individuals (individuals) and legal entities by central state administration bodies in the Slovak Republic, but also possible starting points for resolving the situation in the future.

III. Results and Discussion

As we mentioned in the introduction, the outcome of the problems in the world economy will logically be reflected in rising unemployment, a slowdown in some sectors, as well as an increase in public spending in social policy. In this regard, Pohlán (2018) considers the consequences of unemployment, which have a significant impact on the social and economic situation of the individuals concerned and their families. The resulting consequences are manifested not only by a higher risk of poverty and social isolation (exclusion), but also by their accompanying factors, such as the decline in living standards or the creation of additional barriers to using the opportunities that society offers its members (Gerbery, Džambazovič, 2005).

The first examined socio-economic determinant was the average number of job seekers in the years 2016-2021, registered within the labor, social affairs and family offices in Slovakia. The presentation of the results is presented in the following histogram. In the histogram, we also indicate the function of the course.

Figure 1 Average number of job seekers in 2016-2021 in the Slovak Republic

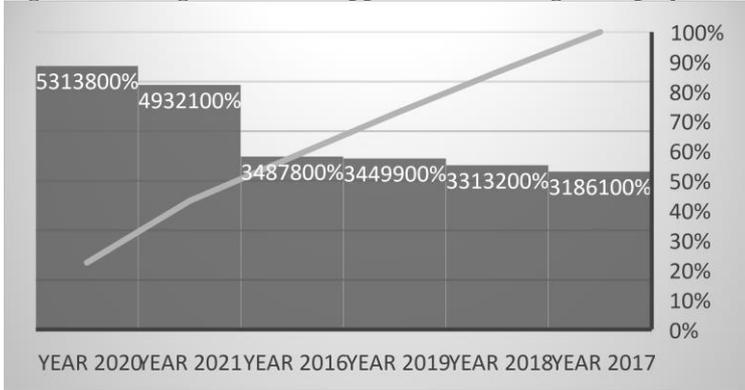


Source: Slovak Statistical Office (2022), own processing

When examining the development of job seekers at employment, social affairs and family offices, significant differences can be observed in the observed period. Despite the fact that from 2016 it can be stated in a positive direction about the continuing decrease of job seekers (for the comparison of 2016-2020 it is a decrease of up to 30.35%), on the other hand, when comparing the years 2019 and 2020 a significant increase in registered job seekers by up to 24.76%. In 2020 and 2021 there is a significant increase in registered jobseekers.

As will be discussed below, this trend is closely related to changes in industry and its individual sectors, where there have also been significant and in some cases sharp changes during the period. The increase in the number of unemployed and the uncertain prospects for the future may be reflected in the transformation of short-term unemployment into long-term unemployment of those who have worked in the most affected sectors. For the state, this circumstance would again require intervention not only in terms of further increase funding for employment policy, but also in the area of social protection in order to prevent the deepening of poverty and social exclusion.

Figure 2 Average number of applicants receiving unemployment benefits in 2016-2021 in the Slovak Republic



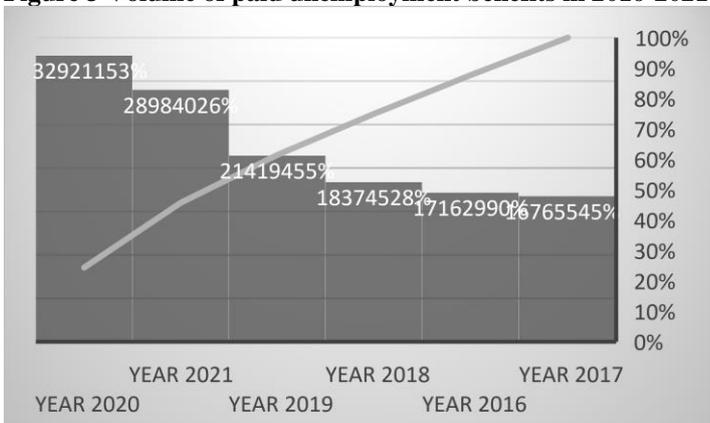
Source: Slovak Statistical Office (2022), own processing

In connection with the previous socio-economic determinant, we further examined the development of the average number of applicants receiving unemployment benefits as another selected socio-economic determinant. The presentation of the results is presented in the histogram. In the histogram we also indicate the function of the course.

However, within the development during the monitored period, a gradual increase in the number of applicants can be taken into account (with the exception of 2017, 2022). For the given type of research, we further state that the average number of applicants receiving unemployment benefits increased by 52.36% in the observed period. Again, significant changes are noticeable when comparing the years 2019 and 2020, when the year-on-year increase in the number of applicants reached the level of up to 45.59%. In the given type of research, we further state an increase in the average number of applicants receiving unemployment benefits. Again, marked changes are noticeable in 2020 and 2021. In 2020, compared to 2019, we can observe an increase in the number of applicants receiving unemployment benefits by 36,499. In this context, Drugas (2013) draws attention to the risk of a psychological impact on the individual (family) in the case of persistent unemployment, which is accompanied by loss of work habits and lack of interest in work, which can culminate in permanent dependence on the social system. In the long run, permanent dependence on the social system of citizens is unsustainable, as each country, including Slovakia, has its own economic limits. It is important to see the pandemic situation in the context of creating the conditions for a restart of the economy across all the sectors involved.

The third socio-economic determinant examined was the volume of paid unemployment benefits in 2016-2021, the results of which are shown in the following histogram. In the histogram, we also indicate the function of the course.

Figure 3 Volume of paid unemployment benefits in 2016-2021 in the Slovak Republic



Source: Slovak Statistical Office (2022), own processing

When examining the volume of paid benefits, we confirm the trend from the previous graphs, arguing about a significant increase in the volume of given benefits when comparing the years 2016-2021. In that period, it can be stated that there was a gradual increase in the volume of paid unemployment benefits (with the exception of 2017 and a decrease of 2.32% compared to the previous year), while the total increase reached the level of up to 91.81%. A significant change occurred again during the examination of 2019 and 2020, when there is a sharp increase in the volume of benefits paid to the level of 53.70%. A significant change occurred again during the examination of the years 2020 and 2021, when there is a sharp increase in the volume of benefits paid.

We consider the increase in the number of unemployed to be a consequence of a significant increase in the volume of benefits paid. The pandemic thus obviously negatively affected Slovakia's public spending. According to data from the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic and the Council for Budget Responsibility, the deficit for last year (2021) was up to 6.2% of GDP, but the overall negative impact of the pandemic on the general government balance reached 3.9% of GDP. Such a deficit was caused by the need to introduce extraordinary measures in the social field but also to support and protect the economy.

An important examined socio-economic determinant was the employment index in selected sectors. The individual percentage expressions for the researched period (2016-2020) are presented in the following table.

Table 1 Employment index in selected industries in 2016-2021 in the Slovak Republic

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
industry together	103.60%	103.0%	102.90%	99.80%	94.30%	98.40%
of which: mining and quarrying	98.40%	106.80%	94.10%	93.50%	91.90%	99.90%
industrial production	104.10%	103.50%	103.10%	99.90%	94%	98.10%
supply of electricity, gas, steam and cold air	94.90%	98.40%	101.50%	100.40%	99.60%	100.20%
water supply; cleaning a sewage disposal	103.10%	97.90%	101.40%	99.10%	97.60%	103.50%
construction	101.20%	102.50%	103.30%	106.40%	94.10%	96.20%
sale and repair of motor vehicles	103.80%	108.10%	106.40%	101.10%	97.90%	97.30%
wholesale, except motor vehicles	95.20%	102.40%	99.90%	97.80%	96.20%	95.90%
retail trade, except of motor vehicles	99.20%	103.10%	103.30%	97.80%	96.50%	96.70%
accommodation	101.80%	106.50%	105.70%	113%	85.80%	90.80%
activities of restaurants	101.20%	107.70%	105.90%	106.20%	91.80%	92.80%
transport and storage	100.60%	103.70%	106.40%	104.90%	99%	98.50%
of which: postal and courier services	99.60%	100%	100.30%	100.60%	101.20%	97.40%
information and communication	105.80%	103.60%	106.90%	105.70%	103%	104.80%
selected market services	106.10%	101.80%	106.20%	106%	99.20%	100.20%

Source: Slovak Statistical Office (2022), own processing

Within industry as a whole, there is a significant decrease in the Slovak Republic within the examined period at the level of -9.30%. Despite the fact that this trend has been gradually declining since 2016, again the most significant changes have occurred in the last two years (2019-2020), when we record a decline of -5.50%, which was caused by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In terms of individual industries, we have recorded a significant decline, especially in industrial production (-10.10%), construction (-7.10%), accommodation (-16%) and restaurants and inns (-.40%). The decline within the given sectors was most pronounced again in 2019 and 2020, when we state a decline in the case of construction by -12.30%, accommodation by -27.20% and the activities of restaurants and inns by -14.40%. On the contrary, a slight increase was recorded in the period under review in postal and courier activities (1.60%), electricity, gas, steam and air

conditioning supply (4.70%) and wholesale trade, except of motor vehicles (1%). In 2021, we see a slight improvement in some sectors.

The declining performance of the economy is already and likely to be seen in the near future in two areas: while the first will increase government spending in support of employment policy, the other will have lower funding (if some sectors continue to stagnate and will result in persistent unemployment), which will then be able to put into practice. Once again, this can create space for the emergence of social tensions in society, which will have an impact on, among other things, the policy and stability of the government.

All measures taken must be sensitive to the sectors affected by the pandemic. Social measures in the field of employment, as well as measures to support the economy, should have the effect of starting both employers and employees and start the labor market. Measures taken by the government are not always sufficient and losses in individual businesses are so great, that without long-term assistance after the end of the pandemic, they will mean liquidation and the end.

IV. State Level Measures and Currently Existing Aid Schemes in Slovak Republic

The pandemic had a negative impact on employers and employees, creating space and need for emergency measures by the state. In the following part of the article, we will focus on selected state measures and currently existing aid schemes in Slovakia for employers, which we have tried to process clearly.

Assistance is provided through several ministries¹, within the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic the First Aid system was adopted, which was later transformed into the First Aid + and First Aid ++ models, while the current scheme includes the following aid model:

1. *Employers*² (including SZČO, who are employers), except for public administration entities, which had to proceed with the closure of facilities, or limit their activities on the basis of a decision of the Public Health Office of the Slovak Republic³.

The measures include the following aspects:

- a) An applicant who was not a “firm in difficulty” as at 31 December 2019 and did not exceed the maximum aid ceiling (primary agricultural production sector - max. EUR 225,000; industry fisheries and aquaculture - up to € 270,000; other sectors - up to € 1.8 million)⁴;
- b) The amount of the contribution represents the payment of the employee's replacement salary in the amount of 100% of the CCP, max. in the amount of 1,100 euros.

2. *SZČO*⁵, who had to close their operations on the basis of a decision of the Public Health Office of the Slovak Republic, or their sales decreased by at least 20%.

The target group is:

- a) SZČO who was insured against sickness and pension (compulsory or voluntary) in the period until 30.6.2020 and the insurance lasts after this date or its obligation arose from 1.7.2020 resp. from 1.2.2021 and the insurance lasts even after this day. SZČO is also entitled to the contribution, which draws the so-called paid holidays;

¹ Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic; Ministry of Culture of the SR; Ministry of Transport and Construction of the Slovak Republic; Ministry of Economy of the Slovak Republic.

² Only an employer who started his activity no later than on February 1, 2021 can be an applicant for the allowance.

³ The target group is an employee to whom the employer or SZČO, who is the employer, cannot assign work due to an obstacle on the part of the employer (Act of the National Council of the Slovak Republic No. 311/2001 Coll., § 142).

⁴ If the applicant does not meet these conditions, he can continue to apply for an employee allowance of 80% of the CCP.

⁵ Only SZČO, who started his business no later than February 1, 2021, can be an applicant for the contribution.

b) SZČO, which have a concurrent employment, are also entitled to the allowance. The amount of net income from this employment relationship is deducted from the amount of the contribution;

c) SZČO, which has its activity canceled or suspended, is not entitled to the contribution.

Table 2 Contribution amount:

Decrease in sales (categories)	The amount of the contribution
20.00 % – 29.99 %	330 euro
30.00 % – 39.99 %	420 euro
40.00 % – 49.99 %	510 euro
50.00 % – 59.99%	600 euro
60.00 % – 69.99 %	690 euro
70.00 % – 79.99 %	780 euro
80 and more	870 euro

Source: Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic, (2021), own processing

3. Employers (including SZČO who are employers)¹, except for public administration entities, which will keep jobs even in the event of interruption or reduction of their activities during the declared emergency.

The target group is represented by the employed employee. The measure covers the following aspects:

a) An applicant who was not a “firm in difficulty” on 31 December 2019 and did not exceed the maximum aid ceiling (primary agricultural production sector - max. EUR 225,000; industry is entitled to a contribution of 100% of the total cost of labor (CCP) of the employee fisheries and aquaculture - up to € 270,000; other sectors - up to € 1.8 million)².

Contribution amount:

a) Payment of the employee's replacement salary in the amount of 100% of the CCP, max. EUR 1,100;

b) A flat-rate allowance to cover part of the wage costs per employee, depending on the decrease in turnover, the scheme of which is the same as for the previous group (category 2).

4. SZČO and single-person company Ltd., which have no income from business.

Eligible applicant³: SZČO, who has interrupted or limited the performance or operation of its activities, and which the obligation of sickness and pension insurance has not incurred, or does not draw the so-called paid holidays; a natural person who is the sole partner of Ltd. company, is also its manager and is not its employee (so-called single-person company Ltd.)

Contribution amount:

a) A flat-rate allowance of EUR 360 to compensate for the loss of earnings.

5. Citizens who find themselves in a crisis situation without income during a coronavirus pandemic.

Eligible applicant: a person who, at the time of the crisis, has ceased to carry out an activity which gives rise to an entitlement to income from employment, entrepreneurship or other self-employed activity and has no other income from dependent activity, business or other self-employed activity.

¹ Only an employer who started his activity no later than February 1, 2021, can be an applicant for the allowance.

² If the applicant does not meet these conditions, he can continue to apply for an employee allowance of 80% of the CCP.

³ Applicants for the contribution can only be SZČO or single-person company Ltd., which started their business no later than on February 1, 2021.

Amount of the subsidy - for the month of October 2020 and the following months, the subsidy is provided for 300 euro per month for one applicant.

6. Basic art schools which were compulsorily closed by a decision of the Public Health Office of the Slovak Republic.

Target group: pedagogical and non-pedagogical employees of basic art schools in employment
Contribution amount: payment of a part of the employee's salary in the amount of 80% of his gross monthly salary, maximum amount of 1,100 euro per employee and per month (Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic, 2021).

Other forms of assistance from individual ministries:

- Ministry of Economy of the Slovak Republic - rent subsidy program, the eligible applicant for rent subsidy is a tenant who applies for a rent subsidy through the recipient. The rent subsidy can be provided to the tenant in the amount in which the rent discount was provided on the basis of an agreement between the landlord and the tenant, but not more than 50 % of the rent for the period of difficult use (Ministry of Economy of the Slovak Republic, 2021);
- Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic - the subsidy is intended for applicants who perform cultural and creative activities in the non-profit sector and during the COVID-19 pandemic period in 2020 had a demonstrable decrease in income of at least 30 % from cultural and creative activities compared to the same period in 2019 (Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic, 2021);
- Ministry of Transport and Construction of the Slovak Republic - scheme of assistance in tourism, authorization arises for tourism facilities, which in the given period decreased revenues by more than 40% compared to 2019, if they are eligible beneficiaries determined by the call. The possibility of deferral of social and health insurance month December 2020-March 2021 to June 30, 2021 (Ministry of Transport and Construction of the Slovak Republic, 2021).

V. Conclusion

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are global in nature and their impact is felt throughout society. In the conditions of the Slovak Republic, it can be stated about significant changes and impacts on the labor market, which brought with it the pandemic. Our findings were that the increase in unemployment in the Slovak Republic is directly proportional to the consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, including an increase in public spending, which the state is trying to alleviate the problems in social policy. Restrictions on the part of the Public Health Office of the Slovak Republic also had an impact on the labor market in this connection, and also when the economy will start to recover again. However, it will certainly be important to maintain support mechanisms, including other aid schemes for those that have not yet received state aid.

In terms of the period under review, significant findings can be made that suggest the need to adopt a rapid response to changes in the social policy of the state. The sharp increase in the number of unemployed, including the volume of funds earmarked for unemployment benefits, is proportional to the decline in the employment index across several sectors, such as construction or the workforce-related tourism and gastronomy sectors. Of course, other sectors have also been affected. Due to the decline in employment, the Government of the Slovak Republic has adopted a series of measures in the interest of sustainable employment and support for natural and legal persons. The question is whether the measures came on time, whether the measures by the state can be sufficient for the situation and how long it will take until the more positive situation in the given sectors (resp. On the labor market) begins to develop again. In any case, the level of funding for the implementation of measures will be costly, and in this case, coordination of policies

at European Union-wide level is essential, as the interconnectedness of the various economies has long gone beyond the national character.

In the long run, permanent dependence of citizens on the social system is unsustainable, as each country, including Slovakia, has its own economic limits. It is important to see the pandemic situation in the context of creating the conditions for a restart of the economy across all the sectors involved. All measures taken must be sensitive to the sectors affected by the pandemic. Social measures in the field of employment as well as measures to support the economy should have the effect of boosting both employers and employees. Restarting the labor market can also help the measures taken by the government, but these are not always sufficient and the losses in individual businesses are so great that without long-term assistance even in the post-pandemic period, they can mean liquidation and the end of many sectors.

There has never been a similar situation in Slovakia, and therefore the state has never before had to set measures for employers in such financial volumes. However, it is questionable whether the funding provided affected all the sectors concerned, whether any of the aid could not have been used sooner, more quickly or more appropriately. Obviously, the pandemic negatively affected Slovakia's public spending. According to data from the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic and the Council for Budget Responsibility, the deficit for the last year (2020) was up to 6.2% of GDP, but the overall negative impact of the pandemic on the general government balance reached 3.9 % of GDP. However, it is important to remind that the adopted measures were also financed from EU funds, which reduced the burden on the Slovak budget. Otherwise, public finances would have suffered even more.

The Recovery Plan is a tool to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on EU countries. This is a joint response of EU countries to the sharp economic downturn due to the pandemic. Its main goal is to support reforms and investments that will enable Slovakia to start catching up with the standard of living of the EU average again. Slovakia sent the recovery plan to the European Commission on 30.4.2021. Slovakia is requesting grants totaling 6.6 billion Euro under the Recovery Plan mechanism. The implementation of reforms and investments under the Recovery Plan is due to be adopted by June 2026. The positive for Member States is that the funds will help member budgets to restart economies. Although this has been criticized several times, we will see real effects in the future.

At present, as of April 2022, the registered unemployment rate is 6.54% (Center for Labor, Social Affairs and Family, 2022). Nevertheless, there are vacancies that are not of interest. Employers want to fill these vacancies with Ukrainian candidates. Employers offer Ukrainians job positions as a kitchen assistant, cleaner, waiter, production operator. Half of the Ukrainian applicants who have worked in the Slovak Republic will work in Bratislava. When looking for a job, the biggest obstacle in Slovakia is Ukrainian applicants, but also Slovak employers consider a weak command of the Slovak language. Another negative factor is the problem with accommodation. In the future, this paper makes it possible to process the issue of examining the effectiveness of the measures taken in Slovakia, as given the post-pandemic situation, it would be too early to assess and present conclusions on state aid and the overall effectiveness of funds spent.

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