

Slovakia

Investing in education: is the timing right?

It's election year in Slovakia. But has the reformist Prime Minister left educational reform too late to show results?

The National Lisbon Strategy, aiming to improve Slovakia's competitiveness and support the development of a knowledge economy by 2010 was approved on 16 February 2005. The Strategy focuses on four areas: The information society; science, R&D and innovation; education and employment; the business environment. Four action plans corresponding to each area were approved in July 2005, specifying measures, responsible actors and funding. Furthermore, the Minerva programme (1) emerged from this strategy. The aim of Minerva is to pursue activities and support coherence within and between each of these four areas.

The Strategy represents a concrete step forward in a country which has long been told that increasing investment in education and R&D must wait until structural reforms are completed. Indeed, structural reforms have been successfully introduced, meeting with the approval of leading economic institutions and analysts. Now the government seems to be getting serious about reforming education in Slovakia, which has the lowest investment in human resources in the EU. After years of broad 'strategies' and policy declarations unaccompanied by efficient measures, the difference is eye-catching: the concrete measures announced signal a real change from rhetoric to action. The involvement of the Ministry of Finance could also improve policy coherence.

The question however remains: why so late? Was it really inappropriate to implement structural reforms aimed at achieving macroeconomic stability *and* reforms aimed at creating a knowledge-based economy, at the same time? Why did curricular reform and the development of the information society have to wait?

Leading economists, in explaining falling investment in R&D and education during the late 1990s and early 2000s, have argued that economic growth (a respectable 6.2 % GDP in 3Q of 2005) was a precondition for raising such investment once more. But the future will show how much damage has been caused by the long period of underinvestment in education, the controversial decision to put macroeconomic stabilisation before investment in human resources. But as 2006 is an election year, it may be too late for the government to show results in this field. Ambitious goals with deadlines set a month before the September 2006 elections may prove impossible to achieve. Moreover, lack of time may lead to inefficient

spending and eventually to a break in continuity, should a new government decide to set different goals and promote different measures.

Premier Minister Dzurinda, loved and hated as reformers usually are, and no doubt an important political figure of modern Slovak history, is famous for taking bicycle tours around Slovakia to promote his party and policies. However politicians choose to campaign, and however the people of Slovakia choose to vote, there is a lesson for all: Timing matters. There is an investment cycle, and there is an election cycle. Everyone - not just cyclists - should think hard about how best to harmonise these cycles. It is to be hoped that the HRD investment deficit in Slovakia will not jeopardise the country's future competitiveness or lead to a period of inefficient spending in an effort to make up for former restrictions.

(1) Not to be confused with the EU programme of the same name - the acronym in Slovak stands for Mobilisation of Innovation in the National Economy and the Development of Scientific-Educational Activities.

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