Slovakia - How to fight high youth unemployment

With a 33.2% unemployment rate in the 15-24 age group in 2011, Slovakia was the EU's third worst-performing country in employment. In response to a letter by Mr. Barroso asking eight EU countries to rethink actions to fight their disproportionally high youth unemployment rate, the Slovak government decided to reallocate EUR 70 million from the ESF Operational programme education (OPE) to the Operational programme employment and social inclusion (OPESI). The resources will be diverted predominantly from Measure 1.1, focused on transformation of traditional schools into modern ones, Measure 1.2, focused on higher education institutions and research and development, and Measure 2.1, focused on CVET and LLL. While OPESI lacks the means to support youth employment and additional sources amounting to the EUR 70 million identified as needed, OPE features very low drawing and contracting (15.72% and 56.73% from May 2012).

According to an analysis by the Education Ministry discussed by the government in June 2012, the OPE managing authority suggested reallocation of the highest proportion of resources from Measure 1.1, arguing that 'by the end of the programming period, objectives set as well as measurable indicators planned will be met or, in some cases, exceeded'. It is true that planned measurable indicators will be met, however, two concerns remain:

- to what extent are these indicators valid and relevant for the 'transformation of traditional schools into modern ones'?
- where is the evidence in support of effectiveness when it comes to planned innovation of content and teaching methods and teacher training, given the permanent complaints from teachers about lack of improvement of school equipment, technologies and teaching/learning materials?

The following projects were suggested by the Labour Ministry in cooperation with employers, to create jobs for young people:

- 7 500 jobs lasting for at least 18 months (subsidised from EU funds for one year and by employers for an additional six months) are to be created by SMEs and enterprises with up to 250 employees (EUR 40 million);
- 2 000 jobs (subsidised from EU funds for six months and by employers for an additional 24 months) are to be created in transportation (EUR 10 million);
- 4 960 jobs are to be created in public works by municipalities or self-government (EUR 20 million).

Opposition experts fear that the government will support government-friendly businesses, criticising the proposal as unable to solve VET problems that cause high youth unemployment. The Labour Ministry agrees that these measures do not offer a systemic solution, but are necessary to support youth employment by reasonable allocation of means. All this is correct; unfortunately, Slovakia is among countries lagging dramatically behind in implementing the Copenhagen tools. All governments have failed so far to implement ESF projects focusing on systemic changes incorporating the Copenhagen tools. Thus, it is unlikely that Slovakia will be able to achieve substantial progress in Copenhagen-tool-related policies.

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