

## NEO-LIBERALISM AND POST-SOCIALIST URBAN TRANSFORMATIONS: POVERTY, INEQUALITY AND THE CITY

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**Abstract:** This paper explores some of the consequences of neo-liberalism in the transformation of urban social life in "post-socialist" cities. The paper highlights the centrality of neo-liberalism in framing "post-socialist" societies, and introduces the work by Anglo-American geographers on the emergence of a model of global neo-liberalism. The paper goes on to examine the relationships between neo-liberalism and urban social change in post-socialist cities. Using the example of household strategies in Petržalka, Bratislava it highlights the emergence of social inequalities in the context of marketisation and social welfare reform.

**Key words:** neo-liberalism, "post-socialist" cities, household economies, urban social change, poverty, inequality

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper we argue that neo-liberal policies, which have been implemented in Slovakia over the last few years, have created significant social inequalities and have had a major impact on households living in post-socialist urban space. In the paper we discuss two issues. The first examines what we might to call the project of neo-liberalism and how it can be understood in the context of the transition from state socialism after 1989 in East-Central Europe. The second issue involves the social impacts of neo-liberal policies for households in the urban space of Bratislava, with a specific focus on households living in Petržalka. This second part of the paper derives mainly from an on-going research project on "Social exclusion, spaces of economic practice and post-socialism"<sup>1</sup>. We bring these two themes together to consider what effects neo-liberalism has on everyday life in urban space.

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<sup>1</sup> This project involves collaborative research with Alison Stenning and Dariusz Świątek at the University of Newcastle, a comparative study of Petržalka, Bratislava and Nowa Huta, Kraków, and is funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (award number: RES-00023-0695). We are very grateful to Alison and Darek for the development of some of the ideas contained in this paper.

In recent years ideas about neo-liberalism have become very influential in Anglo-American geography. Most writers have been very critical of the ways in which neo-liberal policies have impacted on the changing geographies of social and economic inequality. Research has highlighted the very negative impacts of marketisation and liberalisation on many of the most vulnerable groups in society. It has also shown how unregulated markets lead to economic and financial instability and greater levels of geographical uneven development. Perhaps the most important contribution has been provided by David Harvey (2005) in his book *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, in which he highlights the powerful ways in which neo-liberal policies have been disseminated around the world, with severe consequences for long-term economic stability and very negative impacts on the geography of economic development. Others have highlighted how neo-liberal ideas have spread through the influential role of liberal think-tanks, organisations, political figures and economic advisers (Tickell and Peck, 2003); how neo-liberal policies translate into new forms of geographical practices by individuals and social groups (Larner, 2003); and, in particular, how neo-liberalism impacts on urban restructuring, governance and social change in cities (Brenner and Theodore, 2002).

## **2. WHAT IS NEO-LIBERALISM?**

Neo-liberalism is a difficult concept to define, but it involves fundamentally the belief that markets are the most effective and efficient means of organising economic and social life. Neo-liberalism has become increasingly significant in policy thinking throughout the world, from the structural adjustment programmes implemented in the developing world and supported by international agencies such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund to the domestic policies of a large number of states in the advanced capitalist world following the models of Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom and Ronald Reagan in the USA during the 1980s. Neo-liberalism is closely connected to market forms of globalisation and, as a policy discourse, has itself seen a remarkable globalisation around the world during the last 2 decades – most recently in the context of several of the post-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Ideas about neo-liberalism have, in particular, been connected to the earlier liberal economists such as Friedrich von Hayek and Ludwig von Mises in the early part of the twentieth century. In their work, they emphasised the importance of reduced state intervention and the liberalisation of markets as the most rationale and efficient form of social and economic organisation.

However, it is also important to recognise that neo-liberal ideas and policies have gone through several changes and work out differently in different geographical contexts. Indeed, even though neo-liberal theorists typically appeal to universal and historical conceptions of the primacy of markets, and while these continue to provide the basic philosophical parameters of neo-liberal policy development, the exact shape of the neo-liberal project has always been institutionally variable, both across space and through time. Table 1 summarises in simplified form the main shifts that have taken place (Tickell and Peck, 2003). There has been a movement from a period of proto-neoliberalism, during which time neo-liberal ideas were largely concerned with

placing ideas of the market at the centre of philosophical approaches to social and economic life, to a period of roll-back neo-liberalism during the 1980s. During this time deregulationist policies focused on dismantling Keynesian-welfarist institutions and took place in the context of the economic crises of the 1970s. More recently a phase of roll-out neo-liberalism has been identified, “during which active institution building has been increasingly in evidence in the context of an uneasy marriage of under-regulated markets and authoritarian governance” (Tickell and Peck, 2003).

**Table 1** Phases of neoliberalism

|  | <b>Proto- neoliberalism</b> | <b>Roll-back neoliberalism</b>    | <b>Roll-out neoliberalism</b>   |
|--|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| When   | Pre- 1980                   | 1980s/early 1990                  | 1990s/2000s                     |
| Key figures                                  | Friedman, Hayek             | Thatcher, Reagan                  | Clinton, Blair                  |
| Dominant discourses                          | Anti-Keynesianism           | Small government/<br>deregulation | paternal state/ free<br>economy |
| Economic policy                              | Spending cuts               | Privatisation                     | Marketisation                   |
| Source: adapted from Tickell and Peck (2003) |                             |                                   |                                 |

In essence, then, neo-liberal economic policies involve the following key elements (Tickell and Peck, 2003, Peck and Tickell, 2002):

- ◆ The rule of the market:
  - Freedom for capital, goods and services
  - A belief in the self-regulation of the market
  - Trickle down of wealth from rich to poor
  - The need to reduce state regulation and impediments to capital mobility
- ◆ Reducing public expenditure and direct state intervention
- ◆ Deregulation of the economy
- ◆ Privatisation of economic assets
- ◆ Individualism and individual responsibility

Together, then, neo-liberalism represents an attempt not only to visualise a free-market utopia, but to realise these self-same conditions, as the downsizing of nation-states enlarges the space for private accumulation, individual liberties, and market forces (Tickell and Peck, 2003).

### **3. NEO-LIBERALISM AND POST-SOCIALISM**

Neo-liberal ideas and policies have been very influential in the construction of policies for the transition to capitalism throughout East-Central Europe and the former Soviet Union. In looking for ways of shifting economies away from central planning and in looking for mechanisms to enhance individual liberties many governments, institutions and policy makers across the post-socialist world were captured by the imagination of market euphoria (see Pickles and Smith, 1998). Of course, there have been varied levels of adoption of neo-liberal policies in different national contexts, but the transition to capitalism has, on the whole, been a profoundly uneven process (Dunford, 1998; Dunford and Smith, 2000). Amongst others, there has been the increase

in economic and social inequality between urban and rural regions, embedded within earlier forms of socio-spatial inequality established under state socialism and before (Smith, 1998, Sociologický ústav SAV, 2004, Korec, 2005). In particular, core urban regions and cities (particularly capital cities) have become the focus for economic development, in particular the dramatic transformations wrought by foreign direct investment.

At the same time that economic dynamism has been focused in such large urban areas, inequalities have increased within them as some residents have been able to benefit from new employment and business opportunities afforded to them as a result of marketisation and privatisation. Others have been unable, for many complex reasons, to benefit from urban economic growth. These individuals and households have seen their livelihoods and incomes worsen as either they experience unemployment or find themselves trapped in low-paid and increasingly insecure jobs, similar to the experiences of the global cities of the western capitalist world (Sassen, 1991, Evans et al, 2005).

The collapse of certain sectors of industry has occurred alongside a tertiarisation of city economies, as service sector growth has occurred. Employment structures have been reconfigured and the pay and income levels of individuals have changed dramatically, not least through greater levels of differentiation of incomes. In addition, cities have witnessed a dramatic opening to global flows of capital, people, forms of consumption and cultural identities, transforming the livelihoods and everyday lives of those involved, not always in positive ways, and leaving many excluded. Inward investment has transformed industrial capital, sometimes with the result of significant job loss and downsizing. Producer and financial services have emerged as key sites of new activity.

Within this context, levels of inequality and poverty have increased, homelessness has become evident in societies in which in the past there was no visible homelessness, informal economic life has arguably seen an expansion, and – for some – the difficulty of eking out a living has become a major daily task. In many cases, the highest levels of poverty are found in isolated rural communities where job opportunities have collapsed, where the possibility of finding alternative work are very limited, and in certain cases where Roma populations are concentrated. Michálek (2004), for example, has identified the concentration of poverty in the largely rural and small-town environments of east Slovakia, reflecting the wider and more general regional inequalities characterising an east-west divide within Slovakia (Smith, 1998, Rochovská, 2005). Cities have also experienced growing relative poverty and income inequalities, in particular impacting the industrial working class and those with other characteristics of social exclusion, such as the unemployed. Those with access to new economic and employment opportunities have seen a relative increase in income, while there remain quite considerable numbers of people reliant on state benefits or on employment in low-paid jobs that fail to provide a living wage in relatively expensive cities.

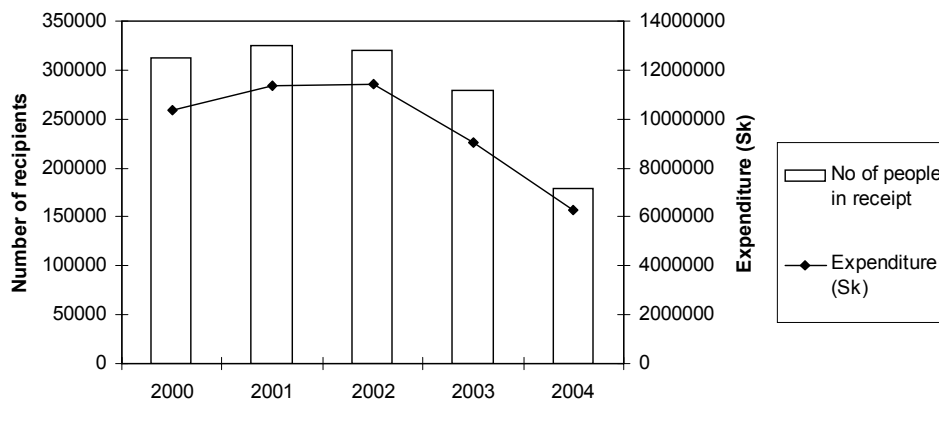
Within this context of increasing social inequality, social policy has invariably seen a shift towards more targeted forms of social assistance, characteristic of the neo-liberal state. As Tickell and Peck (2003: 174-5) have argued, the 1990s witnessed the effective “normalization” of neoliberal modes of regulation which increasingly came to constitute the taken-for-granted context for economic policy decisions.

In Slovakia, for example, over the last eight years, a variety of policies have been implemented based on neo-liberal principles and as a result the election of the centre-right coalition governments under Mikuláš Dzurinda. For example, a recent statement by the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family (2004) in its National

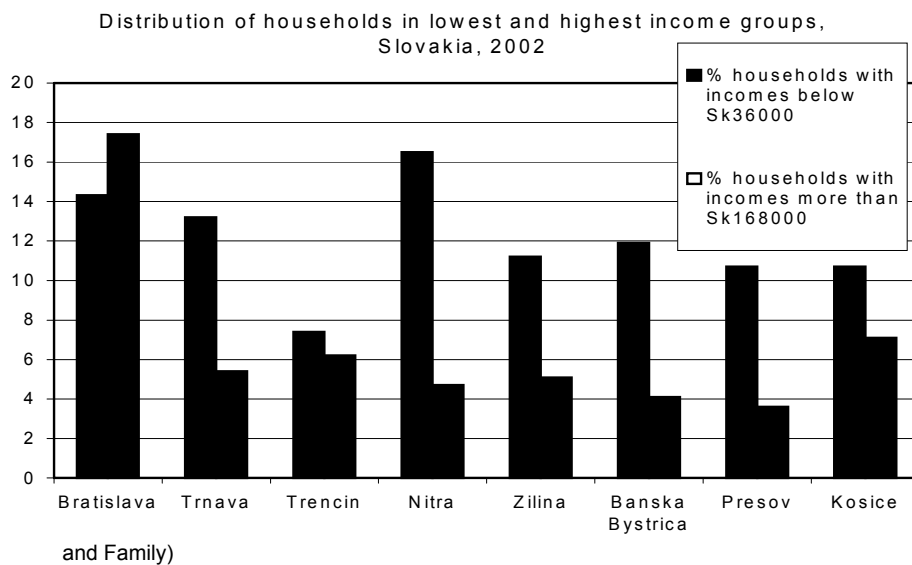
Action Plan on Social Inclusion 2004-2006 exemplifies the kind of neo-liberalism present that individualises processes of urban and social change. The report argued that the social strategy of the Slovak Republic focuses on strengthening the role of the individual and his/her self-support by means of a system of social protection that strengthens and motivates his/her participation in the labour market (Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic, 2004: 7). Essentially this means bringing people out of unemployment by creating conditions in which individuals must work, regardless of whether employment provides a sustainable means of existence, making individuals responsible for working and providing for themselves and their family.

In particular, neo-liberal influenced policy reforms in Slovakia have focused on the following areas:

1. **The reform of the state social support system** – the principle of social reform was defined through active policies of employment creation, labour market liberalisation, pluralism in state public and social services, and the development of a social network for people experiencing social problems, such as the reduction disability payments; the duration of social benefit payments was made a function of the contributive history of the individual, rather than age; replacement ratios were cut, while the maximum benefit is now calculated with the reference to the Minimum Living Standard (*životné minimum*) (i.e., the poverty line), rather than the minimum wage.
2. **Pension reform**, which was partly prepared in conjunction with the neo-liberal think-tank The Hayek Foundation, and has involved an increased retirement age, and a new three pillar, largely privatised, pension system. The reform process has been all about the expansion of the market into the pension system and is likely to create significant differentiation of pension outcomes over time for different social classes depending on ability to pay.
3. **Tax reform**, which has involved the introduction of a flat tax of 19% on income, value added and businesses. Of course, Slovakia is not alone in implementing a flat tax regime. It is part of a so-called flat tax revolution across Central Europe (Economist, 2005). But unofficial estimates suggest that it has resulted in the most improvement in incomes for the wealthiest 10%-20% of the population.
4. **Labour Code amendments**. Changes to the Slovak Labour Code have led to a liberalisation of the labour market and an increasing imbalance between employers and employees. The dominant position of employers in employment regulation has been strengthened. Consequently, Slovakia has the longest working hours among EU Member States, and the highest level of overtime work (400 hours per year). There is an increasing number of self-employed persons, who provide work without minimal protection (such as cashiers in supermarkets), and who work without the legal status of an employee, which is one cause of increasing poverty among some households (Barancová, 2006).
5. **Reduction of public expenditure and population covered by social assistance** – the dramatic social welfare reform has resulted in a significant reduction in expenditure on and the number people in receipt of social benefits (Figure 1).
6. **Ongoing health care reform**, which has significantly increased financial costs of medicine for the elderly and has had the biggest impact on the poor. As an example, according one survey (SME, 2006), 69% of pensioners said that they do not have not enough money for medicine, and 53% of the disabled said they cannot afford the price of medicine.



**Figure 1** Changes in number of recipients of, and expenditure on, state social benefits in Slovakia, 2000 – 2004. (Source: Slovak Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs)



**Figure 2** Regional income polarisation in Slovakia, 2002. (Source: elaborated from Microcensus, 2003)

Together these neo-liberal policy developments in Slovakia have resulted in the rather rapid elimination of concepts of state social welfare provision ("koncept verejno-prospešnosti") and have been replaced by an increasing emphasis on personal responsibility and public expenditure cuts.

In cities such as Bratislava, long-standing processes of uneven development in Slovakia have resulted in the continued concentration of economic development, foreign investment, and structural economic transformation (Smith, 1998). For example, the Bratislava regions had a regional GDP which was 2.3 times the average for Slovakia in 2002, and had increased from 2.1 times the average in 1995. In addition, 70% of all

foreign direct investment to Slovakia was located in the Bratislava region in 2003, and this had increased from 60% in the late 1990s. Yet, these patterns of economic dynamism in the city of Bratislava and the wider region have been accompanied by increasing levels of income (and social) polarisation. For example, estimates from the 2002 Microcensus suggest that the Bratislava region has the highest concentration of individuals in the top income group and the second highest (after the Nitra region) in the lowest income group (Figure 2).

#### 4. NEOLIBERALISM AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN BRATISLAVA: THE CASE OF PETRŽALKA

In this section of the paper we present some preliminary summary results from the ongoing research project in Petržalka. This section is based on a questionnaire survey undertaken in 2005 of 150 households living in three neighbourhoods of the largest state socialist era housing estate in Bratislava. The sample size was 4-5% of the population of each neighbourhood and compared to 2001 Census data the profile of surveyed households is similar to the population (see Smith et al, 2006).

The official poverty line, or minimum subsistence level (*životné minimum*) is used by the Slovak state to assess levels of material deprivation and to establish the basis for the receipt of most forms of state social assistance. The *životné minimum* in 2005 was set at Sk 4,730 or € 120.48 for the first adult in a household. For each additional adult the level was increased by Sk 3,300 or € 84.06 and for each child it increased by Sk 2,150 or € 54.70. Table 2 presents the distribution of surveyed households below or just above the *životné minimum*.

**Table 2** Households in Petržalka relative to the official Slovak poverty line

| Position relative to official poverty (= 100%) | Number of households (n = 150) | %    |
|--|--------------------------------|------|
| Below 100%                                     | 8,0                            | 5,3  |
| 100 – 110%                                     | 11,0                           | 7,3  |
| 110 – 120%                                     | 15,0                           | 10,0 |
| 120 – 130%                                     | 15,0                           | 10,0 |
| 130 – 140%                                     | 19,0                           | 12,7 |
| 140 – 150%                                     | 28,0                           | 18,7 |
| Source: Household survey, 2005                 |                                |      |

Five percent of the surveyed households in Petržalka fell below the official poverty level. But if the official poverty level is increased by only 20% the proportion of surveyed households falling below the poverty line doubles to 10%. If the poverty level is increased by 50% (which is still significantly below the average wage level for the city) the number of surveyed household almost doubles again to 19%.

It is important to remember that the poverty line is extremely low and there is little chance that anyone could survive even on that level in the relatively high cost-of-living context of Bratislava. While the the poverty level for one adult was Sk 4,730 in 2005 average monthly wage levels in the city in 2004 were over four times the poverty line

(Sk 21,016). In this context, the životne minimum is a poor basis on which to measure relative poverty rates in such a high cost location as Bratislava. It is more important to use a measure that takes account of the real costs of living in the city.

A second way of assessing the extent of poverty among households is to use household per capita income relative to mean or median income levels. This is the technique adopted by the European Commission in assessing proportions of the EU population at risk of poverty. The European Commission uses a low income measure set at 60% of median income as defining an individual as being at risk of poverty.

It is not possible to adopt exactly the same approach here because of data limitations, however we have estimated the proportions of surveyed households relative to similar income measures. The data for Petržalka reported in Table 3 is based on an at risk of poverty level of 60% of the median income for the Bratislava region, which has been estimated from the 2003 microcensus (Sk 5,077 or € 129 per person). Regional, rather than national, median income levels are used for Bratislava in order to provide an effective assessment of relative regional poverty levels in the city, which has by far the highest cost of living in Slovakia.

Nearly 15% of surveyed households in Petržalka have a per capita income which places them in the at risk of poverty group according to this measure of relative poverty, and just over half (51%) of households have per capita incomes below the median for the region. At the other extreme, 30% of households have relatively high per capita incomes, reflecting the polarisation of income in the city and the attendant social inequalities that this gives rise to. While the level of risk from poverty is lower than that recently estimated by the European Commission for the country as a whole (at 21%), it is still relatively high and the existence of half of households below the median income level suggests that there are considerable numbers of households which could quite easily fall below the poverty threshold if circumstances were to change for the worse.

**Table 3** Households in Petržalka at risk of poverty, relative to median regional income

| <b>Position relative to median income (= 100%)</b> | <b>Number of households</b> | <b>% of households</b> |
|--|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| Below 60% of median                                | 22,0                        | 14.8%                  |
| 60 – 100% of median                                | 54,0                        | 36.2%                  |
| 100 – 140% of median                               | 28,0                        | 18.8%                  |
| Over 140% of median                                | 45,0                        | 30.2%                  |
| <b>Total</b>                                       | <b>150,0</b>                | <b>100.0%</b>          |
| Source: Household survey, 2005                     |                             |                        |

Most research on urban social exclusion suggests that the poorest households are experiencing worsening levels of material existence and are experiencing increasing financial difficulties. Is there any connection between low-incomes and worsening financial security in the recent past among households surveyed in Petržalka? A worsening of financial security is experienced most intensively by those who are at risk of poverty and below the median income level in Petržalka (Table 4).

Those with more than 140% of the median or mean income level reported the greatest improvement in financial security. This is suggestive of a significant and increasing process of polarisation in the financial situation of households in Petržalka over the last five years.



**Table 4** Risk of poverty and changing financial security over the last five years in Petržalka (% of households in each income category)

| Change in financial situation | below 60% of median | 60%-100% of median | 100%-140% of median | Over 140% of median | Total |
|-------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-------|
| Improved a great amount       | 0.0%                | 3.7%               | 10.7%               | 20.0%               | 9.4%  |
| Improved a little             | 13.6%               | 29.6%              | 14.3%               | 35.6%               | 26.2% |
| No real change                | 22.7%               | 20.4%              | 21.4%               | 28.9%               | 23.5% |
| Worsened a little             | 31.8%               | 25.9%              | 32.1%               | 15.6%               | 24.8% |
| Worsened a great deal         | 31.8%               | 20.4%              | 21.4%               | 0.0%                | 16.1% |

Source: household survey, 2005

## 5. CONCLUSION

These data suggest a significant polarisation of income and relative poverty levels in Petržalka among those households involved in our survey. They highlight the importance of always seeing poverty in a relative context and of assessing social exclusion in relation to local standards of living and costs of living. Furthermore, many households reported increasing insecurity in the context of recent policy reforms and the neo-liberalisation of social and economic policy. These changes have impacted negatively on the most vulnerable households reliant either on low-paid work in the city or on those finding themselves excluded from the labour market due to ill health, unemployment or limited skills and qualifications. Decreasing access to state benefits has worsened the situation for many in a context where jobs are often low paid and costs of living are high. In this sense, even though unemployment levels in Bratislava (and Petržalka) are relatively low, many jobs do not provide a living wage required for a decent standard of living.

In this context of increasing inequality we have attempted in this paper to highlight key theoretical issues of the “project of neo-liberalism”, and the importance of understanding the concept of, and policies associated with, neo-liberalism alongside a concern for poverty and social exclusion in everyday urban life. Neo-liberalism in post-socialist cities should therefore be seen as one of the most important forces in contemporary society exerting a major influence on household urban transformations in the worlds of post-socialism.

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## **Neo-liberalizmus a transformácia post-socialistických miest: chudoba, nerovnosť a mesto**

### **Resume**

Predložený príspevok sa zaoberá problematikou neoliberalnej politiky, realizovanou na Slovensku v posledných rokoch, ktorá vytvorila značné sociálne nerovnosti a má veľký vplyv na život v domácnostiach v priestore post-socialistického mesta. V článku sa venujeme dvom základným problémom. Prvý skúma takzvaný projekt neoliberalizmu a ako tento projekt môže byť chápaný v kontexte post-socialistickej transformácie po roku 1989 v strednej a východnej Európe. Druhým problémom je otázka vplyvu neoliberalnej politiky na domácnosti v priestore Bratislavy, konkrétne na sídlisku mestskej časti Petržalka. Táto druhá časť vychádza najmä z výsledkov projektu Sociálne vylúčenie, postupy a praktiky hospodárenia domácností v priestore a post-socializmus, realizovaného v spolupráci londýnskej univerzity Queen Mary a univerzity v Newcastle. Oboma témami chceme upriamiť pozornosť na to, aký dosah má neoliberalizmus uplatňovaný v súčasných politických reformách na každodenný život v mestskom priestore.

Problematika neoliberalizmu má na anglo-americkú geografiu veľmi veľký vplyv najmä v posledných rokoch. Väčšina autorov zastáva kritický postoj voči negatívnemu vplyvu neoliberalnej politiky, ktorý je sprevádzaný vytvárajúcimi sa sociálnymi a ekonomickými nerovnosťami, s najvyšším dopadom na najzraniteľnejšie skupiny obyvateľov. Taktiež sa v prácach často poukazuje na to, ako neregulovaný trh vedie k ekonomickej nestabilite a nerovnomernému geografickému rozvoju. Za jednu z najdôležitejších a najvplyvnejších prác býva považovaná kniha Davida Harveyho *Krátká história neoliberalizmu* (2005), v ktorej autor objasňuje vplyvné spôsoby, ktorými sú neoliberalizmus

rálne spôsoby rozširované po celom svete, s mnohými následkami na dlhotrvajúcu stabilitu a veľmi negatívnym vplyvom na ekonomický vývoj v praxi. Medzi ďalších významných autorov, ktorí sa tejto téme venujú patria Tickell a Peck (2002, 2003), Lerner (2003), Brenner a Theodore (2002). Ich výskumy sa venujú najmä vplyvu neoliberalizmu na sociálne zmeny v mestách, zmene režimu a rozhodovania, novým formám priestorového správania sa jednotlivcov, aj celých sociálnych skupín.

Definovať koncept neoliberalizmu nie je jednoduché. Základnou myšlienkou neoliberalnej filozofie je presvedčenie, že trh je najefektívnejší prostriedok na riadenie sociálneho a hospodárskeho života spoločnosti. Na celom svete má v súčasnosti enormný politický význam, najmä pri presadzovaní štrukturálnych rozvojových programov v rozvojových krajinách podporovaných Svetovou bankou a Medzinárodným menovým fondom. V rozvinutých kapitalistických krajinách sa neoliberalná politika presadzovala hlavne v 80. rokoch (politika Margaret Thatcherovej vo Veľkej Británii, alebo Ronalda Reagana v USA).

Neoliberalizmus je úzko prepojený s fenoménom globalizácie a ako prejav politiky ho možno v súčasnosti pozorovať v niekoľkých post-socialistických krajinách strednej a východnej Európy a bývalého Sovietskeho Zväzu. Konkrétne myšlienky neoliberalizmu sú spojené s menami liberálnych ekonómov Friedrich von Hayek a Ludwig von Mises zo začiatku dvadsiateho storočia. Hoci základným znakom neoliberalizmu vždy zostáva idea nadvlády trhu, myšlienky a politika neoliberalizmu sa menili v rozličnom geografickom prostredí. Od obdobia proto-neoliberalizmu, cez tzv. roll-back neoliberalizmus až po poslednú fázu roll-out neoliberalizmu (Tickell a Peck, 2003). Citovaní autori za najdôležitejšie znaky neoliberalizmu považujú: nadvládu trhu, slobodu kapitálu, tovaru a služieb, samoreguláciu trhu, viera, že bohatstvo sa presúva od bohatých k chudobným, obmedzovanie štátnych regulácií a pohybu kapitálu, redukciu verejných výdavkov a priamych štátnych zásahov, dereguláciu, privatizáciu, myšlienky individualizmu a individuálnej zodpovednosti.

Ako už bolo spomenuté vyššie, myšlienky neoliberalizmu mali veľký vplyv na formovanie sa politiky v súčasnom transformačnom období v strednej a východnej Európe a krajinách bývalého Sovietskeho zväzu. Pri hľadaní spôsobov prechodu z centrálného plánovania na trhovú ekonomiku boli mnohé vlády, inštitúcie a politici „v zajatí“ jedinej novej alternatívnej ceste, tzv. predstava trhovej utópie (Pickles a Smith, 1998). Samozrejme existujú mnohé úrovne ktorými boli idey neoliberalizmu osvojované v rozličných národných kontextoch, ale všeobecne možno povedať, že prechod ku kapitalizmu je veľmi nerovný proces, ktorý vytvára a prehĺbuje sociálno-priestorové nerovnosti. Vďaka prvatizácii vznikli mnohé nové pracovné príležitosti, z ktorých profitujú najmä podnikatelia. Mnohí iní však nemohli mať (vzhľadom na mnohé, často komplikované dôvody) úžitok z ekonomického rastu. Týmto domácnostiam alebo jednotlivcom sa ich životná úroveň spolu s príjmom zhoršila, buď preto, že sa ocitli na trhu v nízko platených a nestabilných zamestnaniach, prípadne boli nezamestnaní, podobne, ako ukazujú skúsenosti globálnych miest západného kapitalistického sveta.

V kontexte nárastu sociálnych nerovností a chudoby, rozmach často nelegálneho hospodárstva na jednej strane a na strane druhej život z ruky do úst sa stal dennou spoločenskou skúsenosťou. V mnohých prípadoch sa chudoba najviac prejavila v izolovaných vidieckych regiónoch, kde sú veľmi obmedzené možnosti zamestnania sa a tiež kde je výrazná koncentrácia rómskej populácie (Korec, 2005 Michálek, 2004). Taktiež mestá zaznamenali narastajúcu relatívnu chudobu a príjmové nerovnosti. Tie sa dotkli najmä robotníckej triedy a nezamestnaných. Ak u tých, ktorí majú prístup k pracovným príležitostiam možno pozorovať relatívny nárast príjmu, značná časť populácie je odkázaná na štátnu podporu, okrem nezamestnaných aj pracujúci v nízkopríjmových odvetviach, ktorých príjmy nedosahujú úroveň životného minima v relatívne drahých mestách.

V tomto kontexte nárastu sociálnych nerovností, sociálna politika smeruje k stále viac cieleným formám sociálnej pomoci, ktorá je charakteristická pre neoliberalný štát.

Aj na Slovensku boli v posledných ôsmich rokoch počas vlády Mikuláša Dzurindu prijaté niekoľko politické opatrenia, založené na neoliberalných princípoch. Ako príklad môže poslúžiť Národný plán sociálnej inklúzie 2004 – 2006 vypracovaný Ministerstvom práce, sociálnych vecí a rodiny SR, ktorý zamerával sociálnu stratégiu Slovenskej republiky na zosilnenie úlohy individuálnej zodpovednosti jednotlivca pomocou prostriedkov systému sociálnej ochrany, ktorý posilňuje a motivuje účasť na pracovnom trhu. To znamená, že ľudia sú motivovaní nájsť si zamestnanie vytváraním podmienok, bez ohľadu na to, či zamestnanie znamená stály príjem, jednotlivci sa stávajú sami zodpovední za prácu a zabezpečenie seba a svojej rodiny.

Konkrétne oblasti, v ktorých sa presadili neoliberalné politické reformy na Slovensku boli najmä reforma sociálneho systému, dôchodková reforma, pripravená neoliberalným “think-tankom” Hayekovej nadácie, spoločné memorandum o inklúzii, daňová reforma, ktorá priniesla rovnú, 19%-nú daň z príjmu, pridanej hodnoty a podnikania. Ďalej novelizácia pracovného zákona, krátenie verejných výdavkov, nahradenie konceptu verejnoprospešnosti konceptom osobnej zodpovednosti, v rôznych oblastiach spoločenského života.

V poslednej časti príspevku sme venovali pozornosť predbežným výsledkom výskumu, v rámci ktorého prebehol dotazníkový výskum v 150-tich domácnostiach v Bratislave – Petržalke. 5% skúmaných domácností bolo pod oficiálnou hranicou chudoby a ak sa hranica chudoby zvýšila o 20%, podiel domácností pod hranicou chudoby sa zdvojnásobil. Ak by bola hranica chudoby zvýšená o 50% (čo je stále výrazne pod hranicou priemernej mzdy v Bratislave) počet skúmaných domácností sa opäť zdvojnásobil na takmer 19%. Iný spôsob merania rozsahu chudoby domácností je pomocou príjmu na jednu osobu, voči príjmovému mediánu. Je to metóda používaná Európskou komisiou, ktorá používa 60% hranicu mediánového príjmu ako hranicu hrozby chudoby. Podľa údajov získaných výskumom v Petržalke takmer 15% skúmaných domácností je na základe príjmu v skupine ohrozených chudobou a o niečo viac ako polovica (51%) domácností má príjem pod regionálnym mediánom. Ako druhý extrém 30% domácností má relatívne vysoký príjem na osobu, čo odráža mieru polarizácie príjmu v meste a zvyšujúce sa sociálne nerovnosti. Hoci hladina hrozby chudoby je nižšia, než hodnota 21%, ktorá bola nedávno stanovená Európskou komisiou pre Slovensko, je to stále relatívne vysoká hodnota a fakt, že polovica domácností je pod hladinou mediánu naznačuje, že v Petržalke je značný počet domácností, ktoré pri zhoršení finančnej situácie môžu pod hranicu chudoby prepadnúť. Výsledky výskumu odhaľujú značnú polarizáciu príjmov a úrovne relatívnej chudoby v skúmaných domácnostiach Petržalky. Taktiež poukazujú na nevyhnutnosť pohľadu v relatívnom kontexte na mieru sociálnej exklúzie vo vzťahu k miestnemu štandardu, výdavkov na živobytie, atď. Mnohé z domácností uviedli finančnú neistotu v kontexte súčasných politických reforiem a neoliberalnej sociálnej a hospodárskej politiky. Tieto zmeny postihli negatívne, najmä najzraniteľnejšie domácnosti, nízko-príjmových zamestnaniach, alebo vylúčených z pracovného trhu kvôli invalidite, chorobe, nezamestnanosti, prípadne obmedzenej kvalifikácii.

V príspevku sme sa pokúsili zhrnúť základné teoretické východiská “projektu neoliberalizmu”, zdôrazniť dôležitosť chápania tohoto konceptu najmä v kontexte chudoby, sociálnej exklúzie a narastajúcich sociálnych nerovností v spoločnosti, najmä na príklade niektorých konkrétnych reformných politických zmien.