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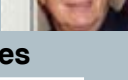
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Slovak society must put the young generation as an absolute priority

Ján Richter

Minister of Labor, Social Affairs and Family

In recent years, Europe has been facing the challenge of high unemployment with all the inherent consequences that this brings. This is made worse by the fact that the continent is specifically confronted by the alarming phenomenon of rising youth unemployment. It is a sad fact that the long-standing figures of youth joblessness in the Slovak Republic are in the region of as much as 30%. This figure is influenced by the lack of coherence between the education system and the needs of the labor market. It turns out that the return to the dual system of education – one we had here 20 years ago – is going to be inevitable. The large majority of people that I spoke with at an expert conference that we recently organized in Nitra during JOB EXPO 2014, the largest job fair in Slovakia, repeatedly confirmed this fact. I believe it is a good sign that this is not only the opinion advocated by the current Slovak government, but also employers, trade unions and academia. The Minister of Education has already started the process, and his department is about to complete the work on amending the Act on Professional Education. I believe that by introducing these systemic changes into practice, we will see future graduates entering the labor market equipped with sufficient skillsets as well as practical experience. After all, investors don't enter this country simply because of the lower labor costs, but also thanks to our qualified and skilled workforce. Therefore, if we wish to retain our reputation as an attractive market with valuable human potential, we must be able to reflect the demand and offer a well-prepared workforce. And this is exactly what we are working on with the help of employers, as they are the key partner for us in preparing the new setup of professional education.

We have been fighting high levels of youth unemployment since we formed this government. Even at that time I set out to label three priority interest groups of people, who had been most disadvantaged since the crisis hit our labor market: young people without practical experience, people aged over 50 and the long-term unemployed. Since we cannot expect the above systemic changes to take effect immediately (especially if we are talking about education) it is also essential to act proactively. The first measure we took was to redirect the money within EU funds, which we did as early as 2012. Thus we managed to add €50m that could not have been drawn from elsewhere, to the funds available for the Ministry of Labor to support the creation of new jobs for young people aged under 29. Thanks to these nationwide projects, over 11,500 young people in need of help at the very beginning of their professional career found a job for the duration of at least 18 months. I do believe that they will succeed and many will be offered proper jobs, also within the framework exceeding the minimum contractual period. I think we will all agree that the first real job experience always strongly drives further success of an individual in the labor market. Thanks to the above measures, the most recent statistical figures show the lowest youth unemployment figures in four years: above all, I see this as encouragement to implement further projects and activities. Moreover, these projects enjoy the continual interest of employers, so we are all the more committed to continue in our efforts. Recently, we managed to extend the project from the regional perspective to include also the Bratislava Region, which has traditionally had rather limited access to EU funds. Similar projects, but without any age limits, have also been prepared at the regional level.

In the effort to reflect the difficulties encountered in employing people with low skills, we launched a new offer in November that gives employers social insurance contribution allowances, when employing applicants who have been jobless for over 12 months. Since then, we have helped over 2000 employers to give jobs to almost 4000 people from this disadvantaged category.

When it comes to future steps to be taken, we see the greatest potential to reduce youth unemployment in our latest initiative, implemented under the auspices of the European Commission titled "Youth Guarantee" that has the ambition to prevent the emergence of the so-called lost generation of young people across the continent. The philosophy of the guarantee is that any young person should receive a job offer, possibility of further education, professional training or internship within 4 months after graduating or losing a job. We even managed to negotiate shifting of the eligibility age limit in this program from 25 to 29 years, as this is exactly the category of young people who are most threatened with unemployment in Slovakia. One of the tools on which we are already working is the right for a first job. This should help graduates to secure their first employment, which is of utmost importance.

The offer of these 'guarantees' will be wide in terms of legislation but, above all, in terms of specific areas of projects and tools: besides my department it will, again, concern also the Ministry of Education. We expect that the program of guarantees funded by both the Slovak government and the EU could lead to jobs for 30 to 40 thousand young people, which is surely a bold objective. However, I cannot imagine a priority with greater legitimacy and urgency than the future of our young generation...

