

# Nutrition policy and the reality of the first stage of constructing socialism in Slovakia

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## Abstract

The study aims to describe the most important changes in public nutrition during the first stage of socialism in Slovakia. It explains the essence of the state Communist ideology's involvement in people's eating habits and the reality of socialist food production and distribution in the 1950s when the acquirement of even basic foodstuffs was often accompanied by food shortage, bad quality, time losses related to food acquirement, and high prices in some cases.

**Key words** socialism, politics, nutrition

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The political authoritarian regime under the leadership of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (CPC), established in our country in 1948, was massively involved in an entire complex of functions and norms of the society. In addition to its primary aim to win and consolidate its power, the democratic people's Czechoslovakia, especially during the first stage of construction that formed its ideological basis and essence, also had a vision of creating "new" socialist people behaving and living in line with the established political line. The "new" man was one of the central figures of the socialist era in general. Their newness was in sharp contrast with tradition, but the very idea of the new model of humanity was based on the European tradition of modernity. This model promoted the independence of individuals from family and the representation of family ties by other types of collective feelings of belonging, and reflected the symptoms of general civilisation changes, such as technical progress, urbanisation, mass migration, women's emancipation, and the general cultural emancipation of the society. The socialist propaganda often referred to these phenomena and adopted them to its ideological needs (Brzóstowicz-Klajn, 2004, p. 147). It was characteristic for this regime that it sought to form "new" people by influencing all parts of their lives, including the most intimate ones. One of the aims was to transform the "backward" rural population into a modern conscious class (Búriková, 2006, p. 83). This process resulted in the fact that most every-day situations ceased to have an individual nature and became society-wide issues. This concerned housing, clothing, education, culture, religion, sports, and, naturally, eating (Piotrowski, 2005, p.143).

With regard to production, modernisation in the socialist perception primarily focused on the development of the heavy industry and on infrastructure construction. As a result of the nationalisation of the means of production, farmers and workers did not produce for their own consumption, but sold their labour force to the state for money in the form of a salary. The fact that the means of production were owned by the state and not by the people who used them shifted their relationship to material culture towards consumption. Since collectivisation and nationalisation, most material items became the object of a consumer relationship, and not of a production one. Socialism thus completed the

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consumption revolution in Slovakia. These changes in consumption were presented as gradual modernisation of the society and as a success of socialism (Búriková, 2006, p. 83). The level of consumption – its affluence or shortage – also formed people's relationship towards the socialist regime. On one hand, increased consumption and the provision of people's basic needs served the Communist Party to legitimise its power; on the other hand, the shortage of goods (especially basic foodstuffs) was reflected in their critical evaluation of the socialist reality (Miller, 1995, p. 15-16).

This work seeks to explain the most important changes in public nutrition during the first stage of socialism in Slovakia, as well as the substance of involvement of the state Communist ideology in eating habits, supported by testimonies published in contemporary scientific works.

In 1948, the leadership of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia set out the directions and tasks of the agricultural and nutrition policy. These were closely linked to the collectivisation of agriculture, the building of farmers' cooperatives, and the paternalist administrative and directive management of economy and of the society. The centralised production planning through the Ministry of Agriculture, the State Planning Authority, and agricultural offices at regional, district and local levels were supposed to restrict or eliminate the "decision-making of capitalists and small producers" (Hlavová, 2006, p.131–143). However, a large part of farmers did not welcome the nationalisation of agricultural production with enthusiasm. Local authorities sought to force those who hesitated entering a cooperative by means of material support and promises, but also under various kinds of pressure, benefits scheduling, strict exaction of unfulfilled tasks, high taxes, firing of relatives from employment or schools, or by calling "kulaks" in the army work units (Lipták, 2000, p. 297).

Although the Communist propaganda was keen on accentuating the building successes of the nationalised industry and state agricultural cooperatives, the economic production sector failed to ensure sufficient supplies of products and foodstuffs to the population on the free market. As a result of this situation, the Communists were forced to introduce a food rationing system in the period from 01 January 1950 till 31 May 1953. Under this system, food rations were limited and allocated according to people's age and occupation. The groups privileged by the regime, such as miners, metallurgists, the police, and Communist cadres, could benefit from increased rations on the controlled market in which they could purchase products in exchange for coupons. Some categories of people were excluded from the rationing system, such as senior officials, police and army officers from the 1st Czechoslovak Republic, owners of larger agricultural companies, trade licence holders, traders, etc. They could only purchase products on the free market for prices several times higher. Also smaller farmers who failed to meet the mandatory supplies of meat, milk and eggs, did not get coupons for sugar and other products. Members of bad-performing agricultural cooperatives that failed to ensure the set amounts of food supplies to the public sector were in a similar situation. The decree of the Ministry of Internal Trade also specified a group of self-suppliers – owners of land of over 0.5ha – who were not entitled to food coupons. The rationing coupon system was cancelled one day before the money exchange under which people could exchange their former money of up to 300 Czechoslovak crowns at a rate of 5:1, and higher amounts and deposits at a rate of 50:1 (Jirásek, Z.-Šůla, J., 1992, 16–20).

### **Attempts to change the nutrition of socialist people**

The death of J. V. Stalin in 1953 meant a turn towards greater interest in people's living standards in the entire Soviet bloc. In 1951, the *Institute for the Research of People's Nutrition* was established in Prague, and in 1953, an institute under the same name launched its activities in Bratislava.

The professional discourse on nutrition was similar to the one on other areas of life. It highlighted not only the big importance of nutrition for the society, but also its health impacts and, secondarily, its

economic aspects as a means to increase the productivity of people's work. In the 1950s, the progress in food quality was also constantly accentuated as compared to the interwar period.

A general feature of contemporary expert nutrition studies was the faith that the new people's democratic and later socialist society would bring a new life-style also in the field of nutrition by respecting the health needs of people without the desire of food producers to earn profits... *Nutrition manifested most clearly the class character of the old capitalist society, while the socialist system enables full respect for the biological aspects. Food ceases to be the subject of profit and becomes the means for a new socialist man to be healthy and fully efficient...* This is a quote from the resolution adopted at the working conference of the Association for Proper Nutrition in 1950. For most experts, especially for physicians, this meant that they could influence people's eating habits to an extent that was previously unthinkable. The vision of a society managed by scientists was a synonym for socialism for many nutritionists in the 1950s (Franc, 2003, p. 25-29).

From the mid-1950s, Czechoslovakia launched a campaign in line with the changes in the nutrition policy, emphasising the benefits of new technologies and the need for a total transformation of people's eating habits. It was related to contemporary modernist ideas associated with the promotion of scientific knowledge in everyday life. The symbols testifying the importance of technical and biological sciences in the field of nutrition included, in particular, various kinds of processed food, especially intermediate products and different ways of food preservation. The professional and promotional materials constantly stressed that people's distrust in such food does not have actual justification; on the contrary, such processed foodstuffs bring significant time savings. The growth of intermediate food products was also related to the process of "liberation" of socialist women from housework and with the development of common catering, i.e. forms of eating habits which, according to contemporary technocratic experts in proper nutrition, should be part of the socialist presence and later of the Communist future. It was envisaged to centralise production to a maximum extent possible, and to establish an intermediate product industry as a separate food industry sector. Despite all proclaimed benefits, the popularity of intermediate food products was not as their proponents had imagined. The reason behind, according to contemporary experts, was the ignorance of the economic importance of time in preparing meals at home (Hrubá, 1964, p. 121). Greater dissemination of intermediate products in the countryside was prevented by the problem related to their distribution, storage, prices, and traditional eating habits.

The technical and technological development in the field of nutrition was also accompanied by a planned shift to automated, continuous food production with high production hygiene as one of the expected positive results. The issue of suitable food packages, especially for meat, fat and milk, was of special interest (Kocián, 1951, pp. 69–70, 98–100, 123–125).

Besides technological problems, the situation was complicated by the fact that compared to more developed countries the purchase of food constituted a significant burden for Czechoslovak citizens. Economists explained this situation by the fact that other living costs, such as the costs of housing, healthcare, culture and taxes, were lower compared to capitalist countries. The high proportion of food costs, however, led to a situation where most households considered proper and healthy nutrition which was extremely expensive a luxury. People mostly criticised the high prices of meat, exotic fruit and butter.

Nutritionists therefore sought to manipulate the public opinion in order to improve the conditions of public nutrition. They promoted cost advantageous foodstuffs to increase their consumption. For example, in times of insufficient consumption of milk and milk products or eggs, they stressed the low prices of this rich source of animal proteins. One of the leitmotifs of promoting a healthy diet, in addition to variety, was the need for moderation due to enormous increase in fat and sugar consumption mainly as a result of the food coupon system. The public catering system offered another possibility for

food price manipulation and constituted one of the priority efforts of those advocating proper nutrition in the 1950s. Public catering was to become the main source of positively influencing the eating habits of the general public.

In spite of the awareness raising efforts, the majority of the population continued to maintain the traditional concept of “good” food, which was also acknowledged by nutrition researchers. The quality of meals in many households was negatively influenced by the typical socialist economic phenomenon: households’ long-term savings to buy a car, a motorcycle, electrical appliances, a weekend-house, a flat, etc. which were very expensive considering the earnings in the socialist Czechoslovakia (Franc, 2003, pp. 30, 169-183).

### **Results of the contemporary research in the nutrition of Slovak citizens**

In the mid-1950s, public nutrition was studied by the researchers from the People’s Nutrition Institute in Bratislava. The results obtained under the leadership of MUDr. Juraj Budlovský (1960) offer a large amount of data documenting the socialist reality in the field of nutrition. The part analysing the contents of menus in examined families represents a relevant source of information. The following facts summarise the findings:

Lunches and dinners, and especially lunches, were very different in urban and rural areas with regard to quality. A lunch in an urban area usually consisted of several courses with various kinds of soups, meat meals, stews and flour dishes. In the countryside, certain, mainly typical regional dishes were served several times a week or even constantly throughout the week, except Sunday. This eating stereotype was the main differences between towns and the countryside, and was present all over Slovakia. People in towns ate less, but more frequently; the menus were more varied and balanced, and special attention was paid to regularity and food preparation. The biggest problem of nutrition in the countryside, especially in the northern regions, was a limited number of basic foodstuffs: cereals, potatoes, sauerkraut, and milk, i.e. foodstuffs (other than milk) containing carbohydrates which, with the low consumption of meat and eggs, had small protein content. The meals were therefore rather unbalanced in terms of nutrients. These results are very similar to those obtained in Czechoslovakia in the 1930s (Pelc, 1940), during the economic crisis. This means that not even after seven years of the building of socialism could one witness a positive turn in the quality of nutrition of the rural population.

Interesting information on the given period can also be found in the part of the book by J. Budlovský which analyses the economic factors of public nutrition, especially those related the distribution of foodstuffs. This part of the book presents a number of important facts. In the first half of the 1950s, it was mainly the lack of distribution of some basic foodstuffs in Slovakia: cream, curd, fresh meat, fruits, and vegetables. The production and distribution sectors were not even able to ensure nutrition for babies in the form of milk powder. Another problem was the imbalanced distribution between urban and rural areas; some basic foodstuffs (bread, for example) were not distributed to rural grocery stores at all, or only sporadically. As evidenced by ethnographic research, this situation persisted in the next years (Markuš, 1956, pp. 283–324). In addition to insufficient and often inadequate food supplies, also other negative factors influenced the eating habits in the countryside, such as insufficient networks of grocery stores, or seasonal character of foodstuffs due to which the contemporary distribution was not able to satisfy people’s needs, i.e. to ensure enough fish during fasting periods, or enough butter, curd, eggs, meat, and fruit during festive days, etc. On the other hand, sugar consumption largely increased, which was considered a positive result, but from the point of view of proper and healthy nutrition it was rather seen as a negative condition with long-term health consequences on the Slovak population. It is apparent that the research in public nutrition in 1955/1956 did not bring very optimistic results, but rather the opposite. In the concluding part of his book, J. Budlovský therefore presented some proposals to improve this situation.

In spite of sincere efforts of mainly scientists seeking to ensure availability, nutrition balance, variety, health and safety of foodstuffs, the reality of socialist food production and distribution in the 1950s did not reach the quality claimed by the regime. The acquisition of basic foodstuffs was often associated with feelings of discomfort in people – due to the lack of foodstuffs and their bad quality, loss of time related to food acquirement, and high prices in some cases. Naturally, these facts had a negative impact on the nutrition models of people, as families were often forced to improvise in the preparation of meals, to replace foodstuffs with those of lower quality, or often eat the same meals throughout the week.

These conditions gradually improved in the period from the 1960s to the 1980s, but food production and distribution in the socialist Czechoslovakia never attained the level of developed capitalist countries connected to the globalised market. Consumption researchers (Slater, 2004, Miller, 2005) therefore note that one of the key failures causing the fall of the socialist regime was the failure to satisfy the everyday needs of people.

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