



The struggle in Slovakia's hospitals is certainly not over

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Negotiations between the Slovak government and the Medical Trade Union Association (LOZ) ended on Saturday with an agreement, the details of which are not yet known. According to initial statements from both sides, all the union's demands should be largely met, from the top-up of hospital funding to the expansion of staff in the public health system, less "stratification" of remuneration and benefits, and an increase in salaries. However, the only thing that is known and somewhat certain so far is a wage rise for hospital medical staff and a 'stabilisation allowance' for the non-medical professions.

Regarding salaries, the LOZ has agreed to several compromises. For example, it initially demanded an increase in the salaries of non-certified doctors from the current 1.25 times the average wage (or the recently approved pay offer of 1.4 times) to 1.7 times, but in the end settled for 1.5 times. Similar concessions were made with regard to the wages of certified doctors as well as the coefficient used to calculate the additional payment for years of service. Thus, it seems the basic salary of a non-certified doctor will increase by more than 28% from January 2023, which is more than the 20% originally planned by the authorities, but less than the 45% originally demanded by the unions.

In any case, a significant part of the increase will be swallowed up by inflation. We do not know what will happen with prices, but the National Bank of Slovakia (NBS) predicts that in 2023 prices will rise even faster than this year. It is therefore quite possible that the fought-for salary increases for non-certified doctors will mean only a modest increase in their real wages in the long term.

The stabilisation allowance is the result of protests by some medical staff, but will benefit also some professions that have not taken any such protest action. There will be a 5,000 EUR allowance for medical staff who undertake to work in a Slovak hospital for at least three years. For an aspiring nurse without a specialisation who accepts this offer, this practically means a monthly salary increase of around 10%, for the next three years. Of course, this is only a short-term help, which is in addition to the previously approved 20% increase in the basic salary of nurses without specialisation from January 2023.

It is not clear whether the labour union LOZ considers this increase as meeting its third requirement (nurses' pay rises).

Recent statements suggest that there will still be difficulties in securing all the demands except for medical salaries. This is nothing new: even in 2011, after the first successful labour action (mass threats to resign), there were glitches in the implementation of the Memorandum. For example, the agreed wage increase came two years after the agreed deadline. There is no need to recapitulate

what happened with the other demands, as many are still being fought over today.

We will know more about what will follow once the new memorandum is signed and made public. However, it seems certain that the reasons for discontent in the health sector will persist.

A running account of the struggle in the hospitals must note the following positives:

- Doctors and doctors have shown considerable collective self-confidence, which relies on structural power (key specialties: anaesthesiology, internal medicine), but also power in the labour market (shortage of doctors and opportunities abroad for Slovak health workers),
- also thanks to the experience of the 2011 struggle, they knew what they were getting into and were not afraid even of the tightened emergency legislation,
- the LOZ proposals were taken other professions in the sector (nurses), which has no precedent,
- the struggle also resulted in tangible benefits - however modest - for other categories of staff.
- The initial success of the LOZ should be a signal to the rest of the sector that more can be fought for.

P.S.

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