

Crisis, vulnerable groups and social responsibility: case study from Slovenia

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Abstract

This article focuses on the influence of crisis on different aspects of social responsibility among vulnerable groups in Slovenia. Representatives of Roma, small farmers, pensioners and social care receivers participated in our study. Data was collected using semi-standardized interviews (n= 51), semi structured interviews (n=30) and focus groups (n=33) among Slovenian respondents with different socio-economic and geographic backgrounds. The data show declining consumption, rising economizing, self-provisioning, dependence on formal and informal help and economically motivated regional and international mobility. The results also show a significant rise in economic, social and psychological stress as a result of crisis and the development of several paranoid perceptions, in particular fear, mistrust and anxiety. As a result of crisis, the traditional networks of social cooperation were transformed from groups providing mutual help and support into competitive groups which destroyed traditional safety nets and rendered households within these social groups less fit for survival. Crisis-induced mistrust and anxieties are tied mostly to perceptions of the state and its institutions as lacking the basic obligation of being socially responsible towards their citizens.

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Key words: Crisis, vulnerable groups, social responsibility, Slovenia

1. Introduction

There are many different definitions and conceptions of social responsibility, ranging from those regarding corporations and business (Crowther and Aras, 2008) to those targeting political, environmental and media context (Rahman, 2011), but no universal definition has emerged since the concept was introduced in ISO 26000 (ISO, 2010). However, there is consensus among authors and researchers (see Archie, 1999; Crowther and Aras, 2008; Rahman, 2011), that the concept can be regarded as an ethical framework for organizations and individuals with the main aim of guiding their actions towards the common good. The concept of social responsibility usually covers dimensions like development, social and ethical responsibility and practices, environmental protection, transparency, accountability and moral obligation.

Many researchers have shown how trust plays an important role in the context of social responsibility (Swean, 2008), in particular through individuals' direct and indirect perceptions of the activities of a given organization. For example, Pivato, Misani and Tencati have shown that in the case of consumers a high corporate social responsibility positively influences consumer trust and that trust in turn positively reinforces consumers' subsequent actions (Pivato et. al, 2007). In this respect trust presents a fundamental part of an authentic and fulfilling relationship between individuals and organizations.

When the current economic crisis struck in 2008 it impacted all areas of the social and economic life, and fall of trust was one of the first negative results (Wälti, 2011). Many studies show drop in life quality, deterioration of health of population, rise in suicides and addiction (Clemens in Moss, 2005; Karanikolos et al., 2013). In addition crisis also negatively influenced social entities like family and close communities, rendering them unable to perform basic functions of material, social and psychological support for their members (McLloyd, 1990). Many authors also tie negative impact of crisis to a massive social and psychological damage (prim. Latif, 2010), ranging from the development of mistrust (Giordano and Kostova, 2002) to other serious psychological, mental and behavioural disorders (Gili, et al., 2012).

The main purpose of this article is to report on research that has examined the influence of crisis on respondents and their households in particular with regards to the elements that make up their conception of social responsibility.

2. Method

Data used for the purpose of this study was collected among 104 Slovenian respondents with different socio-economic and geographic backgrounds (SCOPES project and series of interviews on the topic of crisis between 2010 and 2016). Data collection was based on:

1. Semi-standardized interviews (Flick, 2010) with 51 respondents that were performed between 2010 and 2016 (interviews had 2 phases, with graphical representation and validation), with the main focus on discovering the influence of the crisis on their lives;
2. Semi-structured interviews (Flick, 2010) with 30 respondents performed in 2015 and 2016, with the main focus on economic background and survival strategies in times of crisis;
3. Focus groups (Flick, 2010) with 33 representatives of households performed in 2016 with the main focus on economic background and survival strategies in times of crisis.

The sample of interviewees was heterogeneous and in addition included representatives of the following vulnerable groups: Roma, social care recipients, pensioners and small farmers. The data gathered was managed and analysed using QDA Miner 4.1.23. For the purpose of this analysis, three-phase coding was employed (open-focused-axial coding).

3. Results

Among the general insights emerging from the gathered qualitative data, the following items are reported basically by every respondent:

- Crisis resulted in decline of material and cultural consumption;
- Crisis resulted in raised activities of economizing, reducing, and self-provisioning;
- Crises resulted in heightened dependence on social support, both formal (state provided support) and informal (support of social network);
- Crises rendered international mobility (both seasonal and permanent) more likely; and

- Crises heightened levels of economic and social stress and evoked strong feelings of mistrust towards state and governmental organizations.

3.1 Social Care Recipients

Within our study there were 67 interviewees with the main survival strategies based on social support who could be regarded as representatives of this social group. By self-report, the main reasons for their status of social support recipient include long-term unemployment, long-term health problems or disability, poor employability, failed own business attempts and business closure and subsequent unemployment as a direct result of the current crisis. Interviewees also depict the current crisis as a major factor in almost all aspects of their lives, but mainly in the further drop of living standards and increase of stress and dissatisfaction.

Social support as a structural element provided by the state proved to be insufficient for survival, forcing the recipients to seek additional income:

... during that time I was surviving on social support... after that I had some part time jobs with minimal salary, public work jobs and substitutions from the Unemployment Office... Then my first pregnancy and pregnancy money, after that second pregnancy... At the moment we're (her household) on social support and child support money and Peter (partner) has part-time employment in his firm... you know, to lower tax and other financial obligations as self-employed. (SLO_SCR_11)

In addition, there is also a significant raise in the activities of self-provisioning among social care recipients, in particular in the field of food production. However, it is important to note that self-provisioning presents an activity within their survival strategy and is often combined with economizing and reducing. Self provisioning and economizing often take the form of new household activities that are basically transformed, economized or reduced paid services:

Now that I'm at home, I have time to work around our house. When you do that kind of work by yourself it's cheaper than paying somebody. Now for instance I lay tiles by myself... (SLO_SCR_7)

In this way new possibilities for further improvements are created, for skills, knowledge and household resources can be mobilized as parts of survival strategy:

(Interviewer): You told me that you repair cars for your friends. What exactly do you do?

(D.F): Basically I do it at home or I go to them, but mostly I work at home.

(Interviewer): In your garage? So you transformed your garage into a mechanic shop?

(DF): Yes, in fact I did. (SLO_SCR_2)

Although the data gathered shows relatively high levels of personal motivation and agency among social aid recipients, high personal agency does not automatically ensure improvement of living standards. Interviewees express great concerns which are mostly tied to lack of job opportunities and disproportional relationship between their agency and its impact on household living standard – in their view, high agency does not ensure improvement of living standards. Some households even intentionally lower levels of personal agency for, in their view, it does not pay to work hard for a small or even no improvement.

3.2 Roma

16 representatives (4 households) from this social group participated in the qualitative part of our study. They are living in urban areas and by self-report in households with survival strategies based on social care and child support (n= 12), pensions (n= 2) and the minimum wage (n= 2). These households are organized as a system within which adult receivers of social transfers (pensioners, social support receivers, child support receivers) contribute part of the received money, while other adult members work within the household or earn money outside the household performing odd jobs. These households' survival strategy remains largely based on the reception of social transfers, but it is important to note that interviewees perceive these transfers not as a temporary solution or occasional aid, but as a constant income and a fixed and stable part of their survival strategy. Since the crisis negatively influenced the Slovenian policy of social transfers, interviewees report increase of stress regarding their financial aid. When seeking other sources of support they often turn to members of their social network and reception of help from family members outside the household presents an important non-financial aspect of their strategy:

... We also live in the apartment that is owned by my cousin. If he comes back tomorrow, we are homeless. We can go and live in a tent... 10, 15 years ago, while I was working, everything was different. I knew people and I had salary. Now, nothing. I'm almost like those homeless people. (Male informant, SLO_RO_4):

Apart from direct crisis induced problems, interviewees report feelings of discrimination and marginalization, in particular in the fields of equal chances when applying for a job. Despite many programs for integration of Roma that are available in Slovenia, interviewees also expressed a relatively high level of mistrust in political institutions, in particular towards the European Union. In addition, interviewees describe coping with discrimination as particularly difficult, not only when dealing with issues within state institutions (such as the office of state welfare), but also when competing for resources with other people from the Roma community:

... We're nothing, we have nothing. But we need something... those social workers, they help, but it's still hard... we don't take from their pockets. Government gives this money... we take from people that work. We are a social problem and we know we live on their shoulders. Nobody comes to your door, but when you go there (to the social welfare office) and beg for money... they (other Roma people standing in the line for child support application) say 'Hey, get out... you're not my concern. You have just one kid, we have 3 or 4'... They say 'hey, you're a genuine Gipsy'... then I have to prove I'm not a Gipsy, that I'm Roma. (SLO_RO_4).

Some interviewees expressed feelings of apathy regarding their current situation:

... Because of the crisis we work less. Not because of (lack of) time. We would, but (I wonder) why should I? What do you do, when you don't have anything you like doing (working)? ... It does not pay, nobody sees the point in that. It's better not to worry, get your minimal amount (social support), go shopping and live in peace. (SLO_RO_2)

3.3 Small Farmers

22 representatives (14 households) from this social group participated in the qualitative part of our study. They were living in households organized as semi-subsistence farms (SSF), meaning that they are active in the production of goods of which less than 50% is produced

for the market, while the rest remains to be consumed within the household. By self-report, the current economic crisis had a major influence on the financial part of their strategy, but had no influence on self-provisioning within SSF:

Well... I think the crisis had no major influence. We have enough to buy food and to pay our bills. We only buy those things we have to buy. We buy bread, milk, rice, pasta... Everything else, vegetables and meat, we produce ourselves. Also firewood... We have a share in a village forest, and Robi (her son) goes and helps other (people in the village) and they pay him in firewood. What else? Flour, corn, pumpkins... everything is home produced and if not consumed at home either sold or exchanged for something else... The crisis had no influence on this. (SLO_SF_6)

(In the last 5 years) we aren't really missing anything, no bread or milk and we can still pay our bills. However, the problem is that we cannot put any money on the side for rainy days, because at the end of the month there's nothing left... all spent! Let's pray nothing breaks down, a washing machine or something else; then we have a problem. If our tractor breaks down, then I don't know what we'll do! (SLO_SF_6)

However, farming by itself is not sufficient for survival of the household; therefore, adult members are forced to seek financial income outside SSF:

We live on a farm, a family of 5... And I have to say, thank God we (he and his wife) are employed. Salaries are what they are... We work a lot, for food and money... We are able to save some money for a vacation and for a car... maybe even to buy some more land and extend our farm. (SLO_SF_2)

Our household lives exclusively on farming. Size wise we are somewhere between a small and midsize farm. Let's say a big small farm! We are mostly into cattle and milk production, but we also have fields, forest and a vineyard. According to this everybody (family member) gets an assignment (division of labour). The most goes to me, since my father is very old. My task is to do everything around the cattle, cows and bulls... first thing in the morning I have to clean animal facilities... barn, standstills... then I feed them, milk them and bring milk to our collector. I also work there, as a milk collector... every morning and evening... It's not a lot of money, but it helps. To help me along... for cigarettes and beer, ha, ha... Before that (milk collecting) I was working additionally as mortician, digging graves, carrying coffins... (SLO_SF_5)

State provided subsidies (subsidized milk prices, seed subsidies or fuels tax reductions) make up a crucial part in survival of SSF and many interviewees state that surviving by farming without these incomes is simply not possible. Another important element of their survival is their social network support:

Without the others (people from the village) you cannot survive here. You simply need help. Preparing animal feed, foresting, vine picking, fieldwork and all the rest... Those are things you cannot do by yourself even if you have all the machinery. Most of the times our friends and family come to help us. In most cases they already know when to come and what's the mission (type of work), and they come by themselves. Sometime we call them... Of course we go and help them, when that time comes. That's how these things go here. (SLO_SF_5)

3.4 Pensioners

In the qualitative part of our study there were 10 representatives (7 households) from this social group living in both urban and rural areas. They live by self-report in households that have survival strategies based on the receipt of pension money. Most of our interviewees report monthly pensions to be barely sufficient for their survival; therefore, they are forced to seek resources elsewhere:

Robi (son) works, I have got a pension. We both go around the village and work, help other people... and they give us something, potatoes, meat... But we also work *on the side* (informal, grey economy). (SLO_PEN_2)

Us (respondent and his wife), we have pension, she (daughter living within the same household) earns her money by farming... she gets money, so she's the one buying things that need to be bought (that cannot be produced at home)... like fertilizer. She's in charge of that! (SLO_PEN_1)

... Even before (the crisis) we produced a lot (of food) in our garden... and now even more so, since my husband has retired. We have a big field and we produce a lot of vegetables and fruits, we pickle them for the winter... we also started producing our own honey, which we sell on the side... (SLO_PEN_4)

It is important to note that in our interviews, pensioners in general exhibit a relatively high level of personal agency in self-provisioning as well as in intergenerational cooperation, both of which are by self-report perceived as positive. This is particularly important, for one of the most important elements in their survival strategy is reliance on their social network. Interviewees depict their social network, in particular relatives and friends, as one of the most important elements of their survival strategy. It is important to add that in their perception, financial help or material support present an important, but nevertheless secondary aspect of this support. It is evident that this support provides them primarily with feelings of strong social bonds, emotional support and social inclusion, and therefore it is in their perception a functional safety net.

4. Crisis, development of mistrust and social responsibility

In addition to the above listed forms of impact, crisis resulted in the development of paranoid perceptions, in particular fear, mistrust and anxiety. According to the model developed by Kramer and Schaffer (2014: 206), paranoid perceptions (*out-group*) are a result of a stressful situation within which an individual experiences a high level of actual or perceived dependence on others (state, institution or social group) accompanied with uncertainty or mistrust towards them.

We have already shown that crisis resulted in increased levels of actual or perceived dependence on both formal support (dependence on social transfers) and informal support (dependence on social network of an individual). Crisis further resulted in perceptions of vulnerability, which interviewees mainly experienced in the form of unemployment, uncertainty or existential fear, increased economic, social and psychological stress. Fear and anxiety are but two extreme forms of paranoid perceptions. It is important to note that these fears are not fears for individuals' welfare but rather fears for their families. Anxieties are expressed through actual or potential inability to pay bills (electricity bills) or in areas

regarding ability to provide for the family (anxieties of losing jobs or being forced to return the received social support). It is important to note that these both fears and anxieties are emerging from high mistrust in institutions and the state. Once developed, fear and anxieties lead to hypervigilance and dystrophic processing of information, which is also evident among our interviewees, in particular regarding reports in the popular media on the political situation in Slovenia. In addition, interviewees also exhibit overly personal construction of interactions and ascription of malicious bias, which leads to perceptions of conspiracy when interacting with state institutions or their representatives:

I don't trust our courts and police. I won't go into details, why and all that, let's skip it... let's say I had an unpleasant experience, an unjust verdict. I think in our country the court became a way to destroy the life of an individual. (Informant K)

The next stages in the development of the paranoid scheme are actual forms of paranoid behaviour and tendencies to social withdrawal. By self-report, paranoid behaviours are particularly evident among our interviewees when they come into contact with both formal and informal institutions and groups. There is a relatively high level of mistrust in formal procedures (national taxation, procedures regarding distribution of social transfers) and towards representatives and employees of formal institutions. Paranoid behaviour towards other social and informal groups (Roma, migrants or homosexuals) is somewhat lower, but nevertheless present. The lowest levels of mistrust are evident in data tied to their local social networks, for these still work as cooperative networks and a strong safety net. Tendencies towards social withdrawal are evident mostly with regard to politics (political rallies) and participation in nongovernmental organization (the Church).

With regards to social responsibility in general, major expressions of mistrust are tied to the social and ethical responsibility of state and its institutions, transparency of procedures (in particular procedures regarding social transfers and elections), accountability of politicians, officials and state employees and the moral obligation of the state, institutions and their employees to the citizens. However, to fully understand the impact of crisis on the perception of social responsibility, a more thorough and longitudinal investigation is required.

Conclusion

The present article strives to present impact of crisis on the development of paranoid perceptions and subsequent influence on social responsibility. Paranoid perceptions of our respondents, that could be regarded as a result of crisis are tied mostly to the state and its institution, but are at the same time also evident on micro level, level of interpersonal relationships.

Although successfully showing an impact of crisis on these perception, presenting an outline of their development and impact on social responsibility, the article has some limitations:

- 1.) The here presented paranoid perceptions could not be regarded as either new, exclusively negative or pathologic – as some authors show (i.e. van Prooijen in van Lange, 2014) they are generally present in modern societies and crisis acted mostly as a catalys in their further development;
- 2.) Research that was the basis for his article was limited in sample, method arrangement and time/space frame and results should be understood without the potential for generalization, but rather as an insight into the phenomena;

3.) Since the final extent of crisis is still unknown, the intersection of paranoid perceptions and social responsibility is yet to be fully explored.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Dr. Emilio Miljardo for his assistance in proofreading the English version of this article.

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