

Slovakia

By Benjamin Cunningham

Capital: Bratislava
Population: 5.42 million
GNI/capita, PPP: \$26,820

Source: World Bank *World Development Indicators*.

Nations in Transit Ratings and Averaged Scores

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
National Democratic Governance	2.50	2.75	3.00	2.75	2.75	2.75	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00
Electoral Process	1.50	1.50	1.75	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50
Civil Society	1.50	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	2.00
Independent Media	2.50	2.75	3.00	3.00	2.75	2.75	2.75	3.00	3.00	2.75
Local Democratic Governance	2.25	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.50
Judicial Framework and Independence	2.50	2.75	3.00	2.75	2.75	3.00	3.00	3.00	2.75	2.75
Corruption	3.25	3.25	3.75	3.50	3.50	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75
Democracy Score	2.29	2.46	2.68	2.54	2.50	2.57	2.61	2.64	2.61	2.61

NOTE: The ratings reflect the consensus of Freedom House, its academic advisers, and the author(s) of this report. If consensus cannot be reached, Freedom House is responsible for the final ratings. The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 7 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For the third time in Slovakia's postcommunist independence, voters in 2016 pushed back as a dominant political actor moved to use its political power to consolidate influence over other key institutions. First it occurred when Vladimir Mečiar sought a fourth term as prime minister in 1998. Secondly, as Prime Minister Robert Fico attempted to transition to the presidency in 2014. And in 2016, Fico again saw his share of the vote decline, this time by 16 percentage points, as his Direction–Social Democracy (Smer-SD) party was forced into a coalition government.

At the same time, in a landscape with few coherent alternatives to Smer-SD the splintered electorate portends a period of political uncertainty in the years ahead. The strong showing of extremist Marian Kotleba and his People's Party—Our Slovakia, entering parliament for the first time and drawing strong support from young voters, signifies the risk posed by a public increasingly alienated from its political establishment. Similarly, the success of ideologically hollow populist parties indicate a wider dissatisfaction with the status quo, even as Slovakia's economy continues to be among the top performers in the European Union.

Corruption scandals, especially the so-called Bašternák case in 2016, as well as the political class's inability to solve or prosecute perceived wrongdoing continues to undermine confidence in the system among the public. Meanwhile, Slovakia's strategic position and history as a key transit point for Russian gas making its way to the European Union (EU) makes it a battleground in a struggle between Russia and the West.

Though the coming years are no doubt politically uncertain, there are nonetheless signs of progress on key fronts. By forcing Smer-SD into a coalition government, voters halted and, for now, reversed attempts to consolidate control of the judiciary and erase political checks and balances. Progress on judicial independence, which has been largely driven by the party's calculation that negative public perception makes their current course untenable, looks to have solidified and remains on a positive course. Confidence in the judiciary is up significantly in opinion polls. Independent leadership in the ailing health care sector also seems to be pushing back against entrenched corruption and clientelism.

On the media front, after two years, concerns raised around the controversial financial group Penta's purchase of a majority stake in the country's leading quality daily, *Sme*, look to have been exaggerated. At the same time, the creation of another liberally oriented newspaper, Dennik N, has increased the vibrancy of the media environment. Though tabloid style media still dominates circulation numbers, media are able to hold powerful interests to account. A parliamentary dispute over how to increase funding for state television and radio is an issue to keep an eye on in the years ahead.

Though constitutionally weak, President Andrej Kiska continued as a key voice offering alternative viewpoints to Fico and Smer-SD. While formally the president provides few checks on government power, Kiska raised a number of issues that did not otherwise find significant voice, including the importance of human rights commitments and Slovakia's anchoring in international institutions like NATO and the European Union.

Slovakia's turn at the helm of the European Council in the latter half of the year, and its relatively successful if uneventful stewardship, served as an important milestone for the country and its democracy.

Though Slovakia is not immune to regional political winds—including Russian attempts to divide the EU, Euroskepticism and the entrenched overlap of murky business interests and high-level politics—it has yet to go the way of neighboring Hungary and Poland, where illiberal leadership has set about dismantling key institutions. Though Slovak prosecutors and law enforcement are still susceptible to political influence, the office of president has become more independent in recent years, as has the judiciary. Furthermore, with voters' rejection of Smer-SD attempts at consolidating power further in 2016, Fico and his party look to be losing influence.

Amid this period of change, it remains to be seen what will come next, especially since the most likely contender to replace Fico in the medium term is Andrej Danko, the leader of the Slovak National Party (SNS). Other candidates, like the unpredictable populist Boris Kollar, are equally troubling. These leaders would fundamentally alter the country's track, as they show little ability to balance domestic politicking with Slovakia's place in the world. So much as they are contenders to displace Smer-SD, they are all essentially anti-EU in orientation. However, the complete disintegration of traditional, and largely discredited, center-right parties also offers space for newcomers to emerge. As of 2016, numerous potential candidates were looking to fill that void, but none that had established credibility with the public.

Though Slovakia no doubt still faces significant, and indeed newly emerging challenges, the year 2016 generally saw the consolidation of positive trends that began in 2015. The country enters a period of potential political flux with institutions that have generally been strengthened—in contrast with many others in the neighborhood.

Score Changes:

- **Independent Media rating improved from 3.00 to 2.75** as media coverage is varied and outlets are able to openly challenge those in power. This shows that recent concerns about threats to editorial independence posed by big business investment in the media may have been exaggerated.
- **Civil Society rating declined from 1.75 to 2.00** due to increased organization and mobilization by extremist political groups—which have drawn particular support from young people—and the growing risk it poses to liberal values and civil rights.

Outlook for 2017

The Slovak political system has entered a period of significant change. In November 2017, regularly scheduled regional elections will take place that will offer an indication of larger political trends. Traditional parties continue to see their share of the vote decline, and even the long-dominant Smer-SD party looks set for a shakeup. Amid such shifts populist and far right parties have gained ground and could advance further in the upcoming regional elections, where turnout is traditionally low.

MAIN REPORT

National Democratic Governance

2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
2.50	2.75	3.0	2.75	2.75	2.75	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00

- The long-dominant Direction–Social Democracy (Smer-SD) party saw its electoral strength decline significantly after the March parliamentary elections.¹ After forming a one-party government during its previous term, Smer-SD was forced into what was initially a four-party coalition.² Joining Smer-SD were the center-right parties Most-Híd and Network (Siet') and the conservative-nationalist Slovak National Party (SNS). Siet' collapsed amid infighting in the summer but its deputies continued to back the government. Five of its members of parliament (MPs) joined Most-Híd and its ministers were replaced after the collapse. This coalition was generally unpopular, especially among center-right voters wary of ever cooperating with Fico. At the same time, flagging poll numbers meant most of its members had no interest in holding elections any time soon. While governing in a coalition provided some check on the established power network of Smer-SD, it also dissuaded investigation of past wrongdoing as coalition members had an interest in maintaining the current government.
- The election also saw significant gains by unpredictable parties with no discernible ideology—such as the Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OL'aNO) and We Are Family (Sme Rodina) led by businessman Boris Kollár—as well as the far right People's Party-Our Slovakia (L'SNS) led by Marian Kotleba.³ Both developments are significant cause for concern. Despite the tumult, Slovakia staged a steady, if uneventful six-month term as head of the European Council in the second half of the year.
- The Smer-SD party found itself in the midst of turmoil during 2016.⁴ Prime Minister Robert Fico had heart surgery in April,⁵ reopening questions about his own longevity as party leader and prompting talk of an eventual succession battle. Foreign Minister Miroslav Lajčák spent much of the year unsuccessfully campaigning to be the next United Nations (UN) Secretary General,⁶ and Interior Minister Robert Kaliňák remained embroiled in a major corruption scandal.⁷ The party congress was twice delayed during the year, amid confusion over the party's future direction.⁸ Additionally, despite allegations of vote-buying during the March elections, several officials remained unpunished.⁹
- While the other governing coalition parties saw their popularity decline since forming a government in April, the popularity of the Slovak National Party (SNS) increased, with polls near the end of the year indicating they would receive about 50 percent more votes than they did in the March elections.¹⁰ Party leader Andrej Danko is widely perceived as having prime ministerial ambitions and his party in 2016 declined to field or back joint candidates with Smer for next year's regional elections.¹¹ Amid falling or stagnant prospects for most other mainstream parties,¹² Danko looks positioned to be an influential leader in Bratislava for years to come.
- Though Danko has softened the image of his party and toned down some of its crude views, SNS remained nationalist and socially conservative in outlook, while the party leader sought to play up these wedge issues as part of his efforts to differentiate SNS from Smer. Danko's attempt at reforming parliamentary procedure (such as placing a ban on mobile phones) drew criticism from the political establishment,¹³ similar to his distasteful views toward women.¹⁴ Both were viewed as diverting time and attention from actual policy making, but neither drew significant condemnation from the wider public.
- President Andrej Kiska continues to provide a check on what otherwise can be characterized as a political discourse dominated by illiberal views.¹⁵ Though the president's formal power are limited,

his frequent public statements on issues like human rights, the rights of asylum seekers, and his soft criticism of parliamentary politics draws attention to topics that might otherwise have escaped public interest.¹⁶ This, in turn, continued to fuel speculations that he might move into parliamentary politics in the future. In October, Kiska met with the Dalai Lama, which sparked a minor confrontation with Fico.¹⁷

Electoral Process

2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
1.50	1.50	1.75	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50	1.50

- Though the ruling Smer-SD party was the nominal winner of the March general elections with 28.3 percent, the result saw them drop 34 seats in parliament, winning only 49.¹⁸ The rest of the seats were divided largely evenly across seven parties, with Richard Sulík’s center-right Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) winning 21 seats (12.1 percent), OL’ANO 19 seats (11 percent), SNS 15 seats (8.6 percent), L’SNS 14 seats (8 percent), Sme Rodina and Most-Híd both 11 seats (6.6 percent), and Radislav Procházka’s Siet’ 10 seats (5.6 percent). With eight parties, the newly elected parliament has been the most fragmented in Slovakia’s post-communist history.
- With votes scattered across the spectrum, an unorthodox but relatively stable coalition emerged. Though the process itself was carried out in an environment that was both free and fair, anti-immigrant and anti-refugee rhetoric dominated the campaigning, deployed both by the governing Smer-SD as well as smaller, nationalist parties.¹⁹ According to a monitoring report by the Organization for Cooperation and Security (OSCE), media concentration led to less critical reporting on the government and the ruling party. The OSCE report also noted that recent changes in political party campaign financing have been insufficient and could lead to abuse in the future.²⁰
- Antiestablishment sentiment is widespread and the rise of the neofascist People’s Party-Our Slovakia (L’SNS), which entered parliament for first time, is of particular concern. A full 22 percent of first time voters opted for Marian Kotleba’s party in the March general election.²¹ Though largely sidelined from formal policy making during the year, their ability to appeal to young people will likely pose a significant challenge moving forward. Kotleba seeks reelection as governor of the Banska Bystrica region in 2017.
- The political party landscape remained in flux as traditional powers like the center-right Slovak Democratic and Christian Union–Democratic Party (SDKU) have virtually disappeared and others such as the Christian Democrats (KDH) have fallen out of parliament.²² In their place, newcomers continued to proliferate with many falling outside liberal bounds. Siet', once thought a promising center-right challenger to Smer-SD, lasted less than five months as part of the governing coalition, disbanding itself, and scattering members.²³
- Though center-right parties do collect a fair amount of votes in aggregate, disorganization and divisions mean that they have posed no significant challenge in recent years. Among the more interesting new projects is Progressive Slovakia. A think tank that looks set to translate into a political party, it was founded by Ivan Štefunko a longtime focal point of the country’s tech startup scene.²⁴

Civil Society

2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
1.50	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	1.75	2.00

- Public protests, largely driven by opposition parties over corruption and the so-called Bašternák affair (see Corruption), continued into the early fall, with turnout ranging from the hundreds to the low thousands.²⁵ Protesters targeted the Bonaparte apartment complex in Bratislava, developed by Bašternák and serving as residence for both Interior Minister Robert Kaliňák and Prime Minister Robert Fico. Activists called for Kaliňák to step down, but Smer-SD resisted while other parties in the coalition government largely kept silent as they attempt to preserve the government. Though the protests are evidence of the public's willingness to confront wrongdoing by politicians, they had done little to force changes by year's end.
- Far right groups remain active with Marian Kotleba's L'SNS leading the way. During the year, illiberal groups displayed increased ability to organize themselves and mobilize citizens. In addition to gaining parliamentary representation amid strong support from young voters, the party leadership organized patrols on train transport—purportedly a service to guarantee security. Though not widespread, such vigilante activity led the state-run rail carrier to take the formal step of banning such patrols in August.²⁶ Fallout from the refugee crisis also continued to fuel a general discriminatory sentiment. In an incident that made headlines, a Bratislava hotel openly stated it would not accommodate clients coming from countries where war was underway.²⁷
- In a positive development, after a one-year pause, the LGBTI community staged their Rainbow Pride event in July.²⁸ Organizers had earlier cancelled the 2015 event, citing a negative mood in society following a series of referendums that sought to further curb rights for same sex couples in early 2015. Those measures were ultimately defeated, after voter turnout failed to meet the required 50 percent threshold. Meanwhile, the organizer of those referendums, the Alliance for Family group, staged counter demonstrations during the 2016 Rainbow Pride event and remained a significant force for those supporting socially conservative values. In July, it was fined for interfering with the general election campaign.²⁹ Other affiliated groups, like the Slovak Bishops' Conference, also maintain traditionalist views on gay rights. Such opinions found ample representation at the parliamentary level, as parliament speaker Andrej Danko, among others, publicly expressed opposition to equal rights for the LGBTI community in September.³⁰
- In February, Amnesty International criticized the treatment of both the Roma minority and the discourse surrounding refugees from the Middle East and North Africa.³¹ On the latter front, AI cited the frequent connection of refugees with terrorism. Though Slovakia did grant asylum to 200 Christian refugees in January, in November the parliament passed legislation that made it practically impossible for Islam to gain recognition as an official religion in the near future.³² Many of the stereotypes surrounding immigrants have been adapted from long-held misconceptions about the country's Roma minority—including their purported refusal to integrate with wider society and that they arrive with an intent to abuse state social services.³³ In April, the government appointed a new proxy between the state and the Roma community, but experts were skeptical that this hitherto unknown figure will have a strong enough mandate to make necessary changes.³⁴
- Early in the year, protests by teacher and nurse unions had a damaging effect on the popularity of the ruling Smer-SD party in the March elections.³⁵ Though the demonstrations helped mobilize the public, renewed efforts demanding improved salaries continued into the fall and by year's end had done little to move the policies of the current coalition government. With the 2017 budget set for approval without accounting for any increased pay, the prospect of strikes loom over the coming year.³⁶

Independent Media

2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
2.50	2.75	3.00	3.00	2.75	2.75	2.75	3.00	3.00	2.75

- Though Slovakia’s media environment remains competitive and vibrant, the country nonetheless maintains one of Europe’s heaviest penalties for defamation—with a maximum sentence of eight years in prison.³⁷ In practice, penalties usually take the form of payouts as judges often order the defendants to pay excessive financial damages. Powerful business and political interests frequently take to the courts. In June, former supreme court chief Stefan Harabin won a defamation case against the state television station, which had to pay €10,000 in damages.³⁸ However, in a positive sign, police halted prosecution in the so-called Bonanno case, which saw judges seeking to prosecute a tabloid newspaper for publishing embarrassing photos.³⁹ The judges had sued the newspaper *Nový Čas* for a total of €940,000 in damages.
- The SNS in 2016 blocked attempts to increase licensing fees that finance public radio and television.⁴⁰ The objection came despite the fact that such increases were included in the coalition agreement, which SNS approved. Many viewed this as a threat to the continued functioning and independence of the state broadcasters, as SNS said it would only approve higher fees as part of a larger overhaul that would make both radio and television a “genuine Slovak and national public broadcaster.”⁴¹ Slovaks currently pay €4.64 per month as part of their electricity bills to finance state media, and the rates have not risen in 13 years.
- Amid financial pressure in private media, big business interests still have a profound influence on the country’s media landscape. Opposition leader Igor Matovic of OL’ANO, who had previously controlled a network of free regional print weeklies, was threatened with suspension in the parliament amid accusations that he violated conflict of interest rules by keeping a hand in the business.⁴² Elsewhere, the investment firm Penta continued to draw the biggest scrutiny. However, there was still little sign of editorial interference via their majority stake in the daily *Sme*, Slovakia’s most influential political daily. Antimonopoly regulators approved the consolidation of that publication with Penta’s other media holdings in June.⁴³ Also in June, a district court sided with another daily *Denník N* as Penta sought a court-mandated apology for a commentary published by the paper.⁴⁴ Revelations in the so-called Panama papers in April linked Penta’s media holdings with the Netherlands-based firm V3, adding further confusion over the true owners of Penta’s Slovak media interests.⁴⁵ Though top political officials often treat the press with disdain, including a November incident in which Fico labeled journalists “dirty, anti-Slovak prostitutes,”⁴⁶ *Sme*, *Denník N*, *Týždeň* and other outlets nonetheless continue to openly question and challenge powerful interests.
- News sites promoting conspiracy theories are more common than they were in the past,⁴⁷ and experts increasingly connect such sites with Russian-backed propaganda efforts.⁴⁸ One 2015 survey found 42 such websites active in Slovakia,⁴⁹ with *Zem & Vek* and *Slovak Slobodný Vysielač* among the most prominent. A recent study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) argued that these sites remain a key part of Russian strategy to influence Slovak politics, likely with an eye on the country’s strategic position along European energy networks and as a transit country for Russian natural gas.⁵⁰

Local Democratic Governance

2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
2.25	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.50	2.50

- Extremist political views find some institutionalized support at the local and regional government level. L’SNS leader Marian Kotleba was elected governor of the Banská Bystrica region in 2013. In

2016, the mayor of the city Trnava, from the eponymous region, provided city space for extremist lectures and concerts and even appeared to sympathize with Kotleba’s political party on a radio talk show.⁵¹ For his part, Kotleba sought to mobilize public resources to his own far right cause, including the use of an official regional government newsletter.⁵²

- Attempts to reform the regional electoral process were moving forward at the end of 2016 and set to be in place by the fall 2017 regional elections. Among other things, proposals included limiting voting for regional governor to a single round in lieu of the present arrangement whereby a second runoff round for governor occurs in cases when no candidate garners an outright majority of the vote.⁵³ Such a change is viewed as potentially aiding more extreme political groups that are able to mobilize voters with the rest of the political spectrum divided during a first round vote. Supporters of the change argue it will save money. Other planned reforms, however, were stalled, including a proposed ban on MPs simultaneously holding elected office at the local level.⁵⁴ According to current regulations, those holding both posts can only draw the full salary from one of them.

Judicial Framework and Independence

2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
2.50	2.75	3.00	2.75	2.75	3.00	3.00	3.00	2.75	2.75

- Trust in the judicial system increased markedly among the general public in 2016, up some 11 percentage points over the previous year.⁵⁵ The increase in confidence came on the back of changes in 2015 that among other things saw Stefan Harabín,⁵⁶ Slovakia’s Supreme Court chairman, removed from other key judicial posts. His ouster was largely driven by fellow judges. President Kiska also took action to push judges over the age of 65 into retirement in an attempt to accelerate change in the sector. He dismissed 45 judges over that age limit in March.⁵⁷ Though the trend during the year looked positive, progress comes from a low base, and 60 percent of Slovaks still say they do not trust the judicial system.⁵⁸
- The weak performance of the ruling Smer-SD in the March elections, and the resulting coalition government that saw reformist Lucia Žitňanská take up the post of justice minister, eased concerns that party could continue stacking the judiciary with loyalists. Žitňanská had by year’s end implemented a more transparent judicial selection process, but nepotism remained a significant concern. A recent study found that one-third of newly appointed judges has close ties to somebody already working as a judge. That study also found an increase in the professional credentials of newly appointed judges, with more having previous judicial experience (an indication that fewer nominations are politically driven), as well as that a majority of new appointees are women.⁵⁹ The latter belies professional rules that adversely affect young women looking to enter the legal profession.⁶⁰
- President Andrej Kiska and parliament remained in conflict over the president’s refusal to appoint Constitutional Court judges earlier nominated by a Smer-SD–dominated parliament. Kiska had cited the nominees as unqualified and in 2016 approached the Council of Europe’s Venice Commission for advice on how to proceed.⁶¹ For its part, the new government had yet to appoint any new candidates by year’s end. Thus as of December 2016, the Constitutional Court operated with just 10 of its 13 judges.

Corruption

2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
3.25	3.25	3.75	3.50	3.50	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75

- The so-called Bašternák case⁶² dominated the headlines in the second half of the year. In June, leaked bank account information confirmed that large payments had been made to Interior Minister Robert Kaliňák from a company connected to businessman Ladislav Bašternák. The businessman had been facing allegations of tax fraud.⁶³ Opposition politicians claimed that the payments came in exchange for helping Bašternák to avoid prosecution. Similar payments had been made to former Smer Transport Minister Jan Pociatek. Moreover, both Kaliňák and Prime Minister Robert Fico live in a Bašternák-owned apartment building. The scandal spurred regular protests in front of that building,⁶⁴ but Kaliňák remained on the job as of year's end.
- A 2016 report by the World Economic Forum (WEF) contended that Slovakia tied with Ukraine as the second most corrupt country in Europe, trailing only Moldova.⁶⁵ Even after accounting for methodological differences, this was at odds with other surveys, such as Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index where the country ranked 54th, ahead of Italy, Greece, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and others.⁶⁶ WEF claimed that corruption is the leading hindrance to conducting business and cited the inefficiency of the court system and the unreliability of law enforcement as concerns.
- The Bašternák case, and the continued failure to resolve the long-stalled Gorilla corruption case,⁶⁷ which revealed murky ties between Slovak oligarchs and politicians, were indeed strong indications of continued political influence on such investigations—in particular interference at the level of Interior Minister Robert Kaliňák. Late in the year, scandals over alleged overpriced contracts connected with the country's EU presidency,⁶⁸ and inflated spending on a hospital project added to corruption concerns.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, in addition to providing a check on the clientelism of Prime Minister Robert Fico's Smer-SD party, the coalition government saw reformists take up key cabinet positions. These included Justice Minister Lucia Žitňanská and Health Minister Tomas Drucker, who was tasked with fixing one of the country's worst performing, least transparent, and most corrupt sectors.⁷⁰

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