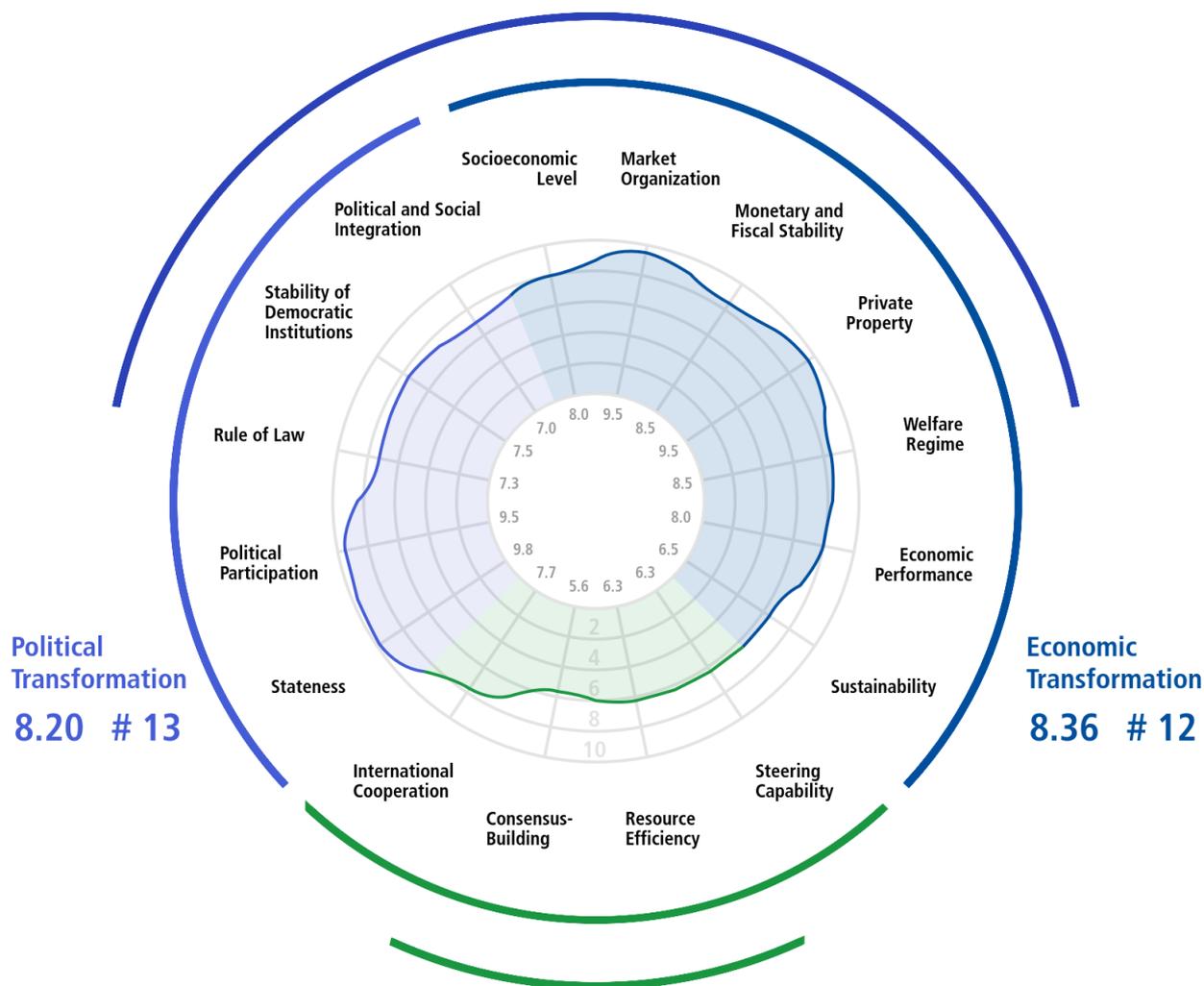


Slovakia

Status Index

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on 1-10 scale out of 137



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on 1-10 scale out of 137

This report is part of the **Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) 2026**. It covers the period from February 1, 2023 to January 31, 2025. The BTI assesses the transformation toward democracy and a market economy as well as the quality of governance in 137 countries. More on the BTI at <https://www.bti-project.org>.

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Key Indicators

Population	M	5.4	HDI	0.880	GDP p.c., PPP \$	47181
Pop. growth ¹	% p.a.	-0.1	HDI rank of 193	44	Gini Index	23.8
Life expectancy	years	78.0	UN Education Index	0.852	Poverty ³	% 0.7
Urban population	%	54.2	Gender inequality ²	0.176	Aid per capita \$	-

Sources (as of December 2025): The World Bank, World Development Indicators | UNDP, Human Development Report 2025. Footnotes: (1) Average annual growth rate. (2) Gender Inequality Index (GII). (3) Percentage of population living on less than \$3.65 a day at 2017 international prices.

Executive Summary

During the reporting period, Slovakia had three governments and held three nationwide elections. Snap parliamentary elections in September 2023 were followed by two rounds of presidential elections in March and April 2024 and elections to the European Parliament in June 2024. The parliamentary elections followed a December 2022 vote of no confidence in the government of Prime Minister Eduard Heger, which led to the appointment of a caretaker cabinet headed by Ľudovít Ódor. President Zuzana Čaputová appointed the caretaker government in May 2023, but parliament did not grant it a vote of confidence. As a result, it exercised only limited technocratic powers.

Multiple failures by the coalition elected in 2020 led to widespread public disappointment and dissatisfaction. Early parliamentary elections in 2023 returned Robert Fico to power. His party, Smer–Slovak Social Democracy (Smer-SSD), formed a coalition with its splinter party Hlas-SD and the Slovak National Party (SNS). Fico’s fourth term as prime minister raised concerns that Slovakia is moving toward a more illiberal and authoritarian form of governance. The new government’s initial steps, including amendments to the criminal code and the abolition of the Special Prosecution Office, were driven by self-protection and revenge. This approach targeted opposition parties and leaders, non-governmental organizations and the media. Politics became increasingly polarized and confrontational, culminating in the attempted assassination of Prime Minister Fico in May 2024.

The deinstitutionalization of parliamentary democracy that began during the COVID-19 pandemic has continued. The new coalition has made extensive use of fast-track legislative procedures, further marginalizing the opposition. It has also violated informal rules governing the parliamentary representation of the opposition as well as formal parliamentary procedures. For example, Smer “lent” one member of parliament to the SNS caucus to prevent its parliamentary group from dissolving. Independent media and journalists faced frequent attacks, alongside instrumental changes to legislation governing public broadcasting.

The previous consensus on the market economy weakened further, particularly on issues related to EU priorities, such as fiscal consolidation and balanced budgets. General government spending increased significantly as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the energy crisis, the war in Ukraine, extensive state intervention and the expansion of the welfare state. Slovakia incurred extraordinary expenditures in health care, economic support and social policy, particularly through measures supporting families with children under the previous OĽaNO-led coalition. The fourth Fico government abolished these measures but increased spending by introducing a 13th pension. In 2023, the government paid limited attention to budget consolidation, but in October 2024 it approved a stability program for 2024 to 2027. Overall, public finances deteriorated amid rising expenditures. The fourth Fico cabinet also introduced some unusual measures, including a financial transaction tax. Slovakia's membership in the eurozone remains the main factor stabilizing basic market principles.

Public policies, including health care and economic and fiscal policy, became increasingly erratic due to the extensive use of fast-track legislative procedures and the exclusion of experts, stakeholders, and local and regional governments from the legislative process. The fourth Fico government also adjusted foreign policy, limiting assistance to Ukraine, criticizing EU institutions and adopting a more pro-Russian orientation. These shifts have made Slovakia a more unpredictable and less reliable partner in the European Union and NATO.

History and Characteristics of Transformation

Since the establishment of the independent state in 1993, Slovakia's transformation toward democracy and a market economy, as well as its efforts at nation-state building, have been uneven.

The first phase, under Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar (1994 – 1998), was marked by the concentration of power in the executive and the suppression of political opposition and media freedom. These practices led to deep political polarization, raised doubts about Slovakia's democratic credentials and jeopardized prospects for EU and NATO integration. The period culminated in the 1998 parliamentary elections, when successful mass mobilization redirected the country toward democratic governance and market-oriented reforms. Economically, this phase was marked by a deep industrial decline, widening regional disparities, high structural unemployment and low levels of foreign direct investment.

The second phase (1998 – 2006) saw a renewed democratic transition, culminating in Slovakia's accession to the European Union and NATO in 2004 and in substantial structural reforms aimed at strengthening the market economy. Party politics shifted away from an understanding of democracy as unchecked majority rule toward a more inclusive model. Opposition parties regained the right to participate in decision-making and to hold the governing majority to account. The second government of Mikuláš Dzurinda (2002 – 2006) introduced far-reaching reforms inspired by the so-called Washington Consensus, including a flat tax, pension and health care reforms, incentives for foreign investors and welfare-state retrenchment. Combined with a large inflow of foreign investment, these reforms underpinned a period of unprecedented economic growth.

The third phase (2006 – 2016) was dominated by Robert Fico and his party, Smer, with center-right governments in office only briefly between 2010 and 2012. Smer-led governments largely respected the consensual rules limiting the power of the parliamentary majority, although protections for minority rights – both ethnic and political – remained fragile. EU norms and policies continued to serve as important anchors for Slovakia’s democracy, market economy and governance. Strong growth, declining unemployment, fiscal convergence and low inflation reduced incentives for major policy change during Fico’s first term. At the same time, Slovakia’s small, open and highly dependent economy remained vulnerable to external shocks. In response to the global financial crisis, the first Fico government modestly expanded the role of the state, partly abandoning fiscal discipline and allowing the budget deficit to rise. The second Fico government later returned to EU fiscal and budgetary requirements.

The fourth phase (2016 – 2023) marked a departure from EU norms, particularly on migration policy, which Fico exploited during the 2016 election campaign. The stability of his broad governing coalition was shattered by the 2018 murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak, which exposed high-level corruption and forced Fico to resign as prime minister. Corruption subsequently became the dominant political issue, contributing to opposition victories in the 2020 elections. The period that followed was shaped by multiple crises, growing social and political polarization and the erratic governance of populist leaders who challenged not only established consensual rules but also democratic consolidation. Amid the pandemic, the energy crisis and the war in Ukraine, fiscal discipline – long one of the few areas of cross-party consensus – eroded. Large deficits combined with declining output pushed the public debt-to-GDP ratio sharply higher, from 48.1% before the crisis to 63.1% in 2021.

Three decades of transformation and nation-state building have produced a mixed but still democratic political system. Slovakia’s party system remains weakly institutionalized and dominated by elitist, personalized parties that have failed to develop stable links to civil society. As a result, the country continues to face high levels of cronyism, low public trust in political parties, pronounced regional inequalities and persistently weak accountability. Following the September 2023 elections, Slovakia entered a new phase marked by heightened tensions between liberal-democratic and autocratic tendencies.

The BTI combines text analysis and numerical assessments. The score for each question is provided below its respective title. The scale ranges from 1 (worst) to 10 (best).

Transformation Status

I. Political Transformation

1 | Stateness

The Slovak Republic maintains an unchallenged monopoly on the use of force nationwide.

Question
Score

Monopoly on the
use of force

10



All citizens of Slovakia enjoy the same human rights and civil liberties, and the state's legitimacy is widely acknowledged by most of the population. Slovakia is a multiethnic country, with ethnic Slovaks comprising 83.8% of the population and Hungarians representing 7.7%, according to the 2021 census. Ethnic identification is a personal decision, and some members of the Roma minority may identify as ethnic Slovaks, Hungarians or Rusins.

State identity

10



Although most ethnic Hungarians accept the Slovak Republic as a legitimate state, the historical coexistence between Slovaks and Hungarians has been marred by perceptions of unjust acculturation policies, especially because of the volatile borders between Czechoslovakia and Hungary in the 20th century. Nationalist politicians on both sides have exploited this sensitive issue. Policies adopted by successive Orbán governments have interfered in the politics of neighboring countries, including granting citizenship to ethnic Hungarians living abroad. During the review period, there have been no ethnically motivated political conflicts at the local level.

According to the constitution, the state is not linked to any religion. However, registered churches are not fully separate from the state because they receive state funding to pay priests' salaries, subsidize central church offices and maintain buildings and church schools. Unlike in Czechia, Slovakia has no comprehensive strategy to separate church and state. The Roman Catholic Church is the largest and most influential religious institution. According to the 2021 census, the share of self-identified Roman Catholics declined from 62% to 55.8%, while the proportion of people identifying as nonreligious rose to 23.8%, reflecting a marked decline in religious affiliation among younger generations.

The Roman Catholic Church remains politically active, particularly on issues such as immigration, abortion, LGBTQ+ rights and the Istanbul Convention. Its influence was underscored by the 2004 treaty with the Holy See on Catholic education and by the 2014 constitutional amendment defining marriage as “a unique union between a man and a woman,” both initiatives of the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH). KDH's return to parliament in 2023, combined with its consistent opposition to abortion and LGBTQ+ rights, may complicate cooperation within the opposition, particularly with liberal democratic parties represented in parliament.

Basic services such as water supply, transport, communications, health care, education and legal institutions are available across Slovakia. However, governments since 1989 have been slow to modernize infrastructure. Many residents still lack access to modern sanitation and safe drinking water. More than half a million people in roughly 450 villages rely on well water that often fails to meet quality standards. The state's administrative structure operates throughout the country, collecting and allocating public resources nationwide. Administrative responsibilities are divided between local offices of the state administration and regional and municipal governments. In segregated, self-built Roma settlements, access to basic infrastructure – including water, sewerage and electricity – remains inadequate. Only a limited number of municipalities have implemented effective measures, such as loans and subsidies, to support Roma households in building homes with full access to infrastructure.

2 | Political Participation

All elections in Slovakia are conducted freely and fairly, with no significant restrictions. Slovakia's unicameral parliament is elected under a proportional electoral system with a 5% threshold in a single nationwide constituency. The president is directly elected every five years under a two-round majority system. While citizens living abroad can use postal voting for parliamentary elections, they do not have that option for the presidential election. This limitation severely restricts their opportunity to participate, as voting at embassies is also not an option.

No interference of religious dogmas

9



1

Basic administration

10



1

Free and fair elections

10



1

Rules and procedures for candidate and party registration are fair and transparent, ensuring a level playing field. The Election Campaign Act, the Broadcasting Act and the Slovak Press Act regulate media conduct during elections and emphasize equal access to mass media for all candidates. Slovakia has clear legislation governing electoral campaigns, but violations are investigated by the Interior Ministry, creating a potential conflict of interest for the minister's party and, potentially, other governing parties.

All adult citizens are automatically registered to vote, and the state distributes information about elections and political parties to citizens' home addresses. Election rules are generally clear and transparent. One concern, however, is that the Constitutional Court hears all election-related complaints, which risks overburdening the court in the weeks following an election. Even so, no serious concerns have been raised about the overall integrity of elections.

Registered political parties, movements and coalitions may nominate candidates for parliamentary elections by collecting 10,000 signatures and depositing 17,000 euros, which is refunded if they receive at least 2% of the vote. Any disqualification must be based on objectively verifiable legal criteria, and such decisions may be appealed to the Supreme Administrative Court.

During the review period, Slovakia held three nationwide elections – parliamentary, presidential and European. All three were administered by election commissions operating at three levels and coordinated by the State Commission for Elections and Control of the Financing of Political Parties.

The directly elected president, parliament, government and other democratic institutions in Slovakia possess the authority necessary to govern effectively within their constitutionally defined roles. These powers are not contested by political actors, and no non-democratic veto players restrict the functions or authority of constitutional institutions. While interest groups and business lobbies exert influence on Slovak politics, this influence does not infringe on the constitutional order.

The rights of association and assembly are constitutionally guaranteed and upheld. Article 29 grants political rights and the freedom to join groups. The freedoms of association and assembly may be limited by law only as necessary in a democratic society for legitimate purposes.

In November 2023, the labor minister (Hlas-SD) proposed changing the rule that allows taxpayers to donate up to 3% of their taxes to NGOs. The plan was withdrawn after civil society protests, which demonstrated citizens' ability to protect their associational rights.

Effective power to govern

10



Association / assembly rights

10



More seriously, parliament passed a law on measures to improve public security (known as the Assassination Law). The law prohibits gatherings near government buildings and outside politicians' private homes, a tactic previously used by Igor Matovič (the leader of Slovensko movement, previously OĽaNO) against Smer-SD leaders before Matovič won the 2020 elections.

Since 2018, Slovakia has experienced several significant protests, including those following the assassination of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée and, more recently, anti-government protests organized by opposition parties and civic groups. None of these protests has faced organized state pressure.

Freedom of expression is protected by law in Slovakia. Independent media and journalists benefit from robust legislation and case law that safeguard their rights, although the behavior of political elites and cultural factors somewhat constrain this freedom. Despite sophisticated media regulations, their implementation faces challenges. Media freedom is supported by laws that ensure the confidentiality of sources, access to state-held information and transparency of media ownership and funding. However, defamation is still punishable by imprisonment.

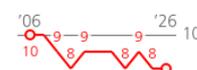
The fourth Fico government has discriminated against independent media by refusing interviews and declining to answer questions at press conferences. Ministers and the prime minister prefer “alternative” outlets that often spread disinformation, or they limit communication to social media. Fico has labeled private TV channel Markíza, newspapers Denník N and SME, and news portal Aktuality as “enemy media.”

In early 2024, the cabinet successfully pushed for the departure of the director of the public TV and radio broadcaster (RTVS) before the end of his term and reorganized RTVS after reducing its funding by 30%. The Act on Slovak Television and Radio replaced RTVS with the new Slovak Television and Radio (STVR) to control the selection of the public broadcaster's director. Previously, the director was elected by parliament with a simple majority; the director is now elected by the STVR Board, five of its nine members will be appointed by parliament and four by the minister for culture. The opposition fears that these changes will undermine the public broadcaster's autonomy.

In summer 2024, Culture Minister Martina Šimkovičová (SNS) replaced Zuzana Petkova (a former journalist and director of the Stop Corruption Foundation) with Dominik Papala, a pro-government journalist linked to platforms that host neo-fascist politicians, as the government representative on Slovakia's Platform for the Promotion of Press Freedom and the Protection of Journalists. Papala often targets mainstream media journalists. Following his appointment, the Investigative Centre of Jan Kuciak and Reporters Without Borders suspended their participation in the state-run press freedom platform.

Freedom of
expression

8



1

3 | Rule of Law

Slovakia’s parliamentary system is based on effective checks and balances, but these weakened during the review period, particularly with regard to the judiciary (see “Association / assembly rights”). Parliamentary oversight of the executive has also diminished, especially since the 2023 parliamentary elections. The concentration of power in the executive had already increased under the OĽaNO-led governments (2020 – 2023) in response to the pandemic, the energy crisis and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine; this trend has accelerated under the fourth Fico government.

The president holds limited constitutional powers and traditionally serves as an independent moral and political authority. President Peter Pellegrini, elected in 2024, has departed from this nonpartisan role. After stepping down as chair of Hlas-SD, he assumed the position of honorary chair of the party, unlike his predecessor, Zuzana Čaputová. To date, Pellegrini has not strongly challenged the prime minister’s controversial actions toward the opposition, including repeated violations of the Parliamentary Rules and Procedures Act.

The Constitutional Court (CC) has built a reputation as an independent arbiter. However, the Fico government has disregarded the court’s earlier ruling on the misuse of fast-track legislative procedures under the OĽaNO government and has continued the practice. In 2023, the fast-tracked reform of the criminal code and the dissolution of the Special Prosecutor’s Office, carried out without proper consultation, were particularly contentious.

The judiciary is formally protected from unconstitutional interference and is professionally differentiated. Slovak courts generally operated independently of the executive during the review period, with a few exceptions following the September 2023 elections.

Although formal rules and institutions align with EU standards and norms, informally the judiciary in Slovakia suffers from deep-rooted behavioral and cultural legacies, such as nepotism and cronyism. Slovak judges are selected through open, competitive and transparent procedures. The Judicial Council, a self-governing body, plays a key role; half of its members are elected by judges, with the rest appointed by the president, the parliament and the government. The council plays an important role in the administration of the judiciary, including the appointment of judges and maintenance of judicial ethics.

Nepotism and cronyism remain widespread. Combined with weak accountability mechanisms and perceived corruption, these factors have contributed to a steady decline in public confidence in the judiciary. About 52% of Slovaks do not consider judges to be independent or free from political and economic influence, according to the Special Eurobarometer survey conducted in spring 2024 (No. 553). Some 38%

Separation of powers

7



1

Independent judiciary

7



1

believe the situation has worsened over the past five years, while only 10% think it has improved. In addition, 73% say Slovak authorities and politicians often fail to respect and comply with court rulings.

The OĽaNO-led government (2020 – 2023) implemented several reforms aimed at strengthening judicial independence, including changes to the Judicial Council, the establishment of a Supreme Administrative Court, asset checks for judges, the introduction of an age cap and revisions to the appointment process for Constitutional Court justices. The situation shifted after the 2023 elections, however, as actions by senior officials in the Fico government suggested a more selective commitment to judicial independence. Interior Minister Matúš Šutaj Eštok threatened judges who ruled against his decision to dismiss seven senior investigators from the National Crime Agency, while Justice Minister Boris Susko used extraordinary powers to overturn the conviction of a former special prosecutor, who was subsequently released from prison. Similar statements targeting judges across different courts, as well as the dismissal of members of the Judicial Council, raised concerns within the European Commission. In its 2023 and 2024 Rule of Law reports, the commission recommended strengthening guarantees of independence for members of the Judicial Council and upholding European standards of judicial independence.

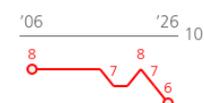
The appointment procedures for the Constitutional Court, the Supreme Court and the Administrative Court aim to ensure their independence. The judges of the Constitutional Court are selected by the president from a list approved by the National Council and serve 12-year terms. In January 2025, one seat remained vacant because the Fico government did not initiate the selection process. In March 2024, the prime minister called on Ivan Fiačan, the Constitutional Court (CC) chair, to resign, citing “anti-government” media reporting allegedly provoked by the CC’s decision to suspend key parts of the government’s amendments to the criminal code. Moreover, Fico and his close ally, Defense Minister Kaliňák, often rely on legal advisers such as Dávid Lindtner, a former judge who co-authored the amendment. Lindtner is facing a corruption charge and has defended a well-known supporter of the extreme right and Nazism.

Corruption and abuse of office undermine democracy in Slovakia. In the past, most allegations were poorly investigated, causing frustration and distrust among citizens, especially under the Smer-SD governments (2006 – 2020). This led to OĽaNO’s 2020 victory on a promise to empower police investigators. The fight against high-level corruption continued under OĽaNO and Odór’s caretaker governments. However, the situation changed dramatically when the fourth Fico cabinet took office.

In December 2023, the parliament passed criminal law reform and dissolved the Special Prosecutor’s Office in a fast-track legislative procedure without appropriate consultation, raising serious concerns.

Prosecution of
office abuse

6



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On the process and content of the reform, the government justified it by declaring that it aims to humanize the sanctions. However, the new legislation includes a radical reduction in penalties for various crimes, particularly economic crimes such as corruption, tax fraud and theft. Moreover, the statute of limitations for many offenses was shortened. The Constitutional Court ruled that most of the changes are constitutional, but some parts, such as retroactive interference with criminal proceedings, are unconstitutional. In response to the Constitutional Court's objections and EU concerns, the government revised the reform to increase penalties for crimes involving EU funds and to extend the statute of limitations for such offenses. This revision aims to protect EU financial interests and mitigate the risk of losing EU funding.

In July 2024, the Constitutional Court ruled that abolishing the Special Prosecutor's Office did not violate the constitution because other units at the General Prosecutor's Office took over its tasks. The court found that while the Criminal Procedure Code was not amended arbitrarily, some changes were unconstitutional. These included reopening previously approved plea bargains, using illegally obtained evidence solely to aid the accused and transitional provisions on asset forfeiture and statutes of limitations in ongoing cases, which favored the accused. The court did not object to lower penalties for economic crimes, shortened statute-of-limitations periods for crimes and adjustments to criminal damage thresholds, which influence the length of sentences. These changes might also apply to pending criminal cases.

Some corruption cases involving senior officials and oligarchs risk becoming time-barred or ending in suspended sentences. These cases include those involving the central bank governor; former Smer Finance Minister Peter Kažimír; interim Speaker of Parliament Peter Žiga of Hlas; former police chief Tibor Gašpar; and Fico's adviser David Lindtner. Because of changes to anti-corruption institutions, these cases are unlikely to be properly investigated.

Civil rights are largely respected in Slovakia. The Constitutional Court, the Supreme Court, general courts, prosecutors' offices, the Office of the Ombudsman, a special committee of parliament and the National Center for Human Rights supervise the observance of civil rights. These independent authorities play an important role in safeguarding civil rights but would benefit from clearer mandates, amended legal status and additional resources.

There is deep polarization over how civil rights are understood following protests organized by Robert Fico's Smer party during the OĽaNO governments (2020 – 2023). These protests violated pandemic-related public health measures, but Fico and his allies questioned the legality of all police actions against them. He often claimed that the National Crime Agency (NAKA) and the Special Prosecutor's Office (ÚŠP) violated human rights and tried to destroy Smer. As a result, extremist and nationalist groups came to view these institutions as illegitimate, and both were dismantled in 2024 after Fico returned to power.

Civil rights

9



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The Roma minority continued to live in segregated, environmentally hazardous housing with inadequate access to water, sanitation and electricity. Few local projects aim to improve housing conditions. Discrimination against Roma persists, including education and public housing. In December 2023, the European Commission referred Slovakia to the European Court of Justice for violating the Racial Equality Directive by failing to effectively address discrimination in education. Many Roma children are illegally placed in segregated schools or classes and often attend school in the afternoon due to a lack of classrooms. This “two-shift system” is considered systemic racial discrimination and is expected to be largely eliminated by 2026. However, progress in building new schools has been slow, and the relocation of Roma children to new schools may reinforce segregation.

LGBTQ+ people remain stigmatized, and their rights are inadequately protected. Same-sex marriage is not possible because of a 2014 constitutional amendment defining marriage as “a unique union between a man and a woman.” This results in unequal access to health care information about their partners and disparities in custody and adoption rights. However, a 2018 European Court of Justice ruling requires Slovakia to recognize same-sex marriages conducted in other EU countries for residency purposes.

4 | Stability of Democratic Institutions

Democratic institutions operate within a framework of parliamentary democracy that includes a directly elected president with limited powers. Political decisions are generally prepared, made, implemented and reviewed by the appropriate authorities through legitimate procedures.

The fast-track adoption of laws – used to avoid criticism from the media, civil society actors and other stakeholders – increased after the 2023 elections. The Smer-led coalition sought to diminish parliament’s formal institutional powers, for example, by frequently blocking the opening of parliamentary committee meetings initiated by opposition members of parliament, thus abusing its majority in committees and putting democratic accountability at risk. The Fico coalition has passed several controversial “legislative add-ons,” that is, amendments unrelated to draft legislation.

The governing coalition struggled to reach consensus on key appointments, such as the speaker of parliament and the constitutional court justice, complicating the effective functioning of crucial democratic institutions. In September 2024, the coalition removed Michal Šimečka, leader of Progressive Slovakia (PS), from his position as deputy speaker of parliament. This broke the post-1998 tradition that the largest opposition party holds one of the deputy speaker positions. Similarly, Mária Kolíková (former minister of justice), the chair of the Intelligence Service (SIS) Oversight Committee, was dismissed by the ruling majority without proper justification. These actions hinder the opposition’s ability to monitor crucial democratic institutions effectively.

Performance of democratic institutions

8



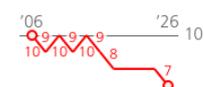
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During the review period, all issues were resolved in accordance with the constitution. However, Smer's takeover of parliamentary control over the SIS is a significant warning sign of weakening democratic accountability.

Most political parties in Slovakia are at least rhetorically committed to democratic institutions and norms. Influential business actors, the clergy and the military also accept most democratic institutions as legitimate. However, investigations launched after the 2020 elections uncovered extensive corrupt ties among senior figures in the Smer-SD party, police officers, judges, prosecutors and rogue business actors who effectively disregarded the legitimate authority of the institutions in which they operated. More than 40 individuals were convicted and imprisoned, including high-ranking officials such as former special prosecutor Dušan Kováčik. Ahead of the 2023 elections, Smer-SD responded aggressively to corruption allegations and claims that it had operated as a “criminal group.” These reactions weakened trust in democratic institutions among the party's supporters. After taking office, the new government moved to weaken anti-corruption institutions by amending the criminal code, which led to the suspension of several high-profile investigations once the changes took effect. This effective “legal shield” for Fico and party officials risks further eroding the popular legitimacy of democratic institutions.

Commitment to democratic institutions

7



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5 | Political and Social Integration

Slovakia's party system is weakly institutionalized and increasingly fragmented. While the dominance of a left-wing party and the fragmentation of right-wing parties have remained stable, the specific parties within these groups change. Party politics is strongly personalized, with many voters supporting parties primarily because of their leaders (for example, Smer, Hlas and OĽaNO).

Party system

5



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Party system instability and fragmentation are further complicated by increasing cross-cutting polarization. Party competition revolves around three dimensions: the far right versus the left, liberals versus conservatives, and ethnic divisions. Several parliamentary parties, such as OĽaNO (now called Slovensko), SaS and SNS, lack institutionalized membership or territorial organization. OĽaNO and SNS accepted representatives of various minor parties and personalities on their party lists.

Despite personal aversion between the leaders, Robert Fico, the leader of Smer-SSD (a self-declared “social democratic” party), coordinated its campaign in the 2023 elections with its splinter, Hlas-SD (Voice-Social Democracy), established in September 2020 by former vice chair Peter Pellegrini. The strategy proved successful, and both parties increased their support (to 22.9% and 14.7%, respectively). The center-right fragmented even further, and many smaller parties failed to enter parliament. Previously non-parliamentary Progressive Slovakia (PS) placed second in the 2023 elections with 18% of the vote, appealing mainly to young and urban voters and offering pro-democratic and pro-European stances. PS

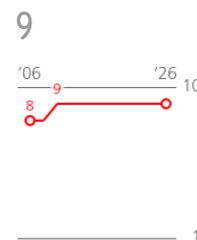
successfully positioned itself as an alternative both to the previous chaotic OĽaNO coalition and Smer. The libertarian Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) gradually shifted toward center-right economic policies. OĽaNO formed an electoral coalition with two small parties and retained parliamentary representation. The 2023 elections also marked the comeback of two long-standing parties: the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) returned after eight years, and the Slovak National Party (SNS) regained parliamentary representation after four years, thanks to numerous popular figures from conspiracy circles with radical conservative and pro-Russian attitudes. Hungarian minority parties have not passed the 5% threshold since 2020. Right-wing extremist ĽSNS experienced a split and was left out of parliament. Republic Movement, the splinter group that has become more popular than ĽSNS, uses less radical rhetoric, disavows Holocaust denial and calls for EU reform rather than an exit.

Overall, all parties struggle to aggregate societal interests effectively. Support for parties remains highly personalized and depends largely on party leaders' appeal. Consequently, volatility and polarization hinge on a leader's ability to attract support and address pressing political issues.

Slovak civil society is firmly rooted in a diverse and well-organized landscape of interest groups. Relations between labor and business follow the continental European model. Umbrella organizations across professional and special-interest sectors represent and mediate their members' demands in interactions with the government and public institutions. Major social interest groups participate in policymaking through tripartite social dialogue and various advisory bodies, including councils at the government and ministerial levels. The social dialogue includes not only business and professional organizations but also civil society organizations (e.g., trade unions, consumer groups, NGOs and churches).

Most organized interest groups enjoy some degree of access to policymaking. Business associations tend to have greater resources – some operate or support think tanks – and are therefore better positioned to develop policy proposals. Trade unions, by contrast, are less well resourced and have faced internal fragmentation. Historically, the main umbrella trade union organization, the Confederation of Trade Unions (KOZ), which represents 25 sectoral unions, benefited from close ties to Smer-SD and was able to advance its interests. After the 2020 elections, however, trade unions gained greater independence from Smer-SD and reasserted themselves as effective advocates of social and economic interests. Individual unions, including the Medical Trade Union Association and the Trade Union of Workers in Education and Science, organized protests and strikes to secure wage increases. Traditionally, the degree of cooperation between different interest groups remains high. For example, in November 2023, when the labor minister proposed abolishing the tax assignment system – which allows taxpayers to allocate up to 3% of their income tax to non-governmental organizations – the proposal was quickly withdrawn following protests from a broad range of interest groups and civil society actors.

Interest groups



1

Liberal democracy in Slovakia was firmly anchored by EU membership, free media, influential pro-democratic civil society actors and democratic political parties. While in opposition, however, Robert Fico and his party, Smer, became markedly more radical. Since their return to power in September 2023, there have been serious indications that they no longer respect liberal democratic values. Their rhetoric and actions raise questions about whether Fico and Smer can still be regarded as liberal democratic actors. As a result, public satisfaction with the functioning of democracy has continued to decline.

According to the fall 2024 Eurobarometer survey, 62% of Slovaks were dissatisfied with the state of democracy, an increase of 9 percentage points compared with spring 2024. Trust in political institutions remains low: only 32% of respondents said they trust parliament, and 31% expressed trust in the government. Trust in the media, by contrast, rose by 18 percentage points, with nearly three-quarters of respondents (72%) saying the media provide trustworthy information.

Similarly, an online survey conducted by NMS Market Research Slovakia in November 2024 found that 57% of respondents believed democracy in Slovakia was at risk. Corruption, weak political leadership, the spread of disinformation, and rising populism and extremism were identified as the main threats. This sense of risk was particularly pronounced among younger, highly educated and urban respondents, as well as supporters of opposition parties. A majority of respondents (51%) continued to prefer democracy over authoritarian rule. Younger generations showed the strongest support for democracy, while older age groups expressed a higher preference for authoritarian governance.

Social capital in Slovakia is characterized by relatively low trust in public institutions and generally low interpersonal trust. According to the 2024 OECD Survey, 51% of Slovaks express trust in other people, which is higher than their trust in public institutions. However, Slovak civil society is well differentiated and organized. In 2024, there were more than 82,000 registered NGOs in Slovakia. Historical legacies such as mistrust of strangers and a parochial political culture have influenced social capital, creating strong social networks among relatives and close friends. Additionally, society is highly polarized over values, posing challenges to building and strengthening social capital.

Approval of democracy

7



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Social capital

7



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II. Economic Transformation

6 | Level of Socioeconomic Development

Slovakia continues to enjoy a very high level of human development, ranking 45th out of 191 countries in the 2022 Human Development Index. Overall, the intensity of poverty in Slovakia remains relatively high. According to the Slovak Statistics Office (SUSR), there were about 943,000 people at risk of poverty in 2024, an increase of 55,000 within a year (in a country of 5.47 million inhabitants). Families with children and single-parent households are particularly vulnerable. The poverty rate among the Roma minority is more than six times that of the general population. Roma people still have limited access to work, social housing and education. For example, 87% of households in marginalized Roma communities (MRK) are at risk of poverty and 52% face serious material deprivation. These figures are worrying when compared with data on the overall population of Slovakia, where 11% are at risk of poverty and 6% face serious material deprivation (EU SILC 2023).

Employment growth that began after the pandemic continued during the review period, with the unemployment rate falling to 5.2% in December 2024 (SUSR). Active labor market policies have improved slightly; however, large ethnic and gender disparities in the labor market persist. More than 64% of unemployed people were long-term unemployed. The Roma minority, young people and women continue to be disadvantaged in accessing the labor market. Roma children face a long-term risk of poverty and social exclusion, as Roma citizens face discrimination in the workplace.

Income inequality remains relatively low, with a Gini coefficient of 21.6, according to the 2023 EU SILC study. However, there are significant differences between regions, ranging from 17.6 in the Bratislava region to 26.5 in the Prešov (Eastern Slovakia) region.

Formally, Slovakia has established institutions and strategies related to gender equality; however, the reality does not match these efforts because parties with very traditional views on gender dominate. Women's employment opportunities conflict with care responsibilities because high-quality, affordable care services, especially for children younger than three, are still lacking. These issues remain insufficiently addressed by social inclusion policies. Slovakia consistently scores below the EU average in the Gender Equality Index, and progress remains slow, leading to widening disparities with Western EU countries over time.

Question
Score

Socioeconomic
barriers

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Economic indicators		2021	2022	2023	2024
GDP	\$ M	120560.9	115884.3	133896.9	141775.7
GDP growth	%	5.7	0.4	2.2	2.1
Inflation (CPI)	%	3.1	12.8	10.5	2.8
Unemployment	%	6.9	6.1	5.8	5.2
Foreign direct investment	% of GDP	2.3	4.2	-0.2	2.5
Export growth	%	10.7	2.8	-0.7	0.3
Import growth	%	11.7	4.2	-7.6	2.3
Current account balance	\$ M	-5775.9	-11126.5	-1169.1	-3894.9
Public debt	% of GDP	60.2	57.7	55.6	57.2
External debt	\$ M	-	-	-	-
Total debt service	\$ M	-	-	-	-
Net lending/borrowing	% of GDP	-	-	-	-
Tax revenue	% of GDP	-	-	-	-
Government consumption	% of GDP	20.8	20.5	20.0	-
Public education spending	% of GDP	4.7	4.7	-	-
Public health spending	% of GDP	6.2	6.2	-	-
R&D expenditure	% of GDP	0.9	1.0	-	-
Military expenditure	% of GDP	1.7	1.8	2.0	-

Sources (as of December 2025): The World Bank, World Development Indicators | International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Economic Outlook | Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Military Expenditure Database.

7 | Organization of the Market and Competition

Market competition is consistently defined and enforced. Entry and exit barriers in product, factor and capital markets are low or nonexistent. Slovakia fully complies with international rules on equal treatment of enterprises. Prices are fully liberalized, and the shadow economy is declining. According to Friedrich Schneider (2022), the size of the informal economy declined to 13.1% of the total economy in 2021. Despite some improvements during the review period, starting and running a business in Slovakia still requires significant time and resources because of the complex legal framework for businesses.

Slovakia adheres to EU antitrust and competition laws and has enacted legislation to prevent monopolies and the concentration of market power. Foreign companies established in Slovakia are treated the same as domestic companies. The country has established antitrust institutions, although the response can be slow at times. The Anti-Monopoly Office (PMÚ) regularly imposes fines on companies involved in cartels or that abuse dominant market positions, such as in the electricity or telecommunications sectors. Some of these companies, which have multinational ownership, have successfully challenged PMÚ decisions in Slovak courts. In such cases, the European Commission assumes responsibility for implementing a coherent antitrust policy, but this process can be lengthy. During the review period, the PMÚ has been investigating the acquisition of the Slovak tabloid *Nový Čas* by News and Media Holding (NMH), part of the Penta Group, citing limitations in its oversight powers under current law. The inquiry, initiated in response to media reports about the 2023 purchase, has highlighted the need for Slovakia to reform its competition regulations to better address similar cases in the future.

Foreign trade is fully liberalized, and the country is integrated into the European Single Market. There are few non-tariff barriers. Entry and exit barriers in the product, factor and capital markets are low or nonexistent. There is no state intervention hindering free trade, and Slovakia has one of the most open economies in the world.

Prospects for an export recovery have dimmed because Slovakia's key trading partners in the eurozone are struggling. The EU remains the main destination for Slovak exports, accounting for 77.1% of export value in November. Imports from EU member states made up 66.4% of total imports. Exports to the European Union increased 1.1% year over year (November 2023 – November 2024), while imports rose 6.3%. Exports to non-EU countries rebounded more strongly, increasing 8% year over year, while imports from those countries declined 3.3%.

The trade balance remained positive for 11 consecutive months until November 2024, with a surplus of €327.9 million. Compared with the corresponding period in 2023, the surplus was nearly €10 million lower.

Market organization

9



Competition policy

9



Liberalization of foreign trade

10



The banking sector is relatively small and highly concentrated. Slovakia has a two-tier banking system consisting of the National Bank of Slovakia (NBS) and private commercial banks. These banks are primarily owned by foreign banking groups or are branches of foreign banks. Austrian, Italian and Belgian groups are notable players. Total banking-sector assets were equivalent to 100.2% of GDP in the third quarter of 2023. Foreign-owned banks account for about 87% of total banking-sector assets, and the five largest banking groups hold about 79% of total banking-sector assets as of the third quarter of 2022.

In 2022, the ratio of non-performing loans (NPL) decreased by 0.3 percentage points, marking the lowest ratio since 2009. According to the World Bank, the ratio of capital to assets was 7.3% in 2022, a decrease of 0.3 percentage points. Capital markets play a less important role than banks in financing the economy. During the review period, the banking system maintained stability and remains resilient due to the NBS' rigorous monitoring of risk management practices. Capital as a percentage of risk-weighted assets was 20.7% in September 2024, indicating strong capitalization. The banking system remains profitable and liquid, as confirmed by European Central Bank assessments.

8 | Monetary and fiscal stability

Since Slovakia's accession to the eurozone, anti-inflation and foreign exchange policies have been in the hands of the European Central Bank. Compared with the record level of inflation in 2022, the pace of consumer price growth has slowed. According to European Commission (EC) estimates, inflation slowly declined in 2023 but remained high at 10.5% (the EC forecast it to increase to 13.9%), as the pass-through from energy and food prices to other goods and services continued. In 2024, inflation was projected to continue declining but remain high. Inflation has been driven by adverse supply-side developments and rising production costs. The EC found that in recent years, inflation in Slovakia has exceeded the euro area average, posing a risk to its competitive position.

Fiscal consolidation previously enjoyed a solid consensus among political actors, as demonstrated by the establishment of an independent fiscal council, the Council for Budget Responsibility (RRZ), in December 2011. However, during the review period, general government spending increased significantly due to the energy crisis, the war in Ukraine, extensive state interventions and a robust welfare state. Slovakia incurred extraordinary expenditures on health care, the economy and social support, especially under the OĽaNO government with regard to support for families with children. The fourth Fico government abolished some of these measures but increased spending by introducing an additional 13th pension payment. As a result, the general government deficit rose to 5.2% of GDP in 2023, up from 1.7% in 2022, according to Slovak Statistical Office data. The increase reflected higher social transfers, public-

Banking system

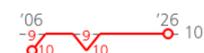
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Monetary stability

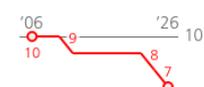
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Fiscal stability

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sector wage hikes, rising interest rates, expanded military spending and temporary measures to support energy schemes. The deficit is expected to remain above 5% of GDP in the foreseeable future, according to the Council for Budget Responsibility (RRZ).

9 | Private Property

Private property rights in Slovakia are respected, and authorities regulate the acquisition, use and sale of property. Property rights are sometimes restricted by the constitutionally defined public interest – such as highway construction projects, protection of cultural heritage and environmental protection. In such cases, owners receive financial compensation at market value. Since the 2017 constitutional amendment, agricultural and forestry land is no longer considered a commodity but a non-renewable natural resource protected by the state. However, there is still no legislation to implement this measure. During the review period, none of the governments passed any relevant legislation to enhance the protection of private property rights. Moreover, political instability and weak judicial independence seem to have negative implications for resolving conflicts over property rights. Such cases are often protracted and hinder the adjudication of contested property rights.

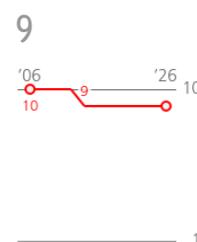
Private enterprise is the central pillar of the Slovak economy. Most state-owned utilities and companies were privatized by 2006, and there has been considerable foreign direct investment and activity by multinational corporations in the country. The Slovak government holds stakes in several energy companies. It has historically been less open to private investment in energy assets, which the government considers in the national security interest. Private companies – primarily in the automotive industry, which has a high prevalence of large foreign-owned firms – have achieved the most productivity gains; however, these gains have not extended to other sectors with a high share of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

10 | Welfare Regime

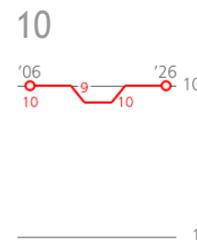
Slovakia provides comprehensive, state-funded welfare systems that cover the most common social risks in a developed market economy.

Social policy in Slovakia encompasses both financial and nonfinancial benefits, including direct and indirect payments, as well as tax-base deductions and subsidies. In general, social policy tends to be bureaucratic and unresponsive. In some nonstandard cases, it is difficult to find appropriate solutions, and nonprofit organizations often compensate for such shortcomings. However, targeted support has not been fully established, so many benefits are distributed equally. Since 2022, the largest social expenditures have included support related to high energy prices, an increase in child allowances and the child tax bonus, a wage increase in the public

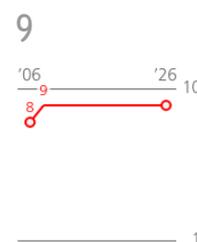
Property rights



Private enterprise



Social safety nets



sector and a one-time 13th pension payment (a €606 social benefit) introduced in 2024 by the Fico government. These policies have a heavy impact on public finances, which are in a dire state.

Health care is funded by one public and two private insurance companies. Social insurance provides benefits for maternity, unemployment, sickness, old age and disability. State social support is mainly financed through employee and employer contributions. Social assistance includes cash and in-kind benefits for those facing hardship.

Slovakia has a three-pillar pension system: a mandatory state pillar, a mandatory private pillar and a voluntary third pillar – the pension savings scheme. The minimum monthly pension (€376.50 in 2023) covers almost everyone older than 64 who has paid into the system for at least 30 years. The average pension was approximately €650 in 2023. However, single people with a pension of less than €500 may have significant difficulty meeting their basic needs, even if they own their home. People unable to secure basic living conditions can also apply for the Assistance in Material Need benefit. Old-age poverty is alarming among single women because of gender inequality in income, which also contributes to the low level of their pensions.

Slovakia has a mandatory health insurance system that ensures access to health care for all residents, including non-citizens, as well as for citizens living abroad. In principle, health care is free, although patients must pay some or all of the costs of dental care and medications. According to a 2021 OECD report, 80% of health care spending is publicly funded, primarily through mandatory health insurance and government sources. Total health expenditure has remained relatively stable over the past decade and amounted to 7.8% of GDP in 2021, somewhat lower than the EU average of 11%. However, the quality and efficiency of health care are low compared with other EU member states due to significant emigration of doctors and nurses, resulting in staff shortages. Moreover, Slovakia allocates less than 1% of its health care budget to preventive care, compared to the EU average of 2.9%.

The main political challenge during the review period has been the negative impact of relatively generous but poorly targeted social policies on the sustainability of public finances. At the same time, there have been no meaningful efforts to improve the performance of welfare protection and service delivery. Key topics in contemporary welfare-state reform, such as social investment policies or universal basic income, are largely absent from Slovak public and political discourse.

The legal system in Slovakia guarantees equal access to work, education and social services. Discrimination based on gender, race, religion or social origin is prohibited by law. Yet despite these legal protections, compelling evidence shows systemic discrimination against the Roma minority in access to employment and rental housing. Children born into disadvantaged families face limited access to education. Because they may lack social skills due to their disadvantaged backgrounds, these children are often placed in special education institutions.

A structured support system designed to help marginalized groups overcome their initial disadvantages has proved insufficient. This problem has been greatest for the Roma, who still struggle to access education and employment. Since 2015, the European Commission has initiated proceedings against Slovakia for breaching the Racial Equality Directive. In May 2023, in response to parliament's failure to amend the School Act to address discrimination against Roma children, the European Commission referred Slovakia to the European Court of Justice for violating EU rules on racial equality, specifically for failing to adequately address discrimination against Roma children in education.

Education at state schools is free at all levels. Men and women have equal opportunity in the education system. Women account for a larger percentage of students in the tertiary education system. In addition, women comprise 46.9% of the labor force, although they remain underrepresented in leadership positions. This is largely due to ineffective family policies, which place the burden of childcare primarily on mothers. As a result, women are often excluded from work for extended periods, leading to significant disadvantages. Slovakia's position slightly improved in the 2023 Gender Equality Index (data from 2021 – 2022), as the country ranked 23rd in the European Union with a score of 59.2, which is 11.0 points below the EU average. The country ranks highest in the domain of knowledge (12th place in the European Union) and lowest in the domains of power (22nd) and the subdomain of social decision-making (25th). Legislative gender quotas are not used for elections in Slovakia and, consequently, the country struggles with equality in the domain of power. While gender equality is promoted rhetorically, active support for increasing women's political representation and participation remains limited. Following the 2023 elections, only 33 women were elected to parliament, accounting for 22% of members of parliament. Progressive Slovakia was the first party to adopt a voluntary gender quota, using a zip system, while candidate lists of other parties elected to parliament were dominated by men.

LGBTQ+ individuals continue to face stigma, and their rights remain insufficiently protected. Same-sex marriage is not permitted under a 2014 constitutional amendment defining marriage as “a unique union of a man and a woman.” Following a ruling by the European Court of Justice, same-sex marriages concluded abroad are recognized for residency purposes when one partner is an EU citizen. Registered civil partnerships concluded abroad are not legally recognized. In 2023, the government, at the request of the Slovak National Party, reversed earlier changes that had simplified the legal process for changing gender.

Equal opportunity

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11 | Economic Performance

From 2000 to 2019, Slovakia was among Europe's fastest-growing economies and maintained a high rate of economic growth. However, since 2019, the economic boom has slowed because of several external shocks affecting Slovakia's export-oriented economy, starting with a decline in exports – a core pillar of the Slovak economy – since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Inflation has been a significant concern, particularly following the energy crises and global economic pressures. In 2023, inflation surged to 11%, largely driven by high energy prices. It is expected to fall to 3.5% in 2024 and further to 2.6% by 2025 as energy prices stabilize. This decline is expected to support household purchasing power and consumption. The increase in employment, which began after the pandemic, continued during the review period, with the unemployment rate falling to 5.2% in December 2024 (Statistics Office of the Slovak Republic).

Slovakia continues to face vulnerabilities related to cost competitiveness, external balances, the housing market and household debt. One of the main challenges is diversifying the economy, as the country remains the world's largest producer of cars per capita. This further increases the country's already high dependence on this sector and on export performance. This challenge is increasingly important, especially given the global shift toward sustainable and digital technologies.

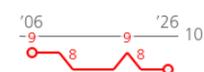
12 | Sustainability

Slovakia has considerable natural resources, primarily water and wood. Industrialization and general economic development remain higher priorities than environmental protection. As an EU member state, Slovakia adheres to the European Union's strict environmental standards, but historical legacies still influence the policymaking process and the administration of the environmental agenda. There is no carbon tax, but discussions suggest it could significantly reduce emissions and energy consumption while generating fiscal revenue that could support low-income households. Increases in environmental taxes have also been considered, but none were introduced during the review period.

The OĽaNO-led governments (2020 – 2023) focused on new strategic documents and implemented many measures in environmental protection, waste management and climate change policy. They envisioned creating legal, institutional and management conditions for landscape protection, ensuring the stability and connectivity of the landscape, the resilience of the natural environment to climate change and the sustainable use of natural resources. However, overall performance is mixed, and the situation worsened after the 2023 elections, as the fourth Fico government has focused on economic growth with little interest in environmental sustainability.

Output strength

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Environmental policy

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The views of far-right Environment Minister Tomáš Taraba (nominated by the SNS) have raised major concerns. He conducted the most extensive purges in the Fico government, replacing nearly 50 experts with unqualified individuals – members of the Slovak National Party (SNS) or Taraba’s own party, Life. He criticized Ján Budaj, his predecessor, for being “a typical representative of eco-terrorism,” who promotes “unscientific green policies that consider animals more than humans.” Taraba also criticized Budaj’s zoning plans for national parks, which ensure the protection of valuable areas, arguing that they deprive national parks of revenue and result in an annual loss of €24 million. He also rejected the plan to create a national park along the Danube near Bratislava, arguing that it would take over the most fertile agricultural land. Many policies are not discussed with the public or stakeholders. In an open letter to the president, various scientific societies and environmental protection associations stated that the Ministry of Environment, under the current leadership, has ceased to fulfill its elementary role – the protection of the Slovak environment. Taraba dismissed the letter and boasted of his ministry’s leadership in attracting EU funds.

According to the 2024 OECD environmental report, Slovakia has reduced some environmental pressures but needs to do more to reduce air pollution, improve waste and wastewater treatment and move toward carbon neutrality. The country has taken important steps to improve its biodiversity policy, but most species and habitats are in an unfavorable state and biodiversity considerations are not sufficiently integrated into sectoral policies. OECD recommendations to improve Slovakia’s environmental performance have placed particular emphasis on biodiversity and forests in the context of climate change.

Slovakia has a developed and functional system of educational institutions offering all levels of education, from preschool to tertiary education, as well as lifelong learning programs. The 2022 U.N. Education Index score for Slovakia (0.842) is similar to that of neighboring countries in the region. However, the quality of education in Slovakia is declining compared with neighboring countries because of low state spending on education and insufficient implementation of innovative teaching and learning methods. Public spending on education was 0.48% of GDP in 2021, among the lowest in the European Union. R&D spending stagnated at 0.9% of GDP in 2021 and remains well below the EU average of 2.3%. Despite a significant increase in recent years, teachers’ salaries are still low, making the profession unattractive to graduates. According to 2023 estimates, the average gross salary of a teacher was €1,206, while the average salary of a master’s degree graduate was €1,782. Due to these factors – and the low social status of teachers – the recruitment of highly skilled teachers is challenging. Many schools repeatedly announce vacancies and, in the interim, are forced to use unqualified teachers to fill empty positions.

Education policy / R&D



The results of Slovak students in PISA have been steadily declining. According to the 2022 results (published by OECD, 2023), performance in all three skills – reading, mathematics and science – is below the OECD average. The state responded to declining primary education quality by implementing a large-scale education reform, and in 2023 new national curricula were approved. The fourth Fico government has continued a slightly amended reform prepared by the previous government; however, reforms often do not address the most important problems. A technocratic approach – focusing on economic performance, not on improving education as such – prevails. For example, reforming the university system is a high priority of the Slovak Recovery and Resilience Plan, but one of its main objectives is to align study programs more closely with the needs of the national economy. Slovak universities do not attract the best secondary students. Almost two-thirds of young people ages 18 to 25 study abroad or consider this option.

Progress on education reforms is slow, as reforms are often poorly prepared and ineffective because of a lack of political consensus and administrative chaos. During the period under review, some policies improved. Notably, the system for evaluating the quality of tertiary education, measures to encourage the remigration of highly skilled Slovaks from abroad, and efforts to streamline the public governance of research and innovation were passed. However, relatively few reforms have been implemented overall.

Governance

I. Level of Difficulty

Slovakia faces relatively few structural constraints on governance. Chaotic governance during the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the energy crisis has amplified existing structural constraints, worsening the sustainability of public finances.

Regional disparities are among the highest in the European Union. Economic growth has not been inclusive, intensifying economic and social differences across regions. Western Slovakia, particularly the Bratislava region, benefits from export-oriented manufacturing and foreign direct investment (FDI). However, other regions continue to lag. Improvements in infrastructure have been slow and are driven primarily by EU-sponsored investment programs.

Long-term unemployment, poverty, low educational attainment, poor health outcomes and discrimination against the Roma population remain serious challenges to good governance. Slovakia's education system fails to produce enough highly skilled workers, particularly in technical fields. Despite some reforms, such as the introduction of a dual education system, the impact has been limited so far.

A significant gap persists between the demand and supply of highly skilled workers across various sectors. The shortage of medical professionals, exacerbated by brain drain, remains a serious challenge despite salary and legislative improvements under the coalition government from 2020 to 2023. This shortage is expected to worsen due to an aging workforce. In the long term, population aging will significantly increase pressure on public finances due to higher spending on old-age pensions, health and long-term care.

In conclusion, although no severe infrastructural deficiencies emerged during the review period, the combined impact of various shortcomings can, moving forward, affect good governance.

Structural
constraints

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Slovakia has long and vibrant civil society traditions and committed civil society actors, including numerous citizen associations, civil society initiatives and platforms, and large interest-based organizations that participate in social dialogue. More than 82,000 NGOs were registered in Slovakia in 2024. One of the most important sources of funding for the sector is the allocation of taxes: Corporate and individual taxpayers can allocate up to 3% of their taxes to selected NGOs. According to the Pontis Foundation, around €101 million was allocated this way to 18,000 NGOs in 2023.

While most NGOs are local and focus on recreational, charitable and sports activities, several important NGOs play a very active watchdog role by raising public awareness – a tradition that dates back to the 1998 mobilization against Mečiar’s semi-autocratic rule. Moreover, many citizens are willing to take part in demonstrations, petitions and protests.

However, socialist legacies continue to influence governance structures, often limiting local governments’ willingness to engage with active citizens. Social polarization also poses obstacles to constructive dialogue among interest groups.

Legacies such as distrust of strangers, parochial political culture, social pessimism and passivity have influenced social capital in Slovakia for decades. As a result, social networks are strong among relatives and close friends, but society is still not particularly open to social relationships that promote cohesion and inclusion of strangers.

In the past, the most prominent division in Slovak society and party politics was between ethnic Slovaks and Hungarians. In recent years, though, this cleavage has become less pronounced. Still, Slovakia’s population remains prone to nationalist and racist sentiments, especially in areas with significant Roma populations living in segregated and socially excluded settlements. Recently, a new dividing line between conservatives and liberals on cultural-ethical issues has gained prominence, shaping public discourse on topics such as reproductive behavior, family models, LGBTQ+ rights, abortion and gender issues. Polarization along this line intensified during the parliamentary, presidential and European Parliament election campaigns in the review period.

Slovakia’s political landscape is characterized by high levels of polarization, confrontation and conflict. While conflicts were traditionally resolved through institutional means such as the parliament or the Constitutional Court, political violence has increased over the past decade. Notable incidents include the murder of an investigative journalist and his fiancée in 2018 and the murder of two LGBTQ+ individuals in 2022. It culminated in an assassination attempt on Prime Minister Robert Fico on May 15, 2024. The government used the incident to intensify attacks on the media, civil society and the opposition, portraying the shooter as a supporter of Progressive Slovakia and the liberal opposition as a ruthless force willing to resort to violence.

Civil society traditions

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'06 _____ '26 10



Conflict intensity

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'06 _____ '26 10



II. Governance Performance

14 | Steering Capability

The administrative capacity for strategic planning in Slovakia, in terms of institutions and personnel, is relatively weak, with no central coordination unit within the government office or a parliamentary committee. However, numerous strategic documents exist, primarily due to EU post-accession requirements for structural funding and coordination. Many other documents have been developed at municipal, regional and sectoral levels over the past two decades. Because of EU conditionality, the Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) procedure was established in 2001 and has improved over time. Yet impact assessments are required only for government-initiated measures, not for bills submitted by members of parliament. Since the pandemic, increased use of fast-track legislation has limited the use of RIA, a trend the Fico government continued after 2023. Consequently, short-term political gains often take precedence over fulfilling strategic priorities.

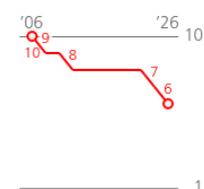
During the review period, the Recovery and Resilience Plan served as the central framework for setting strategic priorities under all three governments. After the 2023 elections, however, immediate party-political interests became more influential in shaping priorities, as all governing parties focused primarily on office-seeking. One example was the amendment to the criminal code, which was adopted in line with the immediate interests of Smer party leaders seeking protection from criminal prosecution.

At the same time, the fourth Fico government has shown mixed performance when ideological commitments conflict with practical considerations. Despite opposing the 2024 EU Migration Pact on ideological grounds, the government in late November advanced fast-track amendments to the Foreigners' Residence Act and the Asylum Act, citing the risk of "substantial economic losses." This move implicitly acknowledged a shortage of highly skilled labor in Slovakia. According to the Interior Ministry, these amendments constitute a key component of Slovakia's EU-funded Recovery and Resilience Plan, making their adoption a prerequisite for accessing the associated funding.

Question
Score

Prioritization

6



Democratic and economic reforms introduced by previous governments were generally driven by the European Union and Slovakia's membership obligations. The implementation of these reforms and policy measures has been largely effective. Since accession, frequent amendments to basic legal regulations and the adoption of new regulatory measures have combined with poor coordination, creating numerous implementation problems and increased transaction costs for society. In general, implementation suffers from a lack of human resources management, effective governance and coordination. In Slovakia, new institutions have been established, and its legal and institutional systems have been aligned with international best practices; however, implementation remains limited or absent.

The implementation record of three governments during the review period was mixed. The Recovery and Resilience Plan (approved in 2022) raised expectations for effective implementation. However, the measures, particularly in health care, education and judicial reforms, faced significant delays. Despite promising numerous reforms, the OĽaNO government failed to offer specific measures, timelines and implementation plans. The Ódor government attempted to improve governance by preparing white papers, but its proposals were rejected by parliament. The caretaker Ódor government had limited powers. The fourth Fico government successfully implemented policies and populist measures to secure its position of power, but it did not implement structural reforms. The Fico government took steps to stabilize the critically unstable public finances.

In the lead-up to Slovakia's EU accession, policy learning advanced through adopting EU legislation and participating in cooperative schemes. The EU has significantly affected Slovakia, especially through Slovakia's eurozone membership and a shared commitment to fiscal discipline.

However, policy learning during the review period was uneven. While some reforms recommended by international organizations have been partially implemented, others have been neglected. For instance, Slovakia has not followed recommendations from the OECD and the European Commission to shift the tax burden from labor to property and air pollution, nor has the government increased energy taxes.

Moreover, Robert Fico's frequent visits to autocratic regimes make democratic policy learning very unlikely. For example, his government introduced a financial transaction tax (FTT) under which funds are withdrawn from the taxpayer's bank account. It applies to funds debited from a taxable entity's account, the use of a payment card issued for a transaction account and cash withdrawals. This tax, unique in the European Union, is part of public-finance consolidation but poses several problems. Instead of fostering a modern, digitized economy, the FTT may paradoxically drive investors back to cash and alternative payments, as seen in non-EU countries where it has been introduced.

Implementation

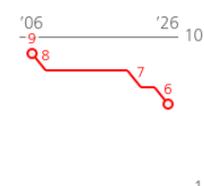
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Policy learning

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15 | Resource Efficiency

None of the governments during the review period made effective use of available human, financial and organizational resources for various reasons. While the Heger and Ódor governments lacked full powers because they did not have a parliamentary majority, the fourth Fico government focused on self-protection and populist measures instead of effective governance.

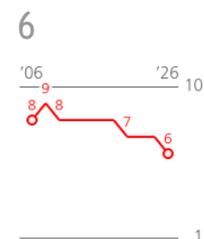
Politically motivated dismissals and appointments have increased compared with previous Smer-SD-led governments. Culture Minister Martina Šimkovičová, nominated by the far-right Slovak National Party (SNS), dismissed many top officials without justification and replaced them with individuals lacking experience in cultural management. The Smer party appointed new leadership at the Office of Geodesy, Cartography and Cadastre (UGKK) who underestimated digital security. As a result, a large-scale foreign cyberattack against the UGKK occurred in January 2025. The ensuing crisis forced citizens to visit offices and pay for services that were normally available online for free.

A balanced state budget used to be an undisputed priority. This consensus has gradually disappeared as several crises (the pandemic, the energy crisis and the war in Ukraine) and incompetent decisions by various populist leaders have disrupted efforts to consolidate the state budget.

The fourth Fico government introduced a stability program for the period from 2024 to 2027 in October 2024. The plan aims to gradually reduce the general government deficit to below 3% of GDP by 2027. The National Medium-Term Fiscal-Structural Plan (2025 – 2028) sets binding targets for the growth of general government net expenditure and aims to achieve a close-to-balance position within a few years to cope with demographic pressures and prevent debt and deficit from exceeding the reference values. According to the Council for budget Responsibility (RRZ), the Stability Program lacks specific measures to fully achieve these targets. The RRZ warned the government that if the deficit is kept at 5.9% of GDP, as planned by the government, the long-term sustainability of Slovakia's public finances will deteriorate. The RRZ underlined a significant short-term negative impact of the consolidation package on the economy, which will be most pronounced in 2026 but will last for another eight years. The strongest negative impact will be the increase in corporate taxes, including the transaction tax.

Like Poland, Slovakia has a constitutional debt brake to prevent excessive government borrowing. Debt has been near the 60% of GDP threshold since 2020 and is expected to rise. Because the threshold decreases by 1% of GDP per year, debt would exceed the upper limit even if it stabilized. In 2024, an IMF mission

Efficient use of assets



recommended loosening the debt brake before it takes effect in 2026 to avoid disrupting fiscal consolidation. Slovakia clearly needs a more ambitious fiscal consolidation with clearly identified revenue and expenditure measures; however, the Fico government prefers a slow pace of consolidation to maintain living standards. During the review period, the cabinet has neither changed its consolidation plan nor released the debt brake.

The government is legally required to consult with regional and local authorities on policy initiatives that directly affect them. Typically, the central government cooperates with self-governments and their organizations in a hierarchical manner. During the review period, relations between the central state and self-government organizations were strained by frequent transfers of tasks from the center to lower levels without corresponding funding. The Fico government resumed its practice of holding meetings in different parts of Slovakia to consult with local authorities. However, the quality of these discussions and the relationship between the government and subnational authorities vary considerably by region, with party patronage common, as the government mainly rewards loyal local governments.

Decentralization of public services is based on poorly defined national minimum standards, especially regarding the independent functions of subnational governments. Monitoring compliance with these standards is often fragmented. If a service is the original responsibility of self-government (for example, waste management), the state does not set standards for its provision; only the requirements of EU directives apply.

The OĽaNO-led governments were characterized by deep conflicts among coalition partners, despite existing formal (legislation regulating ministerial coordination) and informal (a coalition council) institutions. After the September 2023 elections, the fourth Fico government also established a coalition council to coordinate political priorities, legislative activities and communication. Most importantly, the council resolves potential disputes between the coalition parties. However, in late 2024, the coalition's parliamentary majority (79 of 150 MPs) was jeopardized by minor disputes within the far-right Slovak National Party (SNS) parliamentary club. A group of three MPs (members of the National Coalition, a separate party), who were elected to parliament on the SNS ballot, left its parliamentary club, arguing that they were instrumental in the SNS's 2023 results. Later, a group of critics emerged in Hlas, criticizing Šutaj Eštok, the party leader and interior minister, for a lack of communication with the caucus and demanding greater influence within the party. These quarrels undermined smooth executive-legislative cooperation, as the coalition was not always able to convene parliamentary sessions or pass legislation because the parliament lacked a quorum due to the coalition crisis. However, the most important laws, such as the state budget or criminal code reform, were approved after several rounds of negotiations. On the other hand, reforms in health care and education are rather slow.

Policy coordination

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Corruption remains a highly sensitive political problem that undermines good governance and the quality of democracy in Slovakia. During the period under review, the OĽaNO-led coalition governments (2020 – 2023) paved the way for prosecuting corruption; several high-level cases were investigated, and former high-ranking officials were charged with bribery offenses. However, the government did not change the prosecutor general’s authority to close cases, and the use of this authority undermined police efforts. This eroded cooperation with law enforcement, the effectiveness of the fight against corruption and the public’s trust in the integrity of public institutions.

The fourth Fico government devoted one page of its program to fighting corruption and pledged to adopt a new national anti-corruption strategy for 2024 to 2029. In practice, however, it abolished several key anti-corruption institutions, including the Department for Corruption Prevention within the Office of the Government, the Special Prosecutor’s Office and the National Crime Agency (NAKA). These changes, together with a fast-tracked amendment to the criminal code, have significantly affected the coordination, monitoring, detection, investigation and prosecution of high-level corruption. The abolition of NAKA and the transfer of corruption cases to regional prosecutors’ offices have further weakened specialization and investigative capacity. As a result, the adoption of effective and impartial legislation addressing lobbying, revolving-door practices, loopholes in asset declarations, conflicts of interest among members of parliament and public procurement – prepared under previous governments – appears unlikely under the current administration.

Slovakia’s laws on campaign and party financing provide a comprehensive regulatory framework, but significant loopholes remain. Campaign spending is capped at €3 million per contestant, and payments for sponsored advertisements or content on social media must be reported within the 180-day period before elections. According to Transparency International Slovakia, however, campaign funding and reporting during the 2023 elections lacked transparency, with online expenditures far exceeding reported amounts. TIS found that OĽaNO and Smer conducted the least transparent campaigns, while Progressive Slovakia and SaS maintained comparatively higher transparency standards. An assessment by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights concluded that the Interior Ministry lacks the capacity to monitor actual campaign spending and detect under-reporting.

The Registry of Public Contracts and the Register of Public Sector Partners continue to play an important role in facilitating the detection of corruption by increasing transparency in public procurement.

Processes have become more transparent, but enforcement and investigative capacity remain inadequate. Anti-corruption legislation includes provisions on conflicts of interest and asset declarations for senior public officials, yet these rules are widely regarded as insufficient. Many public officials, including Prime Minister Robert Fico,

Anti-corruption
policy

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face unresolved questions regarding their asset declarations. According to the Group of States Against Corruption, Slovakia has made only limited progress in preventing corruption and promoting integrity within the central government.

16 | Consensus-Building

Before the 2023 elections, most major political parties in Slovakia broadly agreed on the need to foster democracy, the rule of law and human rights. However, this consensus eroded with Robert Fico's return to power. The new government's initial actions, such as amending the criminal code, focused on self-protection and revenge rather than on good governance and liberal democratic values. In addition, the foreign policy of the fourth Fico government is based on the view that Slovakia has distinct national interests and should not be exclusively aligned with Western partners. This approach has made Slovakia a less predictable partner within the European Union and has opened space for closer cooperation with autocratic states, including Russia. The inclusion of the far-right Slovak National Party (SNS) in the governing coalition further signaled a shift toward the extreme right. The SNS brought into government figures from disinformation circles, including individuals with extremist and neo-Nazi backgrounds and strongly anti-Western views.

In sum, Slovak politics has returned to a familiar divide, centered on differing understandings of democracy and the importance of pluralism, consensus-building and power-sharing. On the opposite side of this divide are democratic and liberal forces such as Progressive Slovakia (PS) and Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), which advocate pro-democratic and pro-European positions. The Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) also supports democracy, the rule of law and a pro-Western orientation, while maintaining socially conservative values.

Mainstream political parties in Slovakia broadly agree on the importance of a market economy but differ over its precise form. Amid growing populist pressures, a more socially oriented market model is likely to prevail, although its contours remain unclear. The fourth Fico government continued market interventions by maintaining energy price caps in 2024 at levels set by the previous OĽaNO-led governments (2020 – 2023). This has weakened the earlier consensus on market principles, particularly with regard to EU priorities such as fiscal consolidation and balanced budgets.

Slovakia's membership in the eurozone remains the primary anchor preventing a further erosion of basic market principles. At the same time, parties in the current governing coalition have frequently bypassed domestic oversight institutions, including the constitutional debt brake, the Council for Budget Responsibility and the Slovak National Bank.

Consensus on goals

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For a long time, there were no anti-democratic veto players in Slovakia. However, during the review period, the government included many representatives of extremist political forces, and they successfully influenced dominant public discourse and public policies. The main reason is that the parties (Smer, Hlas and OĽaNO) that were previously seen as democratic have shifted toward “pragmatic” populist appeals, and in the 2023 election campaign, they relied heavily on exclusionary pleas and cultural protectionism, playing on different forms of resentment and prejudice. These parties – Smer, Hlas, OĽaNO and the Slovak National Party (SNS) – have successfully appealed to segments of the electorate previously aligned with established right-wing populist and extremist parties, such as Kotlebovci–ĽS Naše Slovensko (ĽSNS) and Republika, a splinter group formed in 2021, neither of which secured parliamentary representation. At the same time, actors once considered part of the political mainstream have shifted markedly toward more extreme conservative positions, regardless of their formally declared left- or right-wing orientation. More recently, prominent figures associated with Smer, including Deputy Speaker of Parliament Tibor Gašpar, have publicly expressed openness to withdrawing from international structures such as the European Union or NATO. Such statements have frequently been made in the context of debates over the war in Ukraine. Some of these figures have also argued that Slovakia’s border with Russia – as they frame it – does not pose a security concern for the country.

Slovakia is characterized by several social and cultural cleavages, including ethnic, political, regional and religious divides, as well as differences related to social status and the urban-rural divide. Traditionally, these cleavages have been crosscutting rather than cumulative, meaning that deep conflicts along ethnic, class, regional or religious lines have been relatively rare. Political leaders have generally not sought to depolarize these structural divisions. Instead, political parties and their representatives tend to position themselves as advocates for particular groups on one side of a given cleavage.

The most salient cleavage is between urban and rural areas, structuring society along lines of economic opportunity and social values, often framed as liberal versus conservative. Ethnic nationalism continues to play a role in politics, although radical nationalist parties such as Kotleba–ĽSNS and Republika are no longer represented in parliament. The Slovak National Party (SNS), however, has moved closer to radical nationalist positions. Slovak-Hungarian tensions have diminished in recent years, partly reflecting ideological proximity to the autocratic governance model promoted by Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Alliance, the most prominent Hungarian party in Slovakia, has adopted increasingly conservative and illiberal positions, whereas until at least 2016 Hungarian parties were aligned with Slovakia’s modern democratic trajectory. As a result, Roma communities and an artificially constructed fear of Muslim immigrants have replaced ethnic Hungarians as the primary targets of hostility among far-right and nationalist actors. Neither the OĽaNO-led government nor the fourth Fico government made serious efforts to prevent the escalation of

Anti-democratic actors

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Cleavage / conflict management

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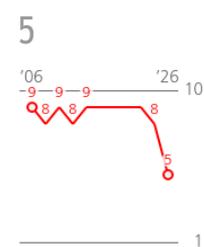
cleavage-based conflicts. Only the caretaker government under Ľudovít Ódor sought to halt the intensification of political and cultural divisions. Under the current Fico government, however, the targeting of political opponents, sexual minorities and transgender people has continued, further sharpening the liberal-conservative dimension of the urban-rural divide.

Since independence, Slovakia has developed fairly stable institutions that support consultation with civil society actors. Various interest groups have the right to participate in decision-making, including chambers of commerce, municipal organizations, professional chambers and organizations of doctors, nurses and lawyers. Because of their elitist character, parties lack expertise, and governing parties often need to consult civil society actors. In addition, the legislative process is open to public consultation.

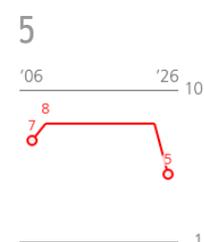
However, the ministers nominated by the SNS in the fourth Fico coalition are definitely not open to public consultation and ignore NGOs that defend liberal democratic values. Several trade unions have turned to strikes and other protest actions to defend their rights. The fourth Fico government and its members of parliament are increasingly resorting to fast-track adoption of laws to circumvent criticism from civil society and other relevant stakeholders.

Slovakia remains split over the legacies of fascist and communist regimes. The reconciliation process has been complicated, and establishing institutions able to address the country's totalitarian past has taken longer. Since the 2023 elections, Prime Minister Fico and his government have tended to glorify the role of the Red Army in the liberation of the former Czechoslovakia. Moreover, he avoids public ceremonies commemorating the 1968 occupation of the former Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact armies and the Velvet Revolution of 1989. The current government does not promote reconciliation because the Smer, Hlas and SNS parties are split in their stances on the two previous non-democratic regimes. While Smer and Hlas acknowledge the Slovak National Uprising of 1944 against the fascist regime, several strongly nationalist and conservative figures elected on the SNS party list have expressed support for that regime.

Public consultation



Reconciliation



17 | International Cooperation

Slovakia is fully integrated into the international community, including the United Nations, the OECD and the European Union – including the eurozone. However, after the 2023 elections, international cooperation with international organizations and allies has raised concerns about the ability to use international assistance effectively to promote the development agenda, mainly due to changes in foreign policy orientation.

The fourth Fico government has continued to implement policies and development projects under the slightly revised National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), which forms part of the national integrated reform strategy, Modern and Successful Slovakia. The plan places strong emphasis on the green transition and digital transformation, which receive 45.7% and 20.5% of total funding, respectively. While the government has prioritized the revised NRRP, it postponed the health care network reform prepared by the previous OLaNO-led government, without providing a clear justification. More broadly, the government has continued to stress the direct material benefits of EU membership.

At the same time, Prime Minister Robert Fico has revived a foreign policy approach oriented toward “all four corners of the world” and visited several autocratic countries – including Russia, China and Türkiye – in 2024. His government, together with Hungary, has also maintained ties with the Russian leadership despite Russia’s ongoing full-scale war against Ukraine. The principal material incentive for cooperation with Russia appears to be access to cheaper gas. Nevertheless, neither the current nor previous governments have sufficiently diversified Slovakia’s gas supply, which remains heavily dependent on Russian imports.

Since 1998, all Slovak governments have been reliable partners in relations with the international community. An underlying state priority is to be recognized as a credible partner by the international community, especially by the United Nations, OECD, OSCE, the Council of Europe, NATO, the European Union and the eurozone, as well as in bilateral relations with individual states. Slovakia’s compliance with existing international agreements is relatively high. However, the fourth Fico government has aligned its foreign policy – at least rhetorically – with Russia, raising security concerns within the European Union. For example, Prime Minister Fico gave interviews to state-run media in Russia and China, where he criticized the West’s role in Russia’s war in Ukraine.

While Fico previously held clear pro-European views, he has now adopted a more Euroskeptic and pro-Russian approach, making Slovakia a less predictable player. For example, in April 2024, he refused to implement the European Union’s new migration system, aligning with Hungary and Poland. Nonetheless, Slovakia aligns with Hungary in dissent only rhetorically and mostly continues to vote in line with

Effective use of support

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Credibility

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other member states at European Council meetings. In January 2025, Fico said Slovakia's foreign policy is determined by NATO and EU membership but warned against proposals to create an EU "superstate" in which smaller nations would have no veto power.

During the review period, Slovakia lost considerable credibility among several neighbors due to foreign policy actions that contradict liberal democratic values.

Slovakia's foreign policy and international cooperation are officially fully dedicated to its Euro-Atlantic orientation. Slovakia also supported the European Union's short- and long-term policy goals in the Western Balkans, which traditionally constitute territorial priorities for Slovakia's development programs. While the two governments before the 2023 elections consistently supported EU foreign policy and NATO security policies, especially regarding support for Ukraine – such as sanctions against Russia, welcoming Ukrainian refugees and providing military equipment and humanitarian aid – the situation changed after the elections. Slovakia's efforts to act as a reliable partner within the European Union and pursue cooperative regional and international relations deteriorated due to inconsistent foreign policy aims and the political rhetoric of the fourth Fico government. Slovakia's relations with many of its neighbors have become tense.

The fourth Fico government's criticism of Western allies and its constant blaming of the United States and the European Union for the war in Ukraine have influenced Slovakia's position in the Visegrád Group. Instead of a format with four equal partners, the current setup more closely resembles 2+2 cooperation. Since 2023, Slovakia has clearly aligned with Hungary, stopped ammunition supplies to Ukraine and built positive relations with Russia. Moreover, in January 2025, Fico further strained relations with Ukraine over the transport of Russian gas to Slovakia. Relations with the Czech Republic and Poland have worsened due to various policy differences, especially over Russia and Ukraine. Shortly after the formation of the Fico cabinet, the Czech government suspended bilateral consultations with the fourth Fico cabinet. However, Czech opposition leader Andrej Babiš has frequently voiced his support for Fico and has promised to resume cabinet meetings with Slovakia should he win the September 2025 election.

Relations with Austria depend on domestic political developments. The more effort democratic forces must devote to their own illiberal challengers, the less international cooperation takes place. Before the 2024 elections, the Austrian democratic government did not perceive the fourth Fico government as a reliable partner. Relations with Serbia appeared to improve, given the autocratic affinities between the leaders.

Regional cooperation

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Strategic Outlook

Slovakia is a small country that has never enjoyed major structural advantages; its success depends on the abilities of political elites, social capital and reforms. In the past, comparatively low wages, a well-educated workforce and state incentives attracted foreign investment and boosted economic growth, but these advantages have largely dissipated. Education has been one of the most neglected sectors for decades. According to the second international Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC 2024), adults in Slovakia achieve average mathematical literacy but lag significantly behind in reading literacy and problem-solving skills. The results show that the reading literacy of a quarter of adults is at the level of a 10-year-old child.

The current governing coalition has been primarily focused on office-seeking and rent-seeking and has been absorbed by internal political conflicts. As a result, there is little prospect that the ongoing erosion of human and social capital will be reversed. Moreover, widespread clientelist practices across coalition parties have contributed to a sharp increase in state spending. Under these conditions, it will become increasingly difficult for any government to implement rational measures to consolidate public finances. Since the 2023 elections, Slovakia has faced its most serious challenge to date from a nationalist, illiberal and populist government that violates key democratic and market norms.

Developments during the review period have highlighted both the strengths and weaknesses of Slovakia's democracy. While polarization, populism and the concentration of executive power have intensified, opposition parties, the media and civil society have demonstrated notable resilience by mobilizing broad public support against some of the most controversial measures adopted by the fourth Fico government.

However, Slovakia's democratic structures and institutional frameworks remain fragile and have been challenged by the new government. Enhancing the quality of liberal democracy and governance requires improving legislative processes and halting the de-institutionalization of parliamentary democracy that stems from abuse of the fast-track procedure and from neglect of regulatory impact assessments and corruption. The rule of law, democratic policymaking, accountability and responsibility should also be upheld and promoted.

Achieving these objectives, however, depends on the return of liberal democratic parties with a clear electoral mandate. This poses a significant challenge, as a majority of voters favor extensive state intervention and a strong welfare state. Core supporters of the governing coalition, as well as voters of several non-parliamentary extremist parties, appear willing to tolerate corruption and state capture by oligarchic interests and express hostility toward immigrants and LGBTQ+ minorities. Liberal democratic parties that promote evidence-based policymaking remain fragmented and disadvantaged by the short-term preferences and limited political engagement of key segments of the electorate.

Several institutional factors further constrain Slovakia's development. The new government has appointed loyal civil servants at all levels – resulting in a highly politicized and inexperienced civil service that undermines the capacity to implement effective policies. Achieving systemic political and economic change in Slovakia requires a grassroots approach and a strong international liberal-democratic consensus, which is lacking. These challenges are compounded by the ongoing war in neighboring Ukraine, which continues to have far-reaching social, economic, energy and security implications for Slovakia's future trajectory.