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# Slovakia

## Country Report

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## **Executive Summary:**

*Since the end of the Communist era and the peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1992-1993, Slovakia has made considerable economic and political progress. Slovakia now has a high-income market economy and a high Human Development Index.*

*The country joined NATO and the European Union in 2004. Slovakia is focused on further integration into European political and security structures.*

*A landlocked country in Central Europe, Slovakia borders the Czech Republic, Austria, Poland, Hungary, and Ukraine. The country has generally good relations with all its neighbors; however, Slovakia's relations with Hungary are relatively strained due to the status of the Hungarian minority.*

*In 2014, Slovakia, as part of the Visegrad Group, reluctantly declared its support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity; however, the country's individual stance on the issue was ambiguous. Moreover, Slovakia maintains working relations with Russia, which provides Slovakia with up to 95% of its natural gas needs.*

*Slovakia maintains strong ties with the United States. The two countries cooperate in military and law enforcement areas. The U.S. also assists Slovakia in consolidating its progress and preserving its development.*

*Slovakia has positive relations with Israel and supports peace process in the Middle East.*

*The Slovak Jewish community is estimated at around 3,000 people mostly centered in Bratislava. Slovakia has many sites of Jewish interest; there are over 100 synagogues 700 Jewish cemeteries across the country.*

*There is no state discrimination against the Jewish community; however, the activity of far-right parties such as 'Kotleba – People's Party Our Slovakia' has made anti-Semitic rhetoric more common in Slovakia. Expressions of support for the World War II fascist Slovak state have also become significantly frequent.*

## **Statistics:**

**Population:** 5,500,000 (July 2015 est.)

**Size:** 49,035 sq km

**Capital:** Bratislava

**Major cities:** Košice, Prešov, Žilina, Banská Bystrica

**Jewish population:** 6,000 (Right of Return)

**Head of State:** President Zuzana Caputova

**Prime Minister:** Eduard Heger

**Foreign Minister:** Ivan Korcok

**Ambassador to United States:**  
Peter Kmec

**U.S. Chargé d'Affaires to Slovakia:**  
Bridget A. Brink

**Freedom House Rating:**  
Free

## History:

Before the arrival of the Slavs between the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, the area of modern-day Slovakia was inhabited by Celts, Germanic tribes, Romans, and Avars. The first Slav state was constructed in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, known as Samo's Empire. Samo's Empire also included Moravia and parts of Austria and Bohemia. The first real Slavic political unit in present-day Slovakia was the Great Moravian Empire, which also included parts of today's Czech Republic in the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

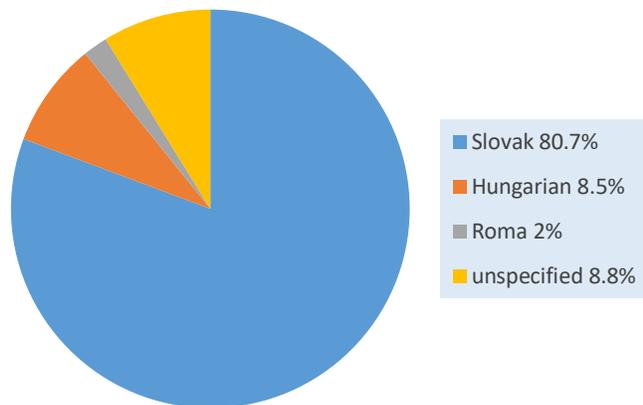
In the early 10<sup>th</sup> century, Germans and Magyars conquered the Slavs of the region and for the next thousand years Slovakia was under Hungarian rule as part of the Hungarian Kingdom.

The 13<sup>th</sup> century Tatar invasion resulted in great casualties in central Slovakia. The Tatar troops also looted the whole southwestern Slovakia and left the country in famine.

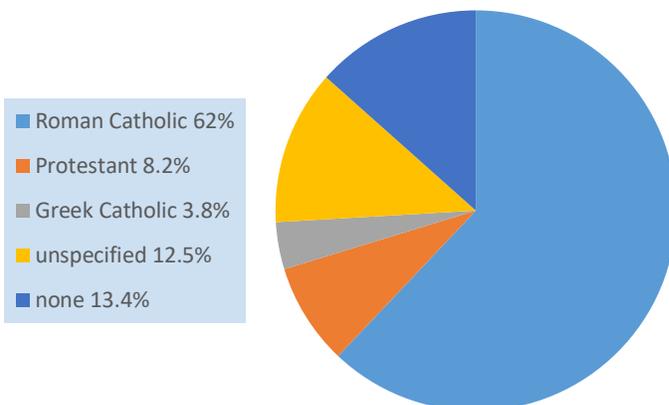
The 16<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman invasion of Europe forced the Hungarians to move their royal seat to Pozsony (present-day Bratislava). As a part of Hungarian Kingdom, Slovakia became a part of the Habsburgs Monarchy and remained so until the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918.

Czechoslovakia was officially created in 1918 in Prague by merging Slovakia with Czech lands.

## Ethnic composition



## Religion



In March 1939, Slovakia proclaimed its independence as a Nazi puppet state while a part of the country was annexed by Hungary.

The victorious Allied powers reinstated Czechoslovakia in 1945 to the country's pre-war boundaries. As for the government, the 1946 elections brought the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia to power.

In the 1960s, the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia Alexander Dubcek, attempted to

liberalize the communist regime in the country; however, his attempts, known as the “Prague Spring”, were suppressed by the Soviet invasion in 1968.

The communist government of Czechoslovakia resigned in November 1989 after a week of demonstrations known as the Velvet Revolution. The Czech Republic and Slovakia separated in 1993, in what became known as the Velvet Divorce, and Slovakia finally became independent. In 2004, Slovakia became a member of both the European Union and NATO.

### **Political Situation:**

The Republic of Slovakia is a multi-party parliamentary democracy, with executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. Legislative power is vested in the 150-seat unicameral parliament. Executive power is exercised by the government led by the Prime Minister. The President is the head of the state and the formal head of the executive

The President of the country is elected by the people for a term of five years and can be reelected once. Andrej Kiska has been the President of Slovakia since June 2014 when he defeated the country’s Social Democratic Prime Minister, Robert Fico.

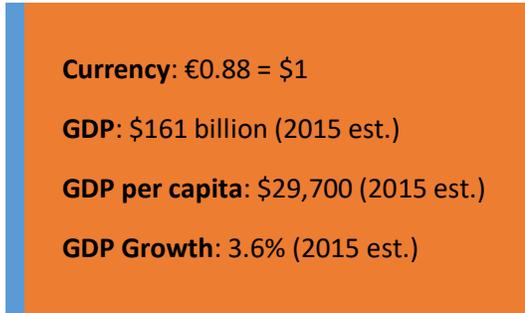
According to Slovak law, the President appoints the Prime Minister. The new Prime Minister recommends the Ministers of the Cabinet to the president who later appoints them to position. Prime Minister is accountable to the National Council and should maintain its confidence. Robert Fico, a former member of the Communist party, has been serving as Prime Minister since 2006 with a short break in 2010-2011. His party, Smer-Social Democracy won the plurality of seats in the 2016 parliamentary elections.

The Slovak political scene is very diverse; among many other parties there are communist and nationalist parties as well. Old parties are frequently replaced or merged with newly-created ones.

In the 2016 elections, the far-right Slovak National Party (SNS), a previous Fico coalition partner, took 15 seats. As for the neo-Nazi People’s Party Our Slovakia (LSNS), led by Marian Kotleba, it is in parliament for the first time with 14 seats

### **Economic Situation:**

Slovakia is the 63<sup>rd</sup> largest market economy by nominal GDP in the world. The country showed success in transitioning into a vibrant market-based economy since the market liberalization in the 1990s. Slovakia has since joined the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). It has also been one of the eurozone countries since 2009.



**Currency:** €0.88 = \$1  
**GDP:** \$161 billion (2015 est.)  
**GDP per capita:** \$29,700 (2015 est.)  
**GDP Growth:** 3.6% (2015 est.)

Before the country reached current success, its economy had experienced setbacks. The initial period of transition from a planned economy to a free-market economy (1994-98) was slowed due to crony capitalism and other fiscal strategies of the government at the time. Under Prime Minister Mikuláš Dzurinda's (1998–2006) two governments policies of macroeconomic stabilization and market-oriented reforms were pursued. As a result of these and later reforms, foreign investment increased noticeably and almost the entire economy was privatized.

In 2007, Slovakia obtained a record-level GDP of 14.3% making it one of the highest GDP growths among the OECD and the EU member countries. For this achievement, the country's economy was even referred to as Tatra Tiger.

Today, exports make up about 93% of the Slovak GDP. The country's top exports are cars, vehicle parts, refined petroleum, video displays, and vehicle bodies.

Despite this, Slovakia's main economic problems remain the high unemployment rate, corruption, management of public finance, and labor freedom. All of these problems threaten the attractiveness of the Slovak market. On top of this, the energy sector is characterized by high costs and government intrusion.

### **Foreign Policy:**

Since the Velvet Revolution, Slovaks have prioritized integration into European political and security structures. Slovakia joined NATO and the European Union in 2004 and is currently holding EU Presidency until the end of 2016. As a member of NATO and the United Nations, the Slovak military has been involved in peacekeeping operations in Afghanistan (ISAF), Kosovo (KFOR), Cyprus (UNFICYP), Middle East (UNTSO), Haiti (MINUSTAH), and others.

Slovakia has generally warm relations with its neighbors. The country has especially close ties with the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary as a member of the Visegrad Four, a regional cooperation group. Despite this, Slovakia's relations with Hungary are relatively strained due to the status of its Hungarian minority. Approximately 8.5% of the Slovak population is of Hungarian descent. In 2010, the Hungarian Parliament gave the ethnic Hungarians living in other countries the right to claim Hungarian citizenship. In response, the Slovak political forces denounced the move and initiated a law that deprived Slovak citizens of their citizenship if they take up another.

Slovakia is considered to have better relations with Russia than the Czech Republic. In 2008, Slovakia along with Russia opposed Kosovo's declaration of independence and refused to establish diplomatic relations with the newly-formed state.

Slovakia imports around 95% of its annual gas needs from Russia. In 2009, Slovak Prime Minister Fico unilaterally supported Russia in the Russian-Ukrainian gas dispute and accused Ukraine of being the one responsible for the disruption of supplies to the Slovak Republic.

In October 2014, Russia cut natural gas supplies to Slovakia by 50% as a response to Slovakia's move to supply natural gas to Ukraine, seen as an act of solidarity supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity after Russia's Gazprom stopped supplying Ukraine.

Similarly to the Czech Republic, Slovakia had an ambiguous stance on the Russian aggression in Ukraine. Prime Minister Robert Fico stated, "vain gestures for [the sake of] gestures" was not the reason for his being in politics as he addressed the importance of imposing sanctions on Russia. However, Slovakia officially rejected the Crimea Referendum in 2014 calling it illegal and illegitimate with Robert Fico's stating that Crimea became part of Ukraine through the Budapest memorandum in 1994.

### **Relations with the United States:**

Slovakia established diplomatic relations with the United States in 1993, following the split of Czechoslovakia into two independent republics. Since Slovakia gained independence from the Soviet regime, the two countries have deepened diplomatic relations and increased cooperation in military and law enforcement areas. As a part of bilateral relations with the U.S., Slovakia has contributed soldiers to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan (ISAF) and Kosovo Force (KFOR).

The U.S. provides assistance to Slovakia with the intention to encourage its modernization efforts and support regional stability. The U.S. helps Slovakia in strengthening its gains and retaining its development.

Slovakia is one of the 38 eligible countries for the U.S. Visa Waiver Program (VWP), meaning Slovak citizens are eligible for a visa-free entry into the United States for stays of up to 90 days.

The United States is one of Slovakia's top import partners. The most common U.S. export products to Slovakia are energy equipment, medical equipment and supplies, electronics, automotive parts and components, chemical products, and plastics. U.S. imports from Slovakia mainly consist of sport utility vehicles.

Among many areas of cooperation between the U.S. and the Czech Republic is cultural cooperation. In March 2001, the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad and the Slovak government signed an agreement protecting American cultural properties in Slovakia.

President George W. Bush visited Bratislava, Slovakia for the Slovakia Summit held in 2005.

President Ivan Gasparovic visited Washington, D.C. and met with President George W. Bush in the Oval Office in October 2008.

## **Relations with Israel:**

In 1947, Czechoslovakia, along with 33 other countries, voted in favor of the United Nations partition resolution proposing the formation of a Jewish state, and was one of the first countries to recognize the State of Israel. Czechoslovakia supported the newly established State of Israel with weapons and military aircraft; however, the Soviet government soon halted this support and terminated diplomatic relations between the two countries. After the disintegration of Czechoslovakia in 1993, Slovakia established diplomatic relations with Israel independently from the Czech Republic.

Today Slovakia enjoys good relations with Israel. Slovakia has an embassy in Tel Aviv and two honorary consulates in Haifa and Jerusalem. Israel has an embassy in Bratislava and an honorary consulate in Košice. The Slovak-Israeli relations are also being facilitated through the Israel-Slovakia Chamber of Commerce and Industry and through the improvement of cultural relations.

In June 2013, the Ambassador of Israel to Slovakia, H.E. Alexander Ben-Zvi, and the Slovak Minister of Economy, Mr. Tomáš Malatinský, signed an Agreement on cooperation in industrial research and development. The two countries also cooperate closely on social security issues as well as in culture, education, and science fields.

In March 2007, Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico and Defense Minister Frantisek Kasicky visited Israel on a three-day official visit. They met with the highest officials of Israel including Shimon Peres, Ehud Olmert, and Tzipi Livni.

In May 2016, a delegation from the Knesset and the World Jewish Congress (WJC) in association with the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem (ICEJ), visited Bratislava to form the Slovak Israel Allies Caucus in the Slovak Parliament.

## **Jewish Community:**

Signs of Jewish presence in Slovakia can be traced back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Slovak Jews were called "Highland Jews" (Oberländer) when Slovakia was part of Hungary. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, almost 800 Jews resided in Bratislava, the majority of which were involved in commerce.

Two infamous blood libels took place in Slovakia. One of them was in 1494, when Jews were burned at the stake at in Trnava. The other took place in Pezinok in 1529, when 30 Jews were accused of misconduct and also burned at the stake. In addition, in 1526, after the Battle of Mohács, Jews were expelled from all major towns. In 1683, hundreds of Moravian Jews fled constraints and repressions in their land and came to western Slovakia. In 1700, a major yeshiva was founded in Bratislava and recognized by the government.

Even though in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century and early 18<sup>th</sup> century Jews returned to their cities and established communities, they were still separated from the rest of the society and banned from a lot of trading industries. However, under Emperor Joseph II in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Jews enjoyed civil liberties and granted religious freedom. Joseph II's 1782 Edict of Tolerance greatly

benefited Jews in Slovakia as they were given opportunities to get education, practice different professions, and be useful to the state.

The Slovak Jews' living conditions significantly improved during the Austro-Hungarian dual monarchy. The Hungarian Emancipation Law promoted integration of Jews into the rest of the society and support for their industries. As a result, the Jewish population grew; however, this instigated more anti-Semitism within nationalist groups. The 1896 Reception Law, placing Judaism on the same level as Christianity, also promoted the growth of anti-Semitism in Slovakia. Even though Jews were protected on a legal level, they were still not accepted by many people.

In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Bratislava hosted the first Hungarian Zionist Convention and the first World Mizrahi Congress.

After the creation of Czechoslovakia in 1918, Jews declared themselves a separate nationality and thrived in industry and cultural life, holding more than one-third of all industrial investments. Before World War II there were approximately 135,000 Jews in Slovakia. There were also 217 congregations in Slovakia. However, all this was threatened by the growing anti-Semitism in the country and the populous anti-Jewish demonstrations led by the Nationalist Youth Movement in the late 1930s.

In March 1939, Slovakia proclaimed its independence as a Nazi puppet state and a "Jewish Code", resembling the Nuremberg Laws, was established in September 1941. A series of anti-Jewish laws were passed since the "Jewish Code" further restricting the lives of Jews in Slovakia. Jews were quickly eliminated from all government positions and military. Jews were deprived of their right to own cars and guns. The government also took control of all Jewish businesses.

The pro-Nazi government of Jozef Tiso was one of the first Axis powers to agree to deport its Jews. Slovak Jews were deported to concentration camps in Sered, Novaky, and Vyhne. The Slovak authorities also transported Jews to the German Reich border and turned them over to German SS. These Jews were killed in Auschwitz, Lublin/Majdanek, and Sobibor. Overall, only 25,000 thousand Slovak Jews survived the Holocaust.

A lot of surviving Jews decided to emigrate to Israel or the United States due to the newly established Slovak Communist government's hostility to Zionism and religious life. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, democracy was restored and thus Jewish consciousness slowly started to reawaken in Slovakia.

Today, there are about 3,000 Jews in Slovakia. The biggest Jewish communities are in Bratislava and Kosice.

The Federation of the Jewish Communities is the biggest communal organization in Slovakia. It serves as an umbrella organization for all Jewish communities in the country. There are branches of international Jewish organizations currently present in Slovakia, such as Maccabi and B'nai B'rith.

Slovakia's Jewish community is of a small size, yet it is very active. Some of the most prominent Jewish events include the Summer and Winter Maccabi Games, Moadon Camps for Children, and socializing events organized by the Slovak Union of Jewish Youth.

Currently, there are two kosher restaurants in Slovakia; one is in Bratislava, the other – in Kosice. There is one Jewish kinder garden in Slovakia located in Bratislava.

Synagogues are located in many Slovak towns. The synagogues in Bratislava and Kosice operate regularly and Rabbis are active in both cities.

Despite the fact that the standard of Jewish life in Slovakia is improving, the Jewish population is declining as most Slovak Jews are over 70 years old and a lot of young Jews are integrating into the Slovak society through intermarriage.

Slovakia sites of Jewish interest include more than 100 synagogues and almost 700 cemeteries all across the country. One of the most prominent Jewish cultural sites in Slovakia is the Chatam Sofer Memorial. The memorial is the only remaining part of the centuries-old Jewish cemetery where Chatam Sofer, one of the leading 19<sup>th</sup>-century Orthodox rabbis, was buried. Chatam Sofer's tomb is surrounded by 23 other graves in an underground setting.

Some other Jewish cultural sites in Slovakia include the Museum of Jewish Culture in Bratislava, Heydukova Street Synagogue, and the former Status Quo Ante synagogue in Tranva.

### **Anti-Semitism:**

There is no official state discrimination against the Jewish community in Slovakia. The Slovak law criminalizes Holocaust denial and prohibits defamation of nationalities.

Despite this, anti-Semitic rhetoric and incidents in Slovakia are still an issue. Mostly, the instigators of anti-Semitic acts are far-right organizations that continue to celebrate the fascist state and honor its authorities. Neo-Nazi groups have an estimated 500 active members and thousands of sympathizers that help spread anti-Semitic messages. Though direct anti-Semitic incidents are rare in Slovakia, the rise of far-right parties has made anti-Semitic rhetoric more common.

In August 2015, the *Bystricky Kraj* newspaper, controlled by far-right People's Party Our Slovakia (LSNS) leader Marian Kotleba, published a cartoon that turned out to be a copy of a Nazi-era cartoon. The cartoon depicted a man with curly hair and a long nose holding banknotes and was positioned next to a story criticizing bankers for the indebtedness of Banks Bystrica residents. The text "with Jews... you lose" was erased; however, other media outlets quickly picked up on the similarities and criticized the cartoon.

In 2015, far-right groups were active in organizing events to honor the World War II Slovak fascist state and its president, Josef Tiso. The People's Party Our Slovakia was particularly operative in arranging these events of commemorations. The efforts to dignify the period of the fascist Slovak state are welcomed by some representatives of the Catholic Church and some historians close to

the Slovak Heritage Trust. Moreover, in September, 2014, Catholic priest Emil Floriš stated that the Jews themselves are to blame for the Holocaust and the same can happen to Romanies.

Notably, in 2012, the Jewish community criticized the National Memory Institute for allowing access to records of Slovak regimes from 1939 to 1989, accusing them of caring too much about the persecution of fascist Slovak leaders and neglecting their role in supporting anti-Semitic policies.

Anti-Israeli and anti-Zionist sentiments are still strongly present in Slovakia. Anti-Zionist attitudes are prevalent in not only far-right groups, but in leftist circles as well.

In March 2016, People's Party Our Slovakia (LSNS) won seats in Slovakia's parliament, receiving 8% of the total vote and 14 seats. Slovakia's Foreign Minister Lajčák, stated after the election, "we have elected a fascist to the Parliament."

The Slovak government officials are actively involved in preventing the spread of anti-Semitic sentiments in the county by monitoring anti-Semitic incidents and rhetoric and by attending Jewish events such as the commemoration of the Day of the Victims of the holocaust and Racial Violence.