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Freedom in the World 2015 - Slovakia

2015 Scores

Status

Free

Freedom Rating

(1 = best, 7 = worst)
1.0

Civil Liberties

(1 = best, 7 = worst)
1

Political Rights

(1 = best, 7 = worst)
1
Overview:

Slovakia's political landscape experienced a number of key shifts in 2014. A record-breaking number of presidential hopefuls ran for office in March. Andrej Kiska—an independent candidate without previous political experience—won the presidency, beating Robert Fico, Slovakia's powerful prime minister and leader of the Direction–Social Democracy (Smer-SD) party, by a significant margin. After 10 years at the helm of the Supreme Court and Judicial Council, controversial judge Štefan Harabín lost a reelection bid to his dual post in May. His replacement was welcomed by many as a victory in the fight against corruption and politically motivated actors in the judiciary.

Major media acquisitions by the financial investment group Penta raised concerns about the editorial independence of several high-circulation publications in an environment where concentration of media ownership remains a key problem.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 37 / 40 [\[Key\]](#)

A. Electoral Process: 12 / 12

Voters elect the president for up to two five-year terms. Members of the 150-seat, unicameral National Council are elected for four-year terms through nationwide proportional representation. Parties must obtain at least 5 percent of the vote to win seats. The prime minister is appointed by the president but must have majority support in the parliament to govern. The presidency is mostly ceremonial, though the president has the power to name judges to the Constitutional Court and to veto legislation.

Early parliamentary elections in 2012 resulted in a landslide victory for Fico's Smer-SD, which won 83 seats. The two main parties in the outgoing center-right government, the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) and the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union–Democratic Party (SDKÚ–DS) captured 16 and 11 seats, respectively. Most-Híd (Bridge), which advocates for better cooperation between the country's ethnic Hungarian minority and ethnic Slovakian majority, took 13 seats, and the Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) party won 11 seats. A new party composed of former SaS members, the Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLaNO), secured 16 seats.

President Ivan Gašparovič, elected in 2004 and reelected in 2009, left office in June 2014. The election for his successor took place in two rounds in March. An unprecedented fifteen candidates competed for the post, including Prime Minister Fico of Smer-SD, who justified his candidacy with the need to maintain "stability" and avoid "experiments." No candidate secured a majority in the first round, but Fico and Kiska came out as frontrunners and proceeded to the second round. Kiska won the second round vote with 59 percent. Fico captured 41 percent.

In September, police launched an investigation into the presidential campaign financing of Radoslav Procházka, founder of the new Siet' (Network) party, after allegations of off-the-books advertising purchases brought by opposition leader Igor Matovič. All candidates are required to submit complete campaign spending reports to the Finance Ministry within 30 days of the election.

In May, the parliament adopted contested changes to electoral laws, scheduled to come into effect in July 2015, that will unify voting procedures across the country, set new campaign spending limits and finance regulations, and prescribe fines for violating election rules. They also include a moratorium on campaigning for two days before an election and a ban on publishing opinion poll results for two weeks before the first round of voting and for one week before the second round. A 14-member committee, appointed with input from political parties and members of the judiciary, will oversee elections and campaigning.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 15 / 16

Slovakia is home to a competitive multiparty system. Since the country joined the European Union (EU) in 2004, power has shifted between center-left and center-right coalitions. The left-leaning Smer-SD, then in opposition, won the 2012 parliamentary elections by a margin large enough to form Slovakia's first-ever single-party government.

Relations between Smer-SD and the opposition center-right parties remained confrontational throughout 2014, with the opposition accusing Smer-SD of using its majority to rush through legislation or block other factions' proposals.

Persistent unemployment and a series of graft scandals have shaken the public's confidence in mainstream political parties. Analysts also attribute Kiska's 59-percent mandate to growing concern that Fico and Smer-SD—which controls two-thirds of the seats in Slovakia's National Assembly—are developing a monopoly on political power in the country.

Slovakia's first-ever Romany representative, Peter Pollak, was elected to the legislature in 2012 and later became the plenipotentiary for Romany communities, the government's top policy coordinator for the Roma.

C. Functioning of Government: 10 / 12

Corruption remains a problem, most notably in public procurement and the health sector. *According to Transparency International, many state-owned companies still do not publish even basic information, such as annual reports.* Slovakia was ranked 54 out of 175 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2014 Corruption Perceptions Index.

In 2014, a major corruption case involved parliamentary speaker Pavol Paška and a state hospital in the city of Piešťany whose board came under control of Smer-SD officials in 2012. The case involved the purchase of medical equipment at a much higher cost than was quoted prior to the Smer-SD takeover. Paška had ties with the firm that made the winning bid in the tender process, and while denying any wrongdoing, he resigned amid public anger in November. Health Minister Zuzana Zvolenská and Renáta Zmajkovičová, the hospital's board director and deputy speaker of the National Council, also resigned in the midst of the scandal. At year's end, no prosecutions had been launched.

About 2,000 demonstrators gathered in Bratislava for an opposition-led protest against corruption in late November. One of their demands—the removal of Health Ministry secretary general Martin Senčák—was met immediately. Newly instated health minister Viliam Čislák also dismissed the heads of three of the country's four state-run hospitals for signing seemingly fraudulent food service contracts.

In 2012, Slovakia's parliament lifted the immunity of its deputies from criminal prosecution; judicial immunity from prosecution was revoked through a constitutional amendment in June 2014.

Controversial revisions to Slovakia's public-procurement rules, adopted in 2013, introduced an electronic marketplace designed to increase competition and transparency in procurements, but included exemptions that would allow ministries and offices to award contracts without a tender process. A nine-member council was established to serve as an appeal body for the Public Procurement Office (ÚVO) to accelerate appeal proceedings and unify ÚVO decision-making. The council is headed by the chair and vice-chair of ÚVO. NGOs will nominate candidates to serve as the remaining seven members, who are appointed by the cabinet.

Civil Liberties: 53 / 60 (-1)

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 15 / 16 (-1)

Freedoms of speech and the press are protected by the constitution, but media outlets sometimes face political interference. Journalists continue to encounter verbal attacks and libel suits by public officials, though these have occurred less frequently in recent years. In June 2014, a Bratislava court ordered the newspaper *Nový Čas* to publish an apology to a plaintiff in the ongoing "Bonanno" defamation case, brought against the daily by members of the judiciary who are seeking a total of €940,000 (\$1.23 million) in damages. The government does not restrict internet access.

News that Penta, a Central European financial investment group, was planning to buy a 50 percent stake in Petit Press, owner of the popular daily newspaper *SME* and several other news publications, prompted *SME*'s editor-in-chief, his deputies, and dozens of staffers to resign in October, citing concerns over editorial freedom. Penta was mentioned extensively in the infamous "Gorilla" file, a leaked document concerning government surveillance of allegedly corrupt relationships between politicians and prominent businessmen, whose contents *SME* was the first to publish in 2011. In November, Penta returned 5 percent of Petit Press shares back to the founder of the publishing house. Penta had also acquired the Holding and Spoločnosť 7 Plus publishing houses in 2014, gaining control of several prominent publications, including *Trend* and the tabloids *Plus 1 Deň* and *Plus 7 Dní*.

Penta's acquisitions are the latest of media buyouts by prominent Slovakian individuals and firms. Business tycoon Ivan Kmotrík controls the TA3 news-only television channel, and the investment group J&T owns the television channel JOJ and has links to the Slovak daily *Pravda*.

The government respects religious freedom in this largely Roman Catholic country. Registered religious organizations are eligible for tax exemptions and government subsidies. However, religious groups must have at least 20,000 members to register, effectively preventing the small Muslim community and other groups from claiming government benefits. Academic freedom is respected.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 12 / 12

Authorities uphold freedom of assembly and association. NGOs generally operate without government interference. Labor unions are active, and organized workers freely exercise their right to strike. A new labor

code with guarantees related to overtime and severance pay, as well as rules on hiring temporary workers, took effect in 2013.

F. Rule of Law: 12 / 16

The constitution provides for an independent judiciary. Despite some reforms pushed through by the previous center-right government in 2011, the court system continues to suffer from corruption and a significant backlog, and public trust in the judiciary is low.

Supreme Court chairman and Judicial Council head Štefan Harabin, an ally of Smer-SD, was nominated for reelection to his dual post in 2014. Thirteen Supreme Court judges protested the nomination, as did civil society groups and individuals. Harabin was allowed to run in May but lost the vote. During his 10-year tenure, he was accused of cronyism and intimidation in the selection and appointment of judges. Harabin also brought numerous lawsuits against the media.

In June, the parliament passed a constitutional amendment that introduced new screening procedures for judges, including background checks conducted by the National Security Office with Judicial Council oversight. Critics denounced the new procedure as a potential channel for political influence on the selection of judges and a threat to their public accountability. In September, the Constitutional Court temporarily suspended the procedure while assessing its constitutionality. The amendment also formally separated the positions of Supreme Court chairman and head of the Judicial Council.

Prison conditions in Slovakia meet most international standards, but overcrowding remains a concern. NGOs and members of the Romany community report that Romany suspects are often mistreated by police during arrest and in custody.

LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) people continue to report discrimination. In August, the Alliance for Family, an umbrella organization linked to over 100 conservative and religious groups, petitioned to put proposed constitutional amendments on marriage, adoption rights for same-sex couples, sex education in schools, and the rights of registered partnerships to a public referendum. The Constitutional Court ruled in October that the first three of the four proposed issues were permissible; the plebiscite is expected to take place in early 2015. Critics have denounced it as an anti-gay referendum. Slovakia currently does not allow same-sex couples to register as partners.

The rights of national minorities and ethnic groups are constitutionally guaranteed. Minority groups in Slovakia—including sizable Hungarian and Romany populations—have the right to develop their own culture, the right to information and education in their mother tongue, and the right to use their language in official communication. Nevertheless, minority groups—most notably the Roma—experience widespread discrimination. The Roma have reported forced evictions and de facto segregation of Romany children in schools. A number of Slovak cities have built walls to isolate Romany neighborhoods since 2008. In January 2014, prosecutors agreed to open a second investigation into a spate of violence that erupted in a Romany settlement in 2013 following a police raid; the first investigation, in which no Romany residents of the settlement were interviewed, had cleared the police of wrongdoing in 2013. The investigator is an employee of the Interior Ministry, raising doubts about the integrity of the process, which remained ongoing at year's end.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 14 / 16

The government respects the freedom of movement and does not arbitrarily interfere with citizens' rights to own property, establish private businesses, or freely choose their residence, employment, and educational institution.

The June 2014 constitutional amendment, drafted by Smer-SD and the socially conservative KDH, alarmed international rights groups with a seemingly unrelated provision that formally defines marriage as a union between a man and a woman. The amendment was adopted with the support of 102 of 128 voting deputies.

Although women enjoy the same legal rights as men, they continue to be underrepresented in senior-level government and business positions. Currently, 20 percent of parliamentary deputies are women. Domestic violence is punishable by imprisonment but remains widespread. Slovakia is a source, transit, and destination for the trafficking of men, women, and children for forced labor and prostitution.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

[Full Methodology](#)

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