



Freedom in the World 2013 - Slovakia

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2013 Scores

Status: Free
Freedom Rating: 1.0
Civil Liberties: 1
Political Rights: 1

Overview

Early elections in March 2012 saw a landslide victory for the center-left Direction-Social Democracy party, resulting in Slovakia's first ever one-party parliamentary majority. In July, the parliament voted unanimously to end the practice of parliamentary immunity. Meanwhile, a new labor code adopted in August provided additional protections for workers, including guarantees related to overtime and severance pay.

Czechoslovakia was created in 1918 amid the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Soviet forces helped establish a communist government after World War II. A series of peaceful anticommunist demonstrations in 1989 brought about the collapse of the communist regime, and open elections were held the following year. In 1992, negotiations began on increased Slovak autonomy within the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic. This process led to a peaceful dissolution of the federation and the establishment of an independent Slovak Republic in 1993.

From 1993 to 1998, Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar and his Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) flouted the rule of law and intimidated independent media. In the 1998 parliamentary elections, voters rejected Mečiar's rule and empowered a broad right-left coalition that worked to enhance judicial independence, combat corruption, and undertake economic reforms.

The HZDS led the 2002 parliamentary elections, but Mikuláš Dzurinda's Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKÚ) formed a center-right government with three other parties, allowing the country to complete reforms associated with European Union (EU) and NATO membership. Slovakia formally joined both organizations in 2004.

Mečiar lost the 2004 presidential election to a former HZDS ally, Ivan Gašparovič. The SDKÚ-led governing coalition fractured in February 2006 amid unpopular economic reforms, prompting early parliamentary elections in June. The left-leaning, populist Direction-Social Democracy

(Smer) party led the voting and formed an unusual coalition with the HZDS – now allied with the People's Party – and the far-right Slovak National Party (SNS). The government, which served until 2010 and was led by Prime Minister Robert Fico, was characterized by the concentration of political power and hostility to the media, the EU, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Supported by Smer and the SNS, President Gašparovič won a second term in 2009, narrowly defeating Iveta Radičová of the SDKÚ (now allied with the Democratic Party, or DS).

The SDKÚ-DS placed a distant second to Smer in the June 2010 elections, but was able to form a center-right coalition in July with three smaller parties – the Freedom and Solidarity party (SaS), the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH), and the Most-Híd, ("Bridge") party, which campaigns to improve relations between Slovakia's ethnic majority and Hungarian minority; Radičová became prime minister. The government collapsed in October 2011 when Radičová tied a parliamentary vote on the expansion of the European Financial Stability Facility, a bailout fund for heavily indebted eurozone nations, to a vote of confidence in her own government.

Early elections held in March 2012 elections saw a landslide victory for Smer. With 83 seats, Smer was able to form Slovakia's first-ever one-party parliamentary majority, with Fico returning as prime minister. Following two major corruption scandals, parties included in the previous ruling coalition fared poorly in the elections: KDH took 16 seats, while former coalition leader SDKÚ-DS captured 11 seats. Most-Híd took 13 seats, and the SaS won 11 seats. A new party composed of former SaS members, the Ordinary People and Independent Personalities party (OlaNO), secured 16 seats by appealing to Slovaks disillusioned with the government. The SNS failed to cross the 5 percent threshold for parliamentary representation.

Fico's new administration pledged a pro-European outlook and support for planned economic reforms, including the abolition of Slovakia's 19 percent flat tax in favor of progressive taxation, with significant increases to be paid by banks, large companies, and the wealthy. The EU has demanded that Slovakia reduce its budget deficit to 3 percent of GDP by 2013, down from a projected 4.5 percent at the end of 2012.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Slovakia is an electoral democracy. Voters elect the president for up to two five-year terms and members of the 150-seat, unicameral National Council for four-year terms. The prime minister is appointed by the president but must have majority support in the parliament to govern. The March 2012 parliamentary elections were deemed free and fair by international monitors, though the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe expressed concern about a lack of oversight and transparency in campaign financing.

Corruption is widespread, most notably in public procurement and the healthcare sector. Iveta Radičová's SDKÚ-led government in 2011 pushed through legislation requiring mandatory online disclosure of contracts involving public authorities and state-owned companies. However, according to Transparency International (TI), many state-owned companies still do not publish even basic information, including annual reports. In September 2012, Interior Minister Robert Kaliňák introduced a revision to the public procurement law requiring deals worth €10 million (\$13.6 million) or more and deemed to be of societal significance to go through a special procurement process. Critics charge that the subjectivity of this process would allow for government manipulation. The law had yet to be adopted by year's end. In January, a collection of videotaped conversations and transcripts of text messages suggested that lawmakers within Radičová's coalition government had been offered large bribes in exchange for loyalty in a 2010 vote to replace prosecutor general Dobroslav Trnka. In July, Slovakia's parliament voted unanimously to lift the immunity of its deputies from criminal prosecution; only judges remain immune from prosecution. Slovakia was ranked 62 out of 176 countries surveyed in TI's 2012 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Freedoms of speech and of the press are protected by the constitution, but media outlets sometimes face political interference. In June 2012, Miloslava Zemková, the director general of Slovakia's public television and radio broadcaster, Radio and Television Slovakia, was dismissed over allegations of misconduct in a public tender. Zemková said her dismissal had been politically motivated and filed a complaint with the Constitutional Court, but the court in December refused to hear the case. The director of the European Broadcasting Union called her firing "a sign of increasing interference and political pressure which will destabilize public service media." Journalists continue to face verbal attacks and libel suits by public officials, though these have decreased in frequency in recent years. A September 2011 amendment to the controversial Press Act reduced pressure on editors by removing a requirement that media publish responses or corrections from public officials if they are criticized for their performance in office. In a January 2012 decision contravening an EU Court of Justice ruling, a Slovak regional court ruled that newspaper articles were not copyright protected in a case brought by the country's major publishers against a media tracking company that repackaged and resold article content at a profit.

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.

Authorities uphold freedoms of assembly and association. Thousands of Slovak citizens participated in a protest against government corruption in February 2012. NGOs generally operate without government interference. Labor unions are active, and organized workers freely exercise their right to strike. The government passed a new labor code in August that includes guarantees related to overtime and severance pay, as well as rules on hiring temporary workers; the measures were expected to take effect in 2013.

The constitution provides for an independent judiciary. Despite some reforms pushed through by Radičová's government in 2011, including removing 14 judges accused of processing cases too slowly, the court system continues to suffer from corruption, intimidation of judges, and a significant backlog of cases. Prison conditions 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 while in custody.

The Roma, who comprise roughly 10 percent of Slovakia's population, continue to experience widespread discrimination, including forced evictions and segregation of Romany children in schools. However, in October 2012, a court in Eastern Slovakia ruled that the segregation of Roma in schools is unlawful. In September, the leader of the far-right Peoples Party-Our Slovakia invited his Facebook friends to help him "clean up" a piece of his land by demolishing the dwellings of Roma squatters; police prevented the event from taking place. Slovakia's first-ever Roma representative, Peter Pollak, was elected to the legislature in March 2012 and later became the government proxy for minorities.

Although women enjoy the same legal rights as men, they continue to be underrepresented in senior-level government and business positions. Domestic violence is punishable by imprisonment but remains widespread. Romany women have been sterilized by doctors without their consent. Slovakia is a source, transit, and destination for the trafficking of men, women, and children for forced labor and prostitution. Bratislava's third annual gay pride parade took place in June 2012, without serious incident. However, one member of parliament from OĽaNO called homosexuality "sick" and expressed approval of the Russian government's ban on gay pride parades. The comment prompted Slovakia's LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) community to call for a ban on hate speech.

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