



Weekly Briefing

**Slovakia Social briefing:
Society in 2017
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Slovak society in 2017 – basic information

As the statistical data on the Slovak society for the year 2017 is not yet available at the time of writing of this briefing, we must rely on 2016 data to gain the basic understanding of the Slovak society. The Slovak society numbered 5,435,343 people as of 31 December 2016, with a yearly increase of 9,091 people (net births and migration combined), according to the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic.

According to the Human Development Index, the Slovak society belongs to the group of societies with a high level of social development. The average household income was 440.90 euro per person per month, which is more than double of the 2001 average household income. Regionally, the highest household income level was reached in the Bratislava region in the west of the country, and the lowest in the Presov region in the east. The typical east-west divide is still persisting in Slovakia, as the other eastern region of Kosice is the second poorest in the country, based on the household income data. Statistically, over 10% of the population had trouble to make ends meet. In this regard, the most at risk population segment in the Slovak society were single parents, of which almost 28% struggled to make ends meet. The overall share of people who struggled to make the ends meet has been the lowest since 2005, according to the Statistical Office.

The living conditions of the Slovak society as a whole have thus been getting better over the years. This is evident when examining the public health data as well. Despite a decrease of few months between 2014 and 2015 (last available data), Slovak men and women have been experiencing the longest life expectancy in history. For men, life expectancy at birth is 73.1 years, of which 54.8 years are deemed to be healthy. In the case of women, the life expectancy at birth has been 80.2 years, with 55.1 years lived out as healthy.

While statistical data offer a glimpse into the Slovak society, it does not do a proper justice to the way Slovak people lived their lives in 2017. To gain a

better understanding of the social dynamics, it is useful to look at the major events which resulted in mobilization of the Slovak Republic.

With regards to mobilization of the Slovak society, the year 2017 was dominated by two topics in Slovakia. In the first half of the year, the Slovak society was largely focusing on the topic of fight against corruption. The topic was to some extent quite relevant in the second half of the year. Nevertheless, social mobilization against right-wing extremism and neonazism was probably more important.

Anti-corruption zeal

Fight against corruption has been a topic for the Slovak society for quite some time, yet only occasionally it reached such intensity that it would rise to become one of the dominating trends present within the society as a whole. The impetus for the 2017 anti-corruption drive came already in late 2016, when Slovakia was presiding over the Council of the European Union. In November 2016, two former employees of the Slovak Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs came forth together with local branch of Transparency International, and international watchdog organization, with allegation of graft in public procurements regarding cultural presentation of the Slovak EU presidency.

The above described whistleblowing case has resulted in unprecedented public mobilization, especially among high school and university students studying both at home as well as abroad. This mobilization peaked around the so called Great Anti-Corruption March, a series of several protests in the capital Bratislava as well as several other towns (including abroad), which started on 15 April 2017.

Great Anti-Corruption March, a series of protests against corruption in the government, was organized by two high school students. The organizers put forth four demands for the government to fulfill. They included active investigation of several corruption scandals with ties to government, resignation of the special prosecutor, removal of the Minister of Interior and Police

President from their office, and abolition of the so called Meciar's amnesties. The first protest, which occurred on 15 April 2017, attracted between 5,000 and 10,000 people according to various estimates, making it one of the largest protests in the country's history.

The amnesty abolition campaign

As was already mentioned, one of the demands of the Great Anti-corruption March was the abolishing of Meciar's amnesties. The amnesties, passed in 1998 by then acting President and Prime Minister Meciar, provided a legal shield to the perpetrators of state sponsored criminal activity. This included an abduction of the then President Kovac's son by the members of the Slovak Intelligence Service, and was followed up by murder of Robert Remias, a local contact point for the crown witness of the abduction – a former intelligence agent on the run Oskar Fegyeveres. The aim of the abduction was to force an abdication of President Kovac, a critic of the Prime Minister Meciar, who complied and abdicated. After Meciar became the acting president, he passed the aforementioned amnesties to protect himself and his cronies.

There have been calls for the abolition of the amnesties ever since 1998, when Meciar was ousted from the office of Prime Minister in the elections that year. However, lack of political will as well as criticism of attempted abolitions by the Constitutional Court of Slovakia, prevented successful setting aside of the amnesties.

However, in 2017, thanks to the pressure from the civil society, led by the NGO Via Iuris, the parliament amended the constitution to give it power to abolish presidential amnesties by the special parliamentary procedure, which required a qualified majority of votes as well as a mandatory Constitutional Court review. In the end, the parliament passed an ad hoc constitutional act, which abolished the amnesties, which was supported by the Constitutional Court.

This feat was accomplished only thanks to the immense pressure the civil society put on the Government. The pressure was four-pronged. Firstly, in late

2016, the former President Kovac passed away. Secondly, in 2017 a movie on the events surrounding the kidnapping of Kovac junior, and murder of Remias came out, gaining a wide popular recognition. Thirdly, a widely successful campaign by the NGO Via Iuris was of high impact. The online petition launched by the organization gained almost 85,000 online signatures. And fourthly, the above mentioned Great Anti-corruption March called for the abolishing of the amnesties, and provided a platform for the mother of the murdered Remias to address almost 10,000 protesters during the first protest. Such a momentum of civil society action was one of the most successful in the country's history.

Mobilization against neonazism and right-wing extremism

While in the first half of the year anti-corruption was the main driver of social mobilization, opposition to the right-wing extremism and neonazism was a major mobilization theme. Over the past several years, Slovakia has seen a resurgence of the far right ideas in the mainstream society. This started already in 2013, when a neonazi Marian Kotleba was elected to the position of the head of one of the Slovakia's self-governing regions, and further reinforced when he and his party were elected to the national parliament, the National Council of Slovak Republic, in 2016. Kotleba and his cohort were elected based on a populist campaign largely based on empty promises to the electorate.

However, as the society was increasingly becoming aware of the nature of Kotleba's promises, he started to lose support among many. This culminated in the regional elections of 2017. Thanks to a powerful mobilization campaign from the civil society, Kotleba failed to win the election in his respective region of Banska Bystrica. Approximately 30% of eligible voters turned out for the election. And while this turnout is dismal compared to national elections, nevertheless it was the highest turnout for any regional elections since 2001, when the regions were established as part of the local self-governance system in Slovakia.