



Weekly Briefing

**Slovakia Social briefing:
Society in 2017
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Outlook for 2018: Slovak Society

In order to analyze the contemporary situation and the emerging trends in Slovakia, the nature and development of the Slovak society need to be considered. The country's society has been influenced by various factors reflecting the state's history, geographical position, demography, economic capabilities, political reality, and foreign relations. The dynamics of societies, in general, has been significantly determined by globalization, and thanks to the high level of digitalization, societies are surrounded by "endless" sources of information.

The Slovak society does not exist in a vacuum and is highly influenced by the situation abroad. On the other hand, Slovakia's population faces very similar issues like other societies. There are two main issues: the country's inner political and economic affairs, including healthcare and education; and foreign issues, especially those coming from the EU.

Slovakia's political situation and corruption

Slovakia's society is very sensitive about the country's political situation, the policy of the governmental authorities and the outputs of the elites. The year 2018 is of course no exemption in this context - certain political scandals and corrupt/tion affairs in the public sector have caught the attention of the Slovaks. In the previous year, the society witnessed several protests against corruption, in which the protesters called for the resignation of the Minister of Interior, who is linked to a shady businessman¹, as well as the President of the police corps and the state's Special Prosecutor. The protests, organized by high school and university students, demanded an adequate investigation into the most serious

¹ Emily Tamkin, "They Spent Months Protesting Corruption. Now What?", *Foreign Policy*, 29 September 2017, <<http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/09/29/they-spent-months-protesting-corruption-now-what-slovakia-kalinak-bratislava/>>.

political scandals, mainly the recent corruption case connected to the country's businessman Ladislav Basternák.² Several famous and influential actors and singers expressed their support in these protests.

Since the above mentioned scandals have not yet been investigated properly, it is expected that in 2018 they will remain relevant, if not the key issue. The topic is gaining a lot of momentum, especially after the murder of the young investigative Slovak reporter Jan Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kusnirova in February 2018. They were found shot dead in their house in a village near Bratislava. Despite the fact that the motives of this act remain officially unknown, there is a high probability the assassination is linked to the reporter's investigative work. The event had an extremely big impact on the society. People almost immediately started expressing their opposition to the Government. Prime Minister Fico has personally condemned the act and promised there would be a serious investigation. The murder, linked to the late journalist's investigations about fraud and possible governmental links with the Italian mafia will certainly be the most discussed topic in the country for the rest of the year 2018.

Rising radicalism and extremism

In recent years, the debate on rising radicalism and extremism has become a more frequent and relevant topic, especially since the far-right political party People's Party Our Slovakia managed to win 14 parliamentary seats in the Slovak general election in 2016. The party is surrounded by a considerable controversy concerning its radical rhetoric criticizing Slovakia's political, economic and social system. More alarmingly, the party's authorities had been, not once, accused of crimes related to defamation of the nation, race and beliefs;

² News Now, "Third Anti-corruption March in Bratislava Draws Thousands", *News Now – The News Agency of the Slovak Republic*, 25 September 2017, <<https://newsnow.tasr.sk/policy/third-anti-corruption-march-in-bratislava-draws-thousands/>>.

or defamation and threats to people due to their race, nationality, skin color or ethnicity. One example is Milan Mazurek, who had been sentenced for racism.³

Regarding the above mentioned party's existence and activities, the Slovak society is much polarized. Firstly, a great part of the society criticizes the party's authoritative and anti-systemic practice and emphasizes that such an approach must not be accepted in the modern and democratic Slovak state. However, a relevant part of the society still supports the party, and some people think it is the only alternative to the traditional Slovak political parties responsible for a high level of corruption. Since more far-right parties exist in the country, this debate should not be underestimated.

The existence of such far-right groups significantly polarizes the Slovak society, especially on issues concerning the Roma minority in the country, people's general trust in the state's authorities and institutions, Slovakia's membership in the key regional and international organizations, acceptance of the non-Christian religious groups and LGBT communities.

Migration

Recently, the political and security crisis in the Middle East, especially in Syria, resulted in a sizeable wave of migration, which has also affected European countries. Accordingly, the EU authorities proposed a system of quota in order to redistribute the asylum seekers into all EU countries. Slovakia has been one of the nosiest countries against this policy. Moreover, the Prime Minister threatened to leave the EU in case the policy is implemented.⁴

The debate regarding migration has become one of the most controversial issues the Slovak society. A relevant part of the society maintains a skeptical attitude towards migration into the country, which can be explained in several

³ The Slovak Spectator, "Extremist MP sentenced for racism", *The Slovak Spectator*, 21 December 2017, <<https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20724301/extremist-mp-sentenced-for-racism.html>>.

⁴ Jake Burman, "EU in crisis as Slovakia threatens to leave over controversial refugee quota", *Express*, 9 October 2015, <<https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/610923/Slovakia-Robert-Fico-Refugee-Crisis-European-Union-Quota-Member-states>>.

ways. Firstly, due to the historical background of the country, the older generations did not have so many opportunities to experience different cultures and peoples, particularly not from the Middle East. Secondly, due to the religious background of the country (the Slovak society is predominantly Christian), terrorist acts of the so-called Islamists in Europe are viewed in this context. These are the issues that will continue to dominate throughout the year 2018.

Healthcare, education and outflow of young Slovaks

The spheres of healthcare and education have always been Slovakia's weakest spots. The lack of financial support and adequate medical research result in the outflow of Slovak medical employees, which in turn negatively influences the overall level of medical care in the country. Furthermore, many scandals and corruption affairs surround this sphere - one example is the 2014 scandal connected to the planned purchase of a computerized tomography device by one of the hospitals in Slovakia. The affair resulted in a major political fallout with many protest in the capital city.⁵ The Government did not face the challenges, thus there is no doubt the Slovak healthcare issues shall remain in the public's interest in the future.

A similar trend is visible in the area of education. The country's educational institutions suffer from a financial deficit, and the overall level of the Slovak education is low. A rising number of Slovak students and teachers seek education or work opportunities at foreign universities, with the Czech ones serving as the best example.⁶ With this substantial brain drain, the Slovak authorities and the society in general face a very serious challenge. Thus, should

⁵ Radka Minarechová, "Healthcare infected with scandals", *The Slovak Spectator*, 9 February 2016, <<https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20087030/health-care-infected-with-scandals.html>>.

⁶ The Slovak Spectator, "EC: Funds for education still low", *The Slovak Spectator*, 9 November 2017, <<https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20693003/ec-funds-for-education-still-low.html>>.

the country prosper and strengthen its regional and international competitiveness, the authorities need to create a more attractive and transparent environment.

Conclusion

For an adequate understanding of a society's reality and development, we need to take into account its historical narrative, geography, political, economic and social system, and the foreign relations. The Slovak society is no exemption in this context, and its dynamics and development continue to follow the most recent and relevant trends.

Speaking of the interests of the Slovak society in 2018, emphasis will be on the domestic political, security and economic situation. Since the recent years were troubled by political scandals and corruption affairs of the elites, Slovaks perceive such issues very sensitively. It is likely that this year after the assassination of the young Slovak journalist in February will result in serious societal and political changes.

The migrant crisis will remain in the society's interest. The situation is much medialized and often publicly discussed by the authorities. Since the issues related to migration of Muslim communities into Europe are controversial for Slovaks, we should not neglect the possible engagement of the Slovak far-right groups in this context.

Finally, looking at the most recent trends, Slovakia faces a great challenge that could influence the country's future. The state needs to deal with the outflow of qualified Slovaks, who find the country's environment not attractive or transparent enough.