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**Slovakia since 1989**

***Erika Harris and Karen Henderson***

The story of post-communist Slovakia started as a tale of political turmoil and ethnic mobilization but has gradually become a cautiously declared success. Slovakia was a difficult case of post-communist transition, long hovering on the verge of regression to authoritarianism, and all the early elections were “critical” to the continuation of democracy.[[1]](#endnote-2) However, Slovakia managed to enter the EU in the first wave of eastern enlargement in May 2004 despite starting detailed negotiations two years after the other Visegrád Four countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland) and became one of the most successful examples of “Europeanization” both politically and economically. Slovakia has benefited from impressive levels of foreign investment and in the second decade of the new century it was the only Visegrád state to have joined the Eurozone. The question remains, however, whether the effects of Europeanization are stronger than the effects of the communist and pre-communist past which, as has been argued elsewhere,[[2]](#endnote-3) constitute an accumulation of negative conditions for the process of democratization.

*The Slovak National Question: 1918-1989*

The Slovak Republic came into existence on 1 January 1993 as a result of the breakup of Czechoslovakia, which split under the pressure of anxiety about the pace of economic transformation on the Slovak side and what in the turmoil of early post-communism appeared to be irreconcilable differences in the cultural and historical understanding of the common Czechoslovak stateon both sides - the Czech and the Slovak.[[3]](#endnote-4) The Czech lands (Bohemia and Moravia) had a markedly different past from Slovakia.[[4]](#endnote-5) The Czechs could boast a glorious medieval and Renaissance past with Prague as one of the most beautiful cities in Europe, while Slovaks, ruled for centuries by Hungary, had little national past.[[5]](#endnote-6) After the Austro-Hungarian compromise (1867), the Habsburg Empire divided into two largely autonomous states with the Czechs assigned to the Austrian half of the empire and the Slovaks to the Hungarian half, with different nationality policies and different consequences for Czechs and Slovaks. The Slovaks became subject to the modernization policies of Hungary, and experienced increasingly intensified “Magyarization’”, with Hungary figuring as a national state built “on an extremely chauvinistic principle”, as was admitted at that time by the leading Hungarian politician, Baron Desiderius Bánffy.[[6]](#endnote-7) In practice, that meant an attempt to annihilate the Slovak nation: eventually all Slovak secondary schools and cultural organizations were closed and prohibited. On the other hand, the Czechs under Austrian rule enjoyed growing autonomy and pre-eminent participation in the industrialization of Central Europe. As far as Budapest was concerned, Slovakia did not exist and Slovaks were merely Slav-speaking peasants in the rural upper (Northern) Hungary. If the first ever appearance of Slovakia on the map of Europe within the newly established Czechoslovakia (1918) was an answer to the centuries of Hungarian domination, the dissolution of the common state (1992) was to be a final answer to the “Slovak question”.[[7]](#endnote-8) The term “Slovak question” dates back to the formation of Czechoslovakia and represents both perceived and legitimate concerns about national, political, economic, social and cultural relations between Slovaks and their larger, mightier and more cultivated partner in the common state.

The interwar Republic of Czechoslovakia (popularly known as *Prvá republika*, the “First Republic”) championed liberal thought in its minority and language policies (the Constitution of 1920 made both the languages -- Slovak and Czech -- official and guaranteed cultural autonomy for all minorities), but its centralized institutions and its economy disadvantaged the less numerous Slovaks. The Slovaks’ preoccupation with their inferior position was exacerbated by the lack of a middle class and educated elites who, if not Hungarian, German or Jewish, were supplemented by Czechs helping to run the new Slovakia. This led to increasing calls for political and cultural autonomy advocated by the cleric Father Andrej Hlinka (1864-1938). The influence of the Slovak People’s Party, led by Hlinka, grew steadily and incorporated a number of growing and mutually complementary trends within Slovak society – the influence of the Catholic Church, the conservative population, and nationalist inclinations toward a national conception of democracy.[[8]](#endnote-9) Seven decades later the state, still marred by the revival of these trends, yielded to their weight.

In 1939, when the German Führer Adolf Hitler declared the “Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia”, Slovak autonomist aspirations were answered in the form of a clericalist, authoritarian Slovak state (*Slovenský štát,* 14 March 1939) led by the new leader of the Hlinka Party, Msgr. Dr. Jozef Tiso (1887-1947), another Catholic priest. [[9]](#endnote-10) The first ever supposedly independent Slovak state was an Axis satellite; whether willingly or not, the regime collaborated in the deportation of Jewish citizens to concentration camps and established its own form of National Socialism which stood for discrimination against all non-Catholics and non-Slovak citizens. Whether Slovak non-collaboration with Hitler would have changed the course of the Czech tragedy is doubtful, but the dramatic events of 1939 left a bitter taste of betrayal among Czechs and seriously damaged the image of Slovak nationalism. The humiliation and limitation of independence under Hitler’s patronage became painfully obvious when Hitler’s bigger and more important ally, Hungary, annexed parts of eastern Slovakia and the southern belt, events that to this day complicate the Slovak-Hungarian relationship.

Slovakia entered the war on the side of Germany, but ended it in an abortive insurrection against German rule (*Slovenské národné povstanie,* August 1944). This was politically a significant event: Slovakia was no longer viewed as an enemy of the Allies, but rather as a partner in negotiations about the restoration of the common state. The reunification of Czechs and Slovaks was sealed, in the presence of the Soviet leadership and the Czechoslovak Communist Party (KSČ), in the 1945 Košice Government Program (*Košický vládny program*). If the Slovak leadership had harbored any hopes about Slovakia’s constitutional position in the newly reconstituted Czechoslovakia, this was not the time to resolve them. The chain of events and power struggles led to a Communist takeover in February 1948. The early years of the communist regime were marked by the repression of all non-communist identities and Church leaders, including purge trials, imprisonment, and executions of some leading Slovak and Czech communists labelled “bourgeois nationalists”. In the notorious *Slánský trial* (1952), involving Rudolf Slánský (1901-1952), the General Secretary of the Party, which was planned in Moscow but carried through by Czechoslovak President Klement Gottwald (1896-1953), eleven out of fourteen accused of treason, Zionism, and bourgeois origins were executed and three were condemned to life imprisonment.[[10]](#endnote-11)

Despite some acknowledgement of past injustices, Czechoslovakia remained in the grip of the rigid Stalinist elite, led by Antonín Novotný (1904-1975), into the early sixties. A protest against the zero-growth economy and increasingly more centralized government led from about 1963 onwards to the emergence of a reform movement culminating in January 1968 in the election of the new leader of the Communist party, Slovak Alexander Dubček (1921-1992), who ushered in a period known as the “Prague spring”. The new reformist Action Programme (April 1968) sought economic decentralization, greater openness of public discussion and crucially, a federal solution to Slovak dissatisfaction with centralized government.[[11]](#endnote-12) The committees were still working on constitutional mechanisms for parallel legislative and executive organs in the two republics when in August 1968 Warsaw Pact armies crushed all hopes for Dubček’s “socialism with a human face”. The only reform from the Action Programme that was implemented was the federalization of Czechoslovakia. In another absurd twist in Czechoslovakia’s sad history, Dubček was replaced in 1969 by another Slovak, Gustáv Husák (1913-1991), who, after being imprisoned as one of the “bourgeois nationalists”, now presided over the “normalization” period. The newly declared federal state was a federation in name only; the Czechs were hurt by perceived Slovak betrayal and Slovaks were disappointed by Husák’s centralization policies.

*The Czecho-Slovak splitH*

In the first days after the “Gentle revolution” (November 1989), the Czechs and Slovaks found themselves united in a struggle against totalitarianism, similar to 1968. The unity, however, did not last long and all the problems hidden by the Husák regime came out in the open with the national question leading the agenda in Slovakia. Nevertheless, in the first free elections in 1990, the only openly separatist political party, the Slovak National Party (SNS), shared third place with the Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS), after Public Against Violence (VPN) and the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH).

The odd alliances that had been built against the common communist enemy, then began to disintegrate in both the Czech Republic and Slovakia, now that that common enemy was gone. In the Czech Republic, the architect of the “Gentle Revolution”, the Civic Forum, split and its dominant faction, led by the “privatization guru” Václav Klaus (b. 1941), became the Civic Democratic Party, which was in favor of capitalism with a harsh face, for which there was little support in Slovakia: in short, Czechs and Slovaks came to democracy with divergent expectations and experience. The Slovak counterpart of the Civic Forum, VPN, split too and for similar reasons. The winner of this split was Vladimír Mečiar (b. 1942) and his HZDS (Movement for a Democratic Slovakia). Mečiar was not a nationalist; in fact he was a reform communist and above all an instinctive politician with a great talent for seizing the moment - and the moment was political turbulence, societal insecurity, growing Hungarian fear of the rising Slovak sense of nationalism and the Czech economic nationalism ready to ditch Slovak interests. Mečiar took up the national question, which to the majority of Slovaks seemed to be if not the main question then certainly a question that in some way concerned democracy. In June 1992, Mečiar won the elections and became prime minister in Slovakia with 37.26% of vote, while Klaus won in the Czech Republic and chose to become prime minister of the Czech Republic rather than Czechoslovakia as a whole. The fate of the country was in the hands of two ambitious leaders with incompatible ideas about the future of the country, while their respective populations, convinced of the need for a solution, but lacking in political ideas and experience, resigned themselves to the leadership of their respective prime ministers.

The split of Czechoslovakia was legal in terms of the complicated and rushed legislation passed by the government which enabled the reluctant Federal Assembly deputies to end the state to which they had sworn allegiance. Whether the split was legitimate we will never know because, in the absence of a referendum, it is impossible to judge whether the population actually wanted to split the country. Contemporary and subsequent polls suggest that this may not have been the case.[[12]](#endnote-13) Yet the Czechs and Slovaks who disagreed with the split often failed to agree on how their common state should be run. It is reasonable to argue that the split of Czechoslovakia was a case of “chance and circumstance”,[[13]](#endnote-14) which produced a result of which some may have dreamed but which few actively sought.

This rest of this chapter is divided into two parts. The first part is concerned with analysis of the political transformation, governance, and “Europeanization” in independent Slovakia. The second part looks at major issues in Slovak politics, including minority and migration policies, the role of the Church and the thorny question of corruption. The conclusion, whilst drawing together the principal issues, such as the speed of reforms combined with historical legacies and ambiguities surrounding national issues, argues that the democratization process in Slovakia has been perhaps more successful than expected, even if by no means complete.

**Democratization, Regression, Restoration and Europeanization of Slovakia**

In conveying the realities and complexities of the Slovak transition from communism to democracy we suggest here that Slovakia’s transition from communism to democracy has gone through several “transitions” that affect one another, but nevertheless have distinct characteristics, within the main post-communist transition. There are at least three clearly distinguishable phases. The ***first*** phase 1989-1992, still within Czechoslovakia, ended with the dissolution of the state. The discontinuity of the first phase of the post-communist transition in both political and constitutional terms bears directly on the subsequent second stage of the transition: two historically and ideologically different processes, nation-building and state-building, became in an unprecedented way compressed into one process - the democratization process.[[14]](#endnote-15) The sudden and controversial attainment of independent statehood meant that political and cultural elites established on the back of nationalist politics during the first phase continued to mobilize on national issues, but their new target became the largest and historically most sensitive national minority in Slovakia, the 9 per cent of citizens who were ethnically Hungarian. Democratic state-building became secondary to the continued nation-building which characterized the first and second phases of Slovakia’s transition.

The ***second*** phase (1993-1998) was the most notorious period in Slovakia’s transition, often labelled “Mečiarism”. Its hallmarks were an ambivalent attitude to liberal democracy and relations with the West, combined with strong nationalist leanings, exemplified by hostility to all things non-Slovak. The general elections in September 1998 brought the victory of political parties committed to the restoration of democracy and the reversal of Slovakia’s much diminished chances for European integration.

1998 signalled the start of a new, ***third*** phase (1998-2006) of post-communist politics in Slovakia and within this third transition liberal democracy was considered to be consolidated enough for the country to accede to the EU in 2004. The main characteristic of this third phase has been the almost complete synchronization of the democratization process with “Europeanization”.

Our political analysis concludes by looking at Slovakia as an EU member state (2006-2018). By this stage, the two pro-reform governments of Mikuláš Dzurinda (b. 1955) had redefined Slovak national interest to entail European integration and international recognition, rather than a battle against Hungarian, Soviet or Czech domination, and Mečiar’s power has been eclipsed by the left-nationalist Robert Fico (b. 1964), who in 2006 formed his first government with Mečiar’s HZDS as a junior partner. However, Fico’s three post-2006 governments showed the limits of “Europeanization”. They promoted pro-European policies, including joining the EU’s border-free Schengen Zone (2007) and the Eurozone (2009), but were also prone to use nationalist and populist rhetoric to ensure political survival.

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From the examination of tables above a number of significant observations about the Slovak party system emerges:

i) the continued emergence of new parties; ii) ethnic divisions in party structures; iii) the marked success of charismatic leaders (Mečiar/HZDS and Fico/*Smer*), and finally, iv) the tendency to form broad government coalitions across the left to right political spectrum.

There is a sense of unsteadiness in Slovak politics whereby each consecutive government tends to be an experiment to redeem the disappointment with the previous experiment. The stability of the party system is permanently undermined by the mobilization of voters’ support, exacerbating the already fluid electoral base that tends to be attracted often by new and sometimes ephemeral parties that disappear after one electoral period (for example, the ZRS, SOP, ANO, *Sieť*). In the same vein there are questions about the ideological profile of “movements” and “coalitions” that have become characteristic of Slovak politics: starting with *Verejnosť Proti Násiliu* (VPN), most obviously Mečiar’s Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) and also the very successful *Smer*. “Left” and “right” are used largely to refer to economic policy, and the self-declared “right” has frequently been more socially liberal than the left.[[15]](#endnote-16) Reformist right parties have stood opposite the nationalist right, with the left uneasily straddling the center ground.

*The second transition: 1993-98*

By 1993, Mečiar’s confrontational political style combined with the removal of Czech-Slovak disputes as the central theme of Slovak politics led to many defections from the HZDS and the nationalist SNS. A parliamentary vote of no confidence in Mečiar was held, followed by a short interlude (March 1994-October 1994) when the government was led by the ex- foreign minister Jozef Moravčík. Moravčík’s government included members of the new Democratic Union (DÚ, formed by the defectors from the HZDS and SNS) aided by post-communist Party of the Democratic Left (SDĽ) and the KDH. However, Mečiar and his HZDS emerged victorious once more in early elections in October 1994 and Mečiar’s third government began with a legendary all-night session of the parliament (3-4 November 1994), when opposition deputies were removed from all positions of influence and the newly reinvigorated HZDS was joined by the newly formed workers’ party ZRS and the right-wing SNS. If Slovak democracy had been fragile before, after the 1994 elections it became even more fragile. The HZDS attempted to defy the Constitutional Court which to its credit continued to challenge the government[[16]](#endnote-17) but the HZDS was successful in completely excluding opposition parties from any participation in bodies overseeing state functions, e.g., broadcasting, scrutiny of the Slovak Intelligence Service, and representation on parliamentary committees. Slovakia’s international reputation was further damaged by the hostile relationship between President Michal Kováč (1930-2016), who, in 1993, had been the HZDS nominee for the presidency, and Prime Minister Mečiar, which culminated in the abduction of the president’s son in August 1995 in Bratislava, in which the Slovak Information Service was implicated.[[17]](#endnote-18) Moreover, the government sabotaged a referendum in favor of the direct election of the president which had been called in May 1997 on the basis of an opposition-backed petition.[[18]](#endnote-19) When Kováč’s term ended in March 1998, the polarized parliament proved unable to elect a new head of state with the requisite three-fifths majority and the presidential powers were, in the absence of a president, transferred to Mečiar. His administration thrived on the preservation and exacerbation of conflicts deriving from ethnic and social divisions and this second stage of Slovak transition can be characterized by attempts to consolidate political and economic power by any means, even -- if necessary – undemocratic means.

By the summer of 1997, the situation in Slovakia was so bleak that both the EU and NATO separated it from the other three Visegrád states in judging its suitability for membership.

*The third transition: 1998-2006*

The parliamentary elections in September 1998 brought victory for a broad “coalition of coalitions” of four parties, of which three were new and two encompassed a number of parties: the leftist SDĽ, the new centre-right SDK (Slovak Democratic Coalition of five parties), the new centre-right SMK (the Hungarian Coalition of three parties) and the newly formed pro-business and pro-integration Party of Civic Understanding (SOP, mostly comprised of technocrats and many ex-communists). Consequently, the four-party coalition led by Prime Minister Mikuláš Dzurinda (SDK) actually comprised ten political parties and one of its problems proved to be the maintenance of its unity because of the plurality of the political streams and personal and party interests it encompassed. The fragility was further compounded by the dire economic situation it had inherited after years of decreased foreign investment, an opaque privatization process, and a misuse of political power which had obstructed proper economic competition. The Dzurinda government’s immediate steps to help the ailing economy were particularly aimed at greater transparency in privatization processes.[[19]](#endnote-20)

The combination of the fear of constitutional crisis, the dismay at the political and financial corruption, the embarrassment of disqualification from European integration, together with a successful mobilization of voters by the opposition (turnout 84.2%) meant that Mečiar faced opponents who, if not united among themselves, were united in hostility toward him. His HZDS won the highest number of votes (a situation to be repeated in the 2002 elections), but was unable to form a government.[[20]](#endnote-21)

The unity of the leading party, the SDK, as expected, was short-lived and the inter-party and inter-coalition fractiousness and further proliferation of parties continued. Among new “alternatives” the most significant was the splinter party from SDĽ, *Smer* (Direction). It was a vehicle for the very ambitious Robert Fico, whose main platform, anti-corruption and order, spiced-up with a careful but persistent exploitation of the “national” issue, became the new ideologically ambiguous movement to dominate Slovak politics. However, it did not come to power in the 2002 elections, in which the main issue was European integration. But Fico won in 2006 when the EU’s political conditionality ceased to exercise influence on Slovakia’s democratization. In the short term, the 2002 election saw an unexpected second victory for Dzurinda, who returned to power with a center-right coalition that pushed ambitious policies of economic reform, including the flagship “flat tax”, unconstrained by a leftist post-communist party. After the 2002 elections, one could have argued that Slovakia’s democracy seemed to have been stabilized and rescued from extreme elements that had sought an alternative to liberal democracy which some commentators termed “postcommunist authoritarianism”.[[21]](#endnote-22)

The lesson of European history is that democracy depends on more than democratic forces within the state: crucially it depends on an international system for its reinforcement. European democracy, whether swept away before 1945, rescued from the outside, reinforced in the west as part of the Cold War competition, or submerged in the east as part of the same competition, and then universalized to most of the continent after 1989, has always been a story of international relations, as well as of politics within the state.In that sense, communism, post-communism and Europeanization have a common denominator: “the role of external power in setting and enforcing political agendas for the states of the region and thus influencing domestic political outcomes”.[[22]](#endnote-23)

Europeanization has become a very “fashionable” concept which at times suffers from “conceptual stretching”,[[23]](#endnote-24) but among its many meanings, it is best understood as “a process of transformation of domestic structures of a state by European frameworks, norms and rules”.[[24]](#endnote-25) Domestic structures entail the formal institutions of the state and its national legal system and administration, but also the perception and public discourses about national and ethnic identity and the meaning of citizenship, the role of the state, and political traditions. In post-communist states the adaptation to economic, social and political changes had to be in accordance with the Copenhagen criteria established in 1993,[[25]](#endnote-26) which made the conditions for entry into the EU explicit.

Democratic conditionality is the “core strategy” of the EU to “induce candidate states to comply with its human rights and democracy standards”.[[26]](#endnote-27) This strategy operates on two levels: explicit and implicit. The explicit strategy is reinforced by reward in the form of full membership of the EU and its success depends on candidate states’ calculations of domestic political costs and compliance. The conditionality strategy assumes that the community’s common ethos and the “density of interaction” will in the longer-term create a self-sustaining environment of international democratic norms.[[27]](#endnote-28) Notwithstanding the many limitations associated with the internationalization of domestic politics, it has been argued elsewhere[[28]](#endnote-29) that, on balance, the EU’s democratic conditionality linked to membership intensifies the democratization process from beyond the state more effectively and concretely than other strategies of other international organizations.

The EU’s scrutiny of the 2002 elections contributed to pro-reform government and hence, to the continuation of the third, restorative transition stage in the face of domestic opposition. The Dzurinda government’s election campaign made the issue of the accession into Euro-Atlantic structures (both the EU and NATO were making their decisions in the autumn 2002) central to its re-election by stressing that “the integration of Slovakia” was not merely a question of foreign policy, but a “paramount domestic issue”.[[29]](#endnote-30) The EU’s appeal to Slovak citizens that if they wanted Slovakia to become a member of the EU, they “should do something about it”[[30]](#endnote-31) brought dividends. The 2002 government coalition that emerged from a short two-week period of negotiations dominated by Dzurinda’s SDKÚ included the Hungarian SMK, the KDH, and the new ANO party and was seen to characterize continuity and consensus in Slovak politics[[31]](#endnote-32) -- this, despite that the fact only one of the four parties that made up the 1998-2002 government – the SMK – returned unchanged in 2002; the other two “continuing” parties were splinter parties of the SDK. Mečiar’s HZDS repeated its 1998 “victory” in the percentage of votes gained, but failed again to form the government. The fact that maintaining the course of democracy was an issue at all in the 2002 elections - the fifth since the fall of communism - indicated the fragility of Slovakia’s transition.[[32]](#endnote-33)

**Politics in an EU member state**

“Critical” may be a description of the June 2006 elections too, since they marked a shift in the main thrust of party competition. Fico’s *Smer* had redesigned itself ‘Direction-Social Democracy’ (*Smer*-SD) and joined with Dzurinda’s SDKÚ in styling the contest as an economic battle between left and right.[[33]](#endnote-34) Nationalism and the struggle over the nature of the democratic system slipped from the forefront. However, following what can only be described as bungled post-election coalition-building negotiations by the opposition, Fico chose the more nationalist ĽS-HZDS (Mečiar had attempted - unsuccessfully - to reposition his movement as belonging to the mainstream European centre right by adding “People’s Party” to its title) and the SNS as his coalition partners. Fico did so largely because they looked less likely to be awkward as coalition partners. If there ever was an argument about the limits of political conditionality for the purpose of accession, the return to power of two parties from the 1994-98 establishment, Mečiar’s HZDS and nationalists, must be it. This reward-based strategy by the EU to stabilize political changes and promote liberal-democratic norms was initially, in the pre-accession period, very effective in Slovakia[[34]](#endnote-35), but lost its influence and domestic rationality very soon after the accession. Had either the HZDS or the SNS been included in the 2002 government, Slovakia’s accession to the EU and NATO would have been highly unlikely.

Fico was Slovakia’s first declaredly left-wing prime minister, but tended to match the typical East European pattern whereby post-communist parties push left-wing economic policies while having illiberal social policies and links to big business.[[35]](#endnote-36) His coalition with the nationalists initially led to his party’s suspension from the Socialist group in the European Parliament, although it was eventually allowed back, largely because Slovakia offered no other left-of-center partners. Despite a number of corruption scandals, the 2006-2010 government benefitted from inheriting a very good economy and a Europhile population who viewed EU accession as a national achievement.

The more detailed analysis of the Fico government’s economic policies (such as changes in Labour Law in favor of less harsh redundancy notice for short-term contracts and part-time employment, reversal of some privatization projects, reduction in doctors’ and hospital fees) suggested it sought to combine the maintenance of the pragmatic policies of the previous administration, including flat tax, while creating a more “caring” image of itself that satisfied voters alarmed by the neoliberalism of the second Dzurinda government. *Smer*-SD was expected to gain another term in office after the June 2010 election, but shifts in opinion in the run-up to the election meant that even though *Smer*-SD gained over a third of the vote – more than in 2006 – it was unable to form a government. Despite some attempts by Fico to exploit nationalism in the election campaign, the result again showed a decline in his party’s power. Mečiar’s ĽS-HZDS fell below the 5 per cent threshold necessary for gaining seats in parliament, as did the SMK, whose Hungarian vote was split by the more successful new party *Most-Híd* (Bridge), which attempted to attract Slovak as well as Hungarian voters.[[36]](#endnote-37)

The 2010 election brought Slovakia’s first female prime minister. Dzurinda had not stood on the SDKÚ-DS candidate slate because of corruption allegations, and the sociology professor Iveta Radičová (b. 1956) had taken his place as lead candidate. But she had an unwieldy coalition to manage. While Mečiar and Fico had always led the dominant party in their governments, center-right government coalitions were more evenly balanced in terms of the number of deputies each member had. Radičová’s downfall came in October 2011, when Richard Sulík, leader of the new neoliberal party Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), refused to vote for the European Financial Stability Facility, necessary for the Eurozone to bail out the Greek economy, even though Radičová had made this a vote of confidence in the hope of forcing his hand. Fico, who supported the bailout, placed domestic self-interest above the interests of the EU as a whole and abstained until a law calling early elections in March 2012 had been passed.

The 2012 elections marked the zenith of Fico’s power, since Smer-SD, with 44 per cent of the vote, gained an absolute majority of 83 deputies and formed Slovakia’s first one-party government. He made little use of this to promote radical change, and, although he introduced a number of “social packages” to help the weaker in society, and moderated the famous “flat tax” policy, he did little to reform education (previously a favorite ministry of parties in both halves of Slovakia’s political spectrum), and an air of corruption surrounded the business interests of some members of his government.

In March 2016, despite exploiting the EU’s 2015 refugee crisis to whip up xenophobia in Slovakia, Fico lost his absolute majority, but remained leader of the largest single party. For the first time ever, eight separate party lists gained parliamentary representation and the presence of the pariah extreme right Kotleba-People’s Party Our Slovakia (Kotleba-ĽSNS) meant that neither of the established “camps” in Slovak politics was able, on its own, to form a government.[[37]](#endnote-38) Since early elections were unlikely to break the gridlock and Slovakia – unlike the Czech Republic – had no tradition of non-party, technocratic or caretaker governments, Fico and his former partners in the SNS were joined by the Hungarian-Slovak *Most-Híd* and the new moderate-right party Network (*Sieť*), although the latter soon disintegrated. The presence of both the Nationalists and a party representing the Hungarian minority in the government highlighted the extent to which ethnic divisions among Slovak citizens had been depoliticized.

There were suspicions that the rather heterogeneous government would prove unstable and that early elections would, at some point, take place once Slovakia had concluded its first EU presidency in the second half of 2016. However, the scandal that ejected Fico from the premiership was entirely unexpected. At the end of February 2018, Slovakia experienced its first murder of a journalist when Ján Kučiak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová were shot dead in their home in a village near Bratislava in a murder thought to be linked to the victim’s investigative work into Italian mafia activity in eastern Slovakia. Although links to the government were not proven, public distrust in the prime minister and interior minister was already substantial because of previous corruption scandals, and public demonstrations and outspoken criticism from the non-party President Andrej Kiska (b. 1963) and also the leader of coalition party *Most-Híd* eventually forced both to resign the following month. Fico was succeeded by his deputy Peter Pellegrini (b. 1975), who was left with the task of damage limitation, while the former prime minister remained chair of the party and became chair of the party’s parliamentary group, often standing at Pellegrini’s side during press conferences. This suggested he wished to return triumphantly as prime minister at the next election, just as Mečiar had done twice – in 1992 and 1994 – after losing the role mid-term.

It was clear after the 2016 election that more changes would take place in the Slovak party system. Half-way through the parliamentary term, *Smer*-SD was in decline but still the most popular single party. Two new liberal parties had been formed and the non-party president, Kiska, after announcing that he would not stand as president for a second term in 2019, indicated that he might seek a role in parliamentary politics.

Yet, although Slovak politics appeared turbulent, and the party system was still in flux nearly thirty years after the fall of communism, there were nonetheless elements of continuity.[[38]](#endnote-39) Although parties came and went, the dividing line between older, more rural, less educated and less cosmopolitan voters on the one hand and more dynamic younger people who looked to the future rather than the past was fairly constant. Alternation of power was regular and whoever was in government faced an organized and vocal opposition. As the second decade of the new millennium progressed, the country’s balance sheet, while initially rather negative, increasingly looked rather positive when compared to that of its Visegrád neighbors, two of whom were involved in protracted argument with the rest of the EU about the state of their democracy.

**Post-Communist Slovakia: major political issues**

The early years of Slovakia’s transformation were marred by anti-liberal tendencies, a strong national orientation, the toleration of lawlessness by state authorities, high expectations of the state combined with egalitarianism and a general misunderstanding about how these tendencies affect long-term prospects. It is beyond the remit of this chapter to elaborate on vague concepts such as political culture,[[39]](#endnote-40) but there is some relevance in reiterating three important factors connected to the lack of democratic tradition and independent statehood if one seeks to grasp the political tradition in post-communist Slovakia.

First, insecure nationhood feeds off insecure democracy and *vice versa.* There is a deep-rooted tradition in Slovakia which understands politics only as a struggle for national realization and confuses political solidarity with ethnic solidarity. This naturally leads to the misinterpretation of statehood as “ownership” of the state by the majority population and creates an ongoing tension in the majority-minority relationship. This is one of the reasons why the Hungarian Coalition, while in the government between 1998 and 2006, achieved only minor compromises on some issues but no major victories and no constitutional guarantees for the protection of minorities.[[40]](#endnote-41)

The second point relates to this belated nation-building. One of the most important, and arguably most damaging, characteristics of communism was its control of information and attempts to curb any independent intellectual thought; inevitably, history too became the subject of the regime’s official ideology – a kind of “organized forgetting”.[[41]](#endnote-42) Nation-building is also an ideology, but an ideology that relies on historical memory in which there is some continuity, even if always somewhat distorted. In the present case, the void of the non-existence first filled by the too short and too confusing interwar period, then wiped out by the wartime fascist state and then totally manipulated by communism, left Slovaks without any moral or historical compass by which to navigate yet another complete overhaul of their identity and normative framework. Society was looking to build a democratic state, but the necessary ingredients, such as historical self-criticism and knowledge, tolerance, civic engagement and political responsibility, were all lacking.

The third point relates to the modernization of Slovakia. It adds to the idiosyncrasy of this transition that the very late, post-World War Two industrialization of Slovakia reached its peak in the 1980s, so that the standard of living was rising markedly throughout the communist period and the majority of the population did not feel that the communist economy needed radical changes. Moreover, industrialization under communism was rapid and, while accompanied by rapid urbanization, a number of huge housing estates were built in rural and very traditional settings; nonetheless, traditional ties, networks and ways of life persisted for a long time. This type of modernization amounted to the cultural ‘ruralization’ of the cities rather than the urbanization of the countryside.[[42]](#endnote-43) Hence, the pre-industrial traditionalism augmented by the communist destruction of the country, cities and history and the persistence of undemocratic regimes begins to explain something about society’s lack of trust in institutions and in the rule of law and the appeal of nationalism and charismatic leaders. It is reasonable to argue that this unfortunate historical legacy will exhaust its appeal with time.

*Minorities and Migration*

During Slovakia’s difficult “second phase” of transition in the mid-1990s, much international attention was devoted to the situation of the country’s rather vocal Hungarian minority, who comprised up to 10 per cent of the population.[[43]](#endnote-44) The percentage of the population declaring themselves ethnically Hungarian declined from 10.8 to 8.5 per cent between the 1991 and 2011 censuses, although it should be noted that the incidence of respondents giving no response to this question increased substantially in 2011. On many indicators, the situation of the Slovak Hungarians was not unfavourable: as can be seen from Tables 1-3, it was not uncommon for political parties representing Slovak Hungarians to have more than 10 per cent of seats in parliament, Hungarian was an official language in local government units where more than 20 per cent of the population declared themselves Hungarian, and Hungarian-language state schools were available in the areas of southern Slovakia where most Hungarian speakers were based.

The difficulties during the Mečiar governments sprang largely from the fact that leading HZDS and SNS politicians chose to “securitize” minority issues by presenting Hungarian speakers as a grave threat to Slovakia’s territorial integrity and culture. Consequently, the Hungarian minority was permanently anxious that the rights they enjoyed would be eroded. Slovaks, in turn, feared that Hungarian control at the local level would leave them living as a disadvantaged minority in their own country. Although ethnic tensions abated when the Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK) entered the government in 1998, it nearly left in the summer of 2001 because a system of regional government was agreed in parliament that did not provide for a southern region likely to be controlled by their party.[[44]](#endnote-45) The exigencies of EU accession weakened their hand, not only because regional government was a requirement of the EU, but also for another reason: once the SMK joined the government, the EU was far more concerned with the situation of the Roma, where violation of citizens’ rights was far more evident.

The situation was again exacerbated in 2006 when Fico chose two more nationalist parties as coalition partners. This caused renewed anxiety among ethnic Hungarians, yet in a sense Fico had achieved something for which he was rarely given credit: he had drawn older, more rural and less educated voters away from Mečiar’s nationalism and toward a program based more strongly on economic issues. Where he exploited anti-Hungarian sentiment, it appeared to be a matter of strategy rather than ideology, and occurred mostly in the run-up to elections -- both the European Parliament election of June 2009 and the June 2010 parliamentary election. In the latter, he was aided by the April 2010 election of nationalist Hungarian Viktor Orbán (b. 1963) to his second term as prime minister. Orbán began the parliamentary term by commemorating the 90th anniversary of the Treaty of Trianon – the post-World War One treaty that had left many ethnic Hungarians, including those now in Slovakia, living outside Hungary’s borders – with a parliamentary session that passed a law allowing ethnic Hungarians in former Hungarian territories (for example, Slovakia) to gain Hungarian citizenship. The Slovak government securitized the issue, represented it as a threat to Slovak territorial integrity, and responded by calling an extraordinary session of the Slovak parliament in which the parliamentary deputies passed a law removing Slovak citizenship from anyone who voluntarily and by request applied for foreign citizenship. Iro- nically, the years that followed showed that the major losers of this law were ethnic Slovaks living in the Czech Republic, Germany, Austria, or Britain: only just over 5 per cent of those who lost their citizenship did so because of obtaining a Hungarian passport.

However, the most notable case of exacerbating ethnic problems for strategic electoral gain came in the autumn of 2015, when the Syrian refugee crisis intensified and neighbouring Hungary was genuinely overwhelmed by a sudden influx of refugees making their way to EU states further west. Given the way Mečiar and Fico had repeatedly securitized the Hungarian threat, when essentially dealing with white, Catholic fellow citizens very much like themselves, it should come as no surprise that the idea of taking immigrants of another nationality was instantly presented as a danger. Slovakia has repeatedly received the lowest number of immigrants annually of all EU member states, even though its population is the median of all post-communist member states (that is, five are smaller and five are larger). In addition, in Slovakia a high proportion of immigrants are EU citizens, and it is the only EU member state where over two-thirds of immigrants were born in EU member states. Nearly half the foreign-born population of Slovakia were born in the Czech Republic, so are barely regarded as “other”.[[45]](#endnote-46) Added to the legacy of the communist period, when crossing borders and foreigners in Czechoslovakia were carefully regulated and monitored, it is clear that Slovakia has little experience of immigration. More strikingly, discussion of immigration almost never compares the very substantial Slovak experience of emigration, both before World War Two and after 2004, to the situation of immigrants in Slovakia, and during the refugee crisis of 2015/16 it was very rare for the considerable number of Czechoslovak refugees from Communism to be mentioned.[[46]](#endnote-47)

However, Slovak paranoia about immigration was also to a large extent manufactured artificially by the second Fico government. Starting with a shocking interior ministry statement in August 2015, which said that Slovakia could take only Christian and atheist refugees, the prime minister began openly promoting islamophobia. Following the Paris attacks of November 2015, he stated that every Muslim on Slovak territory would be monitored, while adding that most of them were in the country legally.[[47]](#endnote-48) This was a stance largely incompatible with EU membership, given that the free movement of persons – a concept defended strongly by Slovaks when entailing their own right to work in other member states – also gave the millions of Muslim EU citizens in France, Germany, and the UK the right to live and work in Slovakia. Moreover, Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union enshrines the principle of non-discrimination of minorities, which includes discrimination on the grounds of religion.

In December 2015, the Slovak government took legal action against a European Commission decision about quotas of how many refugees should be accepted by each member state. Although there were legitimate sovereignty concerns about the EU obliging member states to take in non-EU citizens, earlier statements by Slovak politicians inevitably led to suspicions that their objections could be motivated primarily by racism. *Smer-*SD exploited the argument on quotas for its pre-election campaign, with billboards declaring “We are protecting Slovakia”. The campaign was inadequate, however, to preserve the party’s one-party government after the March 2016 election, and may, ironically, have backfired by helping the far-right Kotleba-ĽSNS party to gain sufficient votes to enter parliament.[[48]](#endnote-49) It would be unfair, however, to blame the Fico governments alone for intolerance toward immigrants. In November 2016, the Slovak parliament passed a bill proposed by SNS requiring a religion to have 50,000, rather than the previous 20,000, adherents in order to be officially registered. While clearly hostile to diversity *per se*, it appeared to be directed in particular against Muslims. Although President Kiska vetoed the bill, 103 deputies – over two-thirds of the Slovak parliament – voted for it again, overriding the president’s veto, so that it became law in March 2017.

Underlying Slovak difficulties in dealing with both indigenous and immigrant minorities is not just a legacy of insecure nationhood and unfamiliarity with the mobility of a globalized world, but also a tendency to generalize and define people on the basis of ethnicity. While Slovakia has opposed the idea of “collective rights” for Hungarians, political discourse tends to speak of “Roma” or “Muslims” as if they were an undifferentiated mass, and there is little awareness that such an approach can encourage racial prejudice.

*The role of the Church since 1992*

Slovakia is generally regarded as a Catholic country, but the oldest polarisation of Slovak society was along religious lines, between Catholics and Protestants. The most important anchors in the Slovak national development were priests – from the 19th century onwards, when protestant clerics were prominent in the national revival although through the interwar period and the wartime Slovak state it was Catholic priests who were predominant. Later, this particular stream of national consciousness combined with many émigrés from abroad formed a strong opposition to the communist regime. Some Catholic dissidents suffered greatly in the struggle for religious freedom under the communist regime and many became leading members of the KDH, most famously Ján Čarnogurský, the founder of the KDH and one time prime minister (April 1991 – June 1992).

However, it cannot be argued that Catholicism has a strong influence on the politics of independent Slovakia. KDH has been a stalwart of the Slovak party system, and one of the only Slovak political parties to survive changing its leader, but has never won a significant electoral victory: even in the first democratic elections in 1990 it came second to the purely civic VPN. In the 2016 elections, it failed to gain parliamentary representation, although another leadership change revived its fortunes. Unlike west European Christian Democratic parties, it lacked a strong conservative economic policy and gradually became too narrowly identified with Catholic values on sexual matters such as abortion and registered partnership to appeal to a wide voter base.

The Slovak relationship to the Catholic Church is in fact highly ambiguous, and twentieth century history presents it with two major challenges. One major controversy is its wartime history, because despite many publications claiming that many priests tried to save Jews,[[49]](#endnote-50) the facts are that the Slovak State was led by a cleric Dr. Jozef Tiso and that out of 90 000 Jews living on the territory of the Slovak State (plus some 40 000 in the territories annexed by Hungary, 130 000 in total) only 12 000 returned from the concentration camps.[[50]](#endnote-51) The Church has sought Tiso’s rehabilitation and blamed his execution for crimes against humanity on the communist propaganda in 1945. The KDH leadership, while denouncing the deportation of Jews, always found it difficult to deny the Church’s role in allowing for these deportations. The more nationalist right, however, such as SNS and the more extreme ĽSNS, have been more sympathetic to the Slovak state. Yet it is hard to seek any deeper linkages in contemporary politics to that regrettable period.[[51]](#endnote-52)

The second challenge is the success of the Communist regime in breaking the power of the Catholic Church to dominate popular values, particularly among the urban population. The Communists imposed, without widespread public discussion, made many changes that were fought for in western Europe for many decades: the right of married women to work, for equal pay, and to have access to reasonably priced child care; and the acceptability of divorce, abortion, equal property rights to the marital home, and also pre-marital sex. These changes are nowadays accepted without question by most Slovaks and when, in contemporary debates, Slovak politicians cite traditional national and Catholic values as a reason for rejecting registered partnership and same-sex marriage or the immigration of Muslims they are in fact defending the communist value system, since the Communist regime was hostile to both homosexuality and migration.

It is true that there was a rise of religious identity after independence, and being Catholic was linked to being Slovak. However, religious identification is highly subjective and fluid: the 1991 census in Czechoslovakia showed that around 60% of Slovaks were Catholic, and although the proportion increased to 69% in 2001, it decreased to 62% in 2011. The European Values Study also shows that trust in the Church halved from around 70% in 1999 to only 35% in 2017.[[52]](#endnote-53) Consequently, the deference of many politicians to the Catholic Church – most clearly demonstrated by the ‘Vatican Treaty’ signed in 2000 – may be misplaced. While post-communist politicians have learnt that arguments over economic policy and foreign policy are legitimate, there is greater timidity in challenging conservative value orientations.

*Corruption*

The cases of proved and suspected corruption at the government level, particularly during the Mečiar administration, are convincing and well-documented. The second wave of voucher privatization was terminated in favor of “direct sales” of state property (1995), regulated by a body beyond government control (*Fond Národného Majetku*/National Property Fund), but with direct links to the government. The sales, if not to unknown companies, could be traced in some instances to members of the government. The most revealing in this respect is the interview in *Sme* with the former Minister for Work, Social affairs and Family in the 1994-98 government Oľga Keltošová*.*[[53]](#endnote-54) In this interview she admits to having been offered the spoils of privatization and explains in some fairly apologetic terms the corrupted atmosphere in the government. Some further examples of clientelist politics of that period are: the largest steel works *VSŽ* were sold to Andrej Rezeš, the Minister of Telecommunications in the government until 1997; the government revoked the license of the largest investment corporation *Sporofond,*  with some 40,000 investors, in the second wave of privatization despite a Supreme Court ruling; 49 per cent of shares in *Nafta Gbely* were sold to an unknown company despite higher offers from other investors at the estimated loss of 100 million USD to the Slovak treasury.

Noteworthy was the influence of ex-managers of former state-owned enterprises, organized in AZZZ (Association of Employers’ Unions and Alliances) whose members helped to formulate the government’s privatization strategy and often became the new owners of the newly privatized enterprises. The list of clientelist structures and connections to organized economic crime is beyond the present brief and does not add to the fact that the close connection between politics and business interests[[54]](#endnote-55) plagues Slovak politics to this day. Despite the *Smer-*SD government’s declaration of a “social state”, there were no social democratic parties in western Europe with such close personal links to the business community as the supposedly social democratic *Smer* (Mesežnikov).[[55]](#endnote-56)

However, while privatization was the major source of corruption during the Mečiar years, with the sharp increase in EU finance in the form of structural funds and agricultural subsidies after accession in 2004, misappropriation of EU funds became a new source of corruption. Slovakia is a major recipient of EU funding, and by the time Fico’s third government entered office, the EU had spent four times as much in Slovakia asthe country contributed to the EU budget, and over three-quarters of public investment involved EU funding.[[56]](#endnote-57)

The most famous corruption cases during the first Fico government involved his smaller nationalist coalition partners, and it was one such scandal that led, in October 2017, to two former ministers being given substantial prison sentences for the first time in post-communist Slovakia. (In this respect, the country had lagged behind other new EU member states in the region who had already dealt with corrupt politicians through the courts and sent them to jail.) The “notice board tender” scandal began in 2007, when a tender worth 120 million euros was “published” by being displayed for four days in a closed corridor in the Ministry of Construction and Regional Development. It was not an uncommon practice for tenders to be illegally “tailored” to suit only a bidder selected in advance, but in this case there was only one bidder, a consortium including companies with links to the SNS leader. After complaints from the European Commission, who was co-financing the project, the SNS minister Marian Janušek was eventually forced to resign, only to be replaced by his deputy Igor Štefanov, who was also found to have been involved in the same affair and was eventually sentenced together with Janušek. Although it took a long time for this case to reach court, it was important in establishing the principle that ministers could be held responsible for illegal contracts they signed off in the course of their work.

It should be noted that the Dzurinda governments had not been wholly immune to suspicious tenders and contracts, and were most heavily implicated when, a few months before the 2012 elections, publicity surrounding the “Gorilla” file provoked widespread demonstrations led mainly by discontented young people. The leaked file allegedly contained data from a 2005-2006 Slovak Information Service investigation into the head of the large Slovak firm Penta, including secret recordings with politicians where bribes and other illegal payments were discussed. Although no prosecutions resulted from the affair, it did much to sour the public mood vis-à-vis politicians.

After the third Fico government came to power, the spotlight was thrown onto the living arrangements of the prime minister and interior minister, both of whom had flats in a block owned by a businessman suspected of tax evasion. During the summer of 2017, two of the four opposition parties orchestrated weekly demonstrations outside the block of flats concerned and interior minister Robert Kaliňak was a continual target for opposition resignation demands in parliament. Attention was deflected from this only by a new scandal, once more leading to the resignation of an SNS minister, who was accused in July 2017 of giving millions of euros of EU science and research funds to small private companies with no track record in the area while projects involving leading Slovak universities were rejected. This was a particularly sensitive matter as education, research and development have long been seriously under-funded in Slovakia.

The resignation of both Kaliňak and, more surprisingly, Prime Minister Fico were finally achieved under tragic circumstances in March 2018 when the aforementioned murders of an investigative journalist and his fiancée brought more demonstrators to the street than at any time since the revolution of November 1989. The links and corruption networks involved remained, as so often, very murky, but it was the crisis in public trust that eventually caused the resignations.

Despite all this, however, Slovakia is by no means the most corrupt country in the EU. Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) for 2017 ranked Slovakia at 54th of 176 states, with a score of 50 out of 100, which was relatively similar to the previous three years.[[57]](#endnote-58) Although not a particularly good performance, five EU states – Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Greece, and Croatia – performed more poorly. Corruption is important because of its adverse effects on the Slovak economy, which is generally considered to be performing well in terms of growth, low public debt and a sound financial section. Yet it is still burdened by long-term unemployment, regional inequalities and low public sector efficiency. There are also weaknesses in the education system and health service, and the discrimination of the Roma population. It would clearly be easier to tackle these problems more efficiently if public funds were not going astray through corrupt practices.

**Consolidated Democracy? A Conclusion**

“Democracy requires a distinctive set of political values and orientations from its citizens: moderation, tolerance, civility, efficacy, knowledge, participation”.[[58]](#endnote-59) Concluding this study of Slovakia, we would argue in sum that democracy in Slovakia has been slow in coming and in consolidating because consensus on its substance has not yet fully developed. On the other hand, the reversal of democracy to some form of a hybrid between democracy and authoritarianism represents an unlikely scenario.

Accession to the European Union is generally perceived as the greatest achievement in post-communist Slovakia, yet Slovaks’ relationship to “Brussels” remains complex and can waver uneasily between subservience and self-assertion. The Fico governments have sought to be in the “core of the EU” and Slovakia’s success in becoming the first former Warsaw Pact state to join the Eurozone is notable.[[59]](#endnote-60) Yet at times the desire to belong to the “core” has shades of an inferiority complex and appears based on fear of exclusion rather than a positive desire for greater European integration. It is also often conceived narrowly as relating to economic issues and is at odds with Slovakia’s hostility to immigration. Yet while Slovakia’s legal action against the EU on the issue of refugee quotas eventually lost in the European Court of Justice (ECJ), prime minister Fico also won insofar as the European Commission has indeed found the quotas hard to implement. In addition, a few constructive gestures on Slovakia’s part, such as accommodating small number of refugees from Austria, were sufficient to exclude it from the infringement procedures that the ECJ began against the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland in December 2017.

It is an irony that, while Slovakia lagged behind the other three Visegrád states in achieving European integration in the 1990s, two decades later it appeared the least problematic of the four. It had a higher standard of living than Hungary and Poland and higher economic growth rates than the Czech Republic and Hungary.[[60]](#endnote-61) Above all, however, political developments were not as alarming as in its neighbors, so that it was their failures as well as Slovak successes that helped its international image. Given the historical disadvantages that have been outlined in this chapter, this is not the most expected outcome.

**Timeline 1989-2018**

**17 November 1989** Beginning of the ‘Velvet revolution’ (in Slovakia often referred to as ‘Gentle Revolution’) leading to the collapse of the communist regime.

**December 1989** Václav Havel becomes the President of Czechoslovakia.

**June 1990** Vladimír Mečiar becomes the prime minister of Slovakia within the newly renamedCzech and Slovak Federal Republic.

**April 1991** Mečiar is replaced as prime minister by Ján Čarnogursky.

**June 1992** Federal Assembly and National Council elections won by Mečiar’s Party for a Democratic Slovakia in Slovakia and by Václav Klaus’s Civic Democratic Party in the Czech Republic. Unwilling to form a federal government, each becomes prime minister of his own republic.

**September 1992** Constitution of Slovak Republic passed.

**January 1993** Slovakia becomes an independent state.

**March 1994** The second Mečiar government falls.

**September 1994** Mečiar wins early election and forms third government.

**June 1995** Mečiar submits Slovakia’s application to join the EU.

**December 1997** The European Council, following a negative European Commission report, does not include Slovakia in leading group of post-communist states for negotiating EU accession because of democratic shortcomings.

**September 1998** Parliamentary elections are won by Mikuláš Dzurinda’s Slovak Democratic Coalition, which forms a four-party coalition including a Hungarian minority party.

**May 1999** Rudolf Schuster becomes elected Slovak president in first direct elections.

**February 2000** Detailed accession negotiations with the EU begin following a positive report of European Commission.

**September 2002** Parliamentary elections return a second Dzurinda government to power.

**April 2004** Ivan Gašparovič replaces Schuster as the president after defeating Mečiar in the second round. Slovakia joins NATO.

**May 2004** Slovakia joins the EU.

**June 2006** Parliamentary elections are won by the leftist Smer-SD party, whose leader Robert Fico becomes prime minister of a government also containing Mečiar’s HZDS and the Slovak National Party.

**December 2007** Slovakia joins the Schengen zone.

**January 2009** Slovakia joins the Eurozone.

**April 2009** Gašparovič reelected as president in second-round runoff against Iveta Radičováof Dzurinda’s Slovak Democratic Christian Union-Democratic Party.

**June 2010** Parliamentary elections lead to a four-party center-right government under Radičová.

**October 2011** Radičová’s government defeated in a vote of confidence over the Greek bailout when one of her coalition partners, Richard Sulík’s Freedom and Solidarity, votes against her.

**March 2012** Fico returns as prime minister as Smer-SD wins an early parliamentary election with an absolute majority, creating Slovakia’s first one-party government.

**March 2014** The non-party entrepreneur and philanthropist Andrej Kiska is elected president in second-round run-off against prime minister Fico.

**March 2016** Parliamentary elections lead to the third Fico government, which also includes the Hungarian Most-Híd party and the Slovak National Party.

**March 2018** Fico resigns as prime minister following the first murder of a journalist in post-communist Slovakia, to be replaced by his party colleague Peter Pellegrini.

**Fact sheet**

**Area** 49,035 km2

**Population (31 December 2017)** 5,443,120

Slovak (2011 census) 80.65%

Hungarian 8.49%

Roma 1.96%

Other (incl. Ruthene, Czech, Ukrainian) 1.81%

Undeclared 7.09%

**Major cities**

Bratislava 429,564 (31.12.2017)

Košice 239,095

Total GDP: 178.7 ($bn) (2017 est.)

GDP(per head): 32,900 ($) (2017 est.)

Real GDP growth: 3.3% (2017 est.)

Inflation rate: 1.2% (2017 est.)

Unemployment: 8.1% (2017 est.)

Below poverty line: 12.3 % of the population (2015 est.)

Urbanization: 53.4% (2017)

*Sources: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic* at [www.statistics.sk](http://www.statistics.sk) (accessed on 1 May 2018); *The World Factbook* at [www.cia.gov/library/Publication/the-world-factbook/geos/lo.html](http://www.cia.gov/library/Publication/the-world-factbook/geos/lo.html), [www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2046.html](http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2046.html) (accessed on 1 May 2018).

**Slovak Government**

The current government was formed in March 2016 by four political parties: Smer-Social Democracy (*Smer*-SD), the Slovak National Party (SNS), Bridge (Most-Híd) and Network (*Sieť*), though *Sieť* later disbanded, with a change of prime minister in March 2018.

The National Council – *Národná rada Slovenskej republiky* (NRSR) *-*  has 150 deputies, elected by proportional representation subject to a 5 per cent threshold.

President: Andrej Kiska (from June 2014)

Prime Minister: Peter Pellegrini (from March 2018)

Composition of the parliament (as of 30 April 2018)

*Smer*-SD 49 Most-Híd 14

SaS 31 Kotleba-ĽSNS 14

OĽaNO 16 *Sme Rodina*-Boris Kollár 8

SNS 15

**Robert Fico**

Fico (b. 1964) is the longest-serving prime minister in independent Slovakia to date, and the first to lead a leftist party. He was born in a working-class family in the small town of Topoľčany on 15 September 1964 and joined the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia while a law student at Comenius University in Bratislava. He transferred to its successor, the Party of the Democratic Left (SDĽ), and was elected as a deputy in the Slovak Parliament for the first time in 1992. Although expected to become SDĽ leader as a 31-year-old in 1996, he unexpectedly withdrew from the race at the last moment for unknown reasons. In the 1998 parliamentary elections, he won more preferential votes than any other SDĽ candidate but failed to gain any significant post when his party joined the government. He subsequently left the SDĽ and founded his own party, Direction (*Smer),* in December 1999. Initially populist rather than left-wing, *Smer* benefitted from the SDĽ’s loss of popularity when part of a center-right government and Fico was expected to become prime minister after the 2002 elections. Deprived of the office by the center-right victory, he consolidated his party in opposition, changing it to ‘Direction-Social Democracy’ and benefitting both from a vacuum on the left and from his ability to win nationalist voters from Mečiar’s HZDS. His three terms as prime minister, after the 2006, 2012 and 2016 elections, ended with resignation in March 2018 after the unexplained murder of a journalist. He stated that he would not leave politics, but his future was unclear.

**Notes:**

1. Geoffrey Pridham, “The Slovak parliamentary election of September 2002: Its systemic importance”, *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (July 2003), pp. 333-356. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. Erika Harris, *Nationalism and Democratisation: Politics of Slovakia and Slovenia* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2002), p. 218. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. For the history of Czechoslovakia and its break-up see Harris, *Nationalism and Democratisation,* Ch. 3. For a detailed account of the actual break up see Eric Stein, *Czecho/Slovakia: Ethnic conflict, Constitutional Fissure, Negotiated Breakup* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997); Jan Rychlík, *Rozpad Československa: Česko-slovenské vztahy 1989-1992* (Bratislava: Academic Electronic Press, 2002); and Abby Innes, *Czechoslovakia: The Short Goodbye* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Tony Judt, *Postwar A History of Europe since 1945* (London: Pimlico, 2007), pp.659-664. See also: Carol Skalnik Leff, *The Czech and Slovak Republics: Nation Versus State* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1997). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Shari J. Cohen, *Politics without a Past* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. Cited in Ľubomír Lipták, *Slovensko v 20. storočí* (Bratislava: Kalligram, 1998), p. 44. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. Rudolf Chmel ed., *Slovenská otázka v 20. storočí* (Bratislava: Kalligram, 1997). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. James Ramon Felak, *“At the Price of the Republic”: Hlinka’s Slovak People’s Party, 1929-38* (Pittsburgh and London: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1994). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. Ivan Kamenec, *Tragédia politika, kňaza a človeka* (Bratislava: Archa, 1998). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. Judt, *Postwar A History of Europe since 1945*, pp. 185-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. Harris, *Nationalism and Democratisation*, p.84 and Leff, *The Czech and Slovak Republics*, p. 57. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. As late as April 1992, 77% of respondents in Slovakia agreed with the statement that despite all disagreements the ties between the two nations should not be broken, whilst roughly half of the population claimed to want to maintain the common state (Czech Republic 53%, Slovak Republic 42%). Z. Bútorová “Premyslené ‘Áno’ zániku ČSFR” *Sociologický Časopis,* Vol.XXIX, No. (March 1993), pp.88-103, p. 91. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. Judt, *Postwar:* *A History of Europe since 1945,* p. 664. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. Harris, *Nationalism and Democratisation*, Ch. 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
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    **Table 1: Representation of parties and movements in the Slovak National Council 1990-1992** (bold denotes government coalition parties)

    |  |  |  |  |  |
    | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
    | Parties | **1990** | | **1992** | |
    |  | % | Seats | % | Seats |
    | VPN | **29.3** | **48** | - | - |
    | KDH | **19.2** | **31** | 8.9 | 18 |
    | SNS | 13.9 | 22 | **7.9** | **15** |
    | KSS/SDĽ/SV | 13.3 | 22 | 14.7 | 29 |
    | MKDH/Egy. | **8.6** | **14** | 7.4 | 14 |
    | DS | 4.3 | 7 | 3.3 | 0 |
    | SZ (Greens) | 3.4 | 6 | 2.1 | 0 |
    | HZDS | - | - | **37.3** | **74** |

    **Table 2: General elections 1994-2002** (bold denotes coalition parties).

    |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
    | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
    | Party | **1994** | | **1998** | | **2002** | |
    | % Seats | | % Seats | | % Seats | |
    | HZDS | **34.9** | **61** | 27.0 | 43 | 19.5 | 36 |
    | SDĽ/SV | 10.4 | 18 | **14.6** | **23** | 1.4 | 0 |
    | MK/SMK | 10.1 | 17 | **9.1** | **15** | **11.1** | **20** |
    | KDH | 10.1 | 17 | - | - | **8.2** | **15** |
    | DÚ | 8.5 | 15 | - | - | - | - |
    | ZRS | **7.3** | **13** | 1.3 | 0 | 0.5 | 0 |
    | SNS | **5.4** | **9** | 9.1 | 14 | 3.3 | 0 |
    | SDK | - | - | **26.3** | **42** | - | - |
    | SOP | - | - | **8.0** | **13** | - | - |
    | SDKÚ | - | - | - | - | **15.9** | **28** |
    | *Smer* | - | - | - | - | 13.4 | 25 |
    | ANO | - | - | - | - | **8.0** | **15** |
    | KSS | 0.7 | 0 | 2.8 | 0 | 6.3 | 11 |

    **Table 3: General elections 2006-2016** (bold denotes government coalition parties).

    |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
    | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
    | Party | **2006** | | 2010 | | **2012** | | **2016** | |
    | % Seats | | % Seats | | % Seats | | ­ % Seats | |
    | *Smer*-SD | **29.1** | **50** | 34.8 | 62 | **44.4** | **83** | **28.3** | **49** |
    | SDKÚ-DS | 18.4 | 31 | **15.4** | **28** | 8.1 | 11 | 0.3 | 0 |
    | SNS | **11.7** | **20** | 5.1 | 9 | 4.6 | 0 | **8.6** | **15** |
    | SMK | 11.7 | 20 | 4.3 | 0 | 4.3 | 0 | 4.0 | 0 |
    | ĽS-HZDS | **8.79** | **15** | 4.3 | 0 | 0.9 | 0 | - | - |
    | KDH | 8.31 | 14 | **8.5** | **15** | 8.8 | 16 | 4.9 | 0 |
    | SaS | - | - | **12.1** | **22** | 5.1 | 11 | 12.1 | 21 |
    | *Most-Híd* | - | - | **8.1** | **14** | 6.9 | 13 | **6.5** | 11 |
    | OĽaNO | - | - | - | - | 8.6 | 16 | 11.0 | 19 |
    | Kotleba-ĽSNS | - | - | - | - | - | - | 8.0 | 14 |
    | *Sme Rodina* | - | - | - | - | - | - | 6.6 | 11 |
    | *#Sieť* | - | - | - | - | - | - | **5.6** | 10 |

    **Table 4: Parliamentary parties in Slovakia 1990-2016**

    ANO Aliancia nového občana/Alliance of a New Citizen

    DS Demokratická strana/Democratic Party

    DÚ Demokratická únia/Democratic Union)

    *Együttélés-*

    *Spolužitie* Coexistence

    (ĽS-)HZDS (Ľudová strana-)Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko/(People’s Party-)Movement for Democratic Slovakia

    KDH Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie/Christian Democratic Movement

    Kotleba-ĽSNS Kotleba-Ľudová strana naše Slovensko/Kotleba-People’s Party Our Slovakia

    KSS Komunistická strana Slovenska/Communist Party of Slovakia

    MK Maďarská koalícia/Hungarian Coalition

    MKDH Maďarské kresťansko demokratické hnutie/Hungarian Christian Democratic Movement

    *Most-Híd* Bridge

    OĽaNO Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti/Ordinary People and Independent Personalities

    SaS Sloboda a solidarita/Freedom and Solidarity

    SDK Slovak Democratic Coalition/Slovenska Demokratická Koalícia.

    SDĽ Strana demokratickej ľavice/Party of the Democratic Left

    SMK Hungarian Coalition

    SNS Slovenská národná strana/Slovak National Party.

    SOP Strana občianského porozumenia/Party of Civic Understanding

    SV Spoločná voľba/Common Choice.

    SZS Strana zelených na Slovensku/Green Party in Slovakia

    VPN Verejnosť proti násiliu/Public against Violence

    ZRS Združenie robotníkov Slovenska/Association of Workers of Slovakia

    SDKÚ Slovak Democratic Christian Union/Slovenská Demokraticka Kresťanská Únia

    *#Sieť* #Network

    *Sme Rodina* We are the Family-Boris Kollár

    *Smer(-SD)* Direction(-Social Democracy) [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
59. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
60. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)