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# SOCIAL RIGHTS MONITOR 2020

## COUNTRY MONITOR: SLOVAKIA



SOLIDAR's National Strategy Group (NSG) in Slovakia reports recent contrasting developments in working and living conditions. The rates of employment, at 73.4%, and unemployment, at 6.1%, are converging toward EU standards, but this does not reflect the reality of structural deficiencies, such as a shortage of high-skilled labour and an expected high rate of job automation. Furthermore, insufficient funding dedicated to targeted active employment is only widening social and regional disparities in the labour market. This is evident in the case of migrants and asylum seekers, who continue to lack adequate access to information, education and employment, despite improvements thanks to 2014 integration policies. The risk of poverty and social exclusion

has been decreasing since 2010 because of the National Framework Strategy for Promoting Social Inclusion and Combating Poverty, and it is now down to 16%. Yet, due to persistent social and regional inequalities, an increase in the cost of living and high taxation on labour, the NSG calls for an updated poverty alleviation strategy to improve living conditions for low-income and vulnerable groups. This is especially relevant given unequal access to healthcare services due to a lack of resources and a lack of just transition plans. As for the state of civic space, an increase in attacks on journalists is endangering critical and independent media, which are already suffering from an increased concentration of media ownership and declining neutrality.

	2018	2019	EU-28 2019
GINI index <sup>1</sup>	20.9	N/A	30.1
Unemployment <sup>2</sup>	6.5%	5.8%	6.3%
Gender Equality Index <sup>3</sup>	51.1	55.5	67.9 (2020)
In-work poverty <sup>4</sup>	6.0%	N/A	9.2%
Housing Overcrowding <sup>5</sup>	35.5%	N/A	15.6%
CIVICUS Civic Space Monitor <sup>6</sup>		NARROWED	N/A

### Selected indicators on the state of social rights

## EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES AND FAIR WORKING CONDITIONS

With a low share of direct tax revenues and the top statutory personal income tax rate reaching 25%, Slovakia continues to depend on a high share of social contributions, at 43.3%, to fund the welfare state.<sup>7</sup> Tax on labour makes up 43.8% of total tax revenue,<sup>8</sup> is one of the highest in the EU<sup>9</sup> and is expected to increase with the rise in the monthly minimum wage to EUR 580,<sup>10</sup> reports the National Strategy Group (NSG) led by AOPSS. The tax wedge on labour makes up 37.4% of total labour costs,<sup>11</sup> so Slovakia's tax system disproportionately affects

low-income earners and the employment prospects of vulnerable groups.<sup>12</sup> Yet the NSG also raises some concerns over the impact on job creation of the high employment costs, with SMEs and social-service providers experiencing increasing financial pressure.

Before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Slovak labour market had been registering continuous improvements since 2013. By the end of 2019, the employment rate reached 73.4%,<sup>13</sup> and unemployment was 6.1%,<sup>14</sup> both

1 Eurostat (2020). Gini coefficient of equivalised disposable income: [http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?lang=en&dataset=ilc\\_di12](http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?lang=en&dataset=ilc_di12)

2 Eurostat (2020). Unemployment by sex and age: annual data: [https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=une\\_rt\\_a&lang=en](https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=une_rt_a&lang=en)

3 European Institute for Gender Equality (2020). Gender Equality Index: <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2020/SK>

4 Eurostat (2020). In-work at-risk-of-poverty-rate : <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tespm070/default/table?lang=en>

5 Eurostat (2020). Overcrowding rate by age, sex and poverty status – total population: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc\\_lvho05a/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_lvho05a/default/table?lang=en)

6 CIVICUS (2020). Civic space monitor - Slovakia: <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/slovakia/>

7 European Commission (2020) Taxation Trends in the European Union: Data for the EU Member States, Iceland and Norway 2020 Edition [https://ec.europa.eu/taxation\\_customs/sites/taxation/files/taxation\\_trends\\_report\\_2020.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/taxation_customs/sites/taxation/files/taxation_trends_report_2020.pdf)

8 Ibid.

9 Gulisova, Simona (2019) An unflattering place for Slovakia. The levy on labor is the fourth highest in developed Europe <https://www.forbes.sk/nelichotiv-miesto-pre-slovensko-odvodove-zatazenie-mame-stvrte-najvyssie-vo-vyspelej-europe/>

10 Eurostat (2020) Monthly minimum wages-bi-annual data [https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=earn\\_mw\\_cur&lang=en](https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=earn_mw_cur&lang=en)

11 European Commission (2020) Taxation Trends in the European Union: Data for the EU Member States, Iceland and Norway 2020 Edition [https://ec.europa.eu/taxation\\_customs/sites/taxation/files/taxation\\_trends\\_report\\_2020.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/taxation_customs/sites/taxation/files/taxation_trends_report_2020.pdf)

12 European Commission (2020) Country Report Slovakia 2020 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0524&from=EN>

13 Eurostat (2020) Employment – annual statistics [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Employment\\_-\\_annual\\_statistics](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Employment_-_annual_statistics)

14 Eurostat (2020) Unemployment by sex and age – monthly data [https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=une\\_rt\\_m&lang=en](https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=une_rt_m&lang=en)

converging towards the EU average. Yet the NSG is critical of this picture, as the rates create a false sense of growth and do not reflect structural deficiencies such as the rate of job automation and the shortage of high-skilled labour. According to current estimates, between 40% and 64% of current jobs in the country will become automated, the NSG reports.

### **GOOD PRACTICE** **REPAS+ & KOMPAS+**

REPAS+ and KOMPAS+<sup>15</sup> tackle youth unemployment through reskilling, by providing further chances to adapt to the requirements of the labour market. The service users first submit an application to the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family and then select retraining or competence courses, for which they receive financial support. Upon completion of the courses, young jobseekers are given a certificate recognising these efforts to strengthen their employment prospects.

Given low spending on active employment measures and limited individualised counselling, social and regional disparities in the labour market are growing.<sup>16</sup> The employment rate of low-skilled workers is the lowest in the EU, at 36.1%.<sup>17</sup> Youth unemployment increased from 14.9% in 2018 to 15.3% in 2019.<sup>18</sup> The gender employment gap is 13% and the gender pay gap is 19% due to sector segregation and a lack of representation in the private sector.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, Bratislava's employment rate is 10 percentage points higher than that of Eastern Slovakia, while its unemployment rate is 7 percentage points lower.<sup>20</sup> In the absence of more-effective labour-market inclusion measures, social enterprises are addressing long-term unemployment and improving people's employment prospects.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, the NSG reports that these inequalities are expected to worsen given the Covid-19 social and economic crisis, as unemployment rose sharply to 6.8% in August 2020, with youth unemployment reaching 19.8%.<sup>22</sup>

### **WORKING CONDITIONS**

Amongst recent developments in working conditions, the NSG singles out the increase in the minimum wage and wage supplements. Not only has the constitution been amended to ensure a minimum statutory wage is applied to all employees, but an additional law introduced an automatic rise in the minimum wage to 60% of the average nominal wage if social partners fail to agree on a new minimum.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, the supplements for Saturday, Sunday and night work were raised to 50%, 100% and 40% of the minimum hourly wage respectively.<sup>24</sup>

In the run up to the 2020 parliamentary elections, political parties engaged in a series of debates on working conditions, the NSG reports. These discussions mainly revolved around reducing administrative and tax burdens, but there was also discussion of how to support the re-employment of the long-term

15 [https://www.upsvr.gov.sk/buxus/docs/SESF/Opis\\_NP\\_Vzdelavanie\\_MUoZ.pdf](https://www.upsvr.gov.sk/buxus/docs/SESF/Opis_NP_Vzdelavanie_MUoZ.pdf)

16 European Commission (2020) Country Report Slovakia 2020 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0524&from=EN>

17 Ibid.

18 Eurostat (2020) Unemployment by sex and age – monthly data [https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=une\\_rt\\_m&lang=en](https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=une_rt_m&lang=en)

19 European Commission (2020) Social Scoreboard <https://composite-indicators.jrc.ec.europa.eu/social-scoreboard/explorer?primarychart=timeline>

20 European Commission (2020) Country Report Slovakia 2020 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0524&from=EN>

21 Ibid.

22 Eurostat (2020) Unemployment by sex and age – monthly data [https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=une\\_rt\\_m&lang=en](https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=une_rt_m&lang=en)

23 Eurofound (2020) Living and working in Slovakia <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/country/slovakia#highlights-working-life-in-2019>

24 Ibid.

unemployed.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, the NSG points out that significant issues regarding working conditions were left out, such as support for professional-growth and skills training.

## EDUCATION

Despite some improvements in primary education achievement, the NSG finds the lack of alignment of the education system and persistent inequalities in performance as barriers to future integration into the labour market. Little effort is made to address these issues in the opinion of the NSG, as proposals to align education with labour market needs have yet materialised. Low salaries for teachers, at 68% of the national average, act as a deterrent to the employment of more staff in the education system.<sup>26</sup>

The rate of early school leaving has been rising since 2010 and is currently 8.3%.<sup>27</sup> Related to this, the performance in basic skills development – especially in IT – is low: Slovakia has a proportion of low achievers above the EU average, and it ranks 22nd in the Digital Economy and Society Index 2020.<sup>28</sup> The NSG indicated that only 27% of Slovaks have attained above-basic digital skills, compared with an EU average of 33%. As a result, 60% of companies seeking to hire workers with ICT profiles reported difficulty in the recruitment process due to the limited availability of candidates.<sup>29</sup> The exception to this trend is in the

dual education system for vocational education and training (VET). Enrolment in VET is at an all-time high of 68.9%, and the employability of VET students reached 84.7%<sup>30</sup> before the Covid-19 outbreak.

The NSG reiterated the education system's insufficient capacity to address social disparities, given the persistent segregation between high and low achievers. With nine out of 10 children in unemployed households living in poverty, as reported by the NSG, inclusion programmes are not effective in addressing the negative impact – such as the cycle of poverty – of such segregation on children from disadvantaged backgrounds.<sup>31</sup> An example of this is the strategy for Roma integration, which ran until 2020. Despite producing annual plans with dedicated measures for education, only 51.7% of the Roma population are still enrolled in formal secondary education at the age of 16.<sup>32</sup> Eastern Slovakia, where the Roma share of the population is higher, registered a lower percentage of students completing secondary education.<sup>33</sup>

## INCLUSION OF MIGRANTS

With the adoption of the first comprehensive migration policy in 2011 and the integration policy in 2014, the NSG considers significant steps were taken to address migrants' integration needs. Even though foreigners only account for 2.2% of the total population,<sup>34</sup> 35 out

25 Ďurana, Radovan (2020) Employment Flexibility Industry In 2020 [https://iness.sk/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/INT/2020/int\\_1-2020\\_index\\_pruznosti\\_zamestnavania\\_2020\\_grafy.pdf](https://iness.sk/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/INT/2020/int_1-2020_index_pruznosti_zamestnavania_2020_grafy.pdf)

26 European Commission (2020) Country Report Slovakia 2020 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0524&from=EN>

27 European Commission (2020) Social Scoreboard <https://composite-indicators.jrc.ec.europa.eu/social-scoreboard/explorer?primarychart=timeline>

28 European Commission (2020) Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) 2020 <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/digital-economy-and-society-index-desi-2020>

29 Ibid.

30 European Commission (2020) Country Report Slovakia 2020 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0524&from=EN>

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Naydenova, Violeta and Matarazzo, Martina (2019) Post-2020 EU Roma Strategy: The Way Forward <https://www.opensociety-foundations.org/uploads/7004b0da-956d-4df9-a1f7-d889a00ae9d5/post-2020-eu-roma-strategy-the-way-forward-20190627.pdf>

34 Caritas Slovakia (2019) Our Common Home: Migration and Development in Slovakia [https://www.charita.sk/cojedomov/N%C3%A1%C5%A1%20spolo%C4%8Dn%C3%BD%20domov%20\(SK\).pdf](https://www.charita.sk/cojedomov/N%C3%A1%C5%A1%20spolo%C4%8Dn%C3%BD%20domov%20(SK).pdf)

of the 90 applications for asylum were accepted in 2019.<sup>35</sup> Departures of Slovaks exceed arrivals of foreigners,<sup>36</sup> and this framework recognises the importance of migrants to address significant labour shortages and cover the skills gap, the NSG reports.

Action by the Ministry of Interior's Migration Office consists of managing residential camps, provision of essential services and liaising with other key stakeholders in the governance of migration inclusion via local inclusion managers, according to the NSG. The two existing residential camps have a joint capacity of 140 people, and they provide accommodation, safety, meals and urgent medical care for asylum seekers.<sup>37</sup> Asylum seekers receive a one-off financial contribution amounting to 1.5 months-worth of subsistence income and, with the help of local authorities, further support related to rental housing, healthcare, citizenship and the labour market. Additionally, modifications of labour legislation have made it easier to redirect the foreign workforce towards sectors in need

of labour and to hire seasonal workers.<sup>38</sup> NGOs mostly play a role as service providers co-funded through Asylum, Migration and Integration Funds and European Social Funds allocated to Slovakia for 2014-2020.<sup>39</sup> Their services mostly concern mandatory language courses, civic education and vocational training.<sup>40</sup>

Yet the NSG indicated some shortcomings in this framework for migrant inclusion. The migration policy puts little effort into family reunification or better access to information. Preferential treatment is given to high-skilled workers compared with low-skilled migrants, refugees, students and immigrants seeking to reunite with family members. Unequal access to education and employment plus (indirect) discrimination by both government and society further limit the positive impact of inclusion measures.<sup>41</sup> The NSG also points out that there is an inadequate number of social workers qualified to attend to migrants' complex and precarious situations, due to gaps in social-work programmes in higher education.

35 European Migration Network (2020) Annual Report on Migration and Asylum 2019 [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/00\\_eu\\_arm2019\\_synthesis\\_report\\_final\\_en\\_0.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/00_eu_arm2019_synthesis_report_final_en_0.pdf)

36 European Commission (2019) Governance of Migrant Integration in Slovakia <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/governance/slovakia>

37 European Migration Network (2020) Annual Report on Migration and Asylum 2019 [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/00\\_eu\\_arm2019\\_synthesis\\_report\\_final\\_en\\_0.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/00_eu_arm2019_synthesis_report_final_en_0.pdf)

38 Ibid.

39 European Commission (2019) Governance of Migrant Integration in Slovakia <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/governance/slovakia>

40 Ibid.

41 Caritas Slovakia (2019) Our Common Home: Migration and Development in Slovakia [https://www.charita.sk/cojedomov/N%C3%A1%C5%A1%20spolo%C4%8Dn%C3%BD%20domov%20\(SK\).pdf](https://www.charita.sk/cojedomov/N%C3%A1%C5%A1%20spolo%C4%8Dn%C3%BD%20domov%20(SK).pdf)

# SOCIAL PROTECTION AND INCLUSION

Slovakia exceeded the Europe 2020 target of reducing the number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion (AROPE) by 25% by 2020. The AROPE rate has been decreasing since 2010 and was at 16% in 2018.<sup>42</sup> Severe material deprivation has followed the same downward trend, despite an increase from 7% in 2018 to 7.9% in 2019.<sup>43</sup> The decline has been achieved through low levels of income inequality and improvements in employment rates.<sup>44</sup> The National Strategy Group (NSG) highlights the important contribution to reducing poverty made by the National Framework Strategy for Promoting Social Inclusion and Combating Poverty.

Yet these improvements have not yet extended to all social groups and regions in Slovakia, the main reasons being the lack of equal opportunities and uneven access to social services. Single-parent families registered an AROPE rate of 45.7%, and households with three or more children registered 37.7%,<sup>45</sup> while the rate for Roma was 84.7%.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, the NSG raises concerns about the high costs of basic necessities and the deterioration of living conditions amongst the elderly due to low pensions. In the context of a 31.1% decrease in the impact of social transfers,<sup>47</sup> below the EU average, the system has yet to provide solutions

for these inequalities. There are also persistent differences in social integration and uneven access to social services between Bratislava and Eastern and South-eastern Slovakia.<sup>48</sup> No recent evaluations of the above-mentioned national strategy to combat poverty have been reported by the NSG.

With a sustained increase in housing prices – including a 5.7% rise in 2019, 5% above wage growth<sup>49</sup> – housing affordability is an issue in Slovakia, especially in Bratislava, to which not enough attention has been given, according to the NSG. With 90.1% of the population living in houses they own,<sup>50</sup> the current regulatory framework favours home ownership and provides little support for renters or social housing. This not only has an impact on labour mobility and disparities in regional employment rates, but it is also driving up households' debt-to-income ratios, which currently average 68.69%.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, 7.9% of tenants are experiencing severe material deprivation and are therefore more vulnerable to the current price volatility and rising private debt.<sup>52</sup> A shortage of public housing and affordable rental options is increasing the number of homeless people in Slovakia and hindering their access to essential social services. As there is no national strategy on homelessness, some local

42 European Commission (2020) Social Scoreboard <https://composite-indicators.jrc.ec.europa.eu/social-scoreboard/explorer?primarychart=timeline>

43 Ibid.

44 Caritas Slovakia (2019) Caritas CARES! Country Report 2019: Slovakia [https://www.caritas.eu/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Caritas-Cares-Report-Slovakia\\_singles\\_light.pdf](https://www.caritas.eu/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Caritas-Cares-Report-Slovakia_singles_light.pdf)

45 European Commission (2020) Country Report Slovakia 2020 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0524&from=EN>

46 Ibid.

47 European Commission (2020) Social Scoreboard <https://composite-indicators.jrc.ec.europa.eu/social-scoreboard/explorer?primarychart=timeline>

48 European Commission (2020) Country Report Slovakia 2020 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0524&from=EN>

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 Eurostat (2020) Gross debt-to-income ratio of households <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tec00104/default/table?lang=en>

52 European Commission (2020) Social Scoreboard <https://composite-indicators.jrc.ec.europa.eu/social-scoreboard/explorer?primarychart=timeline>

housing-integration measures, such as those in Bratislava and Trnava, are yielding positive results in the prevention and reduction of homelessness.<sup>53</sup>

The NSG has reported no improvement in access to affordable and quality healthcare in Slovakia, as the previous government's planned reform has been halted. Despite a low rate of self-reported unmet medical needs of 2.6%,<sup>54</sup> there is a high number of deaths due to preventable causes, at 2.44 per 1,000 people, and a high prevalence of chronic diseases.<sup>55</sup> These factors increase the pressure on a healthcare system with one of the lowest per-capita expenditures in the EU.<sup>56</sup> Improvements in primary care continue to be a challenge due to the hospital-centric system and a lack of general practitioners, who receive low salaries and are constrained by limits to the treatment they can offer.<sup>57</sup> Access to primary care remains a challenge for marginalised communities and low-income households in regions other than Bratislava, Kosice and Zilina.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, the NSG reports that the

government has promised to increase the accessibility and effectiveness of the system, by increasing health expenditure and shifting financial incentives for GPs to reward the quality rather than the quantity of treatment.

Despite a renewed interest by the government in green policies and the adoption of a 2050 carbon neutrality target, the NSG reports that the level of investment put forward in the National Energy and Climate Plan<sup>59</sup> is insufficient to address the transition to a greener economy.<sup>60</sup> Following consultations with local, regional and national stakeholders,<sup>61</sup> the Action Plan for the Horná Nitra region provides some support for job creation away from traditional, carbon-intensive sectors, yet it fails to put forward alternative heating sources.<sup>62</sup> Other regions, such as Trenčín and Košice, that are locations for steel production, coal mining and high-carbon cement production present significant socio-economic challenges for the transition to a green economy. These will need to be addressed through the Just Transition Fund.<sup>63</sup>

53 Baptista, Isabel and Marlier, Eric (2019) Fighting homelessness and housing exclusion in Europe

54 European Commission (2020) Social Scoreboard <https://composite-indicators.jrc.ec.europa.eu/social-scoreboard/explorer?primarychart=timeline>

55 European Commission (2020) Country Report Slovakia 2020 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0524&from=EN>

56 Ibid.

57 OECD and European Commission (2019) State of Health in the EU: Slovakia Country Report

58 Ibid.

59 Slovak Ministry of the Economy (2019) Integrated National Energy and Climate Plan for 2021 to 2030 [https://ec.europa.eu/energy/sites/ener/files/sk\\_final\\_necp\\_main\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/energy/sites/ener/files/sk_final_necp_main_en.pdf)

60 European Commission (2020) Country Report Slovakia 2020 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0524&from=EN>

61 European Commission (2019) Supporting transition from coal energy in Slovakia [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/supporting\\_transition\\_from\\_coal\\_energy\\_in\\_slovakia.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/supporting_transition_from_coal_energy_in_slovakia.pdf)

62 European Commission (2020) Country Report Slovakia 2020 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0524&from=EN>

63 Ibid.

## CIVIC SPACE

Freedom of association and peaceful assembly have been sufficiently respected, according to the National Strategy Group (NSG). But a narrowing of civic space in Slovakia<sup>64</sup> has come as a result of recent developments in the protection of freedom of expression. During the trial for the murder of the investigative journalists Ján Kuciak and Martina Kušnírová, links between key political figures and an illegal journalism surveillance operation were disclosed. Furthermore, continuous attacks on the media from government officials, increased media ownership concentration under the Czech businessman Petr Kellner and the public broadcasting company's departure from its position of neutrality under new management have led Slovakia to be ranked 33rd in the Press Freedom Index.<sup>65</sup> The 2019 amendment of the Press Act, which grants public officials

the right to respond to stories written about them, is considered an increase in politicians' influence over the media.<sup>66</sup>

Social partners are reported to have shifted their focus from traditional social dialogue to alternative means of influencing decision-making, such as lobbying, public protests and media campaigns.<sup>67</sup> The NSG locates the cause as the lack of interest by the previous government in collaborating with civil society organisations. As a result, many CSOs are vulnerable to a lack of continuous funding and depend exclusively on EU funds.<sup>68</sup> Under Slovakia's new political leadership, the NSG reports a renewed interest in support for NGOs and CSOs, especially in areas such as human rights, democracy and the fight against discrimination and corruption.

## COMPARISON WITH THE COUNTRY SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

In the context of the increased disparities between Western and Eastern Slovakia and between Slovakia and the rest of the EU, the European Commission's 2020 Country Specific Recommendations for Slovakia focus exclusively on addressing infrastructure weaknesses exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis. They recommend increasing the resilience of the health-care system by improving primary care, addressing the shortage of doctors and reversing the impacts of underfunding. Further attention

is given to the need to improve access and performance gaps in the education system and to align skills development with the needs of the job market. With the Covid-19 crisis expected to have a disproportionate impact on marginalised communities, the Commission recommends revising access to unemployment support to extend coverage, especially for Roma, the elderly and low-skilled people. All of these recommendations are in line with the requests and remarks of the National Strategy Group.

64 CIVICUS (2016) CIVICUS MONITOR: Slovakia <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/slovakia/>

65 Reporters Without Borders (2020) 'Slovakia' <https://rsf.org/en/slovakia>

66 Freedom House (2020) Freedom in the world 2020: Slovakia <https://freedomhouse.org/country/slovakia/freedom-world/2020>

67 European Commission (2020) Country Report Slovakia 2020 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TEXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0524&from=EN>

68 Ibid.

SOLIDAR's Social Rights Monitor 2020 has been developed in the framework of the Together for Social Europe programme co-funded by the EU Programme for Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI). It provides an insight into the state of social rights in 17 European countries. The Monitor assesses the state of social Europe in terms of equality of opportunities, fair working conditions, social protection, inclusion and civic space based on the observations of Civil Society Organisations working on the ground in combination with statistical data and scientific findings. It does so on the basis of observations of National Strategy Groups set up in each of these countries by a SOLIDAR member or partner. The 2020 Monitor also analyses to what extent these aspects are reflected in the Country Specific Recommendations of the European Semester process towards a socially sustainable recovery after the Covid-19 crisis.

**RESPONSIBLE EDITOR:**

Mikael Leyi

**AUTHOR:**

Miguel Hernandez Littlewood

**COORDINATION OF PUBLICATION:**

Carlos Roldán Mejías, Violeta Meotto,  
Jedde Hollewijn, Julie Martinaud

**COPY EDITING:**

Sebastian Moffett

**GRAPHIC DESIGN:**

Maximilian Fischer

**CONTRIBUTIONS FROM:**

Asociácia odborných pracovníkov v sociálnych službách  
(AOPSS)



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SOLIDAR is a European Network of more than 50 Civil Society organisations who gather several millions of citizens throughout Europe and worldwide. SOLIDAR voices the values of its member organisations to the EU and international institutions across the three main policy sectors: social affairs, international cooperation and lifelong learning.

For more info [www.solidar.org](http://www.solidar.org)

Avenue des Arts, 50  
1000 Brussels - Belgium  
+32 2 500 10 20  
[www.solidar.org](http://www.solidar.org)  
@SOLIDAR\_EU



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