




COUNTRY MONITOR



SLOVAKIA

Social Rights Monitor 2019



Slovakia is characterised by strong regional inequalities, including in terms of employment, education and social mobility and inclusion. The west of the country outperforms the east in virtually all aspects. Similar to other countries in the area, Slovakia is experiencing a period of very low unemployment and even a looming shortage on the labour market. However, long-term unemployment remains a problem, mainly due to skills mismatches and a lack of basic skills. The education system does not facilitate upward social mobility or lifelong learning and there is a worrying trend of increasingly more early school leavers. Due to limited access to formal childcare, the gender employment gap for young women is growing. The integration of Roma, in both education and the labour market, continues to be a challenge. Furthermore, because of the low coverage rate and low benefits, the social protection system is unable to effectively protect people from poverty and social exclusion. Finally, freedom of speech is under pressure as a result of politicians' continuous attacks on the media.



Gini Index: 23.2

Unemployment: 6.5%

Gender equality index: 54.1

Youth unemployment: 14.9%

AROPE: 16.3%

Social welfare spending (as % of GDP): 14.5%

Tax on labour as share of total taxes: 53.9%

In work poverty: 6.3%

CIVICUS civic space monitor: Narrowed

Equal opportunities and fair working conditions

Economic growth has led to an increase in employment¹ and an all-time-low level of unemployment for Slovakia.² Currently, a shortage on the labour market is even looming³, which has caused a rise in wages.⁴ However, despite the implementation of an action plan, long-term unemployment remains an unresolved issue. Skills mismatches and a lack of digital and technological skills are the main cause of long-term unemployment. This problem might become even more pressing in the future, as two-thirds of jobs in Slovakia are likely to be automated or will change drastically due to automatization. A lack of lifelong learning opportunities further aggravates the situation.⁵

Youth unemployment has significantly decreased to 14.9%⁶, however our National Strategy Group indicates that this is not reflected in young people's expectations for the future. They report that young Slovaks have low expectations for the future and many are moving abroad for better education and employment opportunities. This outflow of labour force is only partially compensated by the influx of third country nationals, mainly from Ukraine and Serbia, coming to Slovakia to find work.⁷

Education

Educational outcomes in Slovakia are low and not showing improvement. There are large regional disparities, with the regions in the south-east performing significantly worse than the rest of the country. Public spending on education is low compared to the EU average, and has been decreasing as a percentage of GDP. This is also reflected in the low salaries for teachers, which makes the profession unattractive for skilled workers entering the labour market.⁸

The education system furthermore does not facilitate social mobility.⁹ Students from an advantaged background are much more likely to attain tertiary education than those with a less favourable socioeconomic background.¹⁰ Integration of Roma children through education has proven difficult, as 62% of Roma children attend a school where all or most other students are also Roma.¹¹ Although the rate of early school leavers is lower than the EU-average, it has increased from 4.9% in 2009 to 8.6% in 2018.¹² Again, regional disparities are high here, with a drop-out rate of 4.7% in the west and 14.7% in the east of Slovakia.¹³ Roma students are overrepresented in this group, as it is estimated that 58% of Roma leave school early.¹⁴ A new reform plan (2018-2027) intends to improve the quality and inclusiveness of the education system, however, so far its effects have been limited.¹⁵

Gender equality

Like most other countries, Slovakia is facing a gender employment gap, which at 19% is higher than the EU average. In 2017, at 19.8%, the gender pay gap was also larger than the EU average.¹⁶ However, unlike in most other countries, instead of closing, the employment gap is widening for women between the ages of 25 and 34. This is largely caused



by the low enrolment in early childcare and limited availability of childcare facilities, which prevents women of childbearing age from returning to work.¹⁷ The National Strategy Group reports that in terms of work-life balance policies, Slovakia does not go far beyond the provisions stipulated by EU legislation.¹⁸

Good practice

Childcare reforms

The education reform plan intends to increase women's participation in the labour market and has created 1800 new childcare places in 2018. Furthermore, a new legislative framework on childcare provides unemployed parents with access to childcare, giving them more opportunity to return to work. The government is also in the process of building and renovating 500 childcare facilities mainly aimed at providing access to childcare for marginalised groups such as Roma. Finally, they have also announced that in 2020 the age of compulsory education will be lowered to 5 years old.

Social protection and inclusion

Slovakia has the smallest income inequality of Europe, with a GINI coefficient of 23.2 in 2017.¹⁹ However, this number hides large regional differences. Slovakia's wealth is largely concentrated in the west of the country in the region surrounding the capital. The east of the country is significantly poorer and faces many socioeconomic challenges.²⁰ The National Strategy Group reports that poverty eradication does not seem to be a systematic objective of the Slovak government.

Social protection and healthcare

The impact of social transfers on poverty reduction is below average and has deteriorated since 2014.²¹ The minimum income constitutes of an average

benefit of €134.62 per month, which is far from sufficient to cover basic needs. Furthermore, in 2017, 70% of the people at risk of poverty did not have access to the minimum income scheme. Despite some loosening in 2018, unemployment benefits are also limited by strict eligibility requirements²², resulting in less than 20% of the short-term unemployed being covered.²³ There are concerns about the long-term sustainability of the healthcare and social protection system. The old-age dependency ratio continues to rise²⁴, increasing the costs of healthcare and pensions. The dependency ratio is even expected to triple by 2060, which endangers the financial sustainability.²⁵ Healthcare providers struggle to find well-qualified staff, especially in rural areas. Currently, a large share of the staff is over 50 years old, and thus set to retire soon.²⁶

Integration

Integration of minority groups, most notably Roma, remains a challenge. As mentioned previously, the participation and performance of Roma children in education is below average. This is one of the reasons why in the labour market, Roma are underrepresented in formally paid work. FRA estimates that only 25% of working-age Roma are in paid work. For women these numbers are even lower.²⁷ Slovakia's strategy for integrating Roma focusses on changing the general public's attitude towards Roma. For this strategy, the government cooperates with Civil Society Organisations, churches, the media, academic institutions and Roma communities.²⁸

Civic space

Civic space in Slovakia is classified as narrowed.²⁹ The National Strategy Group reports that there is no real culture of volunteering in modern Slovakia, as these activities are commonly associated with the socialism of the past. Freedom house warns



that whilst civil liberties are generally well-protected, large scale political corruption is a threat to the democratic process and freedom of speech. In 2018, a journalist who was working on uncovering the alleged links between Prime Minister Fico and the Italian mafia was murdered, along with his fiancée, in their house.³⁰ This sparked mass demonstrations against the government, eventually leading to the Prime Minister stepping down. As the leader of Smer-SD, Fico continues to publicly attack the media, calling them ‘anti-Slovak’ amongst many other insults. Media that were previously owned by large international media companies are increasingly falling into the hands and influence of local businessmen. Furthermore, politicians continue to use the harsh penalties for defamation to intimidate journalists.³¹

Comparison to Country Specific Recommendations

The Country Specific Recommendations for Slovakia address many of the challenges also brought forward by our National Strategy Group. For example, the need for better quality education that equips students with a solid foundation of basic skills and allows workers to adapt to the changing demands of the labour market. They also mention the lack of sufficient formal childcare and the need for integrating Roma and combatting corruption. However, there seems to be insufficient attention on the large regional inequalities in the country. Furthermore, there is no mention of the low coverage of the social protection system and the inadequate benefits that are unable to keep people from falling into poverty.



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SOLIDAR is a European Network of membership based 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, lifelong learning and international cooperation.



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