

## POPULISM AND CORRUPTION ARE MAIN THREATS TO DEMOCRACY IN SLOVAKIA

### Summary of the country report on the state and development of democracy in Slovakia

INEKO, April 2017

The report on the state and development of democracy in Slovakia is the main output of the INEKO project which has been financially supported by the Centre for International Private Enterprise (CIPE) and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) in Bratislava. This summary includes some of key findings of the original Slovak version together with recommendations for reversing the growth or the strong influence of non-democratic and authoritative powers. The report should serve as supporting document for decision-making about long-term and more intensive support of selected initiatives aimed at the development of democracy in Slovakia.

INEKO Institute is a non-governmental non-profit organization established in support of economic and social reforms which aim to remove barriers to the long-term positive development of the Slovak economy and society.

#### Some of main findings

- According to international comparisons of the quality of democracy, Slovakia is one of the countries which are free and prevalingly democratic. It also results from three examined rankings made by Freedom House, the Economist Intelligence Unit and the Democracy Ranking Association that **from among V4 countries we rank in front of Hungary in terms of the quality of democracy, but we are still lagging behind the Czech Republic.**
- According to an INEKO questionnaire survey made at the turn of September and October 2016 with selected public figures in Slovakia<sup>1</sup>, the level of democracy in Slovakia is worse than in CR and Austria, but it is better than in Poland, Hungary and Ukraine.
- 7-year research of the level of the quality of democracy, IVO Barometer of the Institute for Public Affairs (2008-2014) has shown that the governments of Smer-SD, SNS and HZDS as well as the absolute rule of Smer-SD did not move the quality of democracy in Slovakia forward but, on the contrary, they made it worse.

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<sup>1</sup> From among 81 participants there were approximately 30% activists from nongovernmental organizations, 27% people from business and economic analysts, 21% people from academy, 12% journalists and other publicists and 10% civil servants and politicians.

- **According to Eurobarometer public opinion survey, the trust to the EU in Slovakia decreased over 2009-2014.** The share of people tending to trust the EU decreased from record level 71% in autumn 2009 to 35% in spring 2014 and consequently stabilized at 42% in autumn 2016. Besides impact of the global financial crisis probably also the public debt problems of several member countries and the refugee crisis contributed to the decline.
- According to Eurobarometer public opinion survey, the satisfaction with how democracy works decreased over 2009 – 2014 in Slovakia, probably also due to the impact of the global financial crisis. Since then it has been improving which is probably also due to the rapid rise in real wages and decrease of unemployment rate. In november 2016, there were 53% rather dissatisfied people and 43% fairly satisfied. Compared to neighbors from V4 only people in Hungary perceived lower satisfaction with their democracy.
- According to Eurobarometer public opinion survey from November 2016, people in Slovakia perceive as the most important issues facing their country unemployment (34%), health and social security (33%), followed by rising prices and cost of living (22%) and economic situation (19%). The corruption was missing among predefined answers. According to the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index, Slovakia ranked 54. from among 176 countries in 2016, compared to 29. Poland, 47. Czech Republic and 57. Hungary (better ranking means lower corruption).
- **From among V4 countries, people in Slovakia tend to distrust most the police (50% distrust, the average for other V3 countries was 34%) as well as the justice and legal system (61% distrust, V3 average was 50%).** On the contrary, people in Slovakia tend to distrust least the national parliament (62% distrust, V3 average was 71%) and the government (62%, V3 average was 66%). Similar to satisfaction with how democracy works in Slovakia, the development of trust to mentioned institutions clearly correlates with the development of real wages and unemployment rate. Over 2009-2014 the trust was mainly decreasing and since then it has been mostly increasing.
- **According to a representative opinion poll focused on perception of democracy, which we organized for the purposes of the present study, 40% of the population considers the quality of democracy in Slovakia to be rather bad to poor and only 26% of the interviewees are satisfied.** According to 43% of the population, the level of democracy has deteriorated in the last 5 years, while only 18% thinks that it has improved. Compared to common people, experts whom we have turned to in a questionnaire survey were even more critical about the state and development of democracy. Half of them finds the current state of democracy rather bad to poor and 71% thinks that the quality of democracy has deteriorated in the last 5 years. The reason is mainly a failure to investigate the cases of Gorila<sup>2</sup> and Bašternák<sup>3</sup>, no punishment for bribery, the entry of Marián Kotleba and his party, ĽS-Naše Slovensko<sup>4</sup>, into politics, the response of politicians to the refugee

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<sup>2</sup> Disclosure of transcription of records from secret meetings of an influential businessman with top politicians which should prove bribery practices.

<sup>3</sup> Revelation of suspected tax frauds of a businessman with close connections to top politicians of the ruling SMER-SD party.

<sup>4</sup> It is a right-wing extremist party, the representatives of which openly admire the fascist Slovak Republic from the WWII period.

crisis as well as the form of election of the General Prosecutor<sup>5</sup>. Contrary to that, democracy was most boosted by disclosure of court rulings and contracts with the state, the appearance and work of Andrej Kiska in the position of the President of SR as well as the fact that Štefan Harabin was not elected as chairman of the Judicial Council of the Supreme Court of SR.

- **Experts believe that from among political parties, Kotleba-ĽSNS and Boris Kollár's Sme rodina are mainly harmful**, and SNS and Smer-SD are rather harmful as well. No political party makes substantial contributions to democracy. The parties of KDĽ, SaS, Most-Híd and OĽANO-NOVA contribute only slightly.
- **According to experts, President Andrej Kiska, NGOs focused on systemic changes and control of the powerful as well as Jana Dubovcová, a public ombudsman, contribute most to the development of democracy with regard to their potential.** Contrary to that, the Government, the National Council of SR and the General Prosecutor's Office contribute least. As far as civic activities are concerned, the activities of watchdogs and think-tanks focused on systemic changes and on combating bribery as well as civic protests in the Gorila and Bašternák cases contribute most to the development of democracy.
- **Experts believe that as far as individual attributes of democracy are concerned, the freedom and quality of NGOs and the media function the best<sup>6</sup>.** NGOs have a relatively strong tradition in Slovakia since the "Mečiar" era in the 1990's when a part of the public became active - also thanks to international support - and tried to reverse the policy of nationalism and isolation from western structures fostered by the then government led by Vladimír Mečiar. At the moment, the stability of NGOs focused on controlling the Government and systemic changes is rather fragile, mainly as a result of the retirement of foreign donors and only partial compensation from national sources.
- The representative opinion poll has demonstrated what people most dislike about the state of democracy we currently have in Slovakia. **The main cause of dissatisfaction of the population is the fact that politicians do not work in the public interest but in their own interest or in the interest of affiliated entrepreneurs.** Similarly, they do not like the fact that non-economical management of state property and state funds is not punished, as well as the fact that people are not equal before the law and that law enforceability is poor. The questionnaire survey among public figures has shown similar conclusions.
- **Dissatisfaction with the abuse of power drives many to extremism.** Based on November 2016 public opinion poll, 23.9 % of citizens of Slovakia believed that abolishment of the parliament system and establishment of dictatorship were an alternative to the current state of democracy. As many as 28% of the population would go back to the socialist regime that existed here before 1989. As many as 35% admitted Slovakia should leave the European Union.
- People refusing democracy or the EU are still in a substantial minority. Most of the population supports democracy. **More than two thirds of respondents can see its improvement in the greater involvement of decent people in governing public affairs. Almost the same proportion of people**

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<sup>5</sup> The President of SR did not appoint the General Prosecutor who had been lawfully elected by Parliament, which led to a re-election and later the appointment of a candidate proposed by the ruling SMER-SD party.

<sup>6</sup> Here we should note that the results may be slightly distorted due to the fact that from among survey participants there were approximately 30% activists from nongovernmental organizations and 12% journalists and other publicists.

wishes to strengthen the independence and expertise of police investigators, public prosecution, judiciary and audit and regulatory authorities in order to reduce the risk of any abuse of power. Strengthening the independence and expertise of audit and regulatory authorities has been identified as one of the key solutions also by selected public figures in the questionnaire survey.

- **The moods of the population are also reflected in the political map of Slovakia.** Smer-SD, a party which has been a political leader in the last decade, lost over 16 pp of its supporters in the elections held in March 2016. The success of the right-wing extremist party of ĽS-Naše Slovensko (ĽSNS) in March 2016 was particularly surprising (it obtained 8.04% of votes), and it had not been forecast by any official pre-election opinion polls. The populist SME RODINA – Boris Kollár party (which obtained 6.62% of votes) also got into Parliament. Post-election political reality showed that neither the right-wing nor the left-wing groups were actually able to create a functional government. A mixed leftist-rightist government model returned to Slovakia after 14 years. In the name of combating extremism, representatives of the nationalistic SNS party and representatives of the Hungarian political Most-Híd party are participating in it together for the first time in history.
- **Voters of ĽS-Naše Slovensko are most frustrated with the current state of society and voters of SMER-SD are least frustrated. Compared to other parties, voters of ĽS-Naše Slovensko and SME RODINA – Boris Kollár are less aware of the relation between the quality of democracy and the quality of life. This may explain their higher willingness to accept radical solutions.** It is precisely voters of the two above-mentioned parties who are most willing to support Slovakia in leaving the EU. Voters of SME RODINA – Boris Kollár also mostly accept establishment of a dictatorship or a return to the socialist regime. Extreme solutions are supported mostly by people with low education and low income.
- **Kotleba has succeeded in mobilizing the first-time-voters.** According to the exit poll of the Focus agency from March 2016 the ĽSNS party was the most successful among the first-time voters attracting almost one quarter of them. This was confirmed also in the elections simulated among students organized prior to the 2016 elections at secondary schools all accross Slovakia by the Youth Council of Bratislava Region in cooperation with the Institute of Public Affairs. With the sample of almost 12 thousand students the winners of the simulated elections were the parties Sme rodina–Boris Kollár and Kotleba–ĽSNS.
- **Supporting extremist and populist parties in Slovakia has major economic reasons.** Regions where extremist parties have gained most support are also the poorest ones. If we focus particularly on ĽSNS, then four regions out of the top 5 regions with the highest support of ĽSNS are also regions most threatened by poverty: the regions of Banská Bystrica, Žilina, Prešov, and Košice. Just like with regions there is a link between support of ĽSNS and economic underdevelopment of particular districts<sup>7</sup> (correlation coefficient 0.36 with poverty index and -0.46 with average wage). Somewhat weaker link is also between support of ĽSNS and share of the Roma population in particular district (correlation coefficient 0.22).

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<sup>7</sup> There are 8 regions (Higher Territorial Units) and 79 districts in Slovakia.

## Some of main recommendations aimed at enhancing democracy

### For the government and other public authorities

- Fight against corruption. Perform trustworthy investigation of all cases suspicious of corruption and power abuse, particularly the "Bašternák" and "Gorila" cases. Cancel the so-called "Mečiar's Amnesties" and investigate related cases, particularly the abduction of Michal Kováč Jr. abroad, which occurred in 1995.
- Implement judicial reform. Strengthen the independence of the police, public prosecution and courts by separating them from the executive, establishing an independent inspection of the police and of public prosecution, abolishing the possibility to withdraw the Police President without a reason, opening the Prosecutorial Council to members from outside the prosecutorial environment, etc.
- Support the independence and expertise of auditing and regulatory offices, e.g. by involving at least two of the highest constitutional authorities in appointing and withdrawing leading representatives, by establishing appellate bodies independent from first-instance authorities, by building analytical capacities, etc.
- Professionalize state administration, foster professional nominations in the management of state-owned organizations and companies financed and co-financed from the state budget, look for high officials and managers through public interview procedures
- Continue implementing the "Value for Money" project and extend it to the entire public sector:
- Reduce corruption by enhancing transparency in the public sector
- Raise awareness, educate teachers and foster a reform of the content of education with the aim of developing critical thinking and knowledge about the functioning and importance of democracy and of the EU for the quality of life of its citizens (including historical connections); use the best foreign and national practices; involve also important and popular persons in awareness-raising (e.g. from culture, sport); support public awareness campaigns targeting a general audience
- Enhance the quality of public services, e.g. in education, healthcare, judiciary, etc., e.g. by measuring and disclosing results (higher accountability), financial incentives, exchanging best practices, etc.
- Eradicate poverty, social exclusion and regional disparities

### For politicians and political parties

- Disclose information about sources of financing and about the use of funds in a clear manner and at one location, both for the entire political party and for individual candidates, disclose contracts on the provision of funds
- Disclose detailed declarations of assets, also for close family relatives
- Adopt codes of ethics for political parties obliging them to inform about any conflicts of interest, eliminate bribery, disclose information about sources and use of funds
- Assess and disclose the impact of election programmes on public finances, the labour market and the business environment