



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.



BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

The Slovak Republic is a landlocked country situated in the heart of central Europe. Covering 18,933 square miles (49,035 square kilometers), it is about the size of West Virginia. The land is generally mountainous; the Tatras (part of the Carpathian range) dominate the central region. The highest peak is Gerlach, at 8,707 feet (2,857 meters). Mountain ridges have inhibited travel at times, preserving Slovakia's variety of dialects and customs. The country's fertile south is part of the Great Hungarian Plain. Slovakia is rich in natural resources such as timber, copper, zinc, mercury, limestone, and iron ore. Its continental climate makes for warm summers (especially in southern lowlands) and cold, snowy winters (particularly in northern highlands). Almost one-third of the land is arable. Corn, oats, wheat, and potatoes are the most abundant crops. Forests cover much of the central region.

History

Slavic peoples first settled in the area during the fifth century. In AD 833, they founded a loose confederation that became the Great Moravian Empire. In 863, the Greek missionaries Methodius and Cyril introduced Christianity and the Cyrillic alphabet. The empire's brief history ended in 907 with an invasion by nomadic Magyars (today called Hungarians). The area came under Hungarian rule. It also adopted Roman Catholicism and the Latin alphabet.

In 1526, Hungary became subject to the rule of the

Austrian Hapsburgs. Upon its defeat in World War I (1918), the Austro-Hungarian Empire disintegrated. Slovaks joined with Czechs under the leadership of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk and Milan Rastislav Štefánik in founding the First Czecho-Slovak Republic (the hyphen was dropped in 1920).

Czechoslovakia became the most democratic of the Hapsburg successor states, although some Slovaks wished for more autonomy within the union. In 1938, the country was not able to withstand Hitler's foreign policy scheming. Even as Germany was annexing Czech lands, Slovakia declared independence in March 1939 and allied with Germany throughout World War II. The move still stirs controversy today. Central and eastern Slovaks staged a revolt in 1944 that was quickly crushed. Upon Germany's defeat, the Soviet Union's Red Army helped install a new Czechoslovak government.

After 1948, Communists seized control of the government, all major institutions, and significant property. Slovaks suffered under forced Stalinization and persecution in the 1950s. During the 1960s, the reform-minded Slovak Communist Alexander Dubček led a movement to create "socialism with a human face." Censorship was relaxed and a spirit of revival and hope swept the country. The experiment met with an abrupt end when Soviet-led Warsaw Pact troops crushed the movement in August 1968. During the 1970s, Gustav Husák's regime attempted to satisfy citizens by making consumer goods more available, but ruthless repression of political dissent continued. Economic stagnation and Mikhail Gorbachev's changes in the Soviet Union laid the foundations for the fall of communism in 1989.

The burst of emotions that accompanied Czechoslovakia's

Velvet Revolution (a passive protest against the Communists) soon gave way to the sobering realities of rebuilding democracy. Nationalism reemerged as a major issue. In 1990, Slovaks began pressing for a greater voice in their own affairs. Disagreements over the amount of autonomy for Slovakia and the pace of economic reform led to victory for Slovak nationalists in 1992 elections. When the newly elected Czech and Slovak national governments could not reach a consensus about the division of federal powers, Czech prime minister Václav Klaus and Slovak prime minister Vladimír Mečiar decided to split the state peacefully and fairly.

Mečiar continued some reforms after Slovakia's independence in 1993, but his confrontational style led to political instability. Parliament removed him from office in 1994, but subsequent elections failed to seat a successor and Mečiar returned to office as prime minister. By the time President Michal Kováč's term expired in March 1998, a lack of political reform allowed Mečiar to assume presidential powers as well. However, he lost his seat in Parliament in September 1998 elections, and Rudolf Schuster became Slovakia's first elected president in May 1999.

Slovakia has made enough progress in its government and economy that the country was allowed to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 2004 and the European Union (EU), and in 2009 it adopted the euro. Controversy with Hungary continues over Slovakia's strict language laws and Hungary's recent decision to allow ethnic Hungarians (many of which live in Slovakia) to apply for dual citizenship.

THE PEOPLE

Population

About 5.5 million people live in the Slovak Republic. The population is currently growing at about 0.13 percent annually. More than 85 percent of the people are Slovaks. Hungarians (Magyars) constitute the largest minority (9.7 percent) and most of them live in southern Slovakia. The Roma (Gypsy) ethnic group officially accounts for a documented 1.7 percent of the population, but this figure may actually be as high as 9 or 10 percent. The Roma people are nomadic and difficult to count, and many listed themselves as Slovaks in the 2001 census. The Roma are poorly integrated into mainstream society, especially in rural areas, and they struggle against prejudice and discrimination.

Smaller ethnic groups who are more integrated into society include Czechs, Carpatho-Rusyns (Ruthenians), Ukrainians, Germans, Poles, Moravians, and others. Close to 60 percent of the population lives in urban areas.

Language

Slovaks speak Slovak, a tongue in the Slavic language group that includes Czech, Polish, and Russian. Slovak uses a Latin script. Literary Slovak is used in official capacities, but numerous dialects exist in various regions. Hungarian is the second most commonly spoken language, especially in the south. Although Slovakia signed a basic friendship treaty with Hungary in 1995, it also passed a law making Slovak the only

official language; Hungarians still want their language to have official status. The Roma speak Romany, an unwritten tongue with Indo-Aryan roots, and Slovak. German is understood widely, while English is the language of choice to study in school. Russian was required before 1989. Other languages are also offered.

Religion

Freedom of worship is guaranteed in Slovakia, and many people have deep religious convictions. The majority (69 percent) of the population is Roman Catholic. Smaller segments of the population are Evangelical Lutheran (7 percent), Greek Catholic (4.1), Calvinist Reformed (2 percent), Eastern Orthodox (0.9), or another religion. Nearly 16 percent of the population is atheist or has no religious affiliation.

General Attitudes

Slovakia is still adjusting to its newly acquired statehood. Politics is a popular conversation topic. Slovaks are especially interested in how foreigners view them and are anxious to foster a positive image abroad. They are aware that their country is small and often unknown to outsiders; still, they do not like to be mistaken for Czechs, Slovenians, or Serbians. Although Slovakia has industrialized, particularly since 1948, a romantic attachment to peasant ideals and the countryside remains in the hearts of many Slovaks. Slovaks value good humor and hard work. Cleanliness and order in the home are also highly valued. Slovaks are generous, especially those in the countryside, and will go out of their way to help a stranger. Education, modesty, and honesty are admired. Self-confidence and aggressiveness are sometimes viewed negatively. Entrepreneurs are considered to be greedy "price gougers," especially by those in rural areas, but this attitude is changing because of increasing economic development. Also, the free-market economy has made social status become more dependent on wealth and material possessions than on education or professional achievement.

Personal Appearance

Urban Slovaks tend to dress fashionably. Rural attire is more conservative, especially among the older generation. Most people are very concerned with their appearance. Professional women dress up for work; businessmen wear suits. Women and girls may wear dresses, skirts, or casual attire, depending on the occasion. Jeans and T-shirts are popular. Short pants are common in the summer. Older villagers might wear traditional folk costumes for special occasions.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Shaking hands is the most common form of greeting. In a group, one should not cross over another handshake to shake hands with a person. Upon parting, a man will firmly shake hands with other men in the group and hug or kiss the women on the cheeks. A man might also shake a woman's hand, waiting for her to extend her hand before he does.

In formal relationships, people are addressed as *Pán* (Mr.) or *Pani* (Mrs.), followed by any professional title (doctor, engineer, professor) or the surname. First names are used among friends and the youth. More formal greetings include *Dobrý deň* (Good day) or *Teší ma* (Pleased to meet you), said upon being introduced to someone new. “Good-bye” is *Dovidenia*. More casual terms are *Ahoj* (Hi), *Čau*, and *Servus* (both mean “Hello” or “Good-bye”). Some older villagers still use the traditional *Zbohom* (God be with you). “Thank you” is expressed with *Ďakujem*. The word *Prosím* (Please) is used for polite requests and for saying “You’re welcome.”

Gestures

Hand gestures are frequently used to emphasize speech. To wish luck, instead of crossing fingers, Slovaks “hold thumbs.” That is, they fold the thumb in and close the fingers on it. Yawning in public is considered improper, and chewing gum is not acceptable during polite social interaction. Smiling is courteous. It is considered polite to give up a seat on the bus to an older person, a pregnant woman, or a woman with a small child. During conversation, personal space is much closer in Slovakia than in the United States.

Visiting

Impromptu visits are common, but only among close friends and family members. Invited guests, especially when coming from a distance, receive a warm welcome. An invitation to dinner is usually in a home rather than a restaurant. Guests remove hats and shoes in the house; hosts often provide slippers. Visitors wait for hosts to invite them to be seated. Invited guests often present the hosts with a gift such as flowers, wine, or liquor. Flowers offered as gifts should be fresh, unwrapped, and odd numbered (in groups of three, five, or seven). Even numbers and dried flowers are for funerals; red roses imply romantic intentions. In the past, if visitors expressed deep admiration for anything in the home, even a prized heirloom, the host would feel obliged to give it to them. This is no longer the case today.

Guests are almost always offered something to eat or drink, no matter how short or unexpected the visit. Rural Slovaks might serve friends or relatives *slanina* (home-smoked bacon) and bread, as well as a drink. Homemade *slivovica* (plum liquor) is a typical drink, but beer, coffee, tea, and other drinks may also be offered. Urban hosts tend to serve chips, nuts, and wine rather than homemade refreshments. A tray of ham, cheese, eggs, vegetables, and sweets may be offered. Out of courtesy, guests often politely decline offers before eventually accepting them. Refusing refreshments altogether is impolite, but one may decline liquor or another specific item without offending. An empty cup or glass will be refilled, so guests should leave a little bit of drink when they are finished. If guests wish to wash up before a meal, they knock on the bathroom door before entering. Slovaks generally close all doors in the home, even if no one is in the room. Slovaks typically accompany their departing guests outside and then wave to them until they are out of sight. Guests may turn often and return the wave.

Eating

Slovaks eat in the continental style, holding the fork in the left hand and the knife in the right. They eat three meals each day. Breakfast consists of bread and rolls, sliced meat or sausage, and cheese. Cereal and yogurt are also popular. The main meal at midday consists of soup, meat, dumplings or potatoes, and salad. Slovaks eat a lighter meal of cold cuts, cheese, and bread in the evening. Midmorning and midafternoon snacks are common. Families usually eat together on weekends but not as often on weekdays. Before eating, a diner says *Dobrá chut'* (the equivalent of *Bon appétit*), and others at the table respond with the same phrase. Diners keep both hands above the table but do not rest elbows on the table. They keep napkins on the table, not in the lap. A plate of baked goods often is served before or after the meal.

Traditionally, women served the meal but did not eat at the table when guests were present. Now it is common for women to join their guests. Slovak guests wait to be offered second helpings, but it is greatly appreciated if a foreigner asks for seconds. Conversation usually takes place after the meal. Toasting with *Na zdravie* (To your health) is common, during which it is important to look the person in the eye.

Restaurants do not provide water unless requested. Commonly ordered drinks include beer, wine, soft drinks, and mineral water. Slovaks consider milk a drink for children. A small cup of Turkish coffee frequently completes the meal. Tipping is accepted at most sit-down restaurants; it is added to the bill, not left on the table.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Typical Slovak families have two or three children. The state used to provide families with free medical care, schooling, and social security, but budget cuts have resulted in charges for some services. Paid maternity leave for mothers, child-care facilities, and cash allowances for each child until they finish school are still provided. Although most women hold jobs outside the home—women comprise about half of the labor force—they usually are also responsible for the home and children. However, some men are beginning to share in household duties. Grandparents are usually actively involved in raising their grandchildren.

Housing

Slovakia was basically a rural country at the onset of the communist era. Under the communist regime, industrialization was accelerated, and there was a mass migration of people from villages and rural areas to the major urban centers. To accommodate the new migrants, the government constructed block after block of high-rise apartment buildings, known as *paneláky*. Sharing the same rather generic design, they provided accommodation to thousands. After communism collapsed, the occupants of these apartments took ownership of them. Because most Slovaks prefer to stay where they are, there are far more people anxious to buy apartments than there are people willing to sell them. Even when accommodation is available,

it tends to be beyond the financial reach of most. This is partly a function of the country's underdeveloped mortgage industry. Though mortgages are becoming more common, some buyers have to pay cash for homes, while others have to quickly pay back the loans they get. Even today, many Slovaks continue to live in small towns and villages. The traditional village home is a rectangular, one-storey structure, which is built very close to others and around a central courtyard or square. More common is a detached house complete with courtyard and garden. Some villages have developed distinctive architectural styles. Houses in high mountain valleys often have enclosed sun porches for trapping heat in cold weather. In other villages, houses are painted in white or in pastel colors.

Dating and Marriage

Popular dating activities in Slovakia include dancing and going to the movies or theater. Festivals are also popular. Men generally marry in their late twenties or early thirties, and women marry about three years earlier. Most Slovak weddings involve church ceremonies, and brides in rural areas often are paraded around the village in a traditional procession. The reception afterward lasts until morning, sometimes longer. Inflation has made celebrations lasting several days too expensive for many families. Traditionally, the groom carried his bride over the threshold of their new home. Now he may carry the bride to their table at the reception instead. Because housing is in short supply, new couples often must live with parents until an apartment is available.

Life Cycle

Pregnant women are encouraged to take things easy. Almost all Slovakian births take place in a hospital. In religious families, including many who do not go to church regularly, children are baptized shortly after birth. Children are considered adults at 18, though many continue living with their parents after that age while studying at a university.

The traditional Slovakian funeral ceremony can be quite involved. Particularly in the smaller villages, it is customary for the family of the deceased to hire professional mourners. These are village women who wail, cry, and generally express sorrow. People are usually buried in local cemeteries, in which graves are usually tended with great care. Indeed, some gravesides look like well kept gardens. Once a year, on All Saints' Day, families cover graves with potted flowers (usually chrysanthemums) and leave behind several lighted candles.

Diet

Among the most popular Slovak foods are *rezeň* (breaded steak) and potatoes, as well as other kinds of meat served with potatoes, rice, dumplings, or pasta and sauce. Slovaks also serve a variety of sweet dishes (such as prune dumplings) as a main course. The national dish is *bryndzové halušky* (small dumplings with processed sheep cheese). Soup and fresh-baked bread are staples at the dinner table. Dairy products such as milk, cheese, and butter are widely available. Fresh fruits (apples, plums, and grapes) are abundant and

eaten in season. Bananas and oranges are popular for holidays and throughout the year. Potatoes, cabbage, and carrots are the most frequently eaten vegetables. Popular desserts come in two categories: *koláč* (a yeast-based dough) and *zákusok* (a dough leavened with baking powder), both of which are filled or topped with fruits, nuts, poppyseed, jam, or other things.

Recreation

Soccer, ice hockey, skiing, and tennis are the most popular sports in Slovakia. Other forms of recreation include moviegoing, hiking, camping, swimming, and attending local festivals, cultural events, or art exhibits. Mushroom hunting and gardening at summer cottages are popular activities for families. Many Slovaks spend weekends or vacations in the beautiful Tatry Mountains, at the beach, in the countryside, or at health spas. Health spas service patients from around the world. More Slovaks are beginning to tour other parts of Europe.

The Arts

Slovaks are proud of their rich cultural heritage. They celebrate their rural roots through poetry, literature, song, and dance. Slovaks sing with marked enthusiasm at gatherings, and knowing folk songs is considered part of being Slovak. A popular saying is *Kde Slováč, tam spev* (Wherever there is a Slovak, there is a song). Slovak folk dances often feature couples dancing together or groups of men and women dancing separately, or a combination of the two. Most of the movement is in the legs, while the upper torso remains still. Lace and embroidery are traditional crafts among women. Ceramics (particularly *Modra* pottery), woodcarving, metalwork, and egg decoration are also valued. Folk art is often given to foreign visitors as a gift.

Holidays

Holidays include Sylvester's Day (New Year's Eve), Independence Day and New Year's Day (1 Jan.), Three Kings Day and Orthodox Christmas (6 Jan.), Easter, Labor Day (1 May), Liberation Day (8 May), Cyril and Methodius Day (5 July), Constitution Day (1 Sept.), and All Saints' Day (1 Nov.). Slovak National Uprising Day (29 Aug.) commemorates the 1944 rebellion against the Nazis.

Christmas is the most celebrated holiday. Children receive gifts of candy, fruit, and nuts on St. Nicholas Day (6 Dec.). Slovaks celebrate Christmas Day with family gatherings featuring ham or poultry, baked goods, and drinking. Following the meal, people decorate the tree and exchange gifts. Church attendance is also traditional. Birthdays are celebrated with family while name days are occasions for parties among friends or colleagues. A name day, commemorating the saint after whom a person is named, usually is more important than a birthday. It is celebrated with gifts and flowers.

SOCIETY

Government

The president of Slovakia (currently Ivan Gašparovič) is head

of state and is directly elected to a five-year term of office. The prime minister (currently Iveta Radičová) is head of government and recommends cabinet members to the president, who makes the appointments. The prime minister is typically the leader of the party that has the majority of seats in parliament. The Slovak National Council has 150 popularly elected members who serve four-year terms. The voting age is 18. Slovakia has eight administrative regions. Court judges are chosen by the National Council.

Economy

Slovakia has proceeded with market reforms to help it compete with other European nations. A number of large firms remain in state control. These industries, built under Communist rule, are often inefficient and environmentally unsound. However, foreign investment has helped the country switch some of its military-related industries to making civilian products. Steel, automobile, chemical, textile, cement, and glass factories produce products that are becoming increasingly competitive in a global market.

The economy is growing, but high unemployment, inflation, and deficits hinder progress. However, low labor cost and low taxes have helped attract foreign investment. Still, corruption in the form of a significant mafia presence is a barrier to economic development, especially in larger cities.

Slovaks generally enjoy a good standard of living. Other EU countries and Russia are Slovakia's biggest trade partners. The Slovak crown, or *koruna* (SKK), was replaced by the euro (EUR) in January 2009 as the national currency.

Transportation and Communications

While Slovak families usually own a car, high fuel prices discourage regular use. People commonly use public transportation (buses, streetcars, trains, etc.). Main roads are paved, but there are only a few good superhighways. The country is in the process of constructing several more highways. Railroads link major cities.

Slovakia's press expanded rapidly with the freedom introduced in 1989. Slovaks rely on newspapers, television, and radio for information about current events. More than 120 newspapers, as well as numerous magazines, are published. Almost every home has a radio and at least one television. The use of satellite and cable TV is increasing, as is internet access. Some Slovaks who still lack phones in their homes are purchasing cellular phones.

Education

Education, which is free at public institutions, begins at age six and is compulsory for 10 years. Though Slovak is the country's official language, schools located in ethnic Hungarian-populated areas may be taught in Hungarian. Slovaks consider education and research to be high priorities. Although public universities charge no tuition, admission is limited and highly competitive. Those who do not attend college can obtain work skills through vocational schools. Comenius University, established in the early 1900s, is the oldest of Slovakia's 13 universities.

Health

Slovakia's national healthcare system, dominated by state-run hospitals, is undergoing change. Nearly all people have access to physicians, and medical advances have lowered the infant mortality rate. Pollution poses serious health hazards in both rural and urban environments. Funds are lacking to clean the water and air and to restore decimated forests.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

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POPULATION & AREA

Population	5,470,306 (rank=111)
Area, sq. mi.	18,933 (rank=128)
Area, sq. km.	49,035

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	31 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	31 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$21,000
Adult literacy rate	100% (male); 100% (female)
Infant mortality rate	7 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	72 (male); 80 (female)

*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).