

# SLOVAKIA

## AN OVERVIEW OF RESTRICTIONS ON CIVIC FREEDOMS



Anti-government protest against recent moves by the government on justice and cultural issues, in Bratislava, Slovakia, August , 2024. Banner reads "Freedom for media". REUTERS/Radovan Stoklasa



## INTRODUCTION

Slovakia is currently rated as narrowed by the CIVICUS Monitor, a research partnership that tracks civic space conditions around the world. Slovakia's rating reflects findings that the government does not fully protect its citizens' freedoms of assembly, association and expression. Occasional harassment and attacks on people who speak out hinder the full exercise of these rights, while press freedom is undermined by government regulations and political pressure.

Slovakia has seen considerable political turmoil in recent years. Following an early parliamentary election in September 2023, Robert Fico's Direction (SMER) party [reclaimed power](#), [winning](#) 42 of 150 seats in the National Council, the country's parliament. Fico had previously served as prime minister for [three terms](#), most recently from 2012 until his resignation in 2018 in the wake of widespread protests in response to the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak.

The centre-right coalition government that came to power after Fico's resignation [lost](#) a vote of confidence in December 2022. This was the culmination of a protracted [political crisis](#) in which COVID-19, Russia's war on Ukraine and the high cost of living were key factors. Capitalising on these tensions, Fico and his party ran a [polarising](#) election campaign, promising to prioritise the 'sovereignty and national interests of Slovakia' by restricting military aid to Ukraine and migration. They also fuelled divisions with culture war rhetoric, tapping into antipathy towards [migrants](#), Roma and [LGBTQI+ people](#).

Fico's vilification of civil society organisations (CSOs) and critical media gave rise to concerns about the impact of the new government on civic space. Fico, who [blamed](#) Hungarian-American billionaire George Soros and CSOs funded by his Open Society Foundations for the protests that drove him out of office in 2018, repeated this narrative in the run-up to the election, accusing Soros and CSOs of a [coup plot](#) to falsify the election. After the new coalition government, formed by SMER, Voice – a [splinter party](#) from SMER – and the right-wing ultranationalist Slovak National Party (SNS), was sworn in, Fico triumphantly [declared](#) this would mark the 'end of the era of reign of political NGOs' in Slovakia.

The new government rapidly embarked on a series of highly [controversial steps](#) that international observers have [warned](#) undermine the rule of law, judicial independence and civil society. These changes, pushed through a fast-tracked parliamentary procedure without public debate, included [abolishing](#) the Special Prosecutor's Office, which tackled organised crime and graft, and lowering penalties for corruption-related crimes. The moves sparked large anti-government [protests](#), which spread from the capital to over 30 cities across Slovakia. Further protests [erupted](#) in early 2024 following a proposed overhaul of the public broadcaster, seen as an attempt to place media under government control.

## ABOUT THE CIVICUS MONITOR

The CIVICUS Monitor, an online platform that tracks threats to civil society in countries across the globe, rates civic space – the space for civil society – in Slovakia as **Narrowed**.

The data provides the basis for civic space ratings, which are based on up-to-date information and indicators on the state of freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression. Countries can be rated as:

**CLOSED****REPRESSED****OBSTRUCTED****NARROWED****OPEN**



In April 2024, Slovakia held a [presidential election](#), in which Peter Pellegrini, a close ally of the government, beat a pro-western, liberal opposition candidate to [succeed](#) environmentalist and civil rights lawyer Zuzana Čaputová as head of state. Pellegrini's victory cemented Fico and his allies' grip on power, as the president is able to block appointments to strategic posts and veto laws, powers Čaputová used on several occasions to [check](#) the SMER-led coalition's plans.

Amid this increasingly polarised atmosphere, on 15 May 2024, Fico was the target of an [assassination attempt](#). After leaving a government meeting, Fico stepped up to greet the crowd when a man shot him multiple times at close range, leaving him in critical condition. The assailant, who was apprehended at the scene, [admitted](#) his motivation was political, citing Fico's policy on stopping aid to Ukraine, proposed changes to the public broadcaster and threats to media freedom as factors that motivated his attack.

This shocking act of violence only further deepened Slovakia's political crisis. Government officials [blamed](#) the media and CSOs for radicalising the attacker and vowed revenge. In his first address following the shooting, Fico [claimed](#) his attacker was 'an activist of the Slovak opposition'. Increasing political and societal polarisation, combined with the proposed changes the government has accelerated since the assassination, has raised grave concerns about a rapid democratic regression and decreasing civic space in Slovakia.

## FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Between 2023 and 2024, Slovakia [fell 12 places](#) on Reporters Without Borders' (RSF) World Press Freedom Index, with a drop in scores for all five indicators. International media watchdog Article 19 has [expressed](#) concerns over a deterioration in the right to freedom of expression following the election of the new government, pointing to a lack of accountability for crimes against journalists, including for the murder of Ján Kuciak and his partner Martina Kušnírová in 2018, and threats to the media in the form of harmful rhetoric from elected officials aimed at several Slovak outlets and their journalists.

In addition, the government's [move](#) to overhaul the public broadcaster by introducing a new governance mechanism would effectively make it a state mouthpiece. Media watchdogs and the European Union (EU) Commission have criticised the move as a threat to freedom of expression.

### IMPUNITY FOR MURDER OF JÁN KUCIAK

On 21 February 2018, investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his partner Martina Kušnírová were [shot dead](#) in their home outside Bratislava. Kuciak had regularly reported on corruption cases for the online news portal [aktuality.sk](#). His [investigative reports](#) included articles about alleged tax fraud by prominent business leaders who were said to have links to SMER and organised crime groups.

The murder led to widespread [anti-corruption protests](#), forcing Fico and the police chief to resign. Several high-ranking judicial officials also resigned after it became known that they had been in contact with SMER-linked business leader Marian Kočner, the suspected mastermind behind the killings.

On 19 May 2023, the Special Criminal Court of Slovakia [acquitted](#) Kočner of ordering the murders. The court ruled that the evidence did not prove Kočner's involvement beyond reasonable doubt, despite his threats to Kuciak over the journalist's reporting on his activities. Kočner's associate, Alena Zsuzsová, was found guilty of ordering Kuciak's assassination and plotting to kill two prosecutors, receiving a 25-year prison sentence and order to pay €160,000 (approx. US\$171,500) in damages to Kuciak's family. The verdict followed a retrial ordered by the Supreme Court, which had annulled the original 2021 acquittal of Kočner and Zsuzsová. Three other people, two contract killers and an intermediary who helped orchestrate the murder, were convicted and [sentenced](#) to long prison terms in 2020.

Media freedom organisations [strongly criticised](#) Kočner's acquittal as an example of impunity, noting that the murders of Kuciak and Kušnírová represent 'the most serious crime against journalism in Slovakia's



modern history', and pointing to the larger pattern of people who carried out such crimes being jailed but those suspected of being behind them walking free.

## **JOURNALISTS FACE HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT**

Media freedom watchdogs such as [RSF](#) and the [International Press Institute](#) (IPI) have long raised concerns about the hostile working environment for journalists in Slovakia. According to the IPI, political attacks on the media are often followed by online harassment, aimed at discrediting and intimidating journalists. This leads to a loss of public trust and the proliferation of disinformation. A particular point of concern is politicians' tendency to frame journalists as political opponents, dividing them into ideological camps and undermining their investigations. Issues under public debate are often portrayed as a struggle to conserve traditional values against supposedly imported antithetical 'western values', with the media politically aligned with these.

Fico has a long-standing reputation for his tirades against journalists, who he's [referred to](#) as 'idiots', 'hyenas' and 'dirty anti-Slovak prostitutes'. When a new government came to power in 2020, it did not offer a complete shift from this hostile approach. For example, former Prime Minister Igor Matovič, who held office between 2020 and 2021, blamed 'corrupt' media for his drop in popularity and [compared](#) them to Nazi propagandists. According to a [survey](#) by the Investigative Center of Ján Kuciak from February 2023, over two-thirds of journalists in Slovakia reported they had experienced some form of threat or attack in the previous year.

In February 2023, Marta Jančárová, a presenter and anchor with public broadcaster Radio and Television of Slovakia (RTVS), received anonymous serious death, torture and rape [threats](#) after hosting an interview with then President Čaputová. The threats escalated the following week after SMER politicians including Fico held a press conference outside RTVS headquarters to accuse it of censorship. Jančárová had refused SMER's last-minute request to replace their representative in a scheduled debate between them and the Minister of Defence. RTVS and Jančárová instead followed the standard procedure of using an empty chair in place of the SMER politician.

Attacks on the media escalated following Fico and SMER's return to power. In November 2023, Fico publicly targeted four leading domestic media outlets for perceived bias, [calling](#) them 'spiritually homeless enemies' and 'hostile media'. In a statement and a video on his personal Facebook page, Fico announced he would review their accreditation to the offices of the government and cabinet, announcing they would be 'unwelcome guests' until a decision was made. In another statement on 20 November, the government announced that Fico would stop all communication with the outlets, saying they had not fulfilled their obligations to inform the public truthfully and completely since the formation of the government.

This dire situation was further exacerbated following the May 2024 assassination attempt on Fico. In its immediate aftermath, several top politicians from the ruling coalition, including Andrej Danko, leader of the SNS and National Council Deputy Speaker, [blamed](#) the opposition and the liberal Slovak media for the attack. Danko said the media had 'blood on their hands' and declared that 'a political war' with critical media was underway. High-ranking officials, including Danko and Deputy Prime Minister Tomáš Taraba, have particularly targeted the major Slovakian satirical website Zomri and publicly called on law enforcement authorities to take action against the website. Zomri has faced numerous other threats, including targeted attacks against its alleged administrators.

## **POLITICISATION OF PUBLIC BROADCASTER, CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS**

In February 2024, Fico [hinted](#) at the need to reform the management of RTVS, accusing it of bias and dismissing viewpoints it considered 'outside the mainstream'. In June 2024, the National Council [passed](#) a controversial law dissolving RTVS and replacing it with a new entity, Slovak Television and Radio (STVR). The change was made without proper public consultation.

In addition to the renaming, the new law [changes](#) the selection procedure for the broadcaster's supervisory





board, strengthening the role of the government in appointing its members. The STVR's new supervisory board will consist of nine members, five of whom will be appointed by the National Council, currently controlled by the SMER-led coalition, and four by the Ministry of Culture. In its previous iteration as RTVS, all of the oversight board's members were elected by a National Council vote.

Critics argue that the law clearly aims to politicise public broadcasting and restrict media freedom. The [EU's](#) and [Council of Europe's](#) Human Rights Commissioners both signalled their concern about the changes. The European Federation of Journalists and the European Broadcasting Union issued a [statement](#) following the law's adoption, describing the move as a 'blow to democracy and media freedom in Slovakia'.

The government has pushed through another [contentious overhaul](#) in the cultural sector. In May 2024, the National Council approved an amendment to the Slovak Arts Fund, shifting decision-making authority from independent experts to a board controlled by the Ministry of Culture, which is under the control of the SNS. The Minister of Culture, Martina Šimkovičová, further inflamed public discontent by dismissing [Matej Drlička](#), Director of the Slovak National Theatre, and [Alexandra Kusá](#), Director of the Slovak National Gallery. These dismissals provoked widespread disapproval among the cultural sector, sparking [public protests](#) demanding Šimkovičová's resignation.

## FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION

In December 2023, the European Centre for Non-for-Profit Law published an [analysis](#) highlighting the main challenges to Slovakia's civic space, identifying antagonistic rhetoric from elected officials towards civil society, a reduction of access to public funding for civil society and potential consideration of a 'foreign agents' law.

The analysis found that the rapidly changing political landscape, with civil society trying to respond to fast-paced legislative changes and threats, is placing an additional workload on CSO staff, putting a strain on their mental health and threatening the sustainability of civil society.

### 'FOREIGN AGENTS' LAW

Immediately after taking office, the government moved to act on long-standing [threats](#) against CSOs, which Fico has routinely accused of working to undermine him. In a Facebook [video](#) posted a month before the election, Fico described Transparency International Slovakia as a 'typical foreign agent' and hinted that all CSOs would soon be required to carry similar labels, a measure reminiscent of Russia's infamous 'foreign agents' law that is used to vilify CSOs as acting in the interests of foreign powers.

A proposal to amend the Non-Profit Organisations Act, Foundations Act and Act on Non-Investment Funds was subsequently drafted and passed its first reading in April 2024. Amnesty International Slovakia has [called](#) the amendments a 'full-frontal assault on civil society'.

The proposed amendments are set to significantly expand the grounds for dissolving CSOs, empowering the Ministry of the Interior to dissolve them if they fail to submit annual reports or comply with new disclosure requirements. Most controversially, it also mandates that organisations receiving over €5,000 (approx. US\$5,400) annually from foreign sources, either directly or indirectly, label themselves as 'foreign-funded organisations' (FFOs). CSOs would need to disclose the identity and nationality of donors, contributors and creditors whose support exceeds this threshold.

As reported by [Civic Space Watch](#), civil society groups in Slovakia have warned that the amendments will stifle their operations, leading to stigmatisation, loss of funding and increased stress on staff. In response, Slovak civil society has mobilised by launching campaigns to communicate the value of civil society, engaging with international bodies and using the EU's legal framework to challenge the proposals.



Via Iuris, a Slovak CSO, identified numerous inconsistencies and unclear provisions in its [analysis](#) of the bill. Alongside other [rights groups](#) and [international observers](#), they have argued that the proposed FFO labelling violates EU principles and parallels a Hungarian law that the EU's Court of Justice previously struck down on the grounds of being an unjustified interference with the right to freedom of association.

In response to mounting pressure, Deputy Prime Minister Peter Kmec [confirmed](#) in May 2024 that the amendments would address the EU's concerns about similarities with Hungary's past legislation. In July 2024, the European Commission explicitly [warned](#) it would take legal action if Slovakia proceeded with the law.

## **OTHER THREATS TO FUNDING**

The European Centre for Not-for-Profit Law has raised concerns about [growing threats](#) to civil society funding in Slovakia.

In early November, Labour Minister Erik Tomáš [announced](#) plans to reform the two per cent tax designation mechanism, a [vital source](#) of funding for CSOs. The mechanism [allows](#) people and legal entities to allocate up to two per cent of their taxes to one or more CSOs. The proposed reform aimed to redirect this contribution towards a new parental pension supplement, giving taxpayers the option to allocate their two per cent either to CSOs or as a pension bonus for their parents. However, after large-scale civil society mobilisation, including a petition signed by over 30,000 people, Tomáš assured CSOs that the mechanism would remain unchanged. Despite this, the government raised the issue [again](#) in 2024, leaving the door open for the change to be revisited in the future.

As the potential changes were being debated, officials sent troubling signals suggesting that state funding for CSOs could become [politicised](#), with the government differentiating between 'worthy' and 'unworthy' organisations in public statements. In November 2023, Tomáš [stated](#) the government would continue supporting CSOs engaged in 'noble causes' such as aiding children, people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups. He argued that other CSOs active in public life already benefit from 'generous foreign donors'. In its [programme](#), the coalition government proposed creating a specialised state agency for distributing grants 'to those CSOs that actually care about improving life in the country'.

## **COOPERATION WITH CIVIL SOCIETY CEASES**

According to Via Iuris' Peter Čuroš, who commented on Slovakia's recent democratic backsliding on [Verfassungsblog](#), the government has cut off dialogue with civil society. He stated that the administration seeks to curtail people's participation at all levels and restrict funding for and systematically target civil society. One example of this change in attitude is the [dismissal](#) by the Minister of the Interior of five civil society representatives from the Government Council for NGOs in April 2024, with no reason being given. The Plenipotentiary for Civil Society Development, the government advisor responsible for cooperation with civil society, was also [removed](#) from office in March 2024 without reasons being given and a new plenipotentiary was appointed without any discussion with civil society.

In July 2024, the government approved a [major change](#) in how representatives are chosen for committees that oversee EU funds, transferring this responsibility from the Chamber of NGOs, an advisory body to the Government Council for NGOs, to the government's plenipotentiary. NGO representatives criticised the move, arguing it violates the partnership principle outlined in Slovakia's Partnership Agreement with the European Commission. Previously, the selection process was collaborative, ensuring diverse input, but the new approach marks a sharp departure, entirely excluding the Chamber of NGOs.



## FREEDOM OF PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY

Threats to freedoms of association and expression have [sparked](#) ongoing protests in the first half of 2024, with thousands gathering to call for accountability and an end to democratic backsliding. After a pause following the attempt on Fico's life, peaceful protests [resumed](#) in August 2024.

### ASSASSINATION LAW - A DRACONIAN BILL RESTRICTING THE RIGHT TO PROTEST

In June 2024, the Slovak government introduced several legislative measures as part of the so-called Assassination Law ([Lex atentát](#)) package, in response to the attempted assassination of Fico. The bill was fast-tracked through parliament in a matter of days, with minimal scrutiny. The law grants Fico a [lifetime pension](#), making him the first prime minister to receive such benefits, as the eligibility criteria were tailored specifically to him. It also extends additional security privileges to political figures, including the president, prime minister and ministers.

The Lex atentát package imposes sweeping [new restrictions](#) on public assemblies. While laws already prohibit gatherings near parliament, the new legislation extends this ban to a 50-metre radius around the offices of the president, government and courts, as well as any buildings used by politicians or officials targeted by protests. Additionally, protests will no longer be permitted in residential [areas](#), on the basis of protecting residents' privacy and the peaceful enjoyment of their homes. The law also allows authorities to ban assemblies if there is a risk of clashes with participants from a previously announced protest, if this is deemed to make it impossible to maintain order and ensure a peaceful demonstration.

Although ruling coalition parliamentarians watered down the bill in response to criticism, they promised to introduce further measures. The government has [argued](#) that the assassination attempt on Fico shows that protests called by the opposition have got out of control and have led to polarisation and radicalisation.

Rado Sloboda, Director of Amnesty International Slovakia, [raised concerns](#) that the bill uses public order and security concerns to remove people's right to protest.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

- The government of Slovakia must adhere to international human rights principles including by respecting people's fundamental freedoms.
- The government must commit to protecting civic space and enabling civil society to organise, mobilise and speak out, and put in place policies and mechanisms to implement this commitment.
- The government must respect the right to freedom of peaceful assembly in law and practice, and must repeal undue restrictions on this right under the pretext of national security.
- The government should refrain from using populist divide-and-rule strategies and stoking culture war issues. Instead it should promote respect for human rights, including of people of diverse sexual orientations, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics.
- The authorities must establish and maintain an enabling environment for freedom of expression, allowing civil society and media to report on public interest matters without impediment, including by enacting policies and implementing laws that seek to protect press freedom and protection of media workers.
- The authorities must take steps to curb the intimidation and harassment of journalists and civil society and publicly denounce these actions at the highest level. Impunity must cease for crimes against journalists.
- The National Council should reject legislation and amendments that seek to restrict CSO activities and funding and engage in extensive consultations with civil society before policies and laws affecting civil society are discussed and passed.
- The government must guarantee the independence and sustainability of the public broadcaster, in compliance with international human rights law standards.
- The government must institutionalise policies and mechanisms to enhance its accountability. These mechanisms should allow the public to participate meaningfully in holding the government to account without fear of reprisal or intimidation. This should be coupled with transparency in governance and public access to information.
- The EU should make support for Slovakia conditional on the government upholding the rule of law, addressing corruption and respecting civic space.