

■ SLOVAKIA

More development aid, though discrimination remains



Tensions between the ruling coalition and the opposition in Slovakia became acute in 2007. Although the country is indisputably democratic, discrimination and violation of basic rights (especially of the Roma minority) remain significant issues. One positive change has been an increase in development assistance as a result of strong economic growth and successful international integration.

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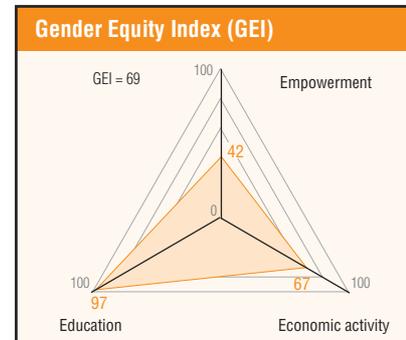
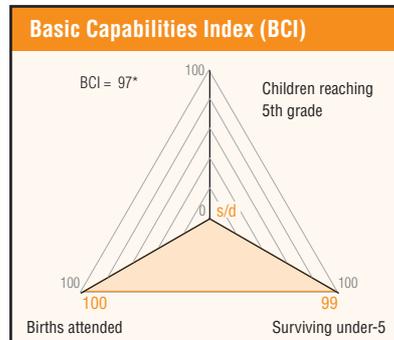
In the relatively short period since 1989, Slovakia has made dramatic progress. Some of the changes had begun previously, when the country was part of Czechoslovakia; none of them are complete. The need to consolidate democracy through implementation of human rights, horizontal and vertical division of political power and other essential elements was evident after the overthrow of the Communist regime in 1989. However, new institutions emerged very slowly, quite often in a chaotic manner.

After Slovakia became an independent state in 1992, the lack of political consensus developed into an increasingly bitter conflict that during 1995-1997 descended into a "struggle over the rules of the game", with members of the Government often acting against the law. In this environment, a consolidated democracy was regarded as highly unstable (Szomolányi 2004: 9). Paradoxically, this political situation activated civil society, and some NGOs played a significant role in the development of a new policy-making process (Klimovský 2005).

The first part of this report focuses on domestic human rights issues (especially the so-called "Roma problem"); the second on the Government's relationships with other countries and selected international organizations.

The "tyranny of the majority"

In 1998 a coalition composed of two right-wing parties, the Democratic Party and the Slovak Democratic Coalition, and two left-wing parties, the Democratic Left and the Party of Civic Understanding took power. In 2004 the country joined the European Union, and since then its respect for human and political rights has been regarded as satisfactory by outside observers.¹ However the reality is more complex. The current ruling coalition, created in July 2006, brings together the social-democratic party (Smer),²



a Christian-nationalist party (SNS) and the centrist people's party ("S-HZDS"),³ forming a "tyranny of the majority" (Mesežnikov 2008) that seeks to annihilate the opposition and dominate political life. The Prime Minister repeatedly attacked individual media outlets and statements by a number of public interest groups, and the Government began employing nationalistic rhetoric in its references to national and ethnical minorities (Sáposová and Šutaj 2008). In the same year, the ruling coalition threatened the fundamental principles of the rule of law, as a number of critics have noted, expressing concern about the coalition's attacks (albeit largely symbolic) on the role of the opposition in Parliament, and its refusal to consider any bills drafted by opposition MPs (Bárány, Hrabko and Pilát 2008).

Threats to human and political rights

A "Report on Observance of the Human Rights in Slovakia in 2006" by the National Centre for Human Rights concluded that other than discrimination against the Roma minority, human rights violations in Slovakia consisted of delays in legal proceedings, domestic abuse and racially motivated violence. However, the report focused on a few selected rights while ignoring many others guaranteed in the Slovak Constitution (Fialová 2008).

One of the primary concerns related to ethnically or racially motivated violence has been flawed police proceedings, which is often downplayed

by the authorities. The 2007 "Hedviga Malinová"⁴ case, for example, aroused so much outrage that it strained relations between Slovakia and Hungary. While Government officials tried to minimize the importance of the incident, the Chief of Police and General Attorney announced in July that police had not followed proper procedure and recommended establishment of a five-member investigatory team to review the case.

Other critics have condemned the Government's social policies as propagandistic and ineffectual, pointing out that it has taken a few high-profile measures, while failing to address the most serious problems, such as the situation of the Roma (Đurana, Karpiš and Reptová 2008). Improving the condition of the Roma may be a difficult challenge, but the need for action is evident. In 2006 the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe declared that "despite improvements in all areas, and numerous programmes and policies, progress remains slow and, inevitably, fails to equally reach all Roma communities. Moreover, the social and economic precariousness of the Roma population is a crucial obstacle for the homogenous and equitable development of the country's population as a whole" (Follow-up Report... 2006). Manifestations of discrimination against the Roma include ill health, limited or lack of access to education and other basic services, bias in the labour market, inadequate housing, social bias and exclusion.

* One of the BCI components was imputed based on data from countries of similar level.

1 In 2007, Freedom House categorized Slovakia as a free country with top scores on political rights and civil liberties.

2 In Slovak this word means "direction".

3 The Movement for Democratic Slovakia (S-HZDS) and the Slovak National Party (SNS) were the strongest members of the ruling coalition during the period when many considered Slovakia an unstable regime (1994-1998).

4 Hedviga Malinová testified that on 25 August 2006 she was attacked by two men because she was speaking Hungarian. The Prime Minister and the Minister of Interior called this a fabrication to damage the reputation of the Government and the police stopped the investigation and started to prosecute her on grounds of false testimony.

Roma living conditions remain far below the European average.⁵ In 2005 the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination ruled that the cancellation of a Government plan to build social housing for Roma in response to explicitly anti-Romani pressure constituted an act of racial discrimination.⁶ The Government has yet to take action on this matter. An Amnesty International report (2007) found that Slovak Romani children have been denied the right to a proper education⁷ by a system that routinely discriminates against them. Scores of children are segregated in Roma-only schools, the report related, while others have been placed in “special” schools despite not having any mental or learning disabilities.⁸

One noteworthy positive trend from the Roma has been greater political representation. More than 200 Roma candidates were elected to municipal councils in 2006, an increase of almost 40% over the previous elections. The number of Roma mayors jumped more than 70%.⁹

Development assistance

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs established a Slovak Agency for International Development Cooperation – Slovak Aid – on 1 January 2007. Parliament adopted an Official Development Assistance Act, which codified the principles, goals, and forms of official development assistance, at the end of the year. As this act only became effective in 2008, its implementation and impact are not covered in this report.

The “Medium-Term Strategy for Official Development Assistance: 2003 – 2008” established development assistance for Serbia and Montenegro as the main priority; this policy has been implemented. In December 2006, Parliament adopted commitments of EUR 250,000 (USD 375,00) to a fund for the Balkan countries administered by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and to the “Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative” for heavily indebted poor countries.

The “National Programme of the Official Development Assistance” was adopted in April 2007.

5 Tensions between the Government Vice-Chairman for Knowledge Society, European Affairs, Human Rights and Minorities and the Plenipotentiary for Roma Communities ended in June 2007 when the Government dismissed the Plenipotentiary and nominated a new one (Hojsík – Laj áková 2008: 195).

6 “Human Rights Organizations Welcome Call on Governments to End Housing Crisis of Roma in Europe”, document published by a group of European NGOs, October 2007.

7 Although the Roma have been recognized as a national minority in Czechoslovakia since 1991, its language is not one of the group of languages which can be used at the primary education level.

8 In these segregated classes Romani children, regardless of their individual abilities, receive a substandard education, jeopardizing their future employment prospects, and reinforcing the cycle of Roma marginalization and poverty (Slovakia. Summary: Still separate... 2007: 1).

9 However, of the approximately 2,900 municipalities in Slovakia, Roma are mayors in only 19.

CHART 1. Official bilateral Slovak development assistance in 2007

Projects / Programmes	Total (in thousand EUR)
Projects in “programme countries” (Montenegro and Serbia)	2,215
Projects in “project countries” (Afghanistan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kazakhstan, Kenya, and Ukraine)	1,415
Projects in “other countries”	769
Development of capacities and projects related to development education, public awareness, and monitoring of projects	331
Co-funding of projects approved by the European Commission	154
Sub-programme on international humanitarian aid	308
Overall	5,192

Source: Národný program oficiálnej..., 2007.

Slovak Aid was inundated with applications, and could not approve all of them. Countries receiving the most funding were Afghanistan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Serbia, and Ukraine. The aid budget also allocated a lump sum to projects in Albania, Kyrgyzstan, Macedonia, Mongolia, Mozambique, Sudan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

On 10 December 2007 ‘lovek v ohrození (People in Peril) became the first Slovak NGO to complete a “Framework Partnership Agreement” with the Humanitarian Aid Office of the European Commission and become an official partner. This gives it the right to apply to the Office for financial support. ■

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