

DEMOCRACY IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE: RENEWING THE PROMISE OF DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS

Helsinki Commission briefing held in Washington DC on July 26, 2017

Key statements to be presented by Peter Goliaš, Director of the Institute for Economic and Social Reforms (INEKO) in Slovakia

INEKO (<http://www.ineko.sk/>) 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.

1. Assessment of democracy in Slovakia and future predictions:

- According to a representative public opinion poll from November 2016, **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, Slovakia's level of democracy has deteriorated in the last 5 years, while only 18% thinks that it has improved.**
- In an October 2016 questionnaire survey, compared to the general public, the experts were even more critical. i. Half of them find the current state of democracy rather bad to poor and 71% think that the quality of democracy has deteriorated in the last 5 years.

Table: Opinions about the quality of democracy

	Opinion poll	Survey among public figures/experts
Rather good to excellent	26 %	25 %
Neither good nor bad	33 %	25 %
Rather bad to poor	40 %	50 %

Table: Opinions about the change in the quality of democracy in the last 5 years

	Opinion poll	Survey among public figures/experts
It has rather improved	18 %	13 %
It has neither improved nor deteriorated	36 %	16 %
It has rather deteriorated	43 %	71 %

Sources: Representative survey conducted by Focus Agency for INEKO (November 2016); INEKO questionnaire survey conducted among 80 selected public figures/experts (October 2016)

- **The main cause of the population's dissatisfaction is the perception that politicians do not work in the public interest but in their own interests or in the interests of affiliated entrepreneurs/oligarchs.** People complain that there is no fair investigation and punishment for inefficient/illegal use of public money and that the state fails to provide quality public services for example in health care and education.

- Dissatisfaction with the abuse of power drives many to extremism. **Approximately one in five Slovak citizens views the abolishment of the parliament system and establishment of a dictatorship as an alternative to the current state of democracy.** Almost one third of the population would go back to the socialist regime that existed here before 1989 (mostly older people) and almost one third has admitted Slovakia should leave the European Union. But on the other hand, **most of the population still supports democracy.** More than two thirds of respondents can see the improvements it has provided in terms of the greater involvement of decent people in governing public affairs. Almost the same proportion of people wish to strengthen the independence and expertise of police investigators, public prosecution, the judiciary, and regulatory and oversight authorities in order to reduce the risk of abuse of power.
- **A portion of frustrated people have started to vote for nonstandard/anti-systemic parties, including the fascist “Kotleba – People’s Party Our Slovakia” led by Marián Kotleba that entered the National Parliament in 2016** (it obtained 8.04% of votes and its popularity is rising). The party is well known for its anti-Roma rhetoric, its claims to punish corruption and exit the EU and NATO, among other divisive platforms. The populist and xenophobic “Boris Kollár – We are Family” party led by local extravagant celebrity Boris Kollár (which obtained 6.62% of the vote) also entered the National Parliament in 2016. As an example of their agenda, they joined forces with Kotleba in October 2016 in an unsuccessful attempt to mark foreign-funded NGOs as “foreign agents”.
- Recent developments have challenged the Kotleba party though, and in May 2017, the Chief Prosecutor proposed the dissolution of the fascist party on the grounds that it is anti-democratic. The Supreme Court is expected to make a decision later this year. In the meantime, the fascists have created a backup party.
- **Regarding future development, the most probable outlook maintains the status-quo. From this perspective, the SMER-Social Democracy party led by current Prime Minister Robert Fico will remain the strongest party, choose its smaller coalition partners and cement its power.** This would mean slow deterioration of democracy, as the gradual erosion of checks and balances would continue and the unpopularity of the SMER-Social Democracy party would increasingly push dissatisfied citizens towards the right-wing parties, like Kotleba or Kollár. On the other hand, the opportunity is that the new democratic parties will be created (two parties have been announced, it is possible that they will later merge) and may get into the Parliament in the 2020 elections. Also the Christian Democrats may return to Parliament.

2. Stating the problems/democratic challenges:

- The key problems are (1) the abuse of power and related corruption which is not punished and (2) opportunistic populism, whereby, for example, top politicians provide various subsidies to gain short-term popularity while ignoring the underlying longer-term social problems such as poverty and the segregation of Roma, the insufficient quality of health care and education, and stagnation in the business environment, etc.

- These problems have fueled the rise of anti-system political parties, which have become popular especially with youth in the country. According to Focus Agency's exit poll from March 2016, **the fascist "Kotleba – People's Party - Our Slovakia" was the most successful among the first-time voters attracting almost one quarter of them.** This was also confirmed by the Youth Council of the Bratislava Region in cooperation with the Institute of Public Affairs after simulating government elections among students at secondary schools across Slovakia prior to the 2016 elections. With a sample of almost 12,000 students, the winners of the simulated elections were the populist "Boris Kollár – We are Family" party and the fascist "Kotleba – People's Party - Our Slovakia".
- Overall, the voting behavior of young people hints at the poor quality of the education system not only to teach critical thinking, but also its failure to demonstrate the importance of democracy and the EU for quality of life in Slovakia. According to a representative public opinion poll organized by INEKO in November 2016, **the inability to understand the link between the quality of democracy and the quality of life proved to be one of the most important distinctions of voters of non-standard political parties.** Among other distinctions, they also typically have lower salaries and a lower level of education, and come from economically disadvantaged regions.

3. Identifying solutions

- Based on an INEKO survey among 80 local opinion leaders from October 2016, **the most desired solution both in the short and long-term is strengthening the independence and accountability of the police, prosecutor, judiciary, regulatory and oversight institutions.** This includes more transparency regarding their work, separation from the executive, establishing an independent inspection of the police and of public prosecution, abolishing the possibility to withdraw the President of Police for no reason, opening the Prosecutorial Council to members outside the prosecutorial environment, and other initiatives.
- **In the short-term, the most desired solutions also include the following:**
 - o Credible investigation of the main corruption cases/scandals;
 - o Consistent feedback to politicians from civil society – fact-checking and tracking their promises;
 - o Monitoring and assessing the efficiency of projects and tenders in areas where the largest public contracts are awarded (e.g. in transport, healthcare, IT, defense, etc.) and where the risk of stealing public money is the highest;
 - o Disclosing detailed declarations of assets of the top politicians and officials.
- **In the long-term, the most desired solutions also include the following:**
 - o A better education system that teaches children to think critically and understand the importance of democracy and the EU for quality of life;
 - o Enhancing the quality of public services (e.g. in education, healthcare, the judiciary, security, etc.) for example by measuring and disclosing results, financial incentives, etc.;

- Emergence of trustworthy, pro-democracy politicians (e.g. establishing new political parties which would mobilize democratic voters).
- **To implement proposed solutions, it is crucial to mobilize democratic forces in the civil society, including local NGOs, businesses, and media both in Slovakia and abroad.**