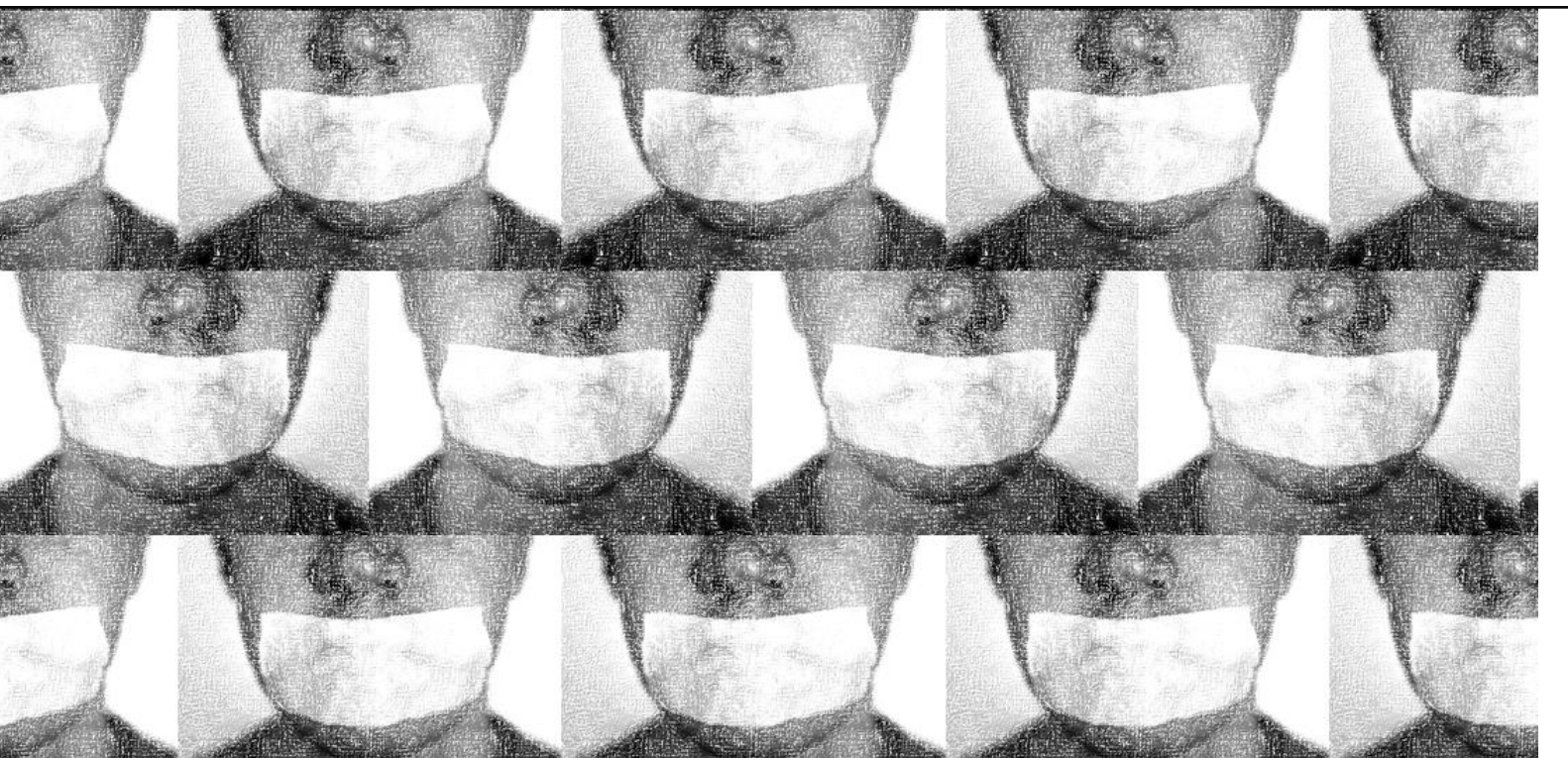


The News Media Landscape: An overview of the context of Press Freedom and Regulation in Slovakia

Authors: John Steel, Neil Roberts, Julie Firmstone, Charlotte Elliott-Harvey



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For further information please contact John Steel, j.steel@derby.ac.uk

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Abstract

The News Media Landscape: An Overview of the Context of Press Freedom and Regulation in Slovakia examines the structure, regulation and cultural context of journalism in Slovakia. The report was produced as part of the Arts and Humanities Research Council funded project *Defining Freedom of the Press: A Cross-National Examination of Press Ethics and Regulation*, which explores and compares systems of press freedom and ethics across a range of European democracies. It outlines constitutional protections for freedom of expression, the regulatory framework governing print, broadcast and online media, and the role of self-regulation. The report analyses the Slovak media landscape, including media ownership, market concentration, and political pressures on both public service and commercial media. It also examines patterns of audience news consumption, public trust, and the growth of digital-native news providers. Further sections explore journalism culture, professional challenges and the impact of political polarisation, misinformation and hostility toward journalists. The report provides a detailed national case study designed to inform comparative research on press regulation, ethics and media freedom within democratic systems.

Slovakia

RSF ranking: 29th out of 180 (RSF, 2024)¹

Population: 5.7m (Worldometer, 2024)

Percentage in the capital: 10.2% (583k; World Population Review, 2024)

GDP: 132.1bn USD (Statista, 2024)

EU member: since 1 May, 2004 (EUROPA, 2024)

Official language: Slovak (EUROPA, 2024)

Press council: *Tlačovo-digitálna rada Slovenskej republiky* (The Print-Digital Council of the Slovak Republic)

Press freedom environment:

Freedom House classes Slovakia as a “free” country with a total score of 90 out of 100 (Freedom House, 2024). This score is split 37/53 for political rights and for civil liberties (Freedom House, 2024). The narrative report for 2024 describes Slovakia as having regular multi-party elections as part of a parliamentary democracy, with general protection for civil liberties (Ibid.). However, there is some political corruption and “entrenched discrimination”, particularly against Roma people, immigrants and people from the LGBT+ community (Ibid.).

The prime minister Robert Fico was subject to an assassination attempt in May 2024 (Hečková and Smith, 2024). This led to universal solidarity in the media and society (Ibid.). He had been returned to power in September 2023, having been

¹ Dropping from 12 in 2016.

forced out by protests over the 2018 murder of journalist Ján Kuciak (Ibid.). The attempt on Fico's life raised fears about political polarisation and parliament passed a resolution to de-escalate tensions and stop hate speech (Ibid.). The Reuters Digital News Report (2024) highlights that this did not prevent attacks on the media immediately after Fico's shooting (Ibid.). Six months previously, Fico had stopped communications with four news organisations and threatened to limit their access to government ministers (Freedom House, 2024). Fico's coalition representatives "attack critical media and refuse to answer their questions" (RSF). Fico also announced plans to separate the TV and radio entities of public broadcaster Radio and Television of Slovakia (RTVS), further raising concerns about political interference (Freedom House, 2024). His government also cut RTVS funding by 30 per cent and demanded the resignation of the corporation's director general (RSF, 2024). Reporters without Borders (RSF) state that Fico's re-election in 2023 saw an end to efforts to improve press freedom in Slovakia (RSF, 2024). The person accused of ordering the killing of Kuciak has yet to be convicted (Ibid.). Two men have been convicted, but well-known businessman Marian Kočner has been acquitted (Freedom House, 2024).

RSF state that the working environment for journalists remains hostile (RSF, 2024) but the Freedom House narrative report still claims that Slovakia's media are "generally free" (Freedom House, 2024). In the civil liberties section, however, the report acknowledges that the country's media "remains shaken", following Ján Kuciak's murder in 2018 (Ibid.). She had been working on stories involving corruption and tax fraud (Ibid.).

Media landscape

There are government proposals to split the TV and radio departments of public broadcaster Radio and Television of Slovakia (RTVS) (Freedom House, 2024), which has maintained strong ratings despite its funding cut by 30 per cent (RSF, 2024). It suffers from government influence while there is also political pressure on the commercial broadcaster TV Markiza, "the most influential privately owned media outlet" (Ibid.). Slovakia's two biggest tabloid newspapers, *Plus Jeden Deň* and *Nový Čas*, are now owned by the Penta group, which Reporters without Borders describes as "oligarchic" (Ibid.). Nevertheless, Slovakia has a strong tradition of investigative journalism in both print and digital news organisations (RSF, 2024).

The parliamentary elections in September 2023 featured "outright hostility" to the media (Hečková and Smith, 2024) and the main terrestrial TV stations can no longer convince some politicians to take part in on-air debates (Ibid.). This has led Robert Fico and other politicians to rely on their sizeable social media followings to get their messages across, instead of facing critical questioning (Ibid.). Fico's Facebook profile had nearly seven million interactions in 2023 (Ibid.). Just before the election, a deepfake video showed an alleged conspiracy between the leader of Progressive Slovakia and a journalist at Denník N to influence the poll (Hečková

and Smith, 2024). It was eventually exposed as faked but not before it had been widely shared as the “most viral social media post of the whole campaign” on Telegram, Instagram, TikTok and Facebook (Ibid.).

Newspapers and market

Penta bought the daily newspaper *Nový Čas* (tabloid, popular) in 2023, along with *cas.sk* (Hečková and Smith, 2024), which means their group now owns both leading tabloids and their online operations (including *Plus Jeden Deň* and *pluska.sk*) (Ibid.). Penta sold its shares in SME (broadsheet, quality) in 2021 (Penta, 2024). Key newspaper titles include *Katolícke noviny* (Catholic, weekly), alongside tabloids *Nový Čas* (New Time) and *Plus Jeden Deň* (One More Day) (Školkay, 2017). Before its takeover by Penta, *Nový Čas* (New Time) had an apolitical parent newspaper, *Čas*, despite having Communist party connections (Ibid.). The quality press includes titles such as *Pravda* (Truth), *Sme* (We Are), *Denník N* (Daily N) and business/economic daily *Hospodárske noviny* (Economy Newspaper; Ibid.). *Pravda* (Truth), is a “liberal left” or “centre-left” newspaper and was once the official newspaper of Slovakia’s communist party and is owned by Florena, which has ties to the populist party Smer-SD and is otherwise only involved in real estate (Ibid.). *Sme* (We Are) is a “liberal right” or “centre-right” newspaper. No longer owned by Penta (2024), it was accused by Robert Fico in his previous term of office as being “anti-government” (Ibid.). Penta has also expanded into the Czech Republic and acquired several other companies (city newspaper for Prešov; Školkay, 2017).

As well as the potential for political interference, media consolidation in Slovakia is one of the factors that undermines editorial independence for news organisations (RSF, 2024). Several major news providers are owned by a small number of oligarchs and the public broadcaster RTVS is still susceptible to financial and political pressures (Ibid.). Reporters without Borders cite Transparency International Slovakia as reporting that 29 per cent of Slovaks live in “local news deserts (RSF, 2024), which leads to criticism of local issues on social media rather than in local newspapers or TV (Ibid.). Digital subscriptions are helping growth for a few of the smaller, private news organisations but this remains a small part of the market (RSF, 2024.).

Audience news consumption

The 2024 Reuters Digital News Report combines results of weekly usage across television, radio, and print, as well as online in Slovakia (Newman et al., 2024: 103). The public broadcaster RTVS scores 41 per cent reach for TV and radio but it’s pipped by commercial operators TV Markiza (43 per cent) and TV JOJ (44 per cent) (Ibid.). The top six newspapers for weekly reach are *Nový Čas* (tabloid, popular) (19 per cent), *Sme* (broadsheet, quality) (12 per cent), *Plus 7 dní* (tabloid, weekly) (10 per cent), *Pravda* (broadsheet, quality) (9 per cent), *Plus Jeden Deň* (tabloid, popular) (9 per cent) and *Dennik N* (broadsheet, quality) (8 per cent)

(Ibid.). For online reach, the market is dominated by digital only brands (see below). Aktuality.sk is the most accessed news site, reaching 38 per cent of consumers each week, followed by topky.sk on 27 per cent (Newman et al., 2024: 103). The newspaper *Sme* scores 20 per cent reach for its online platform and the public broadcaster RTVS is at 16 per cent (Ibid.).

The Eurobarometer Media & News Survey (2023) polled 1,003 Slovaks on their news consumption habits. The most popular source of news was television at 73 per cent, just above the EU average of 71 per cent. Social media for news consumption was much higher than the EU average, however. It was used by 47 per cent of respondents (compared to the EU average of 37 per cent). Well below the EU average (21 per cent), just 11 per cent of respondents still sourced news from the print media (Ibid.).

Public service media

Radio and Television of Slovakia (RTVS) is the public broadcaster for Slovakia (RTVS, 2024). A translated version of its website states that Slovak Television (founded 1956) and Slovak Radio (founded 1926) came together under one brand (RTVS) in 2011 (Ibid.). However, there are now proposals to separate these entities once more (RSF, 2024). The deputy chair of parliament, Andrej Danko, has said he wants “a state broadcaster”, not a public broadcaster (Hečková and Smith, 2024). The public licence fee was abolished in 2023 but RTVS was guaranteed financing of 0.17 per cent of the state budget (Hečková and Smith, 2024), only for it to be cut to 0.12 per cent after Fico returned to power in September (Ibid.). This means the corporation will become more dependent on state contracts for “public influence” programmes, raising concerns about direct political influence (Ibid.). New laws were proposed in March 2024 to alter the structure of RTVS, contrary to the European Broadcasting Union’s key tenets for public sector broadcasting (Ibid.). The proposals would make it easier to remove the director general and prompted a letter of protest signed by the majority of RTVS staff, arguing the corporation was the most trusted news source and must avoid political control (Hečková and Smith, 2024).

Public trust in the press and media

According to the 2024 Reuters Digital News Report, overall trust in Slovakian news is very low at 25 per cent (Newman et al., 2024: 103). This means that Slovakia ranks 45th out of the 47 countries in the study (Ibid.). Commercial broadcaster TA3 is joint top for trust, alongside the public broadcaster RTVS (56 per cent), but no other outlet scores a trust approval rating above 50 per cent (Ibid.). The next best performers are Radio Expres (49 per cent), the daily business newspaper *Hospodarske noviny* (48 per cent) and the top-reaching broadcaster TV JOJ (47 per cent) (Ibid.). The least trusted news outlets are the new Penta acquisition *Nový Čas*

(27 per cent) and high-reaching online specialist topsky.sk (28 per cent), while Refresher.sk and *Plus 7 dní* also record just 31 per cent trust ratings each (Ibid.).

In 2016, 1,023 Slovakian participants took part in Special Eurobarometer 452, titled *Media pluralism and democracy* (Eurobarometer, 2016). Here, 75 per cent of participants thought that the national media represented a “diversity of views and opinions”, and 48 per cent thought that the media were “free from political or commercial pressure” (Eurobarometer, 2016: factsheet for Slovakia). The study predated some seismic events in Slovakian media and politics (see Press freedom environment) but 50 per cent thought that public broadcasting services were free from political influence (Ibid.). General trust in media was then much higher at 60 per cent (Ibid.), reliability in television was at 64 per cent, radio at 71 per cent, and newspapers (both print and online) at 57 per cent. Trust in social media platforms was lower at 40 per cent (Ibid.). A low number of participants were aware of regulatory bodies at 20 per cent, with 50 per cent thinking that they were free from political or commercial influence (Ibid.). In the study, 16 per cent of Slovakian respondents thought that journalists, bloggers, and social media users were the targets of hate speech and abuse (Ibid.).

Online only/digital entrants

The Reuters Digital News Report for 2024 shows a competitive digital market, dominated by new media specialists (Newman et al., 2024: 103). It lists the following as the most-used sources of news “used last week”: aktualita.sk (38 per cent), topky.sk (27 per cent), the community portal startitup.sk (15 per cent), refresher.sk (13 per cent) and pluska.sk (12 per cent) (Ibid.). In terms of digital entrants that publish longform news stories, the daily *Denník N* was founded as an independent alternative to daily newspapers (Sharp, 2017).

Additional context

Data on risks to media pluralism in Slovakia refers back to 2016, pre-dating the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak (Hečková and Smith, 2024) and the attempt on prime minister Robert Fico’s life (Ibid.) The study showed that Slovakia had mixed rankings with “medium risk” to market plurality (44 per cent), social inclusiveness (48 per cent) and political independence (45 per cent), and “low risk” to basic protection (24 per cent) (Sampor, 2018: 4-11). The report highlighted the following in its conclusion regarding each category (Ibid.: 12): that the findings predate the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and the sentencing of Lukáš Milan (for defamation crimes), the need for independent safeguards to prevent state involvement in local media, the need for independence of the public broadcaster, media literacy and recognition of minorities and women, however, there were positives with “media and electoral process regulations, and in relatively new regulations regarding access to the media for people with disabilities”. The report

also predates the attempted assassination of prime minister Robert Fico in May 2024 (Hečková and Smith, 2024).

In the current RSF rankings, Slovakia is ranked 29rd (out of 180) in the 2024 World Press Freedom Index, a rise from 35th in 2019 (RSF, 2024). According to the 2024 Digital News Report, overall trust in Slovakian news was at just 25 per cent, with Slovakia ranking 45th out of the 47 countries in the study (Newman et al., 2024: 103). Internet penetration is at 90 per cent for Slovakia (Ibid.: 102).

Regulatory environment

Reporters without Borders say there is a “favourable legal framework” to protect journalistic sources, provide access to state information and ensure transparency for media ownership and funding (RSF, 2024). Defamation, however, is still a criminal offence (Ibid.). In August 2022, Radu pre mediálne služby – the Council for Media Services (RPMS) - replaced the Council for Broadcasting and Retransmission (TVR) as the regulator for broadcast media in Slovakia (RPMS, 2024). A statement on the RPMS website says that the legal rationale for changing the regulator was based on the increasing convergence between TV broadcasting and digital services on the Internet (Ibid.). The “List of Regulated Entities” section of the website shows that RPMS now has responsibility for radio, television, internet, audiovisual and media services, retransmission and video sharing platforms (Ibid.). It publishes annual reports, in Slovak, on the RPMS website. The public broadcaster (RTVS) has its own Council responsible for overseeing compliance with Slovakia’s Broadcasting Act (RTVS, 2024).

The launch of RPMS came weeks after the introduction of a law to increase media transparency, requiring all outlets to identify their financial backers (Freedom House, 2024). This came alongside new measures to protect confidential sources for online media organisations, as well as traditional ones (Ibid.). However, tensions between government and the media persist and returned prime minister Robert Fico suggested state-owned companies might stop advertising on the commercial outlet TV Markiza, perceived as “hostile” (Ibid.). The broadcaster, along with three other news organisations seen as “unfriendly” (*Denník N*, *Sme* and *Aktuality*) had their media accreditation for government headquarters temporarily withdrawn (Hečková and Smith, 2024). Measures are also being proposed to split the public broadcaster RTVS into TV and radio divisions, which is seen in some quarters as an attempt to exert political influence (Freedom House, 2024).

The press council

The Press Council of the Slovak Republic is the regulator for the newspaper industry. It is now known as the Press-Digital Council of the Slovak Republic, and is the “executive body” of the Association for the Protection of Journalistic Ethics

(AONE) (Slovenský syndikát novinárov, 2024). As a self-regulatory body, the council “addresses complaints about the possible violation of journalistic ethics, as well as motions concerning restraining the journalists’ access to information” (Ibid.). It has nine members that are “figures of the public, cultural and social life that are not actively working as journalists or publishers and do not represent any political party” (Ibid.). The website shows three organisations that are a part of AONE: the Slovak Syndicate of Journalists, the Association of Print and Digital Media (ATDM) and IAB Slovakia (Ibid.).

Recent press council report/cases

The annual reports are only available in Slovakian, via the press council’s website (Slovenský syndikát novinárov, 2024). The 2023 Annual Report does not reveal headline figures for the number of complaints received or resolved. However, the introduction discusses the threat of fake news on the internet and the emergence of artificial intelligence, adding that new technologies have altered the media environment and made the work of a journalist “increasingly demanding” (Ibid.).

Other bodies and codes of ethics

Key organisations are the Slovak Syndicate of Journalists (SSN), the Slovak Section of Association of European Journalists (SSAEJ) and the Slovak Association of Journalists (SAN; Školkay, 2017). A search for codes of ethics for each organisation referred back to the press council (SSN), or none were listed (SSAEJ and SAN). The press council’s code of ethics is available via their website (Slovenský syndikát novinárov, 2024), or by direct link [here](#). It sets out the basic principles of a journalist’s work as follows:

1. Primary values of journalist’s work are values of personal freedom, justice and decency. In their work, they promote these values in society.
2. The main principles governing the journalist in his or her work are impartiality, balance, objectivity, honesty, truthfulness, accountability and consistent verification of facts.
3. The journalist takes care that all of his or her public statements do not contradict the basic principles of journalism laid down in the paragraph 1 and 2 of this Article.
4. The journalist publishing his or her work on the internet is also bound by the IAB Slovakia Code of Conduct for Content Copyright, which was approved by General Assembly of IAB Slovakia Association of the Internet Media on 21 January 2015.

Journalism culture

Slovakia has a liberal-leaning media, at odds with the country’s society at large, and this can cause tension (RSF, 2024). Journalists face criticism and can be harassed

at protests or online, especially women when covering stories about gender or sexual harassment (Ibid.). There is developing co-operation between police and journalists, especially after the murder of investigative reporter Jan Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kusnirova in 2018 (RSF, 2024).

The most recent Media Landscapes report was in 2016. It made note that “we know very little about the journalists themselves” (Školka, 2017). There is not a specific chapter on Slovakia in the book, *The Global Journalist in the 21st Century*. Also, Slovakia is the only country in the DfOP study to not be included in the *Worlds of Journalism* study, and Slovakia is not included in the MEDIAACT project. A brief literature search yielded studies on the use of media as a means for elite-to-elite communication (Örnebring, 2012), the role of investigative journalism (Stetka and Örnebring, 2013), challenges to journalism (Tušer and Hudíková, 2018), the role of legislation in journalism (Belakova, 2013) and studies on council newspapers and how they relate to regulation policy (Lenka Waschková, 2015).

Other information

Governing framework

Parliamentary democratic republic (EUROPA, 2024)

Parliament

The National Council

Seats in parliament

150 (Freedom House, 2024)

Last election

2023 (Freedom House, 2024)

Seats held by women

22% (The World Bank, 2024)

Coalition government

Slovak Social Democracy Party (Smer-SD), Voice (Hlas) party and the Slovak National Party (SNS) (Freedom House, 2024)

Populist party

Smer-SD (ECPR, 2024)

Origins of key minority groups

Hungarians, Roma, Czechs, Ruthenians (Minority Rights, 2024)

Constitutional text on freedom of speech/expression/the press

26.1. The freedom of speech and the right to information are guaranteed.

26.2. Everyone has the right to express his views in word, writing, print, picture, or other means as well as the right to freely seek out, receive, and spread ideas and information without regard for state borders. The issuing of press is not subject to approval procedures. Enterprise in the fields of radio and television may be subject to the awarding of an approval from the state. The conditions shall be laid down by law.

26.4. The freedom of speech and the right to seek out and disseminate information may be restricted by law, if such a measure is necessary in a democratic society to protect the rights and freedoms of others, state security, public order, or public health and morals.

Media model (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 67)

not applied

Key events

... [click here for the BBC's recent articles on Slovakia.](#)

... [click here for The Guardian's recent articles on Slovakia.](#)

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Defining Freedom of the Press: A cross-national examination of press ethics and regulation

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For further information please contact John Steel, j.steel@derby.ac.uk

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