

THE DANUBE STORY

Slovakia at the Crossroads of History

A Story of Courage, Truth, and the Fight for a Nation's Soul

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PROLOGUE

Friday, November 21, 2025, morning — Brussels

In an office on Rue de la Loi, an official click "send." An electronic notification heads to Bratislava. After weeks of warnings, after months of ignored diplomatic signals, and after years of eroding values, the European Commission has spoken in a language every member state understands **infringement procedure**.

Slovakia, a full member of the European Union, receives a formal request to explain why it believes its constitution can stand above the law of a community it voluntarily joined¹.

Article 7 of the constitutional amendment states that in matters of "national identity," Slovak law takes precedence over European law.

Prime Minister Fico calls it a "*dam against progressivism*" and presents it as a response to changes in Western societies.

Brussels sees it differently: as an attack on the very principle that holds the European Union together.

"This is contrary to the principle of primacy of EU law, which is a fundamental element of the EU legal order, together with the principles of autonomy, effectiveness and uniform application of Union law."

— European Commission, November 21, 2025

The government responds with sovereignty. It speaks of traditions, of Western interference, of values. It forgets one thing: Slovakia joined the EU voluntarily, with full awareness of its obligations. No one forced it. And now it wants the benefits without the rules that make them possible.

Saturday, November 22, 2025, Bratislava — extraordinary government session.

While Brussels awaits a diplomatic response, the government convenes on a day when work is normally off. Not because of the constitutional amendment that triggered the proceedings. Because of a law to abolish the **Whistleblower Protection Office**.

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/sk/inf_25_2481 - Commission sends a formal request to SLOVAKIA for violation of fundamental principles of EU law



The same institution that recently fined the Ministry of Interior €90,000 for illegally suspending elite NAKA investigators.

The same institution whose chairwoman had a mandate until 2028.

And the same institution that protected people who spoke the truth.

The government approves **expedited legislative proceedings**.

There is no time for discussion. There is no time for comments. The Office is to be absorbed into a structure under control of the very ministry it had disputes with.

"We reject political interference in the independence of the Whistleblower Protection Office." — Office's response to the government proposal

Approximately one hundred people — whistleblowers of corruption, abuse of power, or legal violations — face retroactive loss of protection.

The European Directive on whistleblower protection contains a clause on **non-regression of conditions**.²

The Slovak government either doesn't know about it or ignores it.

This is how the end of November begins — a November that will test where Slovakia belongs and what it is willing to defend.

THREE MOMENTS OF TRUTH: 1968, 1989, 2025

Slovakia has encountered the question of truth twice in the last half-century.

In August 1968, tanks crushed the Prague Spring. Truth became a crime. Twenty years of normalization followed — twenty years of pretending that lies are reality.

Lesson for 2025: totalitarianism doesn't need a majority. The silence of those who disagree is enough.

In November 1989, students took to the streets. "Truth and love must triumph over lies and hatred," said Václav Havel. The Iron Curtain fell.

Lesson for 2025: change begins from below. It begins with the courage of individuals who say: enough.

Now, in November 2025, the country faces its third test. The question is the same: What is the price of truth? Who will pay it?

The answer lies not only in history, but in how authoritarianism works — in minds, not just in laws.

Why Authoritarianism Wins

Authoritarianism first wins in the moral imagination. Only then does it erode institutions.

² <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/SK/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019L1937> - Article 25



Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian executed by the Nazis, understood this: "*Cheap grace is the mortal enemy.*" Cheap grace — that is faith without responsibility, values without sacrifice, tradition without substance. This is precisely the kind of Christianity offered today as a tool of power.

Hannah Arendt understood something fundamental after Nazism and Stalinism: authoritarianism doesn't begin with brutality. It begins with the destruction of truth. When lies fill the public space so densely that truth ceases to exist as a common category — that's when totalitarianism has a clear path.

Authoritarianism doesn't begin with law. It begins with fatigue, fear, and comfortable following without responsibility. It begins when "values" become an empty label — not a commitment.

This moral erosion also has a measurable form. The numbers speak clearly.

THE VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE CRISIS

According to the V-Dem Democracy Report 2025, Slovakia lost nearly 20 percentage points on the liberal democracy index between 2022 and 2024³. No EU state has experienced such a steep fall since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

"Slovakia shows a very rapid decline on the democracy index over the past two years. This reflects Prime Minister Fico's attempts to consolidate power by undermining judicial independence, attacking civil society organizations, and promoting political control over the media. Slovakia is deeply polarized and remains just above the threshold of autocratization." — V-Dem Report 2025, p. 45

Democracy in Slovakia is not falling under the pressure of tanks. It falls in parliament. In amended paragraphs. In occupied councils. In strategically abolished offices.

February 2024: abolition of the Special Prosecutor's Office. March 2024: transformation of RTVS into politically controlled STVR. September 2025: constitutional amendment placing Slovak law above European law. November 2025: liquidation of whistleblower protection.

Every step looks legal. Every step is presented as reform. And yet — step by step — institutions lose independence and power concentrates. Every step weakens democracy.

Roots of the Crisis

In a village in eastern Slovakia, a retired teacher watches the evening news on STVR. She remembers times when her school had resources, when young people stayed, when politicians said things you could actually verify.

The pandemic revealed what years of Fico governments had produced: a hollowed-out healthcare system, schools that had stopped teaching, regional inequality that no one was

³ https://www.v-dem.net/documents/61/v-dem-dr__2025_lowres_v2.pdf - for 2024 and reports for the previous 2 years - FSF processed the numbers through internal analysis



addressing. The coalition that replaced him in 2020 added rubble instead of reconstruction—and drowned in internal conflicts.

Slovakia recorded one of the highest COVID death rates in the world. Into that vacuum stepped voices offering simpler stories: conspiracies, convenient scapegoats, reassurances that the elites in Bratislava had abandoned ordinary Slovaks. They were largely right about being abandoned.

Understanding this is essential: defeating authoritarianism requires not only defending institutions, but repairing the cracks that enabled its rise.

Selective Morality

The government that mobilizes society for constitutional "protection" against alleged "gender ideology" is silent when Slovak families lose €1.45 billion annually to gambling.

President Pellegrini vetoed the gambling law on November 4, 2025. The coalition can override it.

The contrast is clear: on LGBTI topics, there is mobilization, emotional rhetoric, pressure from certain groups of society. On the explosion of gambling that destroys hundreds of families, there is silence.

"Values" are activated selectively — only where it serves a political goal.

This is not a criticism of faith. It is a criticism of its abuse. Slovakia needs authentic ethics — not a tool for dividing society. It needs faith that stands on the side of the vulnerable, not power.

And it was precisely from the ranks of those the government considered "silent" that the response came.

THE CHALK REVOLUTION

Poprad, Friday, November 7, 2025

Before Prime Minister Fico's planned lecture at the Dominik Tatarka United School, student Michal wrote chalk messages criticizing the Prime Minister on the sidewalk. Police took him for questioning. The Prime Minister postponed the discussion.

Nothing that happened was kept secret — and so the chalk revolution was born. Chalk messages appeared in Bratislava, Košice, Banská Bystrica, and small towns. People wrote everywhere and everything: quotes, messages, opposition to Fico and his government.

A week later, on November 14, Fico met with high school students in Poprad — not at the school, but at the District Office. Students came dressed in black. When some began jangling keys, Fico told them: "If you're such heroes... go fight in Ukraine." Students left the hall en masse.

Chalk. Temporary, washable, fragile. And yet — in that moment — more powerful than any press conference. Because chalk speaks truth that washes away — but memory doesn't.



This revolution wasn't born in opposition offices or NGOs. It was born in the hands of sixteen-year-olds who understood something many adults forgot: silence is consent.

What began with chalk continued in the rain.

NOVEMBER 17: FREEDOM SQUARE

Bratislava, Monday, November 17, 2025

Fifty thousand people stand at Freedom Square. Umbrellas touch umbrellas. Wet European Union flags hang next to Slovak tricolors.

The government canceled November 17 as a day off — supposedly austerity measures. People came anyway. Perhaps precisely because of that.

In Košice, twenty thousand. In Banská Bystrica, five thousand — the largest crowd since the Velvet Revolution. In Poprad, three thousand, including students from the chalk revolution. In smaller towns, numbers these communities hadn't seen in years.

A student from Poprad takes the stage. Guitar in hand. "Don't be afraid," he says. "They must be afraid of us."

But Slovakia is not an isolated case. It is part of a larger experiment.

LABORATORY OF HYBRID AUTOCRACY

Robert Fico is not a provincial autocrat. He is part of a larger experiment.

What Viktor Orbán built over fourteen years in Budapest, Fico is accelerating to eighteen months.

What Aleksandar Vučić tests in Belgrade resonates in Bratislava. And what the Kremlin spreads through disinformation networks finds willing carriers in Slovak media.

Slovakia is becoming a laboratory of hybrid warfare waged by autocracies in the heart of the EU: Institutional decay through parliamentary legislative activity; AI-amplified disinformation campaigns; Energy dependence on Moscow "on demand" of the government; Systematic polarization of society, spreading hatred and fear.

A model that can be exported. That's why Slovakia's crisis is Europe's crisis. And that's why Brussels is responding.

In December 2024, Fico visited Putin in Moscow — the first time since the start of the Russian invasion. After Nehammer and Orbán, he was only the third leader from the European Union who, since the start of the barbaric war, shook hands with the leader of Russia in the Kremlin. A month later, in January 2025, after Orbán's visit and based on a purposeful SIS report, he accused the opposition of preparing a "Maidan." The terminology is not accidental. It is the language of the Kremlin.



But democratic resistance has its own history. And the "sovereign" is the citizens of Slovakia.

FROM CLEVELAND TO BRUSSELS

November 12, 2025, 110 years after Cleveland

In 1915, Slovak and Czech emigrants met in Cleveland to sign an agreement that helped establish the democratic foundations of the future Czechoslovakia.

110 years later, leaders of the Slovak diaspora met in Brussels to adopt the Brussels Agreement. Future Slovakia Forum was there.

The Brussels Agreement, initiated by the Pražská kaviareň civic association and signed by representatives from 15 countries, calls on the Slovak government and parliament to strengthen institutional ties with Slovaks abroad. Among others it demands a new diaspora law and bilateral treaties protecting Slovak communities.⁴

The Czech Republic hosts the largest Slovak community in the EU — an estimated 350,000 people. The Brussels Agreement's call for bilateral treaties protecting Slovak communities abroad is particularly relevant here.

Cleveland was about independence. Brussels is about its defense. The Danube connects both stories — like a river that always flows forward.

THE DANUBE CHOICE: THE ROAD TO 2027

The Danube has flowed since time immemorial. It carves its way through Central Europe, connects nations, and silently observes the passage of history, indifferent to the dramas on its banks. As Claudio Magris wrote in his famous book *Danubio* — it is a river full of color, on its banks diversity concentrates in a small area. And such is the Danube also on its short stretch through Slovakia — it stretches our imagination to embrace all that diversity.

And for Slovakia today, it carries a metaphor: the shape of choice. Head toward democratic renewal? Or slide toward authoritarian consolidation — like another country downstream on the Danube?

Paths of Democratic Defense

European conditionality can work as a lever. Transparent evidence of rule of law violations means pressure to uphold European values.

The Slovak diaspora has enormous potential. In 2023, some 72,000 Slovaks abroad requested postal ballots — but the true potential is far greater. Poland showed what is

⁴ <https://www.krajan.sk/projekt.php?id=34768> – The Brussels Agreement was ceremonially signed in Brussels on November 12, 2025. Full text available at <https://prazska.kaviaren.org/BruselskaDohoda>. Video report by STVR's :24: <https://www.facebook.com/share/v/1DEKcELpQo/>. The Brussels Agreement contains six demands addressed to the Slovak government and parliament.



possible: record turnout and hundreds of thousands of votes from abroad contributed to the return of democratic values.

Independent media and investigative journalism remain key to an informed society.

And finally — solving real problems. Not culture wars. Healthcare. Affordable housing. Population aging. Exodus of young people.

THE WIND IS SHIFTING

The numbers don't just speak about the state. They speak about direction.

The ruling coalition has lost 430,000 votes since the last election. The democratic opposition has gained more than 160,000 votes.

Current models show 87 seats for democratic parties and only 63 for the coalition (including the extra-parliamentary movement Republika)⁵.

Approximately 275,000 voters are still looking for their choice.

This is not optimism. This is mathematics. And mathematics says: it's not too late yet.

But mathematics doesn't vote. People vote.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Somewhere right now, a priest is preparing a sermon and deciding whether to speak the truth. Somewhere, a journalist is weighing a story that could cost her job. Somewhere, a student is considering whether to go to a protest.

Every decision accumulates. Every voice counts.

The paths forward are various: supporting independent media, civic initiatives, organizations defending the rule of law. For those abroad: registering to vote, talking with family who stopped believing it matters.

We live our daily lives and make decisions that affect us, people around us, but perhaps also many nameless ones. The decisions of individuals meet, overlap, and over time can come together and form a mass.

Good is stronger. But only when it acts.

EPILOGUE: THE DANUBE FLOWS ON

Poprad. Chalk on the sidewalk. Words that can be washed away — but not erased.

Bratislava. Rain. Fifty thousand people who came to say: we are home here.

⁵ Agencies IPSOS, NMS, FOCUS and AKO track electoral preferences, FSF analytically processes them - more on FB page <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61557381105524>



Brussels. Formal proceedings. Europe responds.

Bratislava. Saturday session. Power protects itself from those who speak the truth.

Four moments. Two weeks. One story: Slovakia has not lost the ability to rise when it comes to fundamental things, when it comes to truth.

The Steepest Fall, the Narrowest Window

It must be repeated — according to the V-Dem Democracy Report 2025, Slovakia lost nearly twenty points on the liberal democracy index in two years — the fastest decline in the EU since 1989.

Institutions are weakening. Laws are being bent. Power is concentrating.

But the second sentence of this story also holds true. The wind is shifting. The coalition is losing, the opposition is gaining, hundreds of thousands of voters are still looking for their direction.

This is mathematics stated truthfully: it's not too late yet. But mathematics doesn't vote. People vote.

Diaspora: A Voice That Can Change Direction

More than 300,000 Slovak citizens are estimated to live in EU countries alone⁶, with the total diaspora — including the United States, Canada, and other countries — reaching an estimated 1.5 million. However, how many retain Slovak citizenship and voting rights remains uncertain.

In the 2023 parliamentary elections, approximately 72,000 citizens abroad requested postal ballots — a record number, but still a fraction of the potential. If this number could double by 2027, it could decisively shift the outcome.

Poland in 2023 showed that the return to democracy doesn't begin on election day, but eighteen months earlier — with decisions by people who tell themselves: "It still matters."

Central Europe in the River's Current

Slovakia today isn't just dealing with an internal drama. What's happening is a test for the entire Union.

Hybrid autocracy — where a legislative storm mixes with propaganda, cultural conflicts with geopolitics, and fatigue with apathy — is a model that can spread quickly. That's why Brussels is responding. That's why the region is watching. After all — Central Europe has always been a harbinger of what awaits Europe as a whole, a warning signal that must be heeded. The coming months will be decisive for all of Central Europe — and in this sense,

⁶ Eurostat census data (2021, published 2025) shows 330,576 registered Slovak citizens in EU member states. Total diaspora estimate of 1.5 million based on ÚSZZ (Office for Slovaks Living Abroad) reporting, November 2025.



paradoxically, the future of Europe will not be decided in Brussels, but right here, in places connected by the culture of apple strudel.

The Danube flows on. The choice remains.

The future of democracy in Slovakia hangs by a thread. But that thread can be strengthened — one conversation, one convinced voice, one act of courage after another.

Slovakia is deciding and will decide. Not only in the fall of 2027, but now.

In these November days, in these gestures, in these quiet but important decisions.

Nothing is inevitable. The Danube won't stop. Will you?



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dávid Bořuta (b. 1977) is the founder and director of Future Slovakia Forum, a think tank focused on democratic resilience and evidence-based public policy reform.

His professional path led through banking, real estate development, and healthcare consolidation — from Bratislava through Budapest and Zagreb to Prague. He held leadership positions in international companies and also served as an advisor to Prime Minister Ľ. Ódor on investment in Ukraine's recovery.

He founded Future Slovakia Forum in 2024. He is based in Prague and Bratislava.

Michal Vašečka (b. 1972) is a sociologist specializing in extremism, ethnic relations, and democratic resilience. He is the director of Bratislava Policy Institute and since 2012 has represented Slovakia in the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) at the Council of Europe.

He has served as a visiting professor at Georgetown University, Oxford, and the University of Michigan. He chaired the Slovak Fulbright Commission (2010–2017) and served as vice-chairman of the governmental committee VRAX for extremism.

In 2018, the Slovak Minister of Justice awarded him the Prize for Outstanding Contribution in the Field of Human Rights. He is a member of the Advisory Board of Future Slovakia Forum.

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