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30 YEARS

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EXECUTIVE SEARCH

# Contents



# Editorial

"Coronavirus confirmed in Slovakia." This story, from 2020, was one of the most significant in modern Slovak history and is among the tens of thousands that we have covered for our readers. In the 30-year history of The Slovak Spectator, it was among our most-read articles.

Whenever something significant happens in our country, the interest in independent news about Slovakia in English rapidly increases. In recent years, this has included not only the coronavirus but also elections, the assassination attempt on Prime Minister Robert Fico, Slovakia's stance on the war in Ukraine, floods, a deadly gas explosion in Prešov, the murder of a journalist and his partner, and the killing of two young people in a gay bar.

Among the most popular stories was an article about a former bodybuilding world champion who ended up on the streets, the debunking of a hoax suggesting that the inventor of a "water-powered car" had been poisoned, and uncovering mysteries about the Slovak Bermuda Triangle. There was also Tom Nicholson's perspective on Slovakia's story, an article about a fight between football hooligans in Bratislava, as well as rankings of the largest companies in Slovakia.

These 30 years of stories about Slovakia would not exist without the people who have led The Slovak Spectator. In the early years, these included Eric Koomen, Richard Lewis, Daniel J. Stoll, Rick Zednik and Tom Nicholson. In addition to them, the publishing house was led by Nataša Ďuričová (2002-2004), and as editors-in-chief, we had Rachel Salaman (2002-2003), Beata Balogová (2003-2014) and Michaela Terenzani (2015-2023). To this, we must add over 350 contributors.

I have been leading the publishing house since April 2007, and the current editor-in-chief, Peter Dlhopolec, took on his role in 2023. Along with more than 30 colleagues, we are here for our readers and for those interested in what is happening in Slovakia. Without you, it wouldn't make sense. The 30th anniversary of The Slovak Spectator is thus our shared celebration.

**Ján Pallo**
Publisher, The Slovak Spectator

30 YEARS THE SLOVAK SPECTATOR


Ján Pallo – Publisher **EDITORIAL** Peter Dlhopolec – Editor-In-Chief, Jana Liptáková – Managing Editor, James Thomson – Copy Editor, Francis Mejia – Copy Editor, Ed Holt – Copy Editor, Naomi Hužovičová – Copy Editor, Matúš Beňo – Staff Writer, Nina Hrabovská Francelová – Staff Writer, Oscar Brophy – Staff Writer, Mark Taylor – Staff Writer Michaela Terenzani – Special Contributor **LAYOUT** iGor Kovár – Graphic Designer **SALES & FINANCES** Martina Sádovská – Circulation & Sales, Ivana Adžić – Community Manager, Andrea Illéšová – Office Assistant, Elizaveta Blahodarova – Office Assistant **DATE OF ISSUE:** March 31, 2025 **COVER PHOTO:** Adobe Stock

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EK WE ABIDE BY THE CODE OF JOURNALISTIC ETHICS


Celebrating the first issue in The Slovak Spectator office near Bratislava's main railway station.

# Then ... Now

## SOME THINGS NEVER CHANGE

**Text: By Daniel J. Stoll • Photo: Archive of Daniel J. Stoll, Alan Hyža, archive of The Slovak Spectator**

Nowhere was the infrastructure of the Cold War more apparent than at the Slovakia-Austria border in 1995. Crossing into Austria from Slovakia was like an interrogation. Barbed wire fences stretched across the terrain toward the Danube River. Stern border guards would poke their fingers in any crevasse of your passport and grumpily question faded visa stamps. Crossings would take at least an hour, jeopardising catching flights.

Now? From Bratislava, the expressway takes you 12 kilometres out of your way south before hooking up with another highway back north and west toward Vienna to join a fleet of angry trucks. The trip is not geographically intuitive, but it takes about 10 minutes less. For many years after Slovakia's EU membership in 2004, there didn't even seem to be a border (which was awesome!), but since the Covid-19 restrictions and the influx of migrants, the angry Austrian border guards are back. At least they didn't prod my passport this time, and we were only delayed 15 minutes.

### FOOD

Then... It's hard to describe the joy for a foreigner at first discovering the Slovak version of chicken paprikáš. Lunch at the Curisu Gril, a common buffet-style jedáleň (dining room) which lay in the shadow of Michael's Gate in Bratislava's old town, was an almost daily occurrence for fellow founders and friends of The Slovak Spectator. The thought of chicken served with creamy paprika sauce over halušky (small dumplings) by friendly yet impatient Slovak babky (grannies) as they shooed you down the line is a mouthwatering memory.

Today... Buffets have been replaced by food courts. The influx of worldly fast food found in malls may be celebrated by the sophisticated urban crowd. I can't help but lament that these dining options are the same everywhere, whether in Bratislava, Banská Bystrica, Baku, London, New York, or any mall anywhere in the modernised world. I honestly don't have a sense of where I am in any of these settings. Maybe that's by design. I miss the Slovak grannies.

### QUICK "NOW & THEN" OBSERVATIONS

**Cities and towns**... Then, grey, depressing. Now, bright, green and sustainable.

**Roads**... Then, single-lane across the whole country. Now, fast highways to major cities.

**Travel**... Then, the average trip time from Bratislava to Brezno in central Slovakia was 5 hours. Now, the drive takes 2.5 hours.

**Coffee**... Then, Nescafé, Turkish, Viennese (lots of whipped cream). Now, like everywhere else in the West, sweet, milky, espresso.

**Beer**... Then, Topvar, Corgoň, Šariš, and Zlatý Bažant. Now, Pilsner Urquell, Budvar, Bernard, and still Zlatý Bažant.

**Waiters**... Then, the boss. Now, nice (mostly).

Curisu Gril in Bratislava. The lost art of the buffet.

Eric Koomen and Rick Zednik in The Slovak Spectator's first editorial office.

Preparing the pitch. Látky's football pitch.


First issue party at the Hysteria Pub in 1995. Business card from 1997.

The first Slovak Spectator Christmas party, with (from left) Santas Eric Koomen, Richard Lewis, Dan Stoll and Rick Zednik.

**Clothes**... Then, blue jeans were called "rifle", at least in central Slovakia, because that's what was written on the leather label. Now, džínsy (jeans).
**Currency**... Then, $1 = 32 Slovak crowns (Sk) and an average beer = 6Sk. Now, in Bratislava, the average beer = €3 (equivalent to about 90Sk/$3.25), outside Bratislava = €1 (30Sk/$1.08).
**Public bathrooms**... Then, 2Sk for 20 cm of toilet paper, if the bathroom guard felt like giving it to you. Now, free (but not always).
**Politics**... Then, fractured. Now, fractured.

## SOME THINGS STAY THE SAME

**Football**... I learned my first Slovak curse words at a football match between Slovakia and the Czech Republic in a European Cup Qualifier. The Slovak Spectator's extraordinary reporter Daniel Borský, and budding investigative journalist Tom Nicholson, giggled incessantly at my incoherence before finally enlightening me in the nuances of the Slovak language. Decades later at a tightly contested Slovak Cup match between the tiny village of Látky vs. Fiľakovo, my vocabulary was expanded again after a questionable penalty call late in the game. I cannot in good conscience translate, nor do I have the words in English.
**Hiking**... The hike from Starý Smokovec to Téryho Chata in the High Tatras is one that I have traversed often, first in 1995, and most recently in 2022. Skinny-legged sherpas with bulging calves still bring kegs of beer, food, toilet paper, etc. to the mountain hut thousands of feet above sea level. The payoff after the steep hike cannot be beat: kapustnica (cabbage soup), one of Slovakia's gifts to the world, beef goulash, fresh bread, and a mug of beer or Kofola. The camaraderie is just as enjoyable, as Slovaks, Czechs, Belgians, Poles, Hungarians, Americans all gather and delight in each other's company under the warm roof of the cottage among the peaks and stars.
**Slovak hospitality**... Hosť do domu, Boh do domu! Guest in the house, God in the house! Slovak generosity is real. This hasn't changed in 30 years. Many times I have had the pleasure of meeting my wife's extended family and Slovak friends, and every time, they have a spread fit for a king, endless toasts of slivovica (plum brandy) to health and prosperity, and an attentiveness that borders on oppression. But this tyranny of kindness wants you to be content and you learn quickly how to say no three times or suffer the consequences of going shot for shot. Disentangling from one of these visits is a difficult affair. Shouts of kapurková! (Last shot for the road!) And before you know what's happening an accordion appears, everyone, young and old, rises and starts twirling and singing and laughing. True joie de vie! Then... and now. ©TSS

*Daniel J. Stoll is the founder and co-owner of The Slovak Spectator. He lives in the USA and returns to Slovakia regularly in the summer.*

*FOR THREE DECADES, THE SLOVAK SPECTATOR HAS BEEN A TRUSTED SOURCE FOR SLOVAKIA'S DIPLOMATIC COMMUNITY. MARKING THIS MILESTONE, WE TURNED TO SOME OF THE AMBASSADORS CURRENTLY SERVING IN BRATISLAVA WITH A QUESTION: WHAT MOMENTS OR ACHIEVEMENTS IN THEIR RELATIONS WITH SLOVAKIA STAND OUT AS THE MOST SIGNIFICANT – AND WHY?*

# We are partners, friends and Allies

**By Nigel Baker, Britain's ambassador to Slovakia • Photo: British Embassy**

As a young diplomat, establishing the new British embassy in Bratislava, I remember distinctly the first edition of The Slovak Spectator in 1995. It marked another step in Slovakia's journey from membership of the Soviet-controlled communist empire to taking up its position in the club of Western democracies as a fully-fledged independent state. Exciting times! And I am proud that the United Kingdom played its positive and active role in that evolution.

I could highlight many moments on that journey. But I wanted to focus on three that have special meaning in our relationship, and whose impact still resonates today. The opening of the British labour market to Slovaks in 2004 following Slovakia's accession to the EU and NATO. The State Visit of Her Majesty The Queen in 2008. And the decision in 2015 by Jaguar Land Rover (JLR) to open its plant in Nitra.

Britain played a critical role in helping to secure Slovakia's membership in the EU and NATO. We were the NATO Contact Point embassy for Slovakia from the 1990s, and energetically pursued a policy encouraging the growth of both organisations in the emancipated countries of Central Europe. Our decision immediately to open Britain's labour market to Slovak citizens in 2004 was especially significant, because we were amongst the first Western European countries to do so. It marked the key moment in the foundation of the modern Slovak diaspora in Britain which now plays a vital role in our bilateral relationship, a "living bridge" between our countries. Around 140,000 Slovaks now call Britain their home, one of Slovakia's largest communities abroad. We are proud of their contribution to our country and their achievements. Slovaks are an important part of modern Britain – it is even possible to buy Kofola in British shops! And there are more flights to the United Kingdom from Slovakia than to any other country.

The Queen's visit in 2008 marked a moment of maturity in our relationship, 15 years since independence. It was a way in which my country could acknowledge Slovakia's progress and demonstrate at the very highest level the ties that bind our two democracies. Her Majesty recalled those Slovak heroes who had fought alongside Britain in WWII and evoked the modern partnership between our nations. It was a symbol of our mutual past, looking forwards to a shared future.

A future demonstrated in its most concrete form by the decision of JLR to invest in Slovakia, its plant in Nitra planned as the production line of the company's newest Land Rover models. Production began in 2018 and continues to expand. One of Britain's most iconic car brands finding its home under the hills of Slovakia's most ancient city, employing thousands of Slovaks and investing billions of euros. I cannot imagine a stronger evocation of our bilateral ties.

There is much else that characterises the relationship between Britain and Slovakia. We are partners, friends and Allies. Long may that continue, building on the successes of the past 30 years.

Queen Elizabeth II visited Slovakia in 2008.

The biggest and most well-known German company operating in Slovakia is Volkswagen.

# A partnership centuries in the making

**By Thomas Kurz, Germany's ambassador to Slovakia • Photo: German Embassy**

Here is a tough question: What moments or achievements in German-Slovak relations over the past 30 years do we consider the most significant? Well, it seems difficult to pinpoint specific occasions that advanced the extraordinary success story of our two countries' relations. First of all, because these relations began some 800 years ago.

Did you know that a certain Rudolf, of German descent, was elected the first mayor when Banská Bystrica was granted city rights back in 1255? Or that the famous Fugger merchant family, in the 15th and 16th centuries, turned Rudolf's City of Copper into one of the wealthiest places far and wide? Up until the Second World War, almost everyone in Bratislava spoke German alongside Slovak and Hungarian, and any young German craftsman in training could travel the country from one end to the other, staying overnight with German-speaking families.

Decades of totalitarianism may have suppressed Slovakia's vibrant diversity of national minorities, but they could not erase the broad German influences still evident today – in churches, on monuments, and in cemeteries.

This year, we celebrate 35 years of reunited Europe; last year, we marked 20 years of German-Slovak EU cooperation – two pivotal achievements in modern Slovak-German relations. Slovakia's accession to the EU enabled Germany to become its biggest trade partner, with around 600 German companies operating in the country today, providing jobs for approximately 150,000 employees. Our bilateral trade balance exceeds that of Germany with India, the world's most populous country. The German-Slovak Chamber of Industry and Commerce, with nearly 400 member enterprises, celebrates its 20th anniversary this year.

Against this historic and economic backdrop, it is no surprise that German is the second most commonly learned foreign language, voluntarily studied by one in five students in schools and taught at nearly 20 universities across the country. The demand for well-qualified German speakers is increasing, and the economic benefits for individuals are well-documented.

When the German Embassy, together with the Goethe Institute – the main commercial provider of German language courses in Slovakia – organised German Language Days in Košice, Banská Bystrica and Nitra last year, the meetings between representatives of German companies and students learning German were among the most sought-after events. It was fascinating to see how these meetings turned into genuine recruitment opportunities, with companies pitching themselves to attract young talent.

So, returning to the initial question, we believe the most significant achievement in German-Slovak relations is the link between education and economic activity – underpinned by tradition and centuries of linguistic and cultural affiliation, making it second to none. ©TSS

# Licenses and minimum capital requirements for crypto-asset service providers

The National Bank of Slovakia (NBS), the regulator in Slovakia, has updated its fee tariff, showing what types of permits it will grant crypto-asset service providers (CASPs). In light of this, it makes sense to address not only general information about Markets in Crypto Assets regulation (MiCA) but specifically the different types of licenses, as well as the minimum capital requirements that our clients often ask us about.

## LICENSES

The granting of the license is preceded by a licensing process before the NBS, which is quite lengthy. The NBS will comply within the time limits set out in the MiCA. It will, therefore, assess whether the application for the license is completed within 25 working days of the license application delivery. If it is not completed, the NBS will interrupt the proceedings in order to allow the applicant to complete the missing or additional documents. Once the application is complete, the NBS will then decide whether to approve or reject the application within 40 working days from completion of the application.

The license is needed in order to provide selected crypto-asset services. While MiCA defines crypto-asset service, the number and division of licenses for each crypto-asset service is left to the discretion of the supervising entities in each European Union member state. The updated fee tariff of the NBS defines that the NBS will grant seven types of licenses.

## ASSET-REFERENCED TOKENS (ART)

The first license is necessary for the CASP to offer an asset-referenced token (ART) to the public or to seek admission to trading such a token. However, there are two cases in which a CASP will not be required to obtain this license, namely where (i) over 12 months, the average outstanding value of the ART calculated at the end of each calendar day has not exceeded EUR 5,000,000 or the equivalent amount in another official currency, or where (ii) the public offering of the ART is exclusive to qualified investors and only such qualified investors may hold the ART. In these cases, obtaining this license is not required, and CASPs will only need to prepare a whitepaper and notify the NBS of the ART issuance. The application fee for this license is EUR 3,400.

## ELECTRONIC MONEY TOKENS (EMT)

The second license is required for a CASP to offer an electronic money token (EMT) to the public or seek admission to trading such a token. This license is not new, but it is a pre-existing license for operating an electronic money institution (EMI). The application fee for this license is EUR 3,400 or EUR 1,700, depending on whether the scope of the EMI is unlimited or limited.

## CRYPTO-ASSET SERVICE PROVIDERS

The third license is necessary for the CASP to carry on the business of a crypto-asset service provider to the following extent: executing orders on behalf of clients, placing crypto-assets, providing transfer services for crypto-assets on behalf of clients, receiving and transmitting crypto-assets orders on behalf of clients, providing crypto-assets advisory services, and providing crypto-assets portfolio management. The application fee for this license is EUR 1,700.

The fourth license is necessary to allow the CASP to provide custody and administration of crypto-assets on behalf of clients, exchange crypto-assets for funds, and exchange crypto-assets for other crypto-assets. The application fee

**Ján Falath**
**Founder & Managing Partner at Falath & Partners**

for this license is EUR 2,500. The fifth license is necessary for a CASP to carry out all activities covered by the third and fourth licenses. Obtaining two licenses would be inefficient; therefore, one license covering all these activities is the most efficient option. The application fee for this license is also EUR 2,500.

The sixth license is necessary for a CASP to operate a crypto-asset trading platform. The application fee for this license is EUR 3,400.

The seventh and last license covers all the activities of the CASP mentioned above and is a combination of the fifth and sixth licenses. Acquiring this license will allow the CASP to carry out all applicable activities. The application fee for this license is also EUR 3,400.

## MINIMUM CAPITAL REQUIREMENTS

Under MiCA, each CASP must meet minimum capital requirements depending on what crypto-asset services it plans to perform. The minimum capital requirements are divided into three classes, each differing in both the crypto-asset services and the amount of the minimum capital requirements.

If a CASP plans to execute orders on behalf of clients, place crypto-assets, provide crypto-assets transfer services on behalf of clients, receive and transmit orders for crypto-assets on behalf of clients, provide crypto-assets advisory services and/or provide crypto-assets portfolio management (third license), the minimum capital requirements are in the amount of EUR 50,000. If a CASP, in addition to the services mentioned above, plans to provide custody and management of crypto-assets on behalf of clients, to exchange crypto-assets for funds, and/or to provide the exchange of crypto-assets for other crypto-assets (fifth license) the minimum capital requirements are higher and in the amount of EUR 125,000. The highest minimum capital requirements are for a CASP, if it is authorized to provide all of the services above and, in addition, authorized to operate a crypto-asset trading platform (seventh license), in the amount of EUR 150,000.

In the case of an EMI as a CASP, the minimum capital requirement is even higher, as the EMI must have a capital of at least EUR 350,000 (second license). Thus, the minimum capital requirements are generally determinable only for the second, third, fifth and seventh licenses, while they are not clear for the first, fourth and sixth licenses.

Our clients often ask us whether it is necessary to meet the minimum capital requirements solely through the company's share capital or other funds. The truth is that the minimum capital requirements can be met not only through the capital present in the company, but also through an insurance agreement or comparable guarantee. In the case of our clients who are start-up crypto companies with high cash flow with insufficient reserves, we have met the minimum capital requirements through an insurance agreement. It has to be said that this was a challenging task because insurance companies are very wary of such insurance products, which are typically addressed to a crypto company, and avoided. In the end, however, we were able to ensure that our clients did not have to have a large amount of capital immovably invested in the company and were able to use it to the fullest to grow their business.

## CONCLUSION

The licensing process in Slovakia will be lengthy and, therefore, needs to be started well in advance. The time to prepare the supporting documentation for a license application will also depend on the type of license the applicant is interested in. Furthermore, the type of MiCA license also directly affects the minimum capital requirements that each CASP must meet. MiCA allows for minimum capital requirements, i. e. prudential requirements to be met in other ways than through capital or individual funds. It is, therefore, very important to choose the right licensing representative who will know how to guide the client as efficiently as possible, so that the client's business may continue operating smoothly throughout the entire licensing process.

**Martin Herczeg**
**Associate at Falath & Partners**

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& PARTNERS


Tom Nicholson

# What abides: **Giving a shit**

*THE TWIN TOWERS ARE DOWN, WE'VE ALL MOVED ON, BUT THE SLOVAK SPECTATOR'S ESSENTIALS ARE AS RELEVANT AS EVER.*

**Text: Tom Nicholson • Photo: Marko Erd – SME**

Here's a dated tableau: It's April 2000, and I'm smoking a cigarette in an alcove of the World Trade Center in New York with Ivan Mikloš, the deputy prime minister of Slovakia. We're both here for an investment conference. He's touting his government's new openness to the West, and I'm hawking subscriptions to The Slovak Spectator.

Some 25 years later on, turns out the twin towers weren't the only things that proved ephemeral.

I don't remember whether Mikloš and I spoke in English or in Slovak as we smoked. But we shared an appreciation for liberal democracy and for American stewardship, which at the time was helping Slovakia make up lost ground in its NATO and EU integration.

I also remember it was the first time I felt he saw me, despite our many previous interviews. Only here, in that colossal monument to US power, did The Slovak Spectator perhaps finally make sense: As a cultural outpost of a benign America, like baseball in Japan.

Decades later, none of that matters following 9/11, the slow US disengagement from Europe and subsequently from liberal principles, culminating in US President Donald Trump's MAGA revolution.

Looking back, I regret all my carping about corruption. Turns out the United States wasn't as hot against it as they had us believe here in Bratislava. Too bad they didn't tell us earlier; it might have spared some local miscreants a lot of heckling.

Ditto the adherence to budgetary discipline; the contributions to international peacekeeping; the need for arms control; or the concern for migrants in distress. All causes The Slovak Spectator took up, now in need of a patron.

These days, the twin towers no longer stand, and Washington has long lost interest in Bratislava. Mikloš is no longer deputy PM or even in politics; neither of us smoke, as far as I know. And instead of leaders of his stature, a cabal of scroungers rules Bratislava, truckling to Trump and to Moscow and consorting to keep each other out of jail.

But you know what? You're still here, and so am I. And so, for that matter, is Ivan Mikloš, if someone can rescue him from his NGO dotage and convince him to do more than write querulous op-eds.

Doesn't it remind you of 1997, back when I joined The Slovak Spectator? And didn't we have some game?

Trump is America's Vladimír Mečiar. Thanks to The Slovak Spectator, I know what that means; I know he can be beaten; and I know the recipe.

Which is, for anyone just joining: Giving a shit, and spreading the word. ©TSS

*Tom Nicholson worked for The Slovak Spectator from 1997 to 2007 as a staff reporter and later as editor-in-chief and publisher. From 2008 to 2010 he worked with the Sme daily as head of investigations, later going freelance and writing the best-selling non-fiction book Gorila. He is currently an editor with Politico.eu and lives in Canada.*

# Thirty years of The Slovak Spectator: **A newspaper that defied the odds**

**Text: Beata Balogová • Photo: Jozef Jakubčo – SME**


Beata Balogová

I remember the first English teachers who discovered Slovakia after 1989. Some arrived with a saviour complex, determined to civilise a post-communist country – eager to spend a year or two in a communist time capsule, now flung wide open for young Americans and Brits.

Others came for the cheap beer and the admiration of Eastern European women. Some may have dreamed of writing a bestselling novel or publishing a poetry collection about this unfamiliar land.

Four Americans – Rick Zednik, Daniel Stoll, Eric Koomen and Richard Lewis – who found themselves in Bratislava during this post-revolutionary period had bigger ambitions than just keeping an expat's journal on life in Eastern Europe. They founded an English-language newspaper. And something happened that they likely never expected: the paper survived for 30 years.

The Slovak Spectator was born at a time when only a handful of people in Slovakia spoke English. And let's be honest – journalism was going through wild times, just like the whole country.

An entire generation of journalists was missing – the kind unburdened by the habits of the censored communist-era press, the kind trained to use multiple sources, strive for balance, and separate fact from opinion. The founders of The Slovak Spectator drew from a completely different tradition – the one that has since become the standard for serious, critical media.

Of course, The Slovak Spectator had its own moments of uncertainty, times when it questioned exactly who its readers should be. Was it meant to be an information bulletin for expats, helping them navigate life in a country where English was spoken by only a privileged few?

Or should it serve as a trusted news source for foreign diplomats, investors and businesspeople, curating the most important stories, providing context, and asking the right questions? Or would it be better suited as a newspaper for young Slovaks eager to read and communicate in English – not just through textbook exercises?

In the end, The Slovak Spectator became a bit of all these things.

I spent more than 11 years with this newspaper – there were times when I could express my thoughts more precisely in English than in Slovak or Hungarian.

I met with foreign diplomats whose questions helped me understand what outsiders struggled to grasp, what fascinated them about Slovakia, what surprised or even unsettled them. I came to see the misconceptions they had about the country – and where those misconceptions came from.

Even today, as the editor-in-chief of one of Slovakia's largest and most influential daily newspapers, I still draw on that experience.

Today, English is a given, and globalisation has bridged many cultural gaps. Naturally, one might ask: does an English-language newspaper still have relevance in Slovakia? The answer is – of course, it does. Not because of the language itself, but because of the way it selects its topics, explains nuances, and applies the know-how needed to decipher what foreigners struggle to understand about Slovakia.

Ján Pallo, the publisher of The Slovak Spectator, who has been leading the company since 2007, could tell you that for a small but relevant media outlet to stay alive it must be able to constantly reinvent itself – to rediscover its purpose and reach people who want to tell their stories in English.

A testament to The Slovak Spectator's ability to adapt is the role it played after Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine. Thanks to the support of Alexej Fulmek, the head of Petit Press, the newspaper has served as a platform for news and essential information for Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia – including coverage in the Ukrainian language.

What is The Slovak Spectator's relevance today? It is the same as that of any free media outlet that believes in facts, trusts science, and spreads knowledge instead of hate.

In a world where armies of disinformers are growing, one in which readers are confused and often rely on poisoned sources, the least we can do is wish The Slovak Spectator continued vigour and relevance for another decade. And beyond. ©TSS

*Beata Balogová was editor-in-chief of The Slovak Spectator between 2003 and 2014. She is currently the editor-in-chief of the Sme daily.*

# Milestones in The Slovak

- **1st March 1995** – The debut issue hits newsstands.
- **July 1996** – The first edition of *Spectacular Slovakia*, a travel guide, is published.
- **September 1998** – *The Slovak Spectator* launches its **first website**.
- **December 1999** – The first *Book of Lists* (now *Largest in Business*) is published.
- **February 2000** – The first issue of the *Career and Employment Guide* is released, helping professionals navigate Slovakia's job market.
- **February 2001** – The first *Investment Advisory Guide* is published, offering insights into Slovakia's investment landscape.
- **December 2002** – *www.greenpages.sk* is launched as a dedicated business directory.
- **February 2007** – *Na Slovensku po anglicky* project begins, distributing copies of *The Slovak Spectator* to universities to support English-language learning.
- **June 2009** – A specialised service, *Diplomatic Package*, is introduced, offering daily news updates and in-depth weekly analyses.
- **November 2011** – In collaboration with Petit Academy, the Tatra Banka Foundation, and Comenius University, *The Slovak Spectator* launches the *Best Media Traditions* programme, bringing Pulitzer Prize-winning journalists to Slovakia.
- **April 2012** – *The Slovak Spectator* receives the **Via Bona Award**.
- **June 2012** – A new **business-oriented news service**, *Business Spectator*, is launched.
- **January 2013** – The newspaper introduces *Spectator College*, a special section designed for secondary school graduates.
- **April 2014** – *The Slovak Spectator* wins the **Via Bona Main Award**.
- **September 2014** – *Spectacular Slovakia* is released in a **modern book format**.


THE SLOVAK SPECTATOR

Nuclear life or death hinges on EBRD loan

*Mochovce is focus of European debate on safety*

50 years since liberation, Slovak town examines its past

The debut issue.

Founders of The Slovak Spectator with the team in 1995.


Publisher Ján Pallo receives the Via Bona Award from President Andrej Kiska.

# Spectator's Journey

The Slovak Spectator team 30 years ago.


Part of The Slovak Spectator team in 2025, celebrating our 30th anniversary.

- **January 2015** – *The Slovak Spectator* transitions to a **bi-weekly format** and launches a new website, *www.spectator.sme.sk*.
- **November 2015** – The first **ranking of Slovakia's largest law firms** is published.
- **October 2017** – The newspaper adopts a **monthly format**.
- **April 2022** – In response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis, *The Slovak Spectator* and Petit Press launch **www.novyny.sk**, a Ukrainian-language news portal.
- **January 2023** – *The Slovak Spectator* is transformed into a **high-quality magazine**.
- **April 2024** – The launch of the **Slovaks Abroad** section, offering insights for Slovaks living in the US.

SP025002/003

Daniel Tomko Jr with his father Daniel Tomko of the Tomark company.

# From furniture to finance: Tracing the success stories of businesses in Slovakia

## *CELEBRATING 30 YEARS OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND EXPANSION*

**Text: Jana Liptáková • Photo: Lukáš Klčo, IKEA, Citibank, McDonald**

The fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 not only reshaped the political landscape of Europe; it also unlocked new business opportunities in Slovakia. While many foreign companies seized the moment to expand, entrepreneurial minds in Slovakia harnessed the newfound freedom to develop innovative ideas and launch businesses.

Among these companies and entrepreneurs were IKEA, McDonald's, the sport aircraft manufacturer Tomark, the telecoms provider Slovanet, and the Slovak arm of Citibank – all of which are marking 30 years on the Slovak market this year. Their journeys reflect the transformation of Slovakia's economy, from a state-controlled system to a dynamic, market-driven environment.

### SLOVAKIA'S INDUSTRY TAKES FLIGHT

"The launching of Tomark can be ascribed to two points: a gap in the market and the initiative of the people led by Daniel Tomko, who were not afraid to embark on a difficult but ultimately successful path," Matej Furda, marketing manager of Prešov-based Tomark, told The Slovak Spectator.

When signing a contract with their first client they did not even have production facilities, machines or employees. Thirty years later, Tomark is one of the main pillars of Slovak engineering and is a globally respected manufacturer of high-end sports aircraft – in particular, the Viper SD4 and the Skyper GT9.

Although the company's mechanical engineering remains its production mainstay, its high-end sports aircraft – which are appreciated by pilots all over the world – have opened up previously unknown possibilities for them.

"Last year, we launched another unique development project. It falls into the field of hydrogen technology and sustainable futures, and will result in a hydrogen-powered aircraft with vertical take-off and landing," said Furda.

The list of manufacturing companies marking the anniversary this year includes Sylex, which specialises in the design and manufacturing of high-quality optical interconnection solutions and fibre-optic sensing systems. The history of Terichem Tervakoski, formerly known as Terichem, a manufacturer specialising in biaxially oriented polypropylene (BOPP) films, is a bit different. Established in 1995 as a joint venture between the chemical company Chemosvit and the Finnish company AB Rani Plast Oy, it has evolved into a leading producer in its field.

### TELECOMS LIBERALISATION OPENED THE DOOR

The story of the Slovanet telecom company is a bit different. Its founders took their chance after the end of the monopoly held by Slovenské Telekomunikácie and mobile operator Eurotel in the 1990s allowed for the creation of new telecommunication service providers.

"Our company was created by merging two startup companies – PSG from

# ON THE ROAD TO GLOBAL SUCCESS

## Legal Advice Without Borders

Next year, the law firm **HAVEL & PARTNERS** will celebrate 25 years since its founding. Over nearly 25 years in the market, we have grown from an ambitious startup into the largest law firm in Central and Eastern Europe, serving 4,000 clients and generating a turnover of €68 million. Patria Corporate Finance has valued the firm at €131.5 million. We provide comprehensive international support for Czech and Slovak law firms, leveraging our unique knowledge of the legal environment and global reach to complete cross-border transactions worldwide. With **ONE FAMILY OFFICE**, a new multi-family office established in collaboration with **HAVEL & PARTNERS**, we are taking our international support to an even more global level.

## Our Clients

We provide services to over 4,000 regular clients, including approximately 100 of the largest Fortune 500 global companies (according to the Fortune 500 ranking), 50 of the Czech Top 100 companies, and 20 of the TREND Slovak Top 100 companies. In Slovakia, we provide services to more than 500 regular clients.

## Beyond Borders

Our legal and tax advisory services are available in 12 languages across more than 110 countries, with 70% of our cases having an international aspect. We closely collaborate with leading law firms in Europe, Asia, the Americas, Africa and Australia, giving our clients access to the expertise of over 90,000 lawyers in 160 countries.

## Closer to the West and the World

Last year, we became the first law firm from the CEE region to establish a direct presence in Frankfurt am Main, Germany – a key gateway for global business. This move further strengthens our exceptional international reach and deepens our collaboration with clients and business partners abroad. Germany is the closest business partner of both the Czech Republic and Slovakia, which is why we aim to be as close as possible to our clients from the DACH region and local law firms. Our goal is to be the first choice for clients expanding into Western markets, and with the opening of our German office, we are enhancing our existing infrastructure.

**Jaroslav Havel**
Managing partner **HAVEL & PARTNERS** and main partner and investor ONE FAMILY OFFICE

## Expanding Globally with a Multi-Family Office

Last year, we launched our own multi-family office under the name **ONE FAMILY OFFICE**, broadening our asset protection and management portfolio to include family office services. These services range from health concierge to media and reputation security, as well as administrative support for professional fiduciary trustees. This allows us to comprehensively manage family businesses and assets, ensuring smooth generational transfers.
Through the structure of **ONE FAMILY OFFICE**, we have further expanded our international collaboration. A key focus in assembling our investment team was asset diversification, achieved in partnership with top financial experts across the world's leading financial hubs, including New York, Silicon Valley, London, Frankfurt, Zurich, Vienna, Dubai, Singapore and Hong Kong.
Most of our investment team members have previously worked in international financial institutions such as Goldman Sachs, JP Morgan, Credit Suisse, and Erste. With in-depth knowledge of both European and global markets, **ONE FAMILY OFFICE** provides world-class solutions by combining global reach with local expertise.

**ONE FAMILY OFFICE** invests and plans to invest internationally in stocks, bonds, and other publicly traded securities, funds, and ETFs, as well as in leading hedge funds, private equity funds, venture capital funds, and real estate and infrastructure funds, primarily in the United States.

HAVEL & PARTNERS
CONNECTED THROUGH SUCCESS



**IKEA, Citibank and McDonald's this year mark 30 years doing business in Slovakia.**

Trenčín, an internet provider mainly for households, and ViaPVT from Bratislava, a company focused on the operation of corporate data services," Peter Máčaj, general director and CEO of Slovanet, told The Slovak Spectator. "Thanks to this, the merged Slovanet was able to serve both of these large market segments from the beginning."

In the early days, the telecom sector was only available to entities that met stringent licensing conditions. The subsequent demonopolisation and opening up of the market has allowed the emergence of hundreds of internet providers, often only small local firms. Gradually, the market has undergone consolidation – for example, Slovanet has taken over and merged with almost 30 smaller operators and their networks during its existence, and continues to do so.

"Slovanet is currently focusing intensively on advanced and increasingly relevant cybersecurity solutions, powerful cloud services and smart services for Internet of Things (IoT) networks," said Máčaj.

## RETAIL REVOLUTION

It is also 30 years since IKEA and McDonald's, both international retail legends, entered the Slovak market.

IKEA, one of the world's largest furniture retailers, known for its affordable, flat-pack furniture, Scandinavian design, and self-assembly concept, opened its very first store in Bratislava in 1990s, on Gagarinova Street. The store quickly became too small to meet growing demand for affordable modern furniture. As a result, in 1995, IKEA relocated to Tomášikova Street. After the capacity of this store also proved insufficient, the retail giant constructed its current premises on Ivanská Cesta in 2012.

"Over the past 30 years, the retail sector for furniture and home accessories has undergone significant changes, impacting not only how customers shop but also their expectations for products and services," Lucia Klečková, director of the IKEA Bratislava department store, told The Slovak Spectator. "Today, it's no longer just about availability and design, but also about multifunctionality, sustainability, and digital solutions that simplify home planning."

Today IKEA operates in Slovakia, and is planning studios in Košice and Žilina, offering customers professional interior planning and personalised consultations.

"We plan to further expand this concept so it's even closer to customers in other regions," said Klečková, adding that its long-term vision remains to provide affordable, functional and sustainable solutions for a better home life.

In 1995 McDonald's opened its first restaurant in Slovakia, in Banská Bystrica. Today, it operates nearly 50 restaurants across the country.

"The brand's arrival was a response to the dynamic market development and the growing interest of Slovaks in new forms of gastronomy and dining experiences," Lucia Poláčeková, PR manager for McDonald's SR/ČR, told The Slovak Spectator. "Since then, McDonald's has become a stable part of the food service industry in Slovakia."

Since 1995, the Slovak gastronomy sector has undergone significant development. Today, customers expect not only high-quality ingredients but also innovative technologies and a unique restaurant experience, noted Poláčeková.

"Changes in lifestyle trends, the growth of digital services, and increasing demands for corporate social responsibility have also had a major impact," she told The Slovak Spectator.

McDonald's responds to these trends by continuously modernising its restaurants, introducing services such as self-service kiosks, McDelivery, and mobile ordering, while also developing initiatives that have a positive impact on communities across Slovakia.

## FINANCIAL SECTOR

The financial sector also witnessed the arrival of new banks and insurance companies after the sector was deregulated. These include, to mention just


**The first McDonald's outlet opened in Banská Bystrica in 1995.**

a few: the MetLife insurance company, originally Amslico; Privatbanka, the first specialised bank in Slovakia focused on private banking; and Citibank.

"Throughout the past 30 years in Slovakia, we have built a strong reputation as a trusted partner for our clients, leveraging Citi's global expertise to help businesses navigate change and seize new opportunities," Jan Melichar, Citi Country Officer and Banking Head for Slovakia, told The Slovak Spectator.

The corporate banking sector in Slovakia has evolved significantly over the past 30 years, driven by several key factors including technology and digitalisation, regulatory changes, evolving client needs, as well as globalisation and market integration.

"Slovakia's EU and eurozone membership has expanded opportunities for multinational companies, increasing demand for cross-border banking solutions," said Melichar, adding that Citi, whose history dates back to 1812, has continuously adapted to these changes, leveraging its global expertise to support its clients in Slovakia with innovative financial solutions. ©TSS

# Strange romance: Slovak leaders' affection for Russia has yo-yoed

Prime Minister Robert Fico with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow, December 2024.

## *FROM MEČIAR'S NATO SABOTAGE IN THE 1990s TO FICO'S PHOTO-OPS WITH PUTIN TODAY*

**Text: Peter Dlhopolec • Photo: TASR and Robert Fico's FB**

When Russia's then prime minister, Viktor Chernomyrdin, arrived in Slovakia for his second official visit in April 1997, he met with his Slovak counterpart, Vladimír Mečiar, to discuss European security, among other topics.

At the time, Slovakia was seeking to join NATO, something that Mečiar controversially claimed – in an interview with the French daily *Le Figaro* – was being blocked by a secret agreement between the United States and Russia. Both Washington and Moscow denied any such arrangement, though Russia remained opposed to NATO expansion. Chernomyrdin stated that Russia would prefer Slovakia to maintain a neutral stance.

"NATO today is a military alliance with a significant nuclear component, which has always been aimed eastward," he said during his visit. However, he insisted, "I have never told anyone to join or not to join. I would never dare to do such a thing. Neither I nor anyone else from Russia."

Similar to a previous meeting in 1995, where 12 agreements were signed, the 1997 visit resulted in the signing of 16 documents, including a long-term deal on the transit and supply of Russian natural gas. Two years earlier, Slovakia had secured Russian involvement in completing the Mochovce nuclear power plant. Slovakia's deepening ties with Russia have been evolving since 1993, when it split from the Czech Republic and Prime Minister Mečiar visited Moscow at Chernomyrdin's invitation. That visit laid the groundwork for a Treaty of Friendship, signed in Bratislava in August 1993 by Slovak President Michal Kováč and Russian President Boris Yeltsin. The treaty, valid for 10 years, was accompanied by an agreement on military cooperation. By signing the treaty, Slovakia committed to aligning its security policy with the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which was intended to foster European security cooperation and prevent new divisions on the continent – including opposition to NATO expansion.

Russia's resistance to NATO enlargement, though unwavering by 1997, had earlier fluctuated. During Chernomyrdin's first visit to Bratislava in 1995, the topic of NATO was already under discussion. Mečiar, at the time, claimed that he did not sense any Russian attempt to obstruct Slovakia's ambitions to join both the European Union and NATO.

"Russia considers these matters our internal affair," he said.

Chernomyrdin, however, expressed surprise at the speed with which former Eastern Bloc nations were pursuing NATO membership. "There is no real source of danger or tension in Europe today that could lead to armed conflict between states," he argued. "Nobody understands why the Visegrad Four [Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia] is pushing for such rapid NATO accession. One day, we will all cooperate with NATO."

In the end, Slovakia – branded "the black hole of Europe" by then US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright – was left out of NATO's 1997 accession

**A photograph from the visit of Russian President Boris Yeltsin to Slovakia on August 26, 1993 in Bratislava, alongside Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar (right).**


**Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar travelled to Belgium on February 9, 1994, where he signed the Partnership for Peace agreement on behalf of the Slovak Republic at NATO headquarters in Brussels. Pictured: Mečiar (left) and NATO Secretary-General Manfred Wörner (right).**

talks, unlike its Visegrad partners, which joined in 1999. The delay was largely attributed to political instability and concerns over democratic backsliding under Mečiar's leadership from 1994 to 1998. However, Slovakia's close ties with Russia – a strategy ostensibly aimed at bolstering its struggling economy – also contributed to its prolonged exclusion from the alliance.

## A SCHIZOPHRENIC FOREIGN POLICY

Initially, Mečiar framed Slovakia's relationship with Russia in economic terms, positioning the country as a bridge between East and West. But as criticism mounted from Western capitals over democratic backsliding and authoritarian tendencies, Mečiar's government increasingly aligned itself politically with Moscow.

"If the West doesn't want us, we will turn to the East," Mečiar said several months into his third government – though he later claimed he had no recollection of making the remark.

Vladimír Mečiar's government frequently accused the US Embassy in Bratislava of unlawfully interfering in Slovakia's internal affairs, lamenting what it said was a "double standard" by Western countries.

For Russia, opposing NATO expansion was a strategic priority. Slovakia's ambiguous stance under Mečiar fit neatly into this agenda. Though his 1994-1998 government manifesto outlined ambitions to join NATO and the EU, mentioning Russia only in economic terms, his rhetoric on neutrality and alternative security arrangements backed by Moscow gave the Kremlin a foothold in Central Europe. Boris Yeltsin, Russia's president at the time, left little doubt about his support.

Mečiar publicly reaffirmed Slovakia's Western aspirations, meeting NATO officials in Brussels in 1995, but at home he entertained alternative scenarios. Members of his ruling coalition openly promoted Slovakia's neutrality, with security guarantees from Moscow. Ján Slota, head of the far-right and Eurosceptic Slovak National Party (SNS), declared to Russian state media that Slovakia should avoid NATO membership altogether. The left-wing and pro-Russian Union of the Workers of Slovakia (ZRS), another coalition partner, suggested Russia could provide security guarantees instead. Mečiar refused to distance himself from these statements, merely saying that the government's position had not changed "for now".

Meanwhile, under their leadership, Slovakia's democratic institutions eroded. Mečiar clashed repeatedly with President Michal Kováč, attempted to strip him of power, and stifled media freedom.

## THE NATO REFERENDUM FIASCO

By 1997, Slovakia's NATO bid was already in doubt, but a botched May referendum on membership sealed its fate. Instead of a straightforward vote, the Mečiar government added a controversial question: Should foreign troops and nuclear weapons be allowed on Slovak soil?

NATO had already stated in 1996 that it had no plans to deploy nuclear weapons or foreign bases in new member states. The addition of this question sowed confusion and raised suspicions that Mečiar was actively undermining Slovakia's accession process. When the referendum collapsed in controversy, Russian media hailed this as a victory for Moscow. The Russian magazine Itogi described the Slovak prime minister as "the Kremlin's Trojan horse in Central Europe".

The SNS and ZRS had actively campaigned for citizens to reject NATO membership during the referendum campaign. Mečiar himself had urged consideration of Russia's geopolitical interests. "Any rushed solution (expansion) is one-sided and will always provoke a negative reaction," he often said during his third term in office.

Slovakia had to wait until 2004, six years after Mečiar lost power, to become a NATO member.

## ECONOMIC DEPENDENCE ON RUSSIA

Despite Mečiar's talk of Slovakia as an "East-West bridge", its economic reliance on Russia deepened. By 1996, Slovakia had signed dozens of bilateral agreements with Moscow, including on military cooperation, energy dependence and intelligence ties.

*TODAY, RUSSIA IS WAGING AN UNPROVOKED WAR AGAINST UKRAINE. YET FICO AND HIS GOVERNMENT HAVE REFRAINED FROM CALLING RUSSIA THE AGGRESSOR.*

**The first stop on Vladimír Mečiar's official visit to the Russian Federation was Bratislavskaya metro station in the Maryino district of southeastern Moscow, where, on May 27, 1998, he was greeted by a woman in traditional dress bearing bread and salt, in keeping with an old Slavic custom.**

A case in point: in October 1996, Mečiar's government agreed in Moscow to complete the Mochovce nuclear power plant with Russian assistance, committing Slovakia to buying Russian nuclear fuel for its entire lifespan. Experts questioned the move, noting that nuclear fuel could be sourced elsewhere – unlike Russian oil and gas, which had an almost unbeatable price advantage over other sources as it was piped in cheaply.

Trade remained heavily imbalanced, with Slovakia importing far more from Russia than it exported. In 1994, Slovakia imported $1 billion worth of Russian oil and gas but exported only $300 million in goods to Russia.

Mečiar's political downfall in 1998 – which happened to coincide with leadership changes in Moscow, including Viktor Chernomyrdin's departure as premier – marked a decisive shift. A few days after his election defeat, Mečiar went on TV to sing: "Farewell, I'm leaving you – I have wronged none of you."

The new Slovak government, led by Mikuláš Dzurinda, quickly pivoted back toward the West, prioritising EU and NATO accession. Relations with Russia were downgraded to the level of economic pragmatism.

## A RETURN TO THE EAST?

Nearly three decades after Vladimír Mečiar maintained warm relations with Russia, Slovakia's current prime minister, Robert Fico, now in his fourth term, appears to be taking a similar approach – albeit in a vastly changed geopolitical landscape. Unlike in Mečiar's era, Slovakia has been a member of both NATO and the European Union since 2004.

When Fico first assumed office in 2006, he met Russian President Vladimir Putin at an informal EU summit in Finland. At the time, he reflected on Slovakia's post-Cold War foreign policy, saying relations with Russia had not been particularly strong over the previous eight years.

"Not that there were any specific problems, but Slovakia's foreign policy had been quite one-sidedly oriented towards the West," Fico said.

He emphasised Slovakia's economic ties with Russia, noting that the country was entirely dependent on Russian oil and gas. Slovakia has long faced – and continues to face – a trade deficit with Russia. Its dependence on Russian gas is slowly decreasing.

"Every EU member state has its own interests, but when it comes to Russia, we need to formulate common positions," he said after his meeting with Putin.

At the time, Fico's approach was framed as pragmatic economic diplomacy. However, the geopolitical landscape has since changed dramatically.

## FICO'S POSITION ON UKRAINE

Today, Russia is waging an unprovoked war against Ukraine, Slovakia's eastern neighbour. Yet Fico and his government have refrained from calling Russia the aggressor. Instead, he has repeatedly accused the West of exploiting the war to weaken Russia economically and politically.

"There is a military conflict in Ukraine where Slavs are killing each other, and Europe is significantly supporting this killing," Fico has repeatedly claimed, insisting that the war has no military solution. He also asserts that Ukraine will lose a third of its territory to Russia and remain occupied by foreign forces.

Fico's relationship with Ukraine has been strained since a gas crisis in 2009, when a pricing dispute between Russia and Ukraine led to a 11-day halt in Russian gas supplies transiting Ukraine to Europe. Slovakia, one of the hardest-hit countries in the region, faced severe economic consequences. But rather than blaming Russia, Fico pointed the finger at Ukraine, accusing Kyiv of being responsible for the crisis.

Similarly, in 2008, following Russia's invasion of Georgia during a conflict in South Ossetia, Fico refused to condemn Russia's actions outright. "I wouldn't see the situation in black and white, as some do," he said. "Someone provoked, and we know who provoked." His coalition partner at the time, the Slovak National Party (SNS), echoed Russian narratives.

Fast forward to today, Fico has once again allied with the SNS, whose party leader Andrej Danko has emerged as one of the most vocal pro-Kremlin figures in the Slovak governing coalition.

## ISOLATION VS INFLUENCE

When Russia annexed Crimea in 2014,


**A protest against Prime Minister Robert Fico's December visit to Moscow, held in Bratislava's Freedom Square on Monday, December 23, 2024.**

Slovakia, which was still heavily reliant on Russian energy, formally backed EU sanctions against Moscow. Fico acknowledged that Russia had violated international law, yet he remained critical of the sanctions, describing them as "harmful" to Slovakia. A year later, in 2015, he travelled to Moscow for celebrations to mark the end of the Second World War, an event boycotted by most other European leaders in protest at Russia's annexation of Crimea.

Fico plans to visit Moscow again this year, on the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II.

"Please, let's not suffer from Russophobia," Fico argues.

Fico's stance on sanctions hardened after his return to power in late 2023. He has also adopted a more overtly anti-Ukrainian position, opposing Ukraine's NATO membership on the grounds that it would "lead to a third world war". During his 2023 election campaign, he vowed: "If our party wins, we will not send a single bullet to Ukraine."

After taking office, Fico halted military aid from Slovakia's armed forces – though he has not ended commercial contracts for weapons exports to Ukraine, which are a profitable source of income for Slovak arms manufacturers. Despite this, he maintains that he opposes the war. While acknowledging that Russia violated international law by invading Ukraine, he argues that "Russia had a reason to do so".

Then, in December 2024, shortly before a Ukrainian decision not to renew an agreement that had allowed Russian gas to transit to Europe came into effect, Fico secretly flew to Russia to meet with Putin. The exact purpose of his visit remains unclear; Russian gas now no longer flows through Ukraine to Slovakia, and Fico, who met Putin alone, has not explained in detail what was discussed. What did result, however, was a photograph of Fico shaking hands with Putin. In the months since, Fico has repeatedly lashed out at Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky, calling him "a blackmailer" and declaring that he is "sick of him". He has never used such language about Putin.

Despite Fico's rhetoric, his government continues to provide humanitarian aid to Ukraine and supplies electricity and gas when necessary. This is not as surprising as it might sound. Slovakia has previously played a key role in mitigating the effects of Russian energy policies on Ukraine. In 2014, under Fico's rule, after Russia cut gas supplies to Ukraine over unpaid debts, Slovakia enabled a solution: it redirected Russian gas that had already entered Slovakia back to Ukraine via an alternative pipeline route.

Still, Fico's current foreign policy has sparked widespread protests, with demonstrators chanting "Slovakia is Europe".

Much like Mečiar in the 1990s, Fico has embraced the notion of a "sovereign foreign policy". He has railed against the US Embassy, criticised EU leaders, and accused Slovakia's closest allies, including the Czech Republic, of meddling in its internal affairs. At the same time, he has sought to strengthen ties with pro-Russian Serbia and authoritarian China.

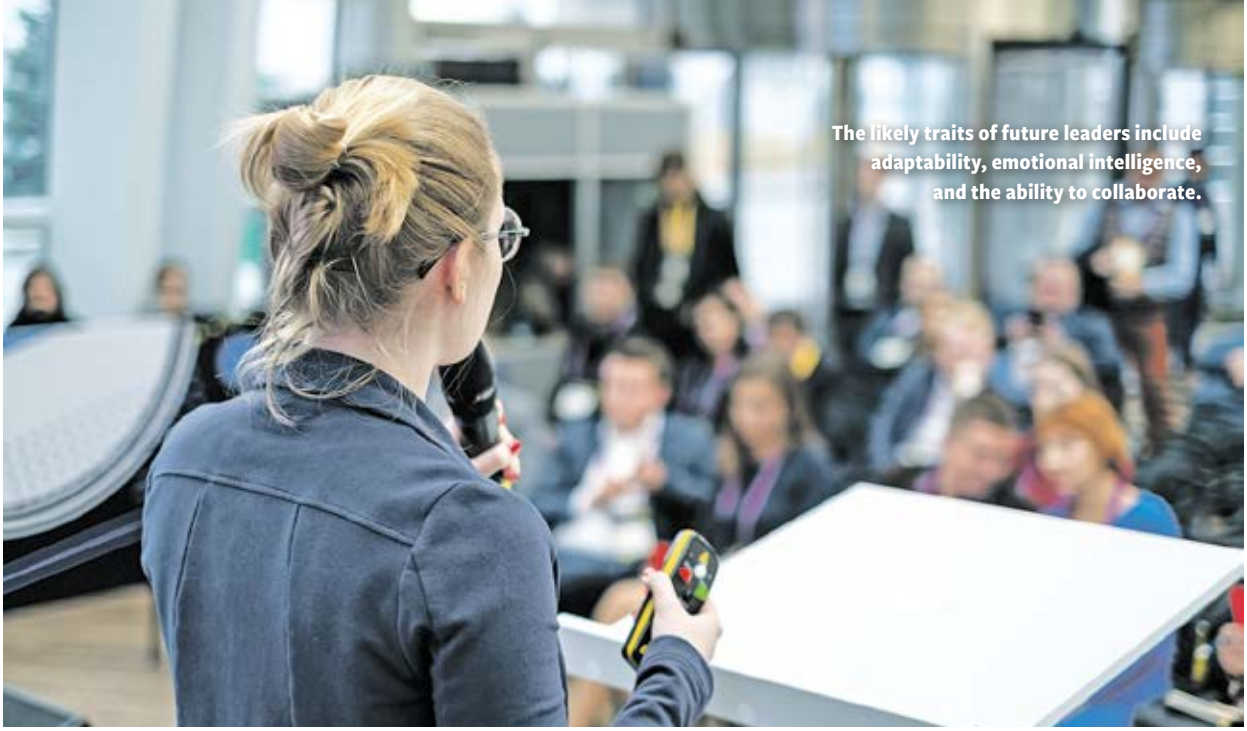
His current stance towards the EU stands in sharp contrast to his own words from 2013, when he championed deeper European integration. "Slovakia must be part of the group of countries that support further integration within the European Union," he said at the time.

Today, while Fico acknowledges the EU's importance to Slovakia, he criticises it for promoting what he calls a "one correct opinion" policy. He also rails against "liberal ideologies", aiming to appeal to ultraconservative and far-right voters. In contrast, following Donald Trump's return to the US presidency, Fico has toned down his criticism of the United States.

Whether Fico's current policies represent a true ideological shift or a strategic political move remains an open question. But one thing is clear: Slovakia's foreign policy under his leadership has once again become a subject of intense debate, both at home and abroad.

And what about Russia? At a meeting with ambassadors in January, Fico rejected what he called a new Iron Curtain between Europe and Russia.

"We are interested in good relations and will do everything we can to normalise ties between Slovakia and Russia once the war ends," the prime minister said. ©TSS



The likely traits of future leaders include adaptability, emotional intelligence, and the ability to collaborate.

# From AI to aerospace: How young Slovaks are leading global change

## *THEY ARE REDEFINING THE QUALITIES A LEADER NEEDS*

**Text: Jana Liptáková • Photo: Adobe Stock, archives of V. Klocok, M. Brchnelová, Ľ. Kučíková, M. Marušin, and J. Šuster**

From tourism and space technology to neuroscience and artificial intelligence, young Slovak professionals are not just excelling in their respective fields – they are reshaping the very definition of leadership. Their impact extends far beyond Slovakia, proving that adaptability, emotional intelligence, and collaboration are the key traits a quality leader should have.

"For me, leadership is not about control but about empowering others, fostering autonomy, and cultivating a culture of sustained excellence," says Vladimír Klocok, CEO of Kubínska, a ski and mountain resort in the Orava region. "This is one of the key lessons I took away from my time at Harvard."

Klocok is one of several young Slovaks featured in the Forbes 30 Under 30 ranking, alongside aerospace engineer Michaela Brchnelová, neuroscientist Ľudmila Kučíková, space technology entrepreneur Marek Marušin, and AI specialist Jakub Šuster, who fights disinformation through artificial intelligence. Each of them exemplifies how Slovak talent is making a global impact and shaping the future of their industries.

### WEATHER, TERRESTRIAL AS WELL AS EXTRATERRESTRIAL

Klocok, a Harvard-educated psychologist, is working with his team to reshape an Orava resort into a unique, year-round travel destination.

"The success of future ski resorts will depend on their ability to innovate, adapt, and offer an all-season mountain experience," said Klocok.

He lists four key factors that will define the future of the ski and mountain tourism industry. The first is climate change adaptability, the second is technology and digitalisation, the third is customer experience & personalisation, and the fourth is diversification beyond winter.

Weather is also a topic for aerospace engineer Michaela Brchnelová, 27, a graduate of the Technical University in Delft, Netherlands – except, in her case, it is connected to outer space. This year she is finishing her doctoral studies at the university in Leuven, Belgium. Currently, she conducts research regarding space weather and space situational awareness under the Dutch Ministry of Defence, as an assistant professor.

"I have loved space sciences ever since I was a child and actually worked on several astrophysical projects while already at high school, just for fun," she told The Slovak Spectator.

During her studies she was lucky enough to realise that next to all that science, what mattered greatly to her was seeing the impact of her work on the society around her. "So, I eventually decided on something that still involved a lot of space science but that was sufficiently applied – and my field was perfect for this."

**Vladimír Klocok**

**Michaela Brchnelová**

**Jakub Šuster**

**Ľudmila Kučíková**

**Marek Marušin**

Brchnelová was selected in 2022 for the #EUwomen4future campaign by the European Commission and was the first Slovak woman to win the Amelia Earhart Fellowship in 2020.

Marek Marušin, 28, CEO of the space technology startup Zaitra.io, which he co-founded, develops innovative AI solutions for satellites. The startup has so far secured over €1 million from investors for research into autonomous artificial intelligence and has signed contracts with the European Space Agency (ESA), as well as satellite manufacturers from South Korea, Poland, Germany and the Czech Republic. They are currently targeting the US market, where they are in negotiations with potential partners, including NASA, Airbus and Boeing.

"The entire space technology sector is evolving dynamically, shifting its focus not only to science, but primarily on the commercial application of our technologies for terrestrial use," he told The Slovak Spectator. "These applications will shape the entire sector."

## DEMENTIA, DISINFORMATION AND AI

Her first-hand experience of how cruel Alzheimer's disease can be inspired Ľudmila Kučíková, 29, to focus on this illness and other forms of dementia. She studied psychology and neuroscience in Aberdeen and Edinburgh, Scotland. She is currently pursuing a PhD in computational neuroscience under supervisors from the University of Cambridge and the University of Sheffield.

"Alzheimer's disease, as well as other forms of dementia, has a devastating impact on families," she told The Slovak Spectator, adding that when her family encountered problems with the disease, she knew very little about Alzheimer's.

Kučíková is the first scientist to identify Alzheimer's-like changes in brain function in individuals as young as 17 to 21 years old, making this the youngest group ever studied in this context. The Alzheimer's Association selected her as one of 25 global ambassadors. She has received multiple awards for conference presentations, including the Laura Pulford Prize for best presentation at the UK National Dementia Conference.

When identifying factors with the biggest impact on her sector she cites the combination of AI and the availability of information, which sometimes leads to misinformation and then a loss of trust in the science.

AI and the fight against disinformation is the focus of interest for Jakub Šuster, 28, CEO and co-founder of the startup Elv.ai. It was built on the foundations of the Elfovia.sk project, which aimed to help activate the Slovak public in the fight against disinformation and hateful content on social media through online moderation.

"The lightning-fast development of AI presents both exciting opportunities and serious challenges," Šuster told The Slovak Spectator.

Generative AI models, like OpenAI's GPT-4, have revolutionised content creation, enabling the rapid generation of human-like text. However, this also leads to the spread of misinformation and deepfakes, making it tough to distinguish credible information from falsehoods. "Striking a balance between leveraging AI for positive communication and mitigating its potential for harm is a pressing concern," he says.

## THE NEW LEADERSHIP MODEL

Despite working in vastly different fields, these young leaders share a common perspective: adaptability, emotional intelligence, and collaboration are the key qualities defining modern leadership.

"In the past, leadership was about top-down control. But now it's about collaboration, embracing diverse viewpoints, and driving innovation," Šuster observes.

# Award-winning Slovak oncologist:
# It's all about trust between doctor and patient

*MICHAL MEGO, WINNER OF THE ESET SCIENCE AWARD PUBLIC PRIZE FOR 2024, FOUNDED A TOP RESEARCH LAB WHEN HE RETURNED TO SLOVAKIA*

**Text: Matúš Beňo • Photo: TASR**

Michal Mego is the head of the 2nd Department of Oncology at the Faculty of Medicine of Comenius University and the National Cancer Institute in Bratislava. Prior to taking up the post he worked abroad, and has used the knowledge he gained while working outside Slovakia to establish the Translational Research Unit.

The Slovak Spectator talked to him about what he learned abroad, the goal of the unit, how patients are involved in oncology research, and teaching students.

"The older I get, the more I feel the need to pass on what I have learnt, so that a generation will be formed that will be able to teach the generation that comes after them," he says.

**You worked abroad for several years. What did you gain from the experience?**

I had the opportunity to go to the Vienna School of Clinical Research, and later I worked in America. The former was a fantastic experience; experts from all over the world explained to us the basic methodology of clinical research, which was not taught much in Slovakia. Only in recent years have efforts been made to teach this to the PhD students at the faculty.

**Where in the US did you work?**

At the MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, Texas, the largest oncology hospital in the world. We focused on circulating tumour cells responsible for the formation of metastases.

**When you returned to Slovakia you established the Translational Research Unit. What is its goal?**

It is a lab that aims to connect basic research with clinical practice. This means that an interesting result in the lab moves into clinical trials as soon as possible, and vice versa. When we have a problem in practice – which is very often – the problem can sometimes be modelled in the lab, either in mice or cell lines. So we try to dissect the problem and then use the solution in practice.

**What are you currently researching at the Unit?**

Two main areas. Firstly, circulating tumour cells. Secondly – and this is perhaps an even more developed area – research into testicular tumours, mainly their resistance. That is, what mechanism stops some tumours responding to chemotherapy, and research of new drugs that could overcome that resistance.

**Is there a reason you focus on this type of tumour in particular?**

It's a historical thing. Slovakia has a relatively long tradition in this area, started by Professor Dalibor Ondruš, who is still working, and my predecessor, Associate Professor Jozef Mardiak. We are sort of the next generation. The tumour is interesting in that it is rare, but it is the most common tumour in young men between the ages of 20 and 40. It is also interesting in that about 95 percent of patients are cured, but that means 5 percent are not. Since these are young people, it is all the more motivating to look for a cure. We also think that what we learn from one type of tumour can be applied to the study of other types in future.

**You often involve your patients in your research. How important is it that they are part of it?**

It is extremely important that research does not end at lab level. This means that if something looks promising in the lab, there is a chance it can also be tested in patients.

**So these patients receive experimental treatment?**

There is standard treatment, but at a certain point, when it is not working, experimental treatment tested in clinical trials comes into consideration. The choice is either this or do nothing. Of course, in order to receive such treatment, a clinical study must be approved by the State Institute for Drug Control, all legal requirements must be met and, of course, it must be voluntary on the part of the patient. In developed countries and the places I have worked, the emphasis is on the patient having access to experimental treatment. For example, in Houston, there are 1,100 clinical trials actively open as compared to 20 in Slovakia. In the case of the former, maybe 50-60 percent of patients are treated as part of a clinical study at some point. Our institute intends to accredit itself to be part of the best oncology institutes in the world. One of the conditions is that at least 5 percent of patients must be treated in clinical studies. This is one of the signs of the quality of a workplace.

**Oncologist Michal Mego during last year's ESET Science Award ceremony. He won the public prize.**

*IF OUR GENERATION DOES NOT PASS KNOWLEDGE ON, THE NEXT ONE WILL HAVE A HARD TIME ACQUIRING IT ON THEIR OWN.*

**You won the public prize at the ESET Science Awards – basically, the people chose you. This comes at a time when experts and scientific consensus itself today faces a huge amount of questioning from parts of the public, and yet you say that most patients ask for your opinion.**
It is always about the trust between a patient and a doctor. My opinion is that a patient who does not trust me will not come to me. People who question medicine usually do not even go to doctors, or they come when everything alternative, conspiratorial, etc. has failed and they realise they have nothing else left. It is very difficult for them to admit that they were wrong. Some of these people who eventually come will run away again as soon as the standard "bad medicine" starts working. As for trust among the general public, I'd say – and perhaps this does not apply solely to Slovakia – there is a crisis of authority. I do not want to get into politics or doctors' strikes. I don't want to comment on whether the strikes [by doctors, Ed. note] are right or not, the problem is that we have had three or four strikes already and the communication from politicians was more akin to calling striking doctors names, that they are people who only care about money and the like. I understand why they did it. Then the Covid-19 pandemic came and politicians were surprised that doctors do not have authority when it comes to the public and related measures. Well, these things are interconnected. Certain rules should be respected.

**In addition to research, you also work with students, future oncologists. Are you battling brain drain?**
There is a primary outflow of students who immediately go abroad once they have graduated. And that is a tragedy. But we still have a relatively large number who are interested, which makes me very happy. Not only they are interested in oncology, but also in science within oncology. We have a huge investment debt in healthcare. Our institute is, I must say, in very good shape, but ordinary hospitals... their visual impression is terrible – you cannot expect that this is supposed to motivate young doctors – not to mention various systemic problems. If we want to improve the state of science, medicine and everything, we need to invest in education. I do not think that the solution is to spend a lot of money for scientists to return from abroad. Of course, we need to support them too, but we need to invest in education in primary schools, in quality teachers. A huge investment debt is being created at the moment and society will suffer for it.

**But it is still important for students to have the same kind of opportunities you did, and bring knowledge back to Slovakia.**
Definitely. I try to motivate my young colleagues, we arrange internships abroad for them. Many have already returned. It is extremely important that they have contact with the outside world. The playing field is not Bratislava, not Slovakia, but at least Europe at the moment. The older I get, the more I feel the need to pass on what I have learnt, so that a generation will be formed that will be able to teach the generation that comes after them. If our generation does not pass knowledge on, the next one will have a hard time acquiring it on their own.

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*This article is part of the Slovak Science section, which is made possible thanks to the support of the the ESET Foundation.*


Puneet Dhiman launched Rolltown, an alcohol-free space in Bratislava that focuses on food and music.

# Puneet Dhiman: **From engineer to bistro boss**

*AFTER COMING TO SLOVAKIA TO STUDY MECHATRONICS, HE NOW PLANS INTERNATIONAL EXPANSION OF HIS POPULAR STREET FOOD OUTLET*

**Text: Elizaveta Blahodarova, Kamila Šebestová • Photo: Jozef Jakubčo – SME**

Puneet Dhiman arrived in Slovakia in 2018 to study engineering, hoping to later get work in the country's thriving automotive industry.

But today he is instead shaping its food scene with Rolltown, an Indian street food bistro in the heart of Bratislava.

His journey, during which he has gone from struggling to find work to creating opportunities for foreign students, and from cooking in his student flat to running a thriving food business, has been one of perseverance, he says.

"I couldn't find a job for seven months because I didn't speak Slovak," Dhiman recalls. "That experience shaped my approach to business – I wanted to create opportunities for others who faced similar struggles."

At Rolltown, vibrant colours line the walls, the scent of spices hangs in the air, and a rhythmic beat of music underpins the chatter of customers. Located on Kamenné Square, a bustling nightlife hub, Rolltown stands out for what it lacks: alcohol. Instead, Dhiman has introduced a different kind of social experience – one rooted in food, culture and community. His signature rolled-up flatbreads, which burst with flavour, are a favourite among customers, while his sober raves, a rarity in the city, have added a new dimension to Bratislava's social scene.

## FOOD TRUCK

Dhiman arrived in Slovakia with a plan: study engineering and mechatronics in Košice, build a career in the country's car industry, and perhaps work for one of the big automotive names, such as Porsche or BMW, whose projects he had contributed to in the past.

"I worked for a German company in Žilina as a design engineer," Dhiman notes.

But ever since he had been a boy, food had been a huge part of his life, and he soon found himself drawn to kitchens rather than engineering labs.

"Back in India, we love street food, but as a student here, I didn't see anything like it – so I jumped into the business."

His first step into the food business came with a food truck on Poľná Street in Bratislava. The premise was simple: fresh, high-quality Indian street food – something he believed Slovakia was missing. It quickly caught on. Customers raved about the bold flavours, and demand grew. Before long, Rolltown was born.

Slovakia has become home in more ways than one. Dhiman met his wife – a Slovak podcaster – here, and has built strong ties within the local community. Unlike many expats, he rarely socialises with fellow countrymen.

"I have maybe two or three Indian friends. Most of my friends are Slovaks. I know a lot of talented, smart people here," he says.

He has embraced aspects of Slovak cuisine – guláš (a hearty meat stew with paprika), kapustnica (a traditional sauerkraut soup often made with smoked meat and mushrooms), zapekané zemiaky (baked potatoes layered with ingredients like cheese, sour cream and bacon) – but draws the line at bryndzové halušky (potato dumplings with sheep cheese and bacon) and pirohy (filled dumplings), which he does not like.

And though he acknowledges the presence of racism – "it exists everywhere, in India too" – his experience in Slovakia has been largely positive.

## SOBER RAVE

For Dhiman, food is not just sustenance but a way of life. Growing up in Gurugram, a city in northern India, near to New Delhi, street food was part of his daily life. He sees a stark contrast to Slovakia.

"In India, we live by street food. Here, there's an alcohol culture – people go out to drink every weekend."

Indeed, alcohol was part of what he says was his first culture shock when, in Košice, he noticed that bars were full even in the afternoon.

Although Slovaks often invite him for a beer, curious to find out more about his background, Dhiman is not a fan of alcohol. This is why Rolltown is an alcohol-free space, focusing instead on food and music. His latest project, Food & Sober Rave, offers a space where people can enjoy a party atmosphere without alcohol. Once a week, Rolltown hosts sober raves from 21:00 to 1:00, serving Indian-inspired non-alcoholic cocktails alongside its food menu.

Puneet Dhiman's philosophy is "Just come and taste". It works, and customers regularly return.

"Gen Z doesn't drink as much any more. We want to create a place where people can tune into the party mood before heading to clubs."

Though no longer cooking daily at Rolltown, Dhiman's love for food started long before Slovakia. As a child in India he experimented with recipes, creating meals from whatever was available at home. And during university in Bangalore, he cooked for friends using their leftover ingredients, surprising them with inventive dishes. Later, while working long hours in an American restaurant during a Work & Travel programme, he honed his skills and developed his signature Honey Chilli Fries, now a Rolltown favourite.

## EXPANSION

Dhiman explains that Rolltown is not just about serving food, but about bringing a new culture to Slovakia. Running a business in Bratislava's lively centre has its challenges: drunk customers, occasional fights, even theft. But Dhiman takes it in stride. His team has even developed a strategy – if faced with aggression, they switch to English to defuse the situation.

Rolltown prides itself on the quality of its food.

"We prepare fresh meat every day and use premium ingredients like Hellmann's mayonnaise and ketchup. Unlike other establishments that often use oil-heavy marinades, we avoid such practices. Our spices come from India, and the flatbreads we use for our rolls are sourced from Britain," Dhiman says.

His philosophy is simple: "Just come and taste." And customers do, returning for more.

Despite being open only a short time, Rolltown is thriving and Dhiman is already eyeing expansion – to Brno, Vienna, Prague and Budapest. But he is in no rush.

His dream? Not just to run a restaurant, but to build a brand. He wants Rolltown to be the go-to spot for Indian fast food in Central Europe.

Even the playful mix of Slovak and English on the menu is intentional – part of the brand's identity. If Rolltown expands, he will adapt the language mix for each city, blending English with German, Czech and Hungarian.

Rolltown may have started with a small food truck in Bratislava, but Dhiman's ultimate vision is for something much bigger.

"If we can bring this concept to other cities, why stop at Slovakia?" ©TSS

*This article is part of the Spectator College section, which is made possible thanks to the support of the US Embassy.*

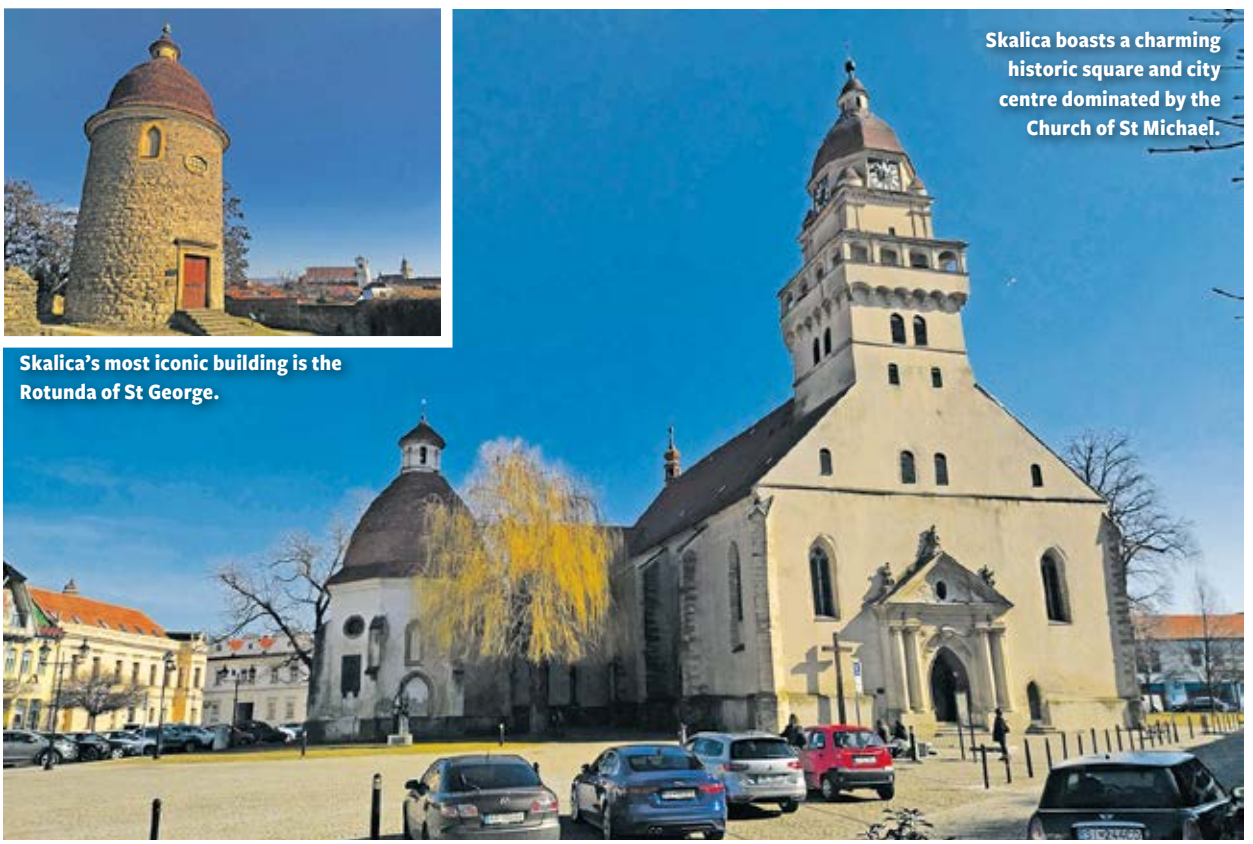
# Skalica's tourism playbook: **A canal cruise, trdelník, alcohol, and singing in church**

*IN SKALICA, A PUSH FOR EXPERIENCE-BASED TOURISM IS RESHAPING HOW VISITORS EXPLORE ITS PAST AND PRESENT*

**Text: Jozef Ryník • Photo: Jozef Ryník**



Skalica's most iconic building is the Rotunda of St George.



Skalica boasts a charming historic square and city centre dominated by the Church of St Michael.

In the historic town of Skalica, western Slovakia, we pull up in front of a striking Art Nouveau building, home to the local Tourist Information Office and a vibrant cultural hub. Inside, Renáta Medňanská, the dynamic head of the office, greets us with infectious enthusiasm, eager to share not just plans for restoring the town's historical treasures but also the evolving trends shaping tourism in this former royal free town.

"Tourists typically visit Skalica for two to three days, but we aim to encourage them to return regularly for unique experiences," explains Medňanská.

## HOW DO THEY PLAN TO ACHIEVE THIS?

According to her, modern tourists are no longer satisfied with simply strolling around historical sites and churches while listening to stories of long-forgotten founders. "People seek experiences, and we can provide them. For instance, they can sing in the Jesuit Church, which boasts excellent acoustics," she elaborates.

For those uninterested in churches or historic houses, Skalica offers a range of technical monuments to explore, such as Pilárik's Mill, which remains operational, or the town icehouse. Additionally, visitors can access locations not typically open to the public, including the historic building of the Špicer Brewery.

"In addition, we are nearing completion of the renovation of the historic pharmacy, which will include antique furniture and equipment. It is set to open in May," says Medňanská.

## TRDELNÍK FROM SKALICA

Although the city's tourist office offers guided tours of the monuments, many visitors prefer to use an audio guide available via a mobile application. "Everything about the city is narrated in three languages, and we are also planning a guide in language suitable for children, to ensure that kids are engaged without being overwhelmed by facts and figures," explains Medňanská, discussing current tourism trends.

An interesting initiative is the installation of "windows into the past" throughout the town. These windows depict monuments that no longer exist because they were demolished or rebuilt.

Visitors arriving in Skalica at the end of May can sign up for a themed tour called "In the Footsteps of Skalica's Specialities", which includes a demonstration of how to bake Skalický trdelník, a traditional sweet pastry. The town has its own trdelník bakery capable of producing 80 pieces per day.

## A CANAL WITH A DISPUTED BEGINNING

Czechs state that the Baťa Canal, a unique waterway named after its initiator, the renowned entrepreneur Tomáš Baťa, ends in Skalica, while Slovaks believe it begins there. It runs from Skalica, which is home to Slovakia's only port, to Otrokovice in the Czech Republic, spanning more than 50 kilometres.

Both countries plan to improve this waterway, but while construction work is already underway on the Czech side of the port, the Slovak side remains quiet as it awaits EU funding.

As the number of cyclists in the town is on the rise, the town plans to construct a cycle path from Mondokov kříž, a religious monument just outside the town, to the neighbouring village of Sudoměřice in the Czech Republic.

"Czechs tend to be more enthusiastic visitors and cyclists than Slovaks, so we aim to attract them to our town," adds the head of tourism in Skalica.

## A LEGACY ROOTED IN 1939

When Peter Kopeček, the current owner of the eponymous winery, reflects on the history of his family's vineyard, he often thinks back to 1939, when his grandfather first planted vines in Novosady, part of Skalica, and built a wine cellar. At that time, he could not have predicted that his descendants would carry on the tradition of grape growing and winemaking.

The journey to the current vineyards has not been easy. After Kopeček's grandfather, František, cultivated the vineyards, his son, also named František, continued the work. However, in the 1970s, the communist regime nationalised the vineyards, uprooting them and converting the land into fields.

Following the fall of communism in 1989, many winemakers in Skalica reclaimed their ancestral vineyards. The Kopečeks, however, chose to plant new vineyards, as their original plots no longer existed. "My father started it, and I joined him. Initially, it was just a hobby for me, but later we began selling wine," Kopeček recalls of the early days of the business.

In 2002, Kopeček and his wife, Renáta, established their own family winery. Today, they cultivate vines on 10 hectares and produce between 20,000 and 30,000 bottles of wine each year. In addition to Kopeček's wife Renáta, their daughter, Lucia, who studied winemaking, assists with wine production.

## WHY ARE THERE MORE WINE LOVERS ON THE CZECH SIDE?

Kopeček mentions that visitors primarily attend winemaking events and the Trdlofest, which take place several times a year. The largest and oldest event is the Open Cellars Day in October, when around 70 winemakers from Skalica showcase their wines.

Additionally, the town and the civic association Vínna cesta Záhorie are working to draw visitors to the Vínna Špacírka (wine wandering), held at the end of April.

Another attraction for visitors is the Summer at Skalica Winemakers event, which runs throughout the summer. During this time, a different winemaker opens their winery each week, offering presentations, wine tastings and light refreshments. However, Kopeček admits that attendance at the summer tastings is often low, despite promotional efforts.

When asked why there are more wine tourists on the Czech side of the Morava River, winemaker Kopeček struggles to provide a clear answer. He says, "I don't know what they do differently, since we also host events with open wine cellars. Maybe it's the quality of the service."

His daughter, Lucia, points out that the wine huts on the Czech side are concentrated in one area, which is an advantage for visitors. "In contrast, in Skalica they are spread out over several kilometres, and some have been converted into family homes, which discourages visitors," she notes.

## A BREWERY IN A HOUSE PURCHASED BY SLOVAKS RETURNING FROM THE USA

In Skalica, beer enthusiasts can find a welcoming spot. Last year, the Špicer craft brewery opened its doors. The brewery's name honours the last tenant of the Skalica city brewery, Mordechai Špicer.

The brewery is housed in a historic building constructed by Eliáš Berger, who served as the court historian for several Hungarian kings from the Habsburg dynasty in the 16th century. Over the years, the house changed hands among various nobles until the 1920s, when it was purchased by Slovaks returning to Skalica from America.

"They undertook extensive renovations of the house and its roof. The area where the stainless steel beer tanks are now located was once a pub. Additionally, the beautiful historic building had a bowling alley and a dance hall," explains Peter Tomčík, the brewery's co-owner.

He founded the business along with his brother and cousin, Martin Jánošík, who is the brewer. Jánošík also proposed using the building for the brewery, partly inspired by the traditional rivalry with the neighbouring town of Holíč, which already had its own brewery.

"We plan to continue the traditions of Skalica, which include not only trdelník but also beer brewing," Tomčík explains, adding that visitors come to Skalica primarily for its gastronomy, which is why he aims to offer them not only craft beer but also high-quality food at the brewery. ©TSS

*This article is part of the Slovaks Abroad section, which is made possible thanks to the support of the FALATH & PARTNERS law firm.*


Lacinka is located in an inconspicuous house on busy Šancova Street.

# Lacinka:
# A pancake legend in Bratislava

## *THIS EATERY MAY BE TINY, BUT WITH 50 SWEET AND SAVOURY OPTIONS ON THE MENU, ITS PANCAKES PACK A PUNCH*

**Text: Mark Taylor • Photo: Ján Pallo, Mark Taylor**

*"A 30 minute wait is not out of the ordinary but don't be surprised if it takes that long to make a final selection." These words, about the Lacinka pancake house – or "palacinky palace" as we dubbed it in 1995 – were published in The Slovak Spectator's very first issue 30 years ago. While the queue is not always so long these days, the list of fillings at this still-popular student hangout remains exhaustive and, given its longevity, it remains an iconic – perhaps* the *iconic – Bratislava eatery.*

Although it's only a short walk from Bratislava's main railway station, you'll need to keep your eyes peeled to spot Lacinka, which occupies a small shop front on nearby Šancova Street. Inside there is a simply decorated room, which only has space for about 12 people. They do not take reservations, so you might find yourself waiting if you want to eat in. Turnover, however, is rapid, and the worn-down track in the floor tiles suggest that the volume of people which I saw coming and going on a weekday lunch time is not unusual.

There is just one menu, attached to the wall next to the till, and they really only do pancakes. However, you do have a choice of about 50 fillings, divided into sweet and savoury categories.

**Lacinka offers a variety of sweet and savoury pancake fillings. The pancakes themselves are served very simply – on paper trays. These also serve for writing messages.**

I tried my best, for the sake of The Slovak Spectator and its readers, but sadly I did not manage to sample all 50, so here are my edited highlights: On the savoury side there is a wide range of cheesy fillings. Bryndza works quite nicely, but the "cheese and onion" is even better, a nicely balanced preparation of a classic pairing. "Roquefort" is a very strong blue cheese flavour, and I also sampled something intriguingly called the "geological speciality". My gentle attempts to find out what this might be didn't help much, but on tasting it seems to be a kind of mildly spiced pepper/vegetable stew, perhaps like lečo.

The sweet side of the menu includes just about all the jams that you can imagine, plus chocolate, nuts and coffee. Some of the jam options became too sweet for me, but you may opt into or out of an extra dusting of icing sugar. Fig was a good choice, which brought texture as well as fruity flavour. The drinks list is also simple, comprising tea, coffee, fruit juices or Kofola, the latter being literally the most expensive thing on the menu.

One thing to beware of is that, once filled and rolled up, all pancakes look very much alike; there is basically no way to know which is which until you bite into it. And you will need more than one; I reckon an adult might eat at least three to four of them (quite possibly more). So if you come as a group and you really do not want to share then you will need to order individually, otherwise you will be playing a kind of flavour-roulette when the paper plates arrive.

Service is very efficient: you line up to place your order, then take a seat and a couple of minutes later your pancakes appear from the kitchen. The facilities are minimal – paper plates and no cutlery – and you might want to visit a bathroom before you arrive. This is simple, good value catering, rather than a place to take a date if you want to impress them. But I think you've probably gathered that already, and of course food does not have to be fancy to be enjoyable. A slightly more interesting observation might be that it is simply amazing that you can find anything tasty to eat, for this price, within a short walk of a capital city's main rail station. You would pay the same amount for a packet of crisps outside King's Cross in London, and although I can vouch for there being truly delicious crêpes in Paris, you should reckon on paying at least €5 for one.

You cannot always be sure of finding a space to sit down if you come at a specific time. But Lacinka is a Bratislava institution for people wanting informal, quick and good value food, and I am glad to have found it.

©TSS

## Lacinka
(pancake restaurant)

- Šancová 3995/18, Bratislava
- Sunday 14:00-21:00, Mon-Fri 11:00-21:00
- Closed Saturday
- Pancakes from €0.50-€1.10, Drinks from €0.35-€1.20

# Slovak Matters: Hold your mushroom

*MUSHROOM PICKING IS SLOVAKIA'S FAVOURITE HOBBY, INVOLVING BUGS, RAIN, COLD, AND POISONOUS FUNGI*

**Text: Tom Nicholson • Photo: Sme**

Talk about doggedness. Every year, several dozen Slovaks wind up in hospital after poisoning themselves with bad mushrooms. But for every death, or green-faced patient, thousands of others take to the dripping fall forests, sure of their ability to tell edible mushrooms from their lethal cousins.

Mushroom picking is a national passion, drawing both pensioners and young people to train stations at dawn, baskets in hand, eagerly discussing the best spots and the ideal rainy conditions for a successful forage.

Nevertheless, it is not my favourite activity. It involves miles of tramping through boggy, buggy forests, looking for hríby that I never seem to notice but which draw gasps of excitement from my companions, especially if they find a dubák, considered the finest variety of wild mushroom. Drž hubu, I mutter under my breath. Hold your mushroom, i.e. hold your gob – i.e. shut up.

Hubári (mushroom pickers) are a special breed, hardy in their tolerance for early risings, foolhardy in their self-confident botany. While Slovakia has many varieties of poisonous mushrooms, the really bad one is the muchotrávka zelená (the green fly poisoner), which is the brother of the red muchotrávka with white spots. Now even I know not to eat that. Other dangerous fungi are less obvious, however. Hubári claim to know the subtle markings on the mushroom caps (hlavička if small, klobúk if relatively large), the intricate details on the stem (nožička) and roots (hlúb, hlúbik) that tell you whether you can eat the thing in safety. But why take the gamble, I always ask them, when even the dubák tastes like boiled snails?

But if you can't get out of going mushroom picking, you might as well know some of the main names. Some names are derived from the trees near which they grow, such as the dubák, which is found near the dub (oak) tree, the brezák which sprouts under the breza (birch), the smrekovec (smrek = spruce).

Then you have ones that take their names from the Slovak calendar (almost each Slovak Christian name is assigned a certain day on the calendar) reflecting the best time of the year for picking them. Thus, you have michalky (after the name Michal, celebrated September 29), and slávky (Slavomíra, celebrated October 10).

Finally, you get names reflecting the properties each mushroom has – the masliak, which is slimy and yellowish-brown, the suchohríb, or dry mushroom, the modrák, or blue mushroom, the prašivka, the powder mushroom, which explodes in a grey puff of dust if you step on it, and finally the kuriatka, or little chicken mushroom which is deep yellow and appears to be covered in feathers.

If a Slovak invites you out mushroom picking, don't say you haven't been warned. ©TSS

*This article was originally published by The Slovak Spectator on October 21, 2002. It has been updated to be relevant today.*

SP025014/001

# FROM ONE TINY SEED...

## ROOTED IN LEARNING,
## BRANCHING OUT TO THE FUTURE

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# History Talks:
# Conspiracy in the kingdom

*SOME OF THE HUNGARIAN NOBILITY WHO ONCE RAN PRESENT-DAY SLOVAKIA PLOTTED AGAINST THE HABSBURG EMPEROR*

**Text: Branislav Chovan • Photo: Branislav Chovan and Jana Liptáková**

**The Marian column, as part of Franciscan Square, captured by painter Heinz Pinggera with a floral decoration from about 120 years ago (left). Today the square is extensively paved, with less greenery, but the Marian column has remained.**

In Bratislava's Franciscan Square stands a tall Marian column, erected in 1675 on the orders of Emperor Leopold I. Marian columns, or plague columns, were built in thanksgiving to the Virgin Mary for averting or ending some kind of disaster, often outbreaks of the plague. This one, however, was placed here to mark events that could have shaken the whole empire.

Relations between the Hungarian nobility and the imperial court in Vienna were rarely ideal, and in the second half of the 17th century they were far from good. Moreover, the country had already been battling against the Ottomans for almost 150 years, and occasional rebellions directed against the Habsburgs did not contribute to overall peace.

## THE ROOTS OF THE CONSPIRACY

In this turbulent era, Hungarian Palatine Wesselényi met with the Ban – i.e. regional governor of Croatia, Peter Zrínsky, in Štubnianske Teplice, thus starting the movement of magnates opposed to the court in Vienna known as the Wesselényi conspiracy. Gradually, numerous nobles joined the conspirators, including some from the Hungarian power elite – regional judge Ján Nádasdy, Archbishop Lippay, Ferencz I Rákóczi, Štefan Thököly and František Frankopán.

However, despite the great names, the anti-Habsburg plot was not organised well, nor was it sufficiently secret. As it turned out later, the conspirators' subjects, despite intense calls from their lords, were not very interested in rising up. And as for secrecy, this evaporated no later than 1667 in Istanbul when Nikosios Panajotti, the interpreter of the Transylvanian embassy, revealed everything to Vienna's envoys.

## PLANS GO AWRY

The plotters wanted to kidnap the emperor during a hunt near Vienna and then transport him to a remote and hard-to-seize castle, Muráň. There, they wanted to make Leopold give up the Hungarian crown. The nobles also counted on Hungary falling under the control of the Ottomans but the idea that they would be better off under the Ottomans than under the Habsburgs was an illusion. Even the Ottoman ruler deemed the plan to kidnap and blackmail the emperor outrageous, so he revealed the plot to Vienna.

After that, events took a rapid course. On January 3, 1671, an extraordinary trial with 230 suspects took place in Bratislava. Most of them were released in the end and only the wealthier had their property seized. Only two nobles, from the eastern-Slovak region of Zemplín, ended up executed: František Bónis and Ondrej Nagy.

Some time later, Nádasdy, Zrínsky and Frankopán were executed near Vienna. Ferencz I Rákóczi was saved from execution thanks to an intervention by his mother, Zsófia Báthory, and the Jesuits – as well as a generous bail payment of 400,000 guldens.

*Už vieš,*

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