

POPULISM AND CORRUPTION ARE THREATS TO DEMOCRACY

**A failure to address problems and abuse of power
opens the door to extremism**

Country report on the state and development of democracy in Slovakia

INEKO, February 2016

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The report on the state and development of democracy in Slovakia is the main output of the INEKO project which has been financially supported by the Centre for International Private Enterprise (CIPE). The present English version of the report includes main findings of the original Slovak version together with recommendations for reversing the growth or the strong influence of non-democratic and authoritative powers. The report will serve as supporting document for decision-making about long-term and more intensive support of selected initiatives aimed at the development of democracy in Slovakia.

The project is performed by INEKO in cooperation with the Business Alliance of Slovakia (BAS).

INEKO Institute is a non-governmental non-profit organization established in support of economic and social reforms which aim to remove barriers to the long-term positive development of the Slovak economy and society.

“Democracy is a complicated, costly, tiresome, and time consuming process that results in a good deal. Totalitarianism, on the contrary, it is simple, cheap, fast process, but the result is a bad solution to which people suffer. And often very tragically.”

Elena Pätoprstá, anti-corruption activist
Round table INEKO about democracy in Slovakia, November 11th, 2016

Foreword

In 1989, the communist totality crumbled in Central Europe. To a large extent, it was due to its inability to keep pace with the economic development seen in the capitalist democratic world. A standard of living which was lagging behind was an important cause of dissatisfaction in people with the then regime. Already in 1995, the Slovak economy generated a gross domestic product per capita in economic parity (i.e. after considering price differences) only at the level of 40% of the EU15, which was comparable to Poland or Hungary. In 2015, i.e. 26 years after the start of democracy, it was already at 71%. In the last 20 years we have been one of the fastest growing economies in post-socialist Europe and, together with our V4 neighbours (Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic), we have come considerably close to old EU members.

The process of catching up started thanks to the fall of the communist totality and the transition to democracy and market economy. However, democracy may have several forms. It may differ in the degree of centralization of political power, freedom of the media, independence of the judiciary, degree of bribery or the impact of oligarchs on politics. The formal existence of democracy is not a guarantee of economic success; the form of its application is crucial.

According to several authors¹, the main source of prosperity includes the so-called inclusive institutions, i.e. such rules of functioning of politics and economy which prevent misuse of power at the expense of the rest of the population. It sounds simple but in fact it is a historical challenge which many societies have not thus far overcome, and even those which have do not have the guarantee that it will remain so forever. Power is namely related to a huge temptation to use it for one's own benefit regardless of others. The theory of "the iron law of oligarchy" even claims that, sooner or later, the powerful will succeed in such effort. More recent knowledge shows that it need not be so if there are institutions in the state which ensure mutual control of various components of power.

The key tool against any misuse of power is functioning democracy in which political power is distributed among several authorities so that they control one another and so that the power is not concentrated in the hands of a small group of politicians. There should be fair competition among political parties. Independent regulatory bodies, independent judiciary and investigation units, should guarantee the rule of law and protect private property. Independent media, civic society and entrepreneurs independent of politicians and monopolies are key players who may support the introduction of inclusive institutions.

¹ See e.g. Daron Acemoglu, James Robinson: Why Nations Fail, 2012: <https://dennikn.sk/blog/preco-su-niektore-narody-uspesne-ine-zlyhavaju/>

Anti-monopoly authorities should efficiently intervene against monopolies, prevent them from being established and from expanding. Authoritative regimes, dictatorships and "captures of the state", where oligarchs control politicians and influence their decisions and legislation for their own benefit, are contradictory to a functioning democracy.

Development in V4 countries shows that democracy development is not straightforward. The appearance of authoritative and populist politicians, the influence of the oligarchs, still widespread bribery, the weakening of media independence, of judicial power and of regulatory authorities are some of the features which are demonstrated increasingly more in different V4 countries. **If democracy continues weakening in the V4 region, sooner or later it will be demonstrated by a slower growth of the economy and by a halt in catching up with the standard of living of highly-developed countries.**

There are no simple solutions. Democracy should be supported by a strong informal coalition of independent media and NGOs focused on checking the government, fighting against bribery and supporting reforms. Entrepreneurs who are not connected to ruling politicians and monopolies but who have both financial resources and motivation to support pro-democratic powers in society are of special importance. It is also significant to accept systemic changes which will decrease the risk of misuse of power. They include mainly higher transparency when using public funds and also in the decision-making process. Disclosure of information strengthens public control. Systemic measures should also be focused on spreading too-centralized power onto several entities controlling one another. Independence and expertise of investigation, inspection and regulatory authorities are important conditions for a functioning democracy. E.g. internal control of the judiciary, police and public prosecution should be personally, financially and organizationally separated from execution and it should not fall under one person. Authorities such as the Supreme Audit Office, the Office for Public Procurement, the Antimonopoly Office, the Health Care Surveillance Authority or the Regulatory Office for Network Industries cannot be puppets in the hands of politicians but rather must be self-confident authorities which make independent decisions based on professional analyses.

The present study shows the considerable dissatisfaction of people with the quality of democracy in Slovakia as well as its worsening in the last few years. It results from a representative public poll, a questionnaire survey made with selected public figures, detailed interviews with business people and several discussions held with students which we made in the second half of 2016. **The study reveals that a large part of most frustrated people is prone to give up democracy and support even extremist powers. They are mainly people who least realize the connection between the quality of democracy and the quality of life.** This may explain their higher willingness to accept radical non-democratic solutions.

INEKO believes that the high dissatisfaction with the state of democracy and the relatively high proportion of people refusing democracy and integration in the EU is a warning sign which more attention needs to be paid to. It is namely a breeding-ground for further strengthening of extremists and populists in political life.

According to INEKO, it is in the public interest to develop critical thinking in people and to explain that a functioning democracy is a basic precondition for improvement in the quality of life of the entire

population. It can namely best protect people against any misuse of power, offering room for their potential to be utilized. A functioning democracy also creates conditions for free discussion, enabling us to look for the best solutions to social problems.

A key sign of populism is the fact that it ignores and even disrupts fair discussion based on arguments. This makes it impossible to address problems. In Slovakia populism started to be spread more intensively in 2006 when the Smer party, led by Robert Fico, took charge and overloaded the country with a myriad of unreal or harmful promises². At that time we thought that populism could not win in the long run specifically because it could not solve social problems and, sooner or later, dissatisfied people would start preferring real, although less popular solutions. After some time we came to see that it need not always be so. **A failure to address problems in combination with misusing power really increases the dissatisfaction of the people. However, it is not simple to propose, popularize and foster real solutions. If it fails, many people start looking for a way out, even towards extreme ideas.**

A discussion about the significance of democracy should not leave out, on the contrary, it should involve and be targeted towards people who support extremist and populist parties and especially at young people. It is disturbing that extremists are winning most support among the youngest voters. At the same time, it is necessary to appeal to the governing regime to more efficiently address problems which people perceive as a failure of democracy and thus to reduce the room for growth of popularity of extremists. Measures aimed at supporting economic growth and eradicating poverty should be a part of the solutions. As we will namely show in the study, the regions where extremist parties have gained most support are the poorest ones. Moreover, many people sympathizing with extremists point out long-term unsolved problems with marginalized Roma communities.

Just like in 1989, growing dissatisfaction of people is generating demand for change. The difference is that before fall of communism people clearly saw the alternative in transit to democracy and market economy, proved to be working well in the western world. Today, many people do not see such clear alternative. **Paradoxically, many of them consider as weakness of democracy that there is the abuse of power and the government does not address social problems. It is a challenge to explain that not democracy is guilty but, on contrary, that we have not got far enough on our way to functioning democracy.** If we do not succeed and do not change the course towards better democracy, there is a risk that the demand for change will be more successfully satisfied by the authoritarian politicians with simple, cheap and fast solutions to which people suffer at the end of a day. And often very tragically.

Peter Goliaš
INEKO Director

² See the INEKO project named "Promises and whinging – what politicians have promised and never delivered", <http://www.ineko.sk/ostatne/sluby-a-lamenty-co-politici-slubili-a-co-z-toho-plnia>.

Main findings

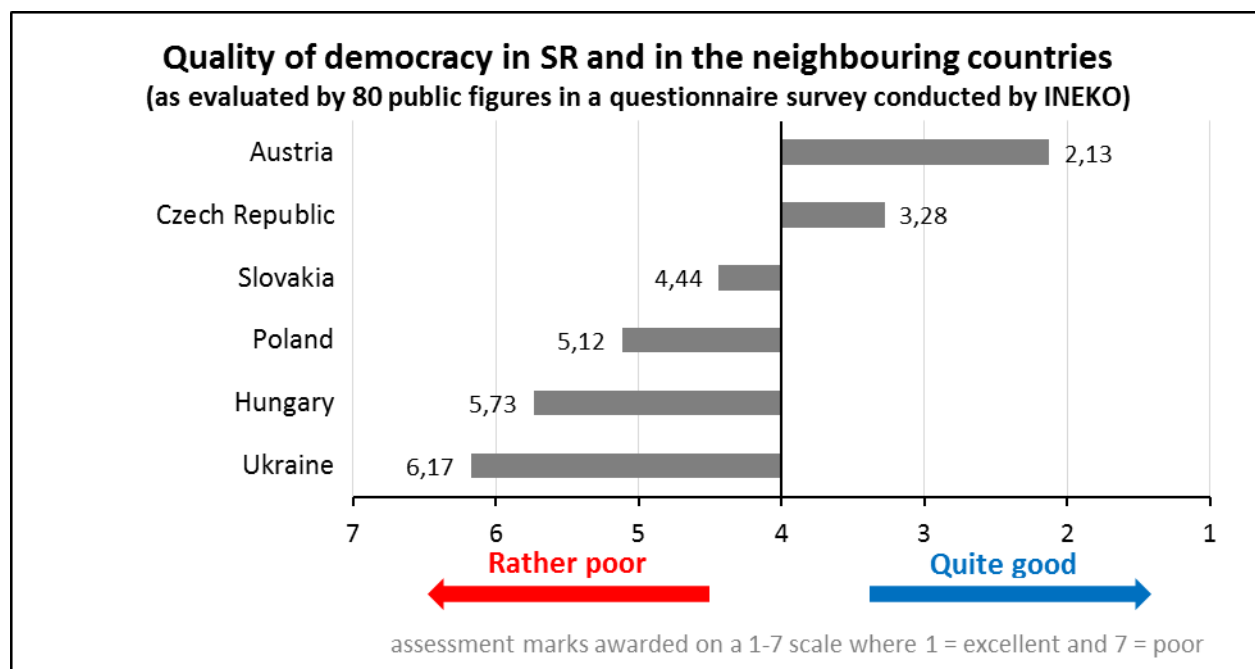
- According to international comparisons of the quality of democracy, Slovakia is one of the countries which are free and prevalingly democratic. It also results from three examined rankings made by Freedom House, the Economist Intelligence Unit and the Democracy Ranking Association that **from among V4 countries we rank in front of Hungary in terms of the quality of democracy, but we are still lagging behind the Czech Republic.**

Table 1: Ranking of V4 countries in international rankings assessing the quality of democracy

	CR	SR	Poland	Hungary	Number of assessed countries
Economist Intelligence Unit, 2015	25	43	48	54	195
Freedom House, 2016	24	50	33	74	167
Democracy Ranking Association, 2015	29	35	30	38	113

- According to an INEKO questionnaire survey made at the turn of September and October 2016 with selected public figures in Slovakia³, the level of democracy in Slovakia is worse than in CR and Austria, but it is better than in Poland, Hungary and Ukraine.

Chart 1: Opinions of experts in SR regarding the quality of democracy in SR and in its neighbouring countries



Source: INEKO questionnaire survey made among selected public figures in SR

³ From among 81 participants there were approximately 30% activists from nongovernmental organizations, 27% people from business and economic analysts, 21% people from academy, 12% journalists and other publicists and 10% civil servants and politicians.

- 7-year research of the level of the quality of democracy, IVO Barometer of the Institute for Public Affairs (2008-2014) has shown that the governments of Smer-SD, SNS and HZDS as well as the absolute rule of Smer-SD did not move the quality of democracy in Slovakia forward but, on the contrary, they made it worse.

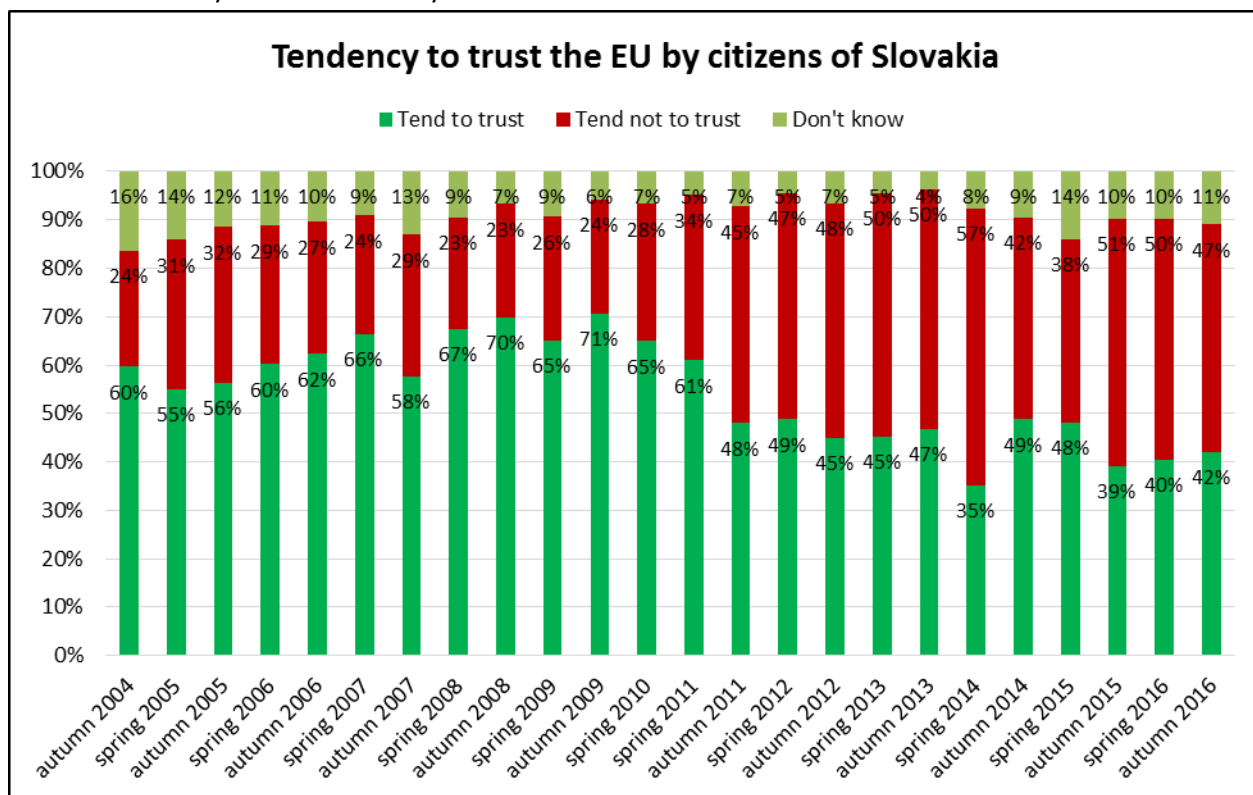
Table 2: Development of the overall mark for the quality of democracy according to the IVO Barometer (on a 1-5 scale where 1 = the optimum state of democracy)

Year	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Mark	2.9	3.3	3.2	2.6	2.8	2.9	3.2

Source: Institute for Public Affairs

- **According to Eurobarometer public opinion survey, the trust to the EU in Slovakia decreased over 2009-2014.** The share of people tending to trust the EU decreased from record level 71% in autumn 2009 to 35% in spring 2014 and consequently stabilized at 42% in autumn 2016. Besides impact of the global financial crisis probably also the public debt problems of several member countries and the refugee crisis contributed to the decline.

Chart 2: Tendency to trust the EU by citizens of Slovakia

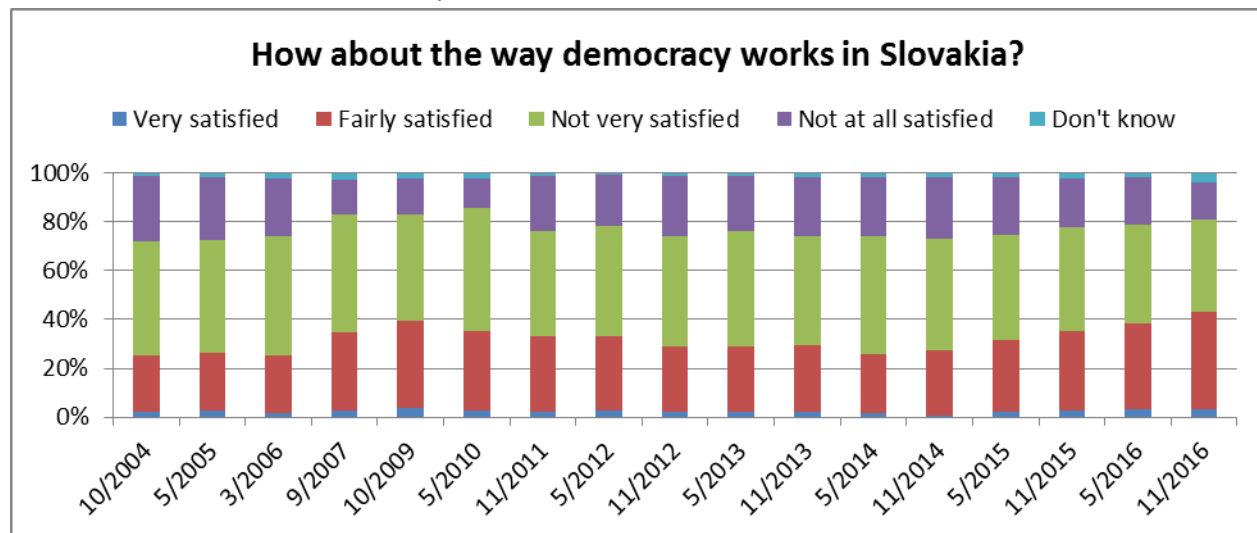


Source: Eurobarometer

- According to Eurobarometer public opinion survey, the satisfaction with how democracy works decreased over 2009 – 2014 in Slovakia, probably also due to the impact of the global financial crisis. Since then it has been improving which is probably also due to the rapid rise in real wages and

decrease of unemployment rate. In november 2016, there were 53% rather dissatisfied people and 43% fairly satisfied. Compared to neighbors from V4 only people in Hungary perceived lower satisfaction with their democracy.

Chart 3: Satisfaction with democracy in Slovakia



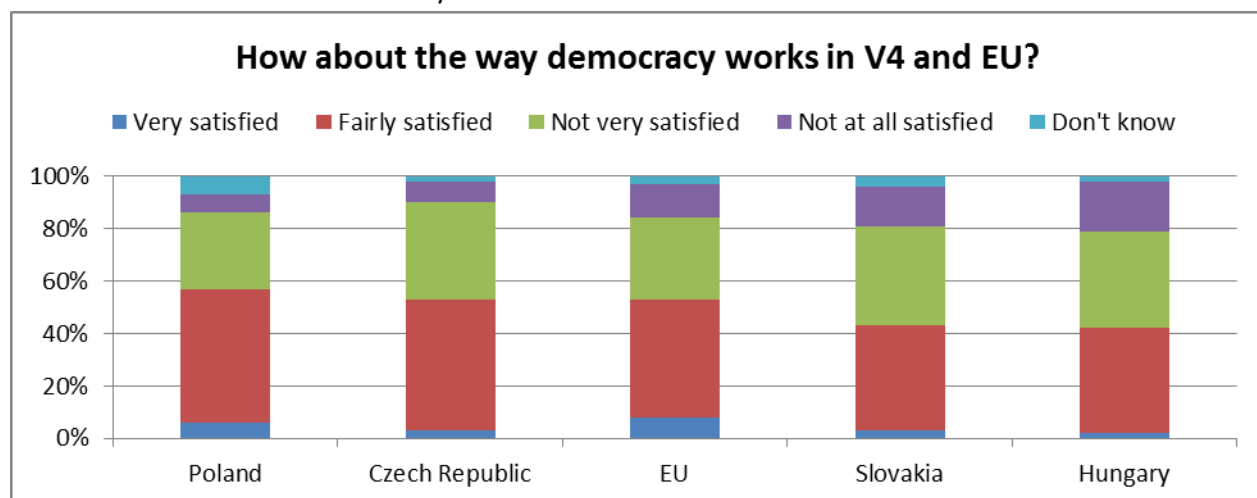
Source: Eurobarometer

Table 3: Change in real wages and unemployment rate (in %)

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Change in real wages	4.3	3.3	1.4	2.2	-1.6	-1.2	1.0	4.2	3.3	3.6
Unemployment rate	11.0	9.6	12.1	14.4	13.6	14.0	14.2	13.2	11.5	9.7

Source: Statistics Office of the SR, 2016: Prognosis of the Institute for Financial Policy, Ministry of Finance

Chart 4: Satisfaction with democracy in V4 and EU



Source: Eurobarometer

- According to Eurobarometer public opinion survey from November 2016, people in Slovakia perceive as the most important issues facing their country unemployment (34%), health and social security (33%), followed by rising prices and cost of living (22%) and economic situation (19%). The corruption was missing among predefined answers. According to the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index, Slovakia ranked 54. from among 176 countries in 2016, compared to 29. Poland, 47. Czech Republic and 57. Hungary (better ranking means lower corruption).
- **From among V4 countries, people in Slovakia tend to distrust most the police (50% distrust, the average for other V3 countries was 34%) as well as the justice and legal system (61% distrust, V3 average was 50%).** On the contrary, people in Slovakia tend to distrust least the national parliament (62% distrust, V3 average was 71%) and the government (62%, V3 average was 66%). Similar to satisfaction with how democracy works in Slovakia, the development of trust to mentioned institutions clearly correlates with the development of real wages and unemployment rate. Over 2009-2014 the trust was mainly decreasing and since then it has been mostly increasing.
- **According to a representative opinion poll focused on perception of democracy, which we organized for the purposes of the present study, 40% of the population considers the quality of democracy in Slovakia to be rather bad to poor and only 26% of the interviewees are satisfied.** According to 43% of the population, the level of democracy has deteriorated in the last 5 years, while only 18% thinks that it has improved. Compared to common people, experts whom we have turned to in a questionnaire survey were even more critical about the state and development of democracy. Half of them finds the current state of democracy rather bad to poor and 71% thinks that the quality of democracy has deteriorated in the last 5 years. The reason is mainly a failure to investigate the cases of Gorila⁴ and Bašternák⁵, no punishment for bribery, the entry of Marián Kotleba and his party, ĽS-Naše Slovensko⁶, into politics, the response of politicians to the refugee crisis as well as the form of election of the General Prosecutor⁷. Contrary to that, democracy was most boosted by disclosure of court rulings and contracts with the state, the appearance and work of Andrej Kiska in the position of the President of SR as well as the fact that Štefan Harabin was not elected as chairman of the Judicial Council of the Supreme Court of SR.

Table 4: Opinions about the quality of democracy

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

⁴ Disclosure of transcription of records from secret meetings of an influential businessman with top politicians which should prove bribery practices.

⁵ Revelation of suspected tax frauds of a businessman with close connections to top politicians of the ruling SMER-SD party.

⁶ It is a right-wing extremist party, the representatives of which openly admire the fascist Slovak Republic from the WWII period.

⁷ The President of SR did not appoint the General Prosecutor who had been lawfully elected by Parliament, which led to a re-election and later the appointment of a candidate proposed by the ruling SMER-SD party.

Source: Representative survey made by Focus for INEKO; INEKO questionnaire survey conducted among selected public figures

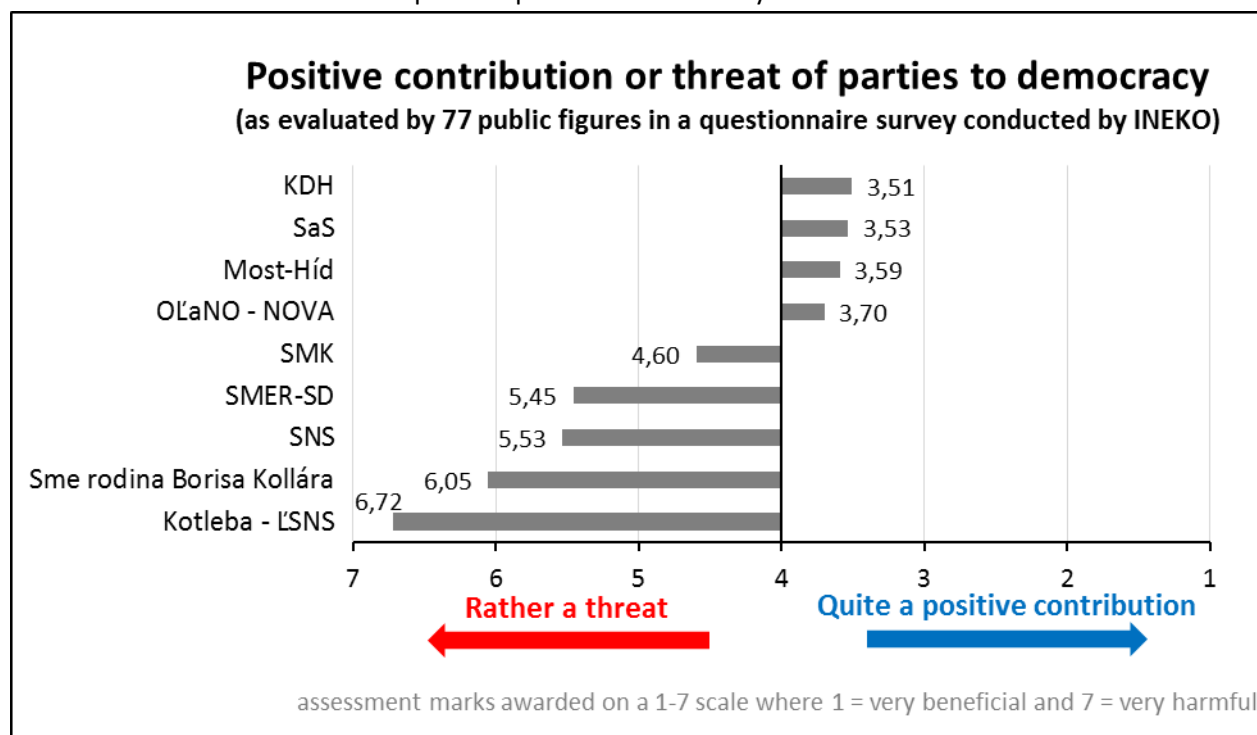
Table 5: Opinions about the change in the quality of democracy in the last 5 years

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

Source: Representative survey made by Focus for INEKO; INEKO questionnaire survey conducted among selected public figures

- **Experts believe that from among political parties, Kotleba-ĽSNS and Boris Kollár's Sme rodina are mainly harmful, and SNS and Smer-SD are rather harmful as well. No political party makes substantial contributions to democracy. The parties of KDH, SaS, Most-Híd and OĽaNO-NOVA contribute only slightly.**

Chart 5: Contribution or threat of political parties to democracy



Source: INEKO questionnaire survey made among selected public figures in SR

- **According to experts, President Andrej Kiska, NGOs focused on systemic changes and control of the powerful as well as Jana Dubovcová, a public ombudsman, contribute most to the development of democracy with regard to their potential.** Contrary to that, the Government, the National Council of SR and the General Prosecutor's Office contribute least. As far as civic activities are concerned, the activities of watchdogs and think-tanks focused on systemic changes and on

combating bribery as well as civic protests in the Gorila and Bašternák cases contribute most to the development of democracy.

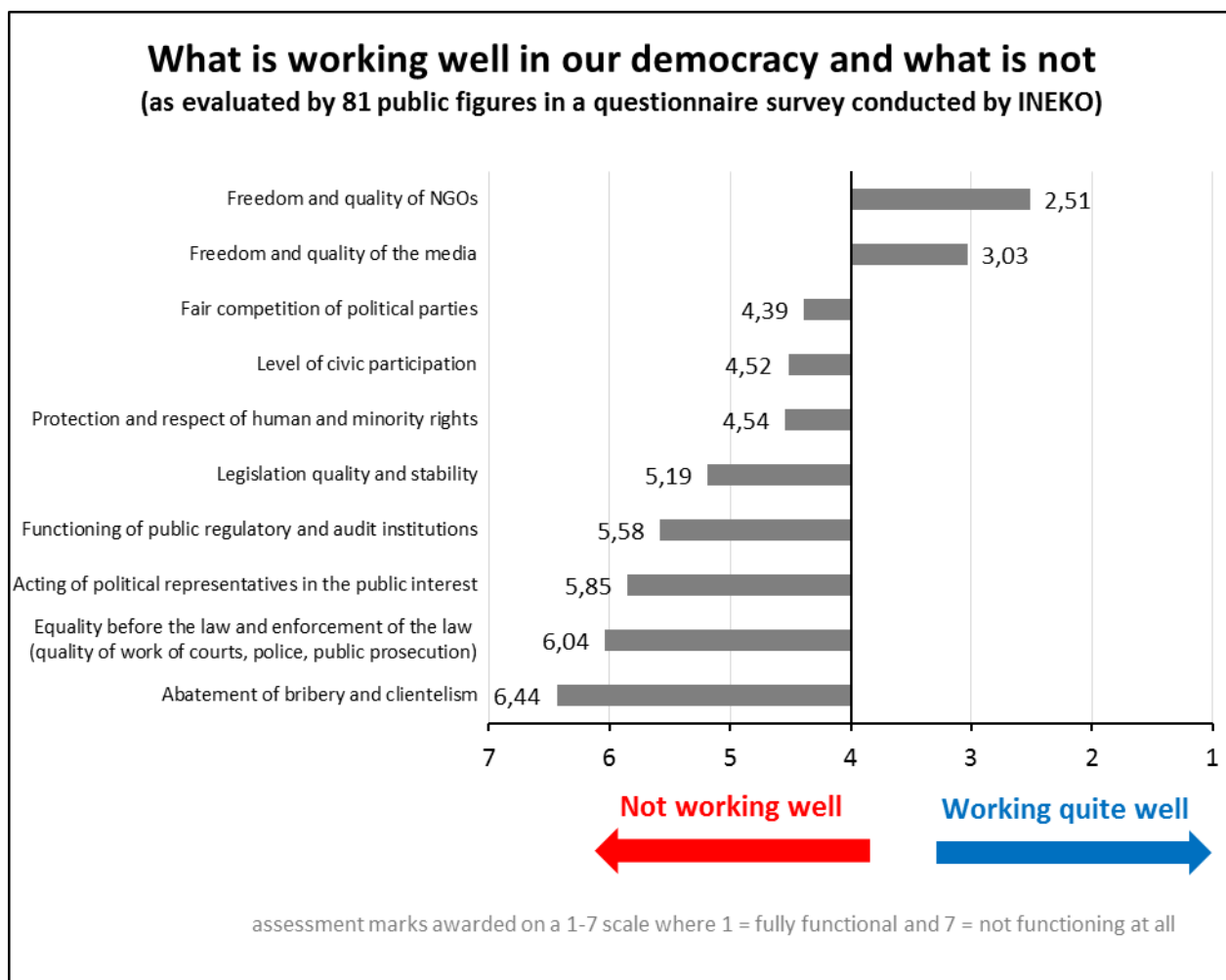
- **Experts believe that as far as individual attributes of democracy are concerned, the freedom and quality of NGOs and the media function the best⁸.** NGOs have a relatively strong tradition in Slovakia since the "Mečiar" era in the 1990's when a part of the public became active - also thanks to international support - and tried to reverse the policy of nationalism and isolation from western structures fostered by the then government led by Vladimír Mečiar. At the moment, the stability of NGOs focused on controlling the Government and systemic changes is rather fragile, mainly as a result of the retirement of foreign donors and only partial compensation from national sources.

Freedom of the media is confirmed by the current 12th place of Slovakia in a freedom of media ranking of 180 countries (2016 World Press Freedom Index) made by Reporters without Borders. To compare, the Czech Republic has been ranked 21st, Poland 47th and Hungary 67th.

As also results from the survey among experts, the least functional attributes of democracy include abatement of bribery and clientelism, equality before the law and enforcement of the law, the acting of politicians in the public interest, the functioning of regulatory and audit institutions, the functioning of an independent police, public prosecution and courts.

Chart 6: What is working well in our democracy and what is not

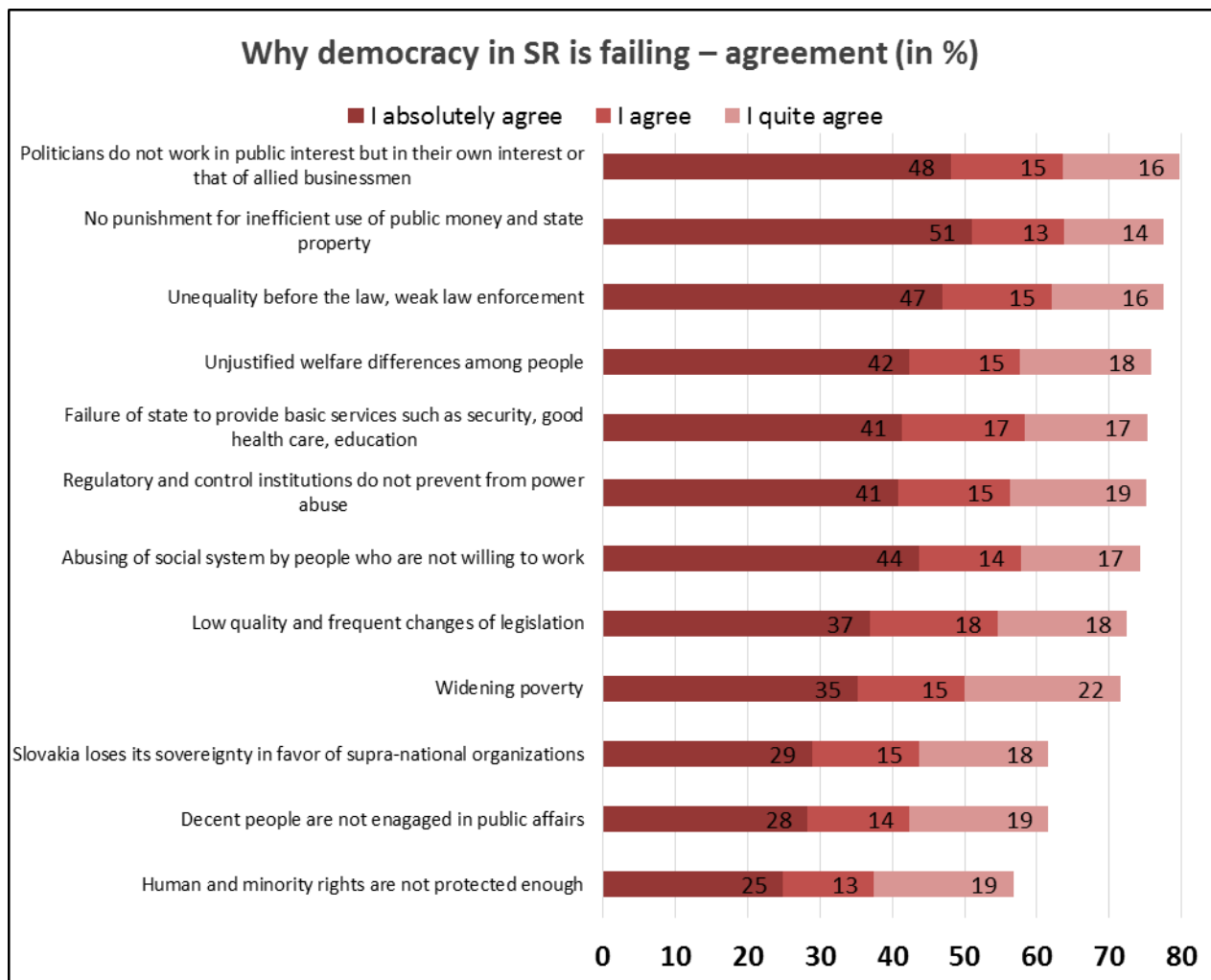
⁸ Here we should note that the results may be slightly distorted due to the fact that from among survey participants there were approximately 30% activists from nongovernmental organizations and 12% journalists and other publicists.



Source: INEKO questionnaire survey made among selected public figures in SR

- The representative opinion poll has demonstrated what people most dislike about the state of democracy we currently have in Slovakia. **The main cause of dissatisfaction of the population is the fact that politicians do not work in the public interest but in their own interest or in the interest of affiliated entrepreneurs.** Similarly, they do not like the fact that non-economical management of state property and state funds is not punished, as well as the fact that people are not equal before the law and that law enforceability is poor. The questionnaire survey among public figures has shown similar conclusions.

Chart 7: Reasons for the failing democracy in Slovakia



Source: Representative survey of Focus for INEKO

- Dissatisfaction with the abuse of power drives many to extremism.** Based on November 2016 public opinion poll, 23.9 % of citizens of Slovakia believed that abolishment of the parliament system and establishment of dictatorship were an alternative to the current state of democracy. As many as 28% of the population would go back to the socialist regime that existed here before 1989. As many as 35% admitted Slovakia should leave the European Union.

Altogether, 16% of respondents supported leaving the EU and also replacing the parliamentary system with a dictatorship. People with such opinion may be found more often in the regions of Bratislava (26%) and Prešov (25%), they have a lower net monthly household income of around EUR 500-700 (27%) and they are more frequently seen among supporters of Sme rodina (22%) and Ľudová Strana Naše Slovensko (21 %). Nonetheless, they are also present among voters of other parties (11-19%) or non-voters (20%).

11% of respondents supported leaving the EU, abolishing the parliamentary system and returning to the system seen before 1989.

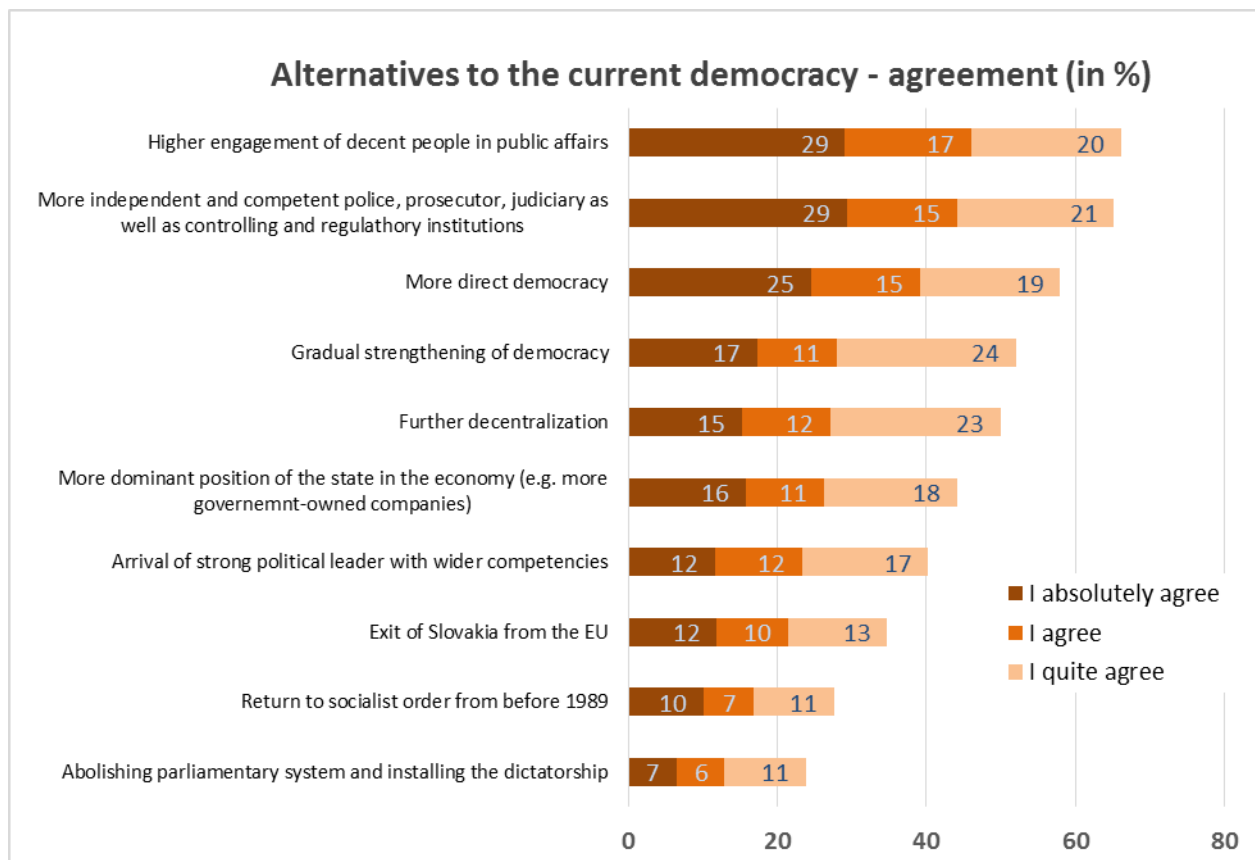
To verify the results, we repeated the survey in January 2017 with the same question about *“degree of agreement with pre-defined alternatives to the current democracy in Slovakia”* and with a more specific question asking people directly if they *“want to change current democracy in Slovakia according to pre-defined options”*. The results showed no significant difference between answers to the original and the new question given at the same time. However there were three statistically significant differences from the November 2016 survey:

- The share of people preferring dictatorship fell from 24% to 16%;
- The share of people preferring exit of Slovakia from the EU fell from 35% to 28-30% (depending on question wording);
- The share of people preferring more dominant position of the state in economy fell from 44% to 37-39% (depending on question wording).

We do not know the reasons for these changes. We can only assume that the public meaning was influenced by intensive media coverage of November 2016 survey results and by intensive discussion about the meaning of liberal democracy. Another reason may be missing context of other questions that we did not use in January survey. From among international developments, the election of Donald Trump as the US president aroused probably the biggest media coverage in Slovakia in relevant period between both surveys.

According to both surveys, people refusing democracy or the EU are still in a substantial minority. **Most of the population supports democracy. More than two thirds of respondents can see its improvement in the greater involvement of decent people in governing public affairs. Almost the same proportion of people wishes to strengthen the independence and expertise of police investigators, public prosecution, judiciary and audit and regulatory authorities in order to reduce the risk of any abuse of power.** Strengthening the independence and expertise of audit and regulatory authorities has been identified as one of the key solutions also by selected public figures in the questionnaire survey.

Chart 8: Alternatives to the current state of democracy



Source: Representative survey of Focus for INEKO

- **The moods of the population are also reflected in the political map of Slovakia.** Smer-SD, a party which has been a political leader in the last decade, lost over 16 pp of its supporters in the elections held in March 2016. Together with a disruption of the centre-right wing of the political scene characterized mainly by the débâcle of a former prime-ministerial SDKÚ party, this has created room for strengthening non-standard and extremist forces.

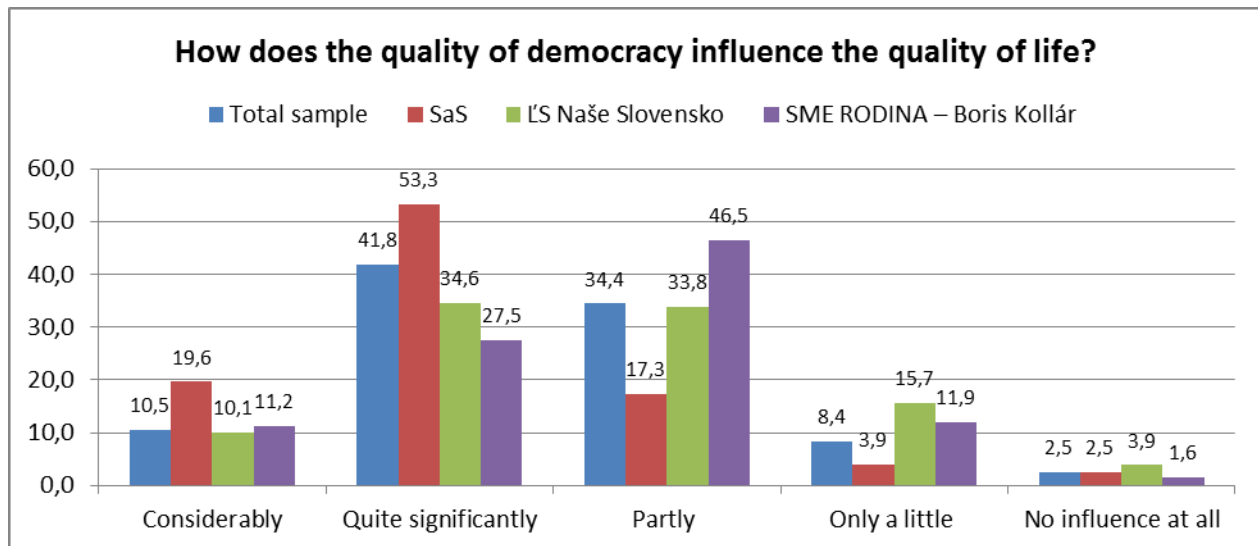
The success of the right-wing extremist party of ĽS-Naše Slovensko (ĽSNS) in March 2016 was particularly surprising (it obtained 8.04% of votes), and it had not been forecast by any official pre-election opinion polls. The populist SME RODINA – Boris Kollár party (which obtained 6.62% of votes) also got into Parliament. If we also include an inhomogeneous grouping of ideologically various personalities, OĽaNO, with officially just 4 members and its eccentric leader, Mr. Igor Matovič (the party obtained 11.02% of votes) in non-standard parties, then non-standard entities together obtained more than a quarter of all votes.

However, post-election political reality showed that neither the right-wing nor the left-wing groups were actually able to create a functional government. A mixed leftist-rightist government model returned to Slovakia after 14 years. In the name of combating extremism, representatives of the nationalistic SNS party and representatives of the Hungarian political Most-Híd party are participating in it together for the first time in history.

The success of extremist and non-standard forces in the 2016 elections cannot be seen only as short-term extravagance. In particular, ĽSNS stabilized its preferences with an unexpected good election result and a party which never had more than 4% before the elections (Focus, 2010 to 2016) has been maintaining around 8% since the elections. Since the party is in opposition and it need not face criticism for government measures, several politologists even predict its potential growth. In June 2016, Martin Slosiarik, a politologist, estimated ĽSNS's election top limit to be even 15%.

- **Voters of ĽS-Naše Slovensko are most frustrated with the current state of society and voters of SMER-SD are least frustrated. Compared to other parties, voters of ĽS-Naše Slovensko and SME RODINA – Boris Kollár are less aware of the relation between the quality of democracy and the quality of life. This may explain their higher willingness to accept radical solutions.** It is precisely voters of the two above-mentioned parties who are most willing to support Slovakia in leaving the EU. Voters of SME RODINA – Boris Kollár also mostly accept establishment of a dictatorship or a return to the socialist regime. Extreme solutions are supported mostly by people with low education and low income.

Chart 9: Opinions of the effect of the quality of democracy on the quality of life of the Slovak population



Source: Representative survey of Focus for INEKO

- **Kotleba has succeeded in mobilizing the first-time-voters.** According to the exit poll of the Focus agency from March 2016 the ĽSNS party was the most successful among the first-time voters attracting almost one quarter of them. This was confirmed also in the elections simulated among students organized prior to the 2016 elections at secondary schools all accross Slovakia by the Youth Council of Bratislava Region in cooperation with the Institute of Public Affairs. With the sample of almost 12 thousand students the winners of the simulated elections were the parties Sme rodina– Boris Kollár and Kotleba–ĽSNS.
- **Supporting extremist and populist parties in Slovakia has major economic reasons.** They are not caused by an absolute drop in the standard of living, because the opposite is true, but rather

continuing or only slightly shrinking regional varieties and the perceived poverty. People in less developed regions perceive dependence on the central government more sensitively because they receive social allowances from it - to a larger extent than others, they expect it to decrease the local above-average unemployment and create local jobs so that they do not have to travel abroad for work.

Regions where extremist parties have gained most support are also the poorest ones. If we focus particularly on ĽSNS, then four regions out of the top 5 regions with the highest support of ĽSNS are also regions most threatened by poverty: the regions of Banská Bystrica, Žilina, Prešov, and Košice. In the case of the region of Trenčín, which is one of the three regions least threatened by poverty in Slovakia, ĽSNS support is most likely connected to a traditional historical inclination to nationalistic and populist parties.

In case of regions with high share of Hungarian population (e.g. regions of Nitra and Košice), the potential gain of ĽSNS is lower because the voters with Hungarian nationality have tendency to vote by ethnicity. This was confirmed by the March 2016 Exit poll of the Focus Agency according to which 83.1% of voters with Hungarian nationality voted for SMK and Most-Híd, while just 1,4% of them voted for ĽSNS.

Table 6: Regions ranked in descending order according to their ĽSNS election results and degree of poverty.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Regions ranked according to their ĽSNS election results	BB	ZA	PO	TN	KE	TT	NR	BA
Regions ranked according to their poverty levels	BB	PO	KE	ZA	NR	TN	TT	BA

Source: Statistics Office

Note: We are using the official abbreviations of the self-governing regions: Banská Bystrica (BB), Bratislava (BA), Nitra (NR), Košice (KE), Prešov (PO), Trenčín (TN), Trnava (TT), Žilina (ZA).

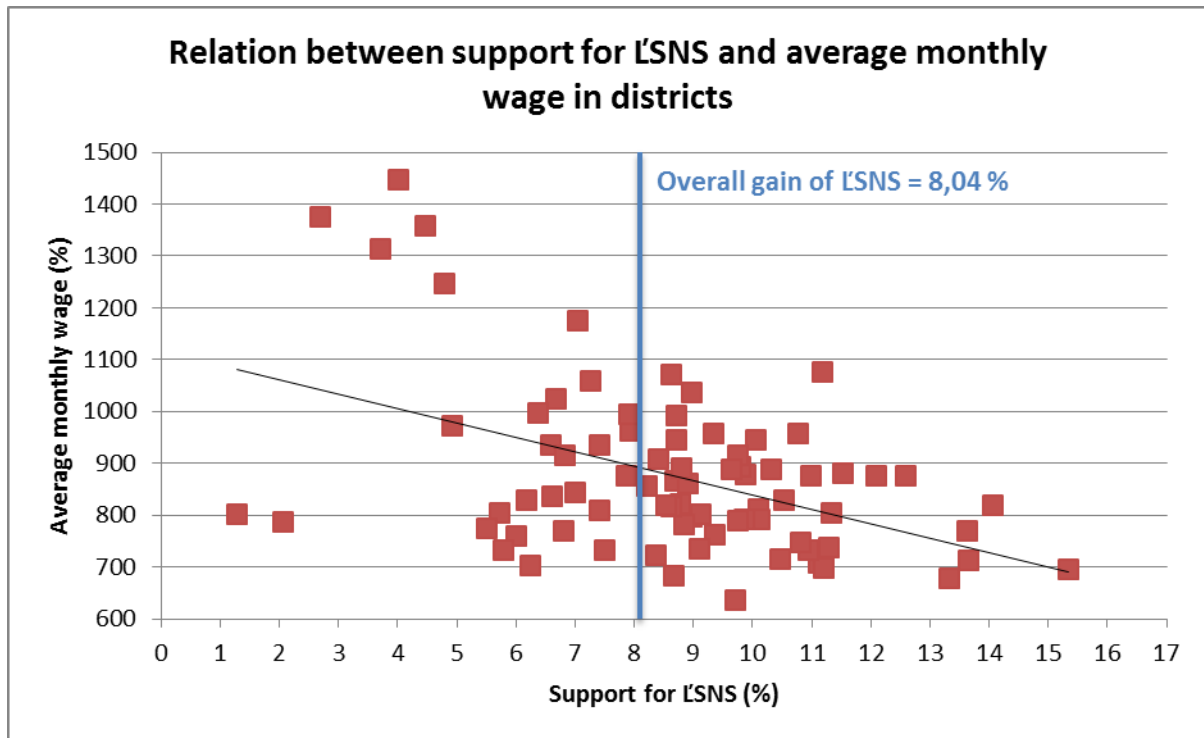
The regions of Banská Bystrica, Prešov and Žilina, i.e. again regions with the highest ĽSNS support, suffer most from unemployment, insufficient offer of local job vacancies and forced migration to foreign countries for work. Moreover, in the last five years the proportion of workers who have found jobs abroad has been rising mainly in the above-stated regions, which proves the continuation of regional differences.

Revenue increase indicators for the last ten years indicate that the regions are catching up with the most developed south-western Slovakia, but partially only at the cost of migrating for work.

Just like with regions there is a link between support of ĽSNS and economic underdevelopment of particular districts⁹ (correlation coefficient 0.36 with poverty index and -0.46 with average wage).

⁹ There are 8 regions (Higher Territorial Units) and 79 districts in Slovakia.

Chart 10: Relation between support for ĽSNS and average monthly wage in districts



Source: Statistics Office

Somewhat weaker link is also between support of ĽSNS and share of the Roma population in particular district (correlation coefficient 0.22). This can be influenced by lower potential gain of ĽSNS in districts with higher shares of the Roma and Hungarian nationality. The unemployment and dependence on social allowances of the Roma population is very high, mainly in remote settlements. This can outrage ĽSNS voters listening to its anti-roma rhetorics.

Table 7: Correlations between support for ĽSNS, poverty indicators and share of the Roma in districts

	Support for ĽSNS	Support for ĽSNS after subtracting part of votes of SMK and Most-Híd	Poverty index	Rate of unemployment	Average wage
Support for ĽSNS	1.00	0.94	0.36	0.34	-0.46
Share of the Roma	0.22	0.38	0.78	0.84	-0.48

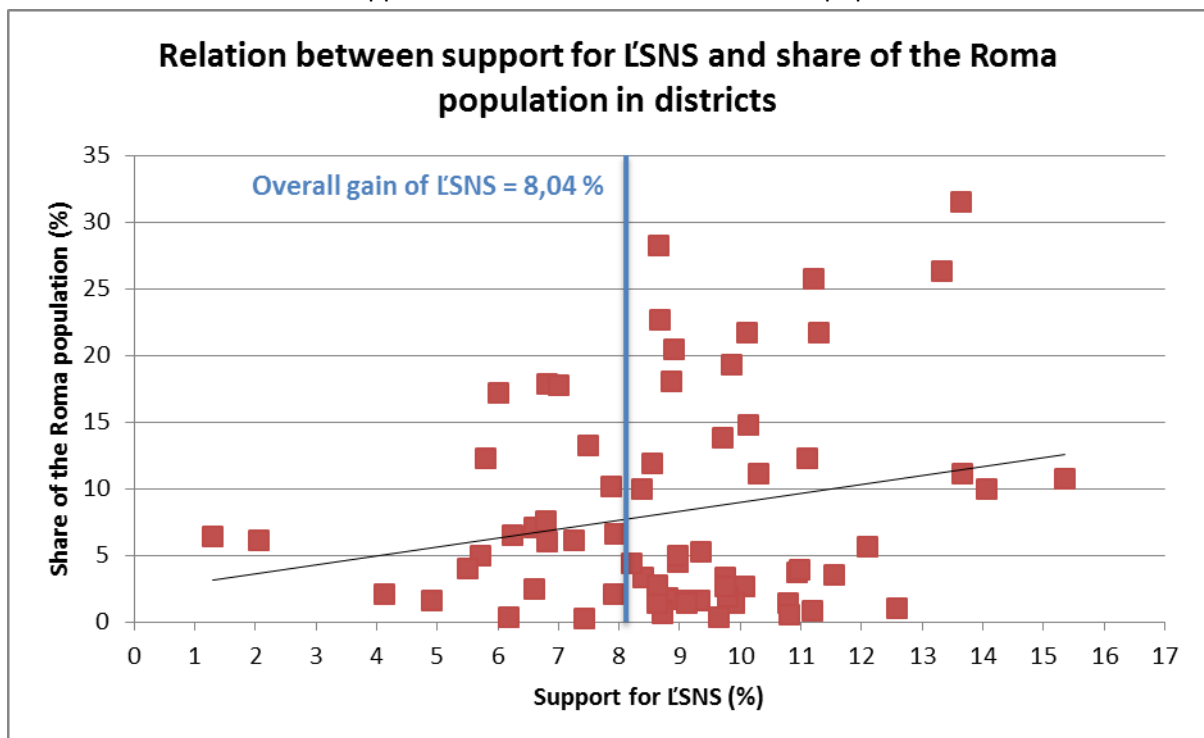
Source: Calculations of authors

The poverty and failing integration of the Roma is one of major long-term social problems in Slovakia. According to the Atlas of the Roma communities from 2013 there were around 403 thousand of the Roma people living in communities which represented 7.45% of the total population of Slovakia. The total share of the Roma is higher because the Atlas did not include the integrated Roma who live outside identified communities. The Council of Europe in 2010 estimated the total share of the Roma to 9.17% which was among the highest in Europe. According to the Atlas, 46.5% of the Roma living in communities are dispersed among majority population within the municipality and 53.5% are separated from majority population either within or outside the

municipality. The Roma living in separated communities are mostly effected by poverty. In particular over 68 thousand of the Roma (17% of all Roma) living in segregated settlements outside municipality are often suffering from extreme poverty.

The concentration of the Roma in particular districts can be among reasons for higher popularity of extremists. On the other hand, there are several districts with low share of the Roma population and high support of extremists. Here, probably, people voted for ĽSNS based on stereotypes without direct experience with Roma or based on different reasons such as nationalist or anti-corruption rhetorics.

Chart 11: Relation between support for ĽSNS and share of the Roma population in districts



Source: Statistics Office, Atlas of the Roma Communities 2013

- In our questionnaire survey we have also asked selected public figures about the reasons for the growing popularity of authoritative and non-standard politicians.

As the main reasons on the part of demand, they have mentioned the following:

- People are disappointed with the bribery of standard politicians and their connections to oligarchs and business groups
- People are disappointed that standard politicians have not brought order and justness
- People are disappointed that standard politicians are not enhancing the quality of public services, e.g. in education, healthcare, judiciary, security, etc.

As the main reasons on the part of offer, they have mentioned the following:

- Populism - politicians are successfully using influential media to spread unreal or false promises/solutions which are insufficiently or only sometimes confronted with reality or the assessment of professionals
 - There is no decent democratic alternative among political parties
 - Authoritative and non-standard politicians are using the fact that, instead of searching for the truth, most popular media in SR usually content themselves with a political balance in which populism is winning
- In our questionnaire survey, experts also assessed the most efficient solutions which would enhance democracy.

The most efficient solutions which would enhance democracy even in a short period of time:

- Trustworthy investigation of the Bašetrnák case
- Monitoring and assessing the efficiency of projects and tenders in areas where the largest public contracts are awarded (e.g. in transport, healthcare, IT, etc.)
- Disclosure of detailed declarations of the assets of politicians and high state officials
- Strengthening an independent functioning of the police, public prosecution and courts, e.g. by separating them from the executive, establishing an independent inspection of the police and of public prosecution, abolishing the possibility to withdraw the Police President without a reason, opening the Prosecutorial Council to members from outside the prosecutorial environment, etc.

The most efficient solutions which would enhance democracy from a long-term perspective:

- Children and students at schools should learn to think critically and to understand the importance of democracy
 - Strengthening the independence and public control of the police, public prosecution and courts
 - Enhancing the quality of public services, e.g. in education, healthcare, judiciary, security, etc. (e.g. by measuring and disclosing results, financial incentives, etc.)
 - Appearance of trustworthy democratic politicians (e.g. establishment of new political parties which would activate democratic voters)
- According to experts (based on enquiries in the questionnaire survey), new initiatives of the civic society aimed at supporting democracy should be mainly focused on:
 - Public control, making the courts, police, public prosecution and other public auditing offices (e.g. Office for Public Procurement, Supreme Audit Office) stronger and more functional
 - Public control of efficient use of public resources, particularly in major projects in IT, transport, healthcare, defence, etc.
 - Education of young people aimed at democratic citizenship, developing critical thinking and supporting civic and community involvement
 - Promoting and educating the media, revealing distorted information in the public area - confronting facts (monitoring the ethics and professionalism of the media)

- Checking the actions and promises of politicians - verifying the truthfulness of politician's statements, verifying the extent of performance of their pre-election programmes
- At round-table discussions experts also emphasized the need for the following solutions in addition to the above-mentioned ones:
 - The hostility of opinions hampers the enhancement of democracy - greater tolerance during discussions, education and awareness-raising and open discussion also with those who did not vote for democrats are needed
 - There are no projects which would not only criticize but also praise politicians, officers or journalists. Pointing out only the negative things distorts the truth and may play into the hands of extremists.
 - Awareness must be raised about the basic values which democracy is built on (e.g. tolerance) which were often painful to achieve and which are often connected also to the historical development of Slovakia
- The following main conclusions have resulted from detailed conversations with 11 managers and entrepreneurs in Slovakia (from various companies differing in sizes and industries, with small, medium-sized and large businesses represented):
 - No respondent is satisfied with the state of democracy in Slovakia. Several institutions, e.g. the judiciary, are not reliable, there is no equality before the law, morality in society is declining. A turn for worse occurred during the first government of Robert Fico in 2006.
 - None of the respondents is satisfied with the current state of the business environment and many of them say it has been deteriorating in the last few years. The activities of offices represent an exception, mainly thanks to the electronization of services.
 - Companies are mainly concerned about the fact that the state gives advantages to certain companies which then have a competitive advantage over others. The government intentionally prefers certain businesses, e.g. it makes special laws, as in the case of the restructuring of Váhostav, and selectively burdens others with special taxes, e.g. banks or telecommunication operators. Pavol Lančarič, general director of mobile operator Orange Slovensko explains: ***"Instead of setting the level playing field, the chaos occurs, unequal treatment of businesses. With the goal to fill in the state coffers such firms are burdened that have money."*** Ivan Trančík, general director of textile producer i.tran from Turzovka even said that strong financial groups were making decisions about the business environment.
 - Many businessmen complain that the oligarchs dominate in the country and decent entrepreneurs have no possibility to promote their opinions. Ondrej Smolár, executive director of IT company Soitron: ***"The links between the state and the oligarchic structures is one of reasons why the status of business has negative connotations. Entrepreneurs and cheaters are somehow like becoming synonyms."***
 - In relation to the government, several respondents point out the differences between small and large companies. Attorney Peter Serina from Bratislava explains: ***"The quality of democracy is important mainly for small enterprises with domestic capital so that they***

have equal chances and a stable, foreseeable and fair environment. Supra-national companies arrange important things alone (...)For a state it is easier to communicate with a company which employs 20,000 people than to communicate with 20,000 free-lancers."

- Another frequently mentioned problem is the lack of high-quality workers as a result of a failing school system.
 - A vast majority of the interviewed entrepreneurs does not participate in public tenders and in calls aimed at the acquisition of subsidies and EU funds. They consider them to be manipulated and corrupt. Respondents confirm that such tenders are often won by companies established only for such purpose and after winning they forward contracts to real suppliers. Something similar is true for allocating EU funds. Ján Lunter who is the founder and co-owner of the food producer Alfa Bio in central Slovakia is more specific: ***"Who wants something from the state, e.g. financing for EU funds, must give money to the ruling parties. Such money is collected through project companies for EU funds, while we may generally speak about commissions amounting to 30% of the contract amount."***
 - You may do fair business in Slovakia but only if you ignore participation in corrupt state tenders and thus lose the chance to have better short-term economic results. From a long-term point of view, fair business is worth it because it leads to the stability of demanding customers and to good payment conditions. It is important to eliminate unfair entrepreneurs and cheaters.
 - Entrepreneurs feel that their recent general dissatisfaction with the current political scene forces them to think about political activities or about supporting brand new politicians.
 - Businesses should group in business associations and together they should be critical to governments. Attorney Peter Serina said: ***"Unless entrepreneurs understand that democracy is the only system where they may achieve their business goals and show their competitiveness, they are doomed to perish."***
- The dissatisfaction of business people is documented also by local Index of Business Environment compiled by the Business Alliance of Slovakia that has been decreasing continuously from 2005 with only short exception in 2010 and 2011. The reasons are mainly disapproval of changes in laws, state economic policy, and worse perception of functioning of the political system in the country. Also **according to the Competitiveness Index compiled by the World Economic Forum Slovakia had the best 37. rank in 2006, then fell down to 78. rank in 2013 and improved to 65. rank in 2016 from among 138 countries of the world.** From among evaluated areas, Slovakia ranked worst in trust to politicians, justice independence, credibility of police and particularly in corruption and bribery.
 - In Doing Business 2017 ranking produced by the World Bank, Slovakia ranked 33rd compared with Poland 24th, the Czech Republic 27th and Hungary 41st. This ranking is based mostly on “hard” data about specific areas of business environment and does not reflect opinions of businessmen.
 - The following main conclusions resulted from discussions with students (altogether 5 discussions with 40 students, while 3 discussions were held at secondary grammar schools in various regions of Slovakia and two were held at a university in Bratislava):

- A negative view of the state of democracy and society prevails; secondary-school students were generally much more frustrated than university students.
- **According to many students, democracy in our country functions only "seemingly" because politicians usually do not deliver on their promises, do not pursue the public interest, abuse power, lie and are not punished for that.** As potential solutions, they have mentioned informing the public about failures to deliver on their promises (public control of delivering on promises), more direct democracy - referenda, punishing bribery, even at the top level among the politicians and in the government, independent judiciary and police.
- Students from eastern Slovakia feel that top politicians are not interested in their regions, they are not addressing their problems, mainly that the regions are lagging behind (hunger valleys), they take more care of themselves or of western regions.
- According to most secondary-school students, there is nobody to vote for, there is no decent democratic alternative. They do not trust the PM and the head of the Smer-SD party, Robert Fico, or other politicians. According to them, Fico has had too many scandals, he has been governing for too long. There were even more critical opinions, such as "*he is stealing state money and is not even trying to hide it*" or "*he can manipulate people*". On the other hand, most secondary-school students believe that he has a reasonable attitude to refugees. It is also to his credit that we are one of the fastest growing economies in the Euro area.
- Bribery and clientelism are common in education, healthcare (people jump the lines when waiting for surgeries/check ups), police, at courts, EU funds are being stolen, etc. The state fails to control and punish injustice. Students in one of the discussions would rather not report a bribe since it would not make a change and it could even harm them. Several students confirmed that they also had personal experience with bribes.
- **A large majority of secondary-school students wants to study and live outside of Slovakia and a major part of them does not even want to come back. Causes: low quality of education, bribery and clientelism, higher standard of living and better work opportunities abroad.** Secondary-school students usually do not believe that they can change anything about the functioning of the state with their own actions. Unlike secondary-school students, university students usually want to stay in Slovakia.
- A majority of students dislike Marián Kotleba most because he is radical, he wants to leave the EU, keep strict "guard" over the entire population, establish a dictatorship and restrict freedoms. According to them, Kotleba is a threat to democracy; several of them have directly called him a fascist. Students disagree with human rights violation. In spite of that, **many of them believe that Kotleba has basically identified problems correctly (particularly the Roma issue, the need to establish order and the regions which are lagging behind).** Students know many of his supporters among their peers. Kotleba was voted for by young people because he is a new face and he stands for change; according to some people he did good things as the Banská Bystrica region administrator. Young people are often appealed to by his anti-Roma speeches. Many people also voted for him out of rebellion (allegedly, several of them have already changed their minds); other reasons include defending national interests, an effort to establish order and safety (e.g. voluntary guards on trains).

- Contrary to Kotleba, Kollár does not represent a threat to democracy, but is not a great benefit either. Some students (usually girls) often watch Boris Kollár's contributions on Facebook; they believe he is sincere and nice and he communicates well through his videos. Several students have expressed an opinion that since Kollár was rich he did not enter into politics in order to steal.
- Facebook is an important source of information for students; they mentioned it e.g. when acquiring information about Kotleba's or Kollár's parties.
- **Many students (particularly secondary-school students from areas with large Roma populations) mentioned that a vast majority of the Roma were misusing the social system (they do not work and receive social allowances or child allowances or disability allowances).** Some propose abolishing the positive discrimination of the Roma, decrease/abolish social allowances or force them to have real work, abolish/decrease allowances above a certain number of children, send children to boarding schools. There has also been an extreme opinion: *"An ideal although unreal solution would be their relocation; let them live in their own state."*
- Among tertiary-school students an opinion emerged that the Roma are not misusing the social system: *"We are not helping Roma because they are Roma. We are helping them because they are poor."* Another student explained that the social benefits decrease with higher number of children and *"it is impossible to live with dignity only from that"*. He disputed an argument that the number of Roma children depends on the level of social benefits. He thinks that the key reason is lack of education and zero financial literacy. **One student with experience from humanitarian aid in Africa said that Slovakia has no Roma problem but "...it has enormous social problem and failure of a state that cannot integrate particular groups of citizens"**. She claimed that high crime rates or high number of children is the phenomenon of poverty not of Roma or any other ethnic group. She criticized underfunding of community centers that work with marginalized people often isolated and locally, she is missing the structural solution. *"We build them a house and then we leave, (...), but we do not lead them to some change. In reality we do not teach them to use those things that we give them"*.
- The relation of students to the EU is positive, mainly thanks to the possibility to travel and thanks to foreign investments. According to them, Slovakia profits mainly thanks to foreign companies, while if we left the EU we could lose such an advantage.
- Opinions about Russia and the USA differ, but they all believe that we should have good relations with both super powers. As some of the negatives things about Russia they mentioned a lack of freedom and social differences, regarding USA it was mainly its foreign policy which is accountable for many conflicts.

Recommendations aimed at enhancing democracy

For the government and other public authorities

- Fight against corruption. Perform trustworthy investigation of all cases suspicious of corruption and power abuse, particularly the "Bašternák" and "Gorila" cases. Cancel the so-called "Mečiar's Amnesties" and investigate related cases, particularly the abduction of Michal Kováč Jr. abroad, which occurred in 1995.
- Implement judicial reform. Strengthen the independence of the police, public prosecution and courts by separating them from the executive, establishing an independent inspection of the police and of public prosecution, abolishing the possibility to withdraw the Police President without a reason, opening the Prosecutorial Council to members from outside the prosecutorial environment, etc.
- Support the independence and expertise of auditing and regulatory offices, e.g. by involving at least two of the highest constitutional authorities in appointing and withdrawing leading representatives, by establishing appellate bodies independent from first-instance authorities, by building analytical capacities, etc.
- Professionalize state administration, foster professional nominations in the management of state-owned organizations and companies financed and co-financed from the state budget, look for high officials and managers through public interview procedures
- Continue implementing the "Value for Money" project and extend it to the entire public sector:
 - Analytically assess all major expenditures, projects, regulations and policies from the point of view of their need, potential alternatives as well as efficiency
 - Strengthen the analytical and expert capacities of public authorities
 - Make decisions based on publicly available expert analyses
- Reduce corruption by enhancing transparency in the public sector, in particular:
 - Disclose the political nominations and CVs of high state officials as well as managers in state-owned companies
 - Extend the legal obligation of state, regional and municipal agencies/companies to provide information based on the Law on Free Access to Information including automatic disclosing of contracts, CVs and information about selection process of head civil servants and nominees in Boards of Directors and Supervisory Boards
 - Systematically disclose all public data at one location in a machine-processable and user-friendly form
 - Have key documents such as draft policies, project plans and also draft tender documentation for public procurement of major projects disclosed for comments by the public prior to their approval or prior to calling for tenders
 - Disclose justifications of decisions (e.g. on cancelling public procurement) so that their traceability is also possible
 - Disclose information about any provided subsidies at one location and in a clear form

- Disclose detailed declarations of the assets of politicians and high state officials, including their close family relatives
- Raise awareness, educate teachers and foster a reform of the content of education with the aim of developing critical thinking and knowledge about the functioning and importance of democracy and of the EU for the quality of life of its citizens (including historical connections); use the best foreign and national practices; involve also important and popular persons in awareness-raising (e.g. from culture, sport); support public awareness campaigns targeting a general audience
- Enhance the quality of public services, e.g. in education, healthcare, judiciary, etc., e.g. by measuring and disclosing results (higher accountability), financial incentives, exchanging best practices, etc.
- Eradicate poverty, social exclusion and regional disparities, e.g. by:
 - Decreasing levies for low-income population
 - Introducing a major concurrence of social allowance and earnings from work in such a way that it motivates people to work legally
 - Enhancing the qualifications of the long-term unemployed, helping them to seek and apply for vacancies; when performing the above-stated activities, use the capacities and know-how of labour offices as well as the private sector based on regular measurement and disclosure of data on how such unemployed found employment in the labour market
 - Motivating secondary vocational schools to improve results of their graduates in the labor market and to reduce the skills mismatch (for example by measuring and disclosing the average salaries and unemployment rate of graduates, financial incentives)
 - Increasing the availability of healthcare, pre-school education and education for marginalized population groups
 - Systematically integrating marginalized population groups, including supporting local partnerships and projects focused on integration
- Improve the business environment; particularly decrease the administrative burden, eliminate inefficient regulations, promote competition in public procurement and by effective anti-monopoly policy, lower direct taxes on labor (compensate by higher taxes on property or ecologic taxes, if needed), simplify legislation, decrease electricity prices by transferring subsidies from tariffs to the state budget; use the World Bank's "Doing Business" indicators to identify further specific measures
- Make it possible for private capital to enter areas where economic competition may work and where the state can measure and thus also regulate the amount, quality and efficiency of products (e.g. passenger rail transport, post, healthcare, energy industry)
- Measure and disclose the results and efficiency of organizations financed and co-financed from the state budget and take steps aimed at enhancing efficiency, including the option to abolish inefficient organizations
- Measure and disclose (also retrospectively) the efficiency of projects co-funded by EU funds

- Use knowledge, capacities and independence of the Council for Budget Responsibility to assess and disclose the impact of political parties' election programmes on public finances, the labour market and the business environment
- Actively seek and effectively punish any expressions of extremism
- Fight against foreign propaganda – reveal and identify foreign sources of false information and collusions, including national sources which uncritically receive such information; critically assess such information based on facts; special attention must be paid to false information and collusions spread on social networks
- Make sure that ordering paid promotion of projects financed from EU funds in the media does not restrict the independence of the media and also that the content of the promotion is focused particularly on dealing with social problems not only on informing about supported projects; particularly disclose the criteria for promotion ordering, disclose the amounts spent on promoting particular projects in individual media and involve experts, who are as independent from politicians as possible, in decision-making about the promotion content and allocation of funds for promotion
- Perform transparent grant tenders to provide subsidies to civic society primarily for projects the goals of which are in accordance with the recommendations specified herein; make sure that socially respected persons, who are as independent from politicians as possible, decide on the awarding grants (e.g. also in the 'Efficient Public Administration' Operational Programme)

For politicians and political parties

- Disclose information about sources of financing and about the use of funds in a clear manner and at one location, both for the entire political party and for individual candidates, disclose contracts on the provision of funds
- Disclose detailed declarations of assets, also for close family relatives
- Adopt codes of ethics for political parties obliging them to inform about any conflicts of interest, eliminate bribery, disclose information about sources and use of funds
- Assess and disclose the impact of election programmes on public finances, the labour market and the business environment
- Use the existing capacities of think-tanks (or establish their own think-tank) to look for solutions to socio-economic problems
- Answer the questions of all journalists, not refuse to answer journalists who work for "uncomfortable" media
- Respect the freedom of the media when selecting opponents in discussions, not refuse "uncomfortable" opponents

For municipal-level politicians

- Enable and strengthen the involvement of the population in decision-making about the use of public resources; for specific measures, take inspirations from recommendations of the Transparency International Slovensko project "Open Local Government" - <http://samosprava.transparency.sk/recommendations>

For businesses and foreign donors, including the EU

- Support NGOs focused on systemic changes and vigilance regarding the powerful ones, support projects and provide institutional grants (e.g. such as the Fund for Transparent Slovakia¹⁰, or also by directly supporting selected organizations and projects)
- Primarily support projects the goals of which are in accordance with the recommendations specified herein (e.g. judicial reform, fight against corruption and increasing transparency in the public sector, eradicating poverty, education reform, raising public awareness about the importance of democracy and the EU, measuring quality and efficiency of public services and expenditures, systemic reforms to improve functioning of the state and business environment, fact-checking and tracking promises of politicians, fighting against propaganda, etc.)

For businesses

- Support democratic politicians and political parties, also at the regional level; support serious opinion-forming media and the independence of their opinions, particularly investigative journalism; disclose information about the form and amount of provided support, including the full wordings of related contracts; publicly declare that the businesses do not expect any counter-value for such support
- Organize themselves in alliances promoting enhancement of the business environment and democracy
- Be actively involved in public discussions regarding society-wide problems
- Withdraw any advertising from internet portals and information sources which spread false information and collusions

For the EU

- Measure and disclose the efficiency ("value for money") of projects co-funded by EU funds

¹⁰ The Fund for Transparent Slovakia in Pontis Foundation (<http://www.nadaciapontis.sk/fond-pre-transparentne-slovensko>) supports nongovernmental organizations focusing on increasing transparency and fight against corruption. Private firms put money into the Fund and the Fund distributes grants based on submitted projects evaluated by committees created by well recognized individuals.

- Pay special attention to the efficiency of paid promotion of projects financed from EU funds in media, disclose the amounts expended on the promotion of particular projects in individual media

For NGOs, civic activists and the media

- Fact-check politicians – continuously verify the truthfulness of statements of politicians, reveal and correct false statements made also in the past (e.g. such as the demagog.sk project)
- Track promises of politicians – continuously check the viability of politicians' promises as well as their fulfilment, assess election programmes, including quantification of their impacts on public finances, the labour market and the business environment
- Monitor and assess the efficiency of projects and tenders primarily in areas where the largest public contracts or subsidies are awarded, including EU funds (e.g. in transport, healthcare, IT, defence, etc.)
- Monitor and assess the work of the courts, police, public prosecution and other public auditing and regulatory offices (e.g. The Office for Public Procurement, Supreme Audit Office, Antimonopoly Office)
- Propose and support systemic changes aimed at improving the functioning of the state and of the business environment, seek and spread examples of best practices in public governance
- Request and foster transparency in the use of public finances and also in decision-making processes, fight against bribery
- Measure and disclose the quality and efficiency of public services, e.g. compare the quality of hospitals, the success rate of graduates from different schools, the error rate of decisions or the length of proceedings at different courts, etc.
- Look for and investigate the failures of public authorities, e.g. reveal assets-related connections between politicians and businesses compare the financial situation and official incomes of politicians and high state officials, reveal any wasteful use of public finances, unfair decisions, etc.
- Monitor and assess the quality of proposed and adopted legislative measures as well as the work of MPs (e.g. such as in the HESO project where an expert committee assessed measures)
- Monitor and regularly assess the quality of democracy in SR (e.g. such as in the IVO Barometer project)
- Fight against propaganda – reveal and identify sources of false information and collusions; critically assess such information based on facts; confront those who spread false information and refute their allegations; spread the truth; pay special attention to false information and collusions spread on social networks
- Seek and spread best foreign and national practices about forms of education regarding the functioning and significance of democracy and of the EU
- Discuss the functioning and significance of democracy and of the EU also with people who support extremist and populist parties, particularly with young people; educate mainly young people towards democratic citizenship, developing critical thinking and promoting civil and

community engagement; involve important and popular persons, active also on social networks, in awareness-raising

- Appreciate and protect "whistle-blowers", appreciate positive examples of the work of politicians, officials and activists
- Use facts to verify claims about the Roma minority misusing the social system

For NGOs and civic activists

- Regularly provide feedback to the media with the aim of strengthening their ethics and professionalism (e.g. such as in the Slovak Press Watch project), monitor and disclose the media owners, appreciate positive examples of the work of journalists
- Create local partnerships focused on integrating citizens from marginalized groups into society, create conditions for their employment
- Disclose information about sources of financing, including the amounts of provided support

For the media

- Do not acquiesce to politicians when selecting preferred opponents in discussions
- Prefer searching for the truth to political balance and tabloidization
- Devote more space to investigative journalism and to coverage of current events, social problems and potential solutions
- Devote more space to raising awareness about the functioning and importance of democracy and of the European Union (including historical connections), e.g. also in the form of a TV series; involve important and popular persons in the awareness-raising
- Be interested in the reasons for supporting extremist and populist parties and focus the discussion on such supporters
- Disclose information about end owners as well as donors, including the amounts of provided support
- Unlock key articles and interviews explaining the significance of democracy and of the EU, the threat of populism and extremism (if not immediately, at least after a few days)

For schools and teachers

- Speak with pupils about the functioning and importance of democracy and of the European Union, about current events, social problems and potential solutions

For all citizens

- Be engaged in issues of public interest at both a central and local level or in your immediate surroundings including social networks, be active in politics, also in municipal politics
- Discuss based on arguments, respect different opinions; exclude and condemn hostility and negative emotions in discussions; be constructive rather than destructive, avoid spreading hatred, seek understanding and common starting points, especially in communication on social networks
- Critically assess the information appearing on social networks, take note and ask for the original sources, search for arguments in favor and against, ask questions