

Slovakia – people, culture, language

A guide for businesses



The country

There are two Slovak Republics.. On the surface is a land of rugged mountains whose steep slopes attract climbers, hikers and winter sports enthusiasts. Long valleys are guarded by romantic castles. A string of 13th-century medieval towns shelter Gothic artworks and the capital Bratislava is a cosmopolitan city with a rich cultural life. Slovakia's cities and folk culture reflect a long and varied history.

Deep below the surface, however, lies another fascinating world of mines and caverns, underground rivers and ice caves. Rich ore seams in the mountains have been mined since the Bronze Age. The world's first technical university – the mining academy – was established in 1762 and trained many leading mining engineers.

A great system of 700 caves and chasms underlies the Slovak Karst, a vast area of limestone and dolomite. These underground caverns contain stalactites, stalagmites and a beautiful display of aragonite crystals. Heat from the earth's core warms the underground water to provide thermal baths, hot springs and spas.



Dobšiná cave with its spectacular ice formations. Source: European Commission

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Slovakia's population of 5.4 million have lived in a fully-democratic political system, and the country has made remarkable progress in its transition from a command-driven to a market economy.

The people: Slovaks are a Slav people of whom half a million live in the capital, Bratislava and 250,000 in the second city Kosice. 10% of the population is of Hungarian extraction and about 500,000 Slovaks are Roma.

Key sectors: Slovakia now offers an attractive investment environment and key sectors are metal and metal products; food and beverages; electricity, gas, coke, oil and nuclear fuel; chemicals and manmade fibres; machinery; paper and printing; earthenware and ceramics; transport vehicles; textiles; electrical and optical apparatus; and rubber products.

Business culture and etiquette

- **Overview:** Slovakia has a small business community and is a very relationship based culture. People are informal and happy to work on a first name basis. They enjoy charm and good humour and tend to be indirect in public but frank in private. Slovaks prefer face-to-face meetings and telephone communication to faxes and emails but written communication, especially minutes and action points, are useful ways of cementing understanding.
- **Adaptability:** the Slovakian population has proved its excellent ability to adapt to new market conditions, through its sense of enterprise, commercial talent, management skills and flexibility.
- **Relationship-building:** Personal relationships are crucial in successful business. Be prepared to spend time on this.
- **Centralised decision-making:** leadership is top down with decision making lying with a few, or one, senior manager. Teams are dominated by a senior figure who takes decisions and delegates tasks. Consensus is not seen to be necessary. People are on time for meetings and agendas and action plans are kept to. People follow deadlines without being reminded.
- **Meetings:** it is recommended to start a business meeting with polite conversation of a general nature, accompanied by a toast with a local alcoholic drink. Only after that, should the conversation turn to business matters.
- **Highly-skilled workforce:** there are 24 universities in Slovakia, and 88% of the Slovak population receives a higher or secondary education.
- **New technologies:** there are almost 4 million mobile phone users in Slovakia today.
- **Gifts:** acceptable gifts for business meetings are items for the office, quality pens (including pens with your company logo) or specially selected wines. On receiving an invitation to a home, luxury chocolate, a scarf for the hostess or flowers are welcome gifts.
- **Holidays:** try to avoid business meetings in the months of July and August or around the times of national holidays.



Language

Official language: Slovak.

Other languages: some Hungarian is spoken, and many Slovaks also have knowledge of German and Russian.

English: some business people have a good command of English, and English is becoming more popular, particularly among the young. Nevertheless, German is better understood. To conduct meetings effectively, it may make sense to use an interpreter.

Finding translators/interpreters: in the UK, you can search for local, quality-assured providers on **BLIS Professionals** (www.blis.org.uk/professionals). In Slovakia, translators and interpreters are readily available – the best place to enquire is at the British Embassy.



Cows on a grass field below the High Tatras mountain.
Source: European Commission

Basic Slovak phrases

The positive impression you will make by learning to speak a few basic Slovak phrases cannot be overestimated. Below are some commonly-used phrases – if you are interested in learning the Slovak language, you can search for quality-assured trainers and courses at www.blis.org.uk.

	Slovak	Pronunciation
Hello	Ahoj,	Ahoy,
Good day/ morning	Dobrý deň / Dobré ráno	Do-bree den / Do-byre ra-no
Goodnight	Dobru noc	Dob-ruh nots
Goodbye	Dovidenia	Doh-vee-den-eeyah
Yes / no	Áno / Nie	Ahno / nyeh
Please/Thank you	Prosím / Dakujem	Pro-seem/da-kooh- Yahm
Excuse me	Prepáčte (mi)	Pre-pach-te me
My name is...	Volám sa.....	Vol-am sa
What's your name?	Ako sa volate?	Akoh sa volate

Sources

Research and text: Central European Development Agency (CEDA) 01:302 367662
Euro Information Centre www.euro-info.org.uk
International House www.ihworld.com
Mole, John (2003) *Mind Your Manners*. London: NB Publications

Other Resources: UK Trade & Investment www.uktradeinvest.gov.uk
Photographs: European Commission www.europa.eu.int

Using an interpreter



Traditional St. Mary pilgrimage of Slovak believers near the town of Levoca, east Slovakia.
Source: European Commission

Before the assignment: firstly, define the type of interpretation required (whispering or simultaneous). Fully explain the goals and objectives of the meeting or presentation. If you are making a speech or presentation, let your interpreter have a copy of the text in advance. Explain any important or difficult concepts and points. If you are part of a group, make sure they understand that only one person should speak at a time.

At the assignment: appreciate that interpretations may take much longer than the original speech. Speak clearly and slowly, and pause regularly – every minute; after a thought is complete; or after you have made a major point.

Make sure you avoid: long or complex sentences; slang, jargon, or colloquial expressions; jokes and humorous stories (humour seldom travels well and risks creating misunderstanding or causing offence); and interrupting the interpreter (unless it is really necessary, this can be confusing and appear rude).



The National Park in the Mala Fatra mountains, north-west Slovakia. Source: European Commission

Signposting and resources

■ **BLIS Professionals** (www.blis.org.uk/professionals) – an on-line, quality-assured database of translators, interpreters, language trainers and cultural consultants in your area. You can search for BLIS providers offering Slovak language services in the East Midlands.

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