



**TRUEDEM**

Trust in European Democracies

**EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS ON TRUST IN  
POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS IN THE EU: SLOVAKIA  
(OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES)**



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## A. What is political trust and how to cultivate it?

Although we are all individuals, most of the time we live our lives within different types of groups or communities: our families, our schools, groups of friends or the people in our neighbourhood. Every time we need to do something within or with this group, we have to make a collective decision. For example, if you want to organize a sports competition or plan a class trip, you will need to talk to your colleagues and decide how to go about doing this. Often times, a few of your colleagues will be entrusted by the whole class to bring the case to the school's principal, who will then discuss the matter with a few other teachers and parents, and then will try to offer a solution. The way political decisions are made is similar.



**In a democracy, people are directly engaged in deciding how their societies function.** Although they can participate in decision making directly - by voting in elections, in a referendum, or by joining a debate at the city hall - often times, participation means electing certain representatives. These representatives are entrusted by people to make decisions on their behalf, and those decisions become laws and policies. Nevertheless, **in a democracy, elected representatives do not just make decisions according**

**to their own wishes**, but, rather, by operating within a dense nexus of institutions, that ensure continuity and fairness. These institutions also make sure that different decisions are made according to the core principles defining a society (the constitution, for example). In this context, it is obvious that trusting both politicians (and civil servants) on the one hand, and political institutions on the other hand, is paramount.

**Political trust refers mostly to the way in which we assess political institutions and includes so-called attributes of trustworthiness such as “credibility, fairness, competence, transparency, [and] openness to competing views”** (Zmerli 2014, 4887). Evaluating these institutions - basically trusting or distrusting them - is contingent upon trusting the people that, at certain moments in time, populate these institutions, and also trusting the political system (i.e. democracy) itself (Zmerli 2014).

When we are talking about political trust, most of the time we refer to **trust in political institutions**. Those institutions include **the Parliament, the Government, the Court system, the City Hall, or political parties**, and also more abstract types of institutions which are the embodiment of broad political, social and economic principles, such as the **Constitution**.

Now, that we decided that political trust is important in a democracy, let's see how it gets created. Political trust is acquired following similar processes of building trust in other people. How do you decide that you trust a person? Well, you trust someone because you have known them for a long time, or because during that time they have not tried to wrong you in any way or disappoint you, or because they are reliable. By the same token, you trust elected members of Parliament because they have always tried to be responsive

to your needs and tried to help solve problems brought before them by your community. Switching the focus from politicians to institutions, you trust political institutions because you know how they function, and, you can observe that, in general, they try to act in your best interests. **You trust political institutions when their decisions are fair, when their policies are well-documented, when the way in which they function is transparent and when, if needed, they are able and willing to change.**



Therefore, you learn to trust political actors and political institutions based on how well they perform. It is also possible to trust certain institutions because historically, they have benefitted from people's trust and you, as a young adult, hear about this at home, at school, among friends. In other words, **trust can be built through reputation.**

Although trust is a general concept, and the beneficiary of someone's trust can be another person, group of people, or institution, these sub-types of trust are also somewhat different. Trusting other people is referred to as **social trust**. Research shows that societies where there is high trust in other people also display significant amounts of political trust (Zmerli and Newton 2008). Trusting the way things function and get decided upon in any political system is split in two categories. First, there is trust in the system itself, its main institutions (Parliament, Government, political parties, etc.), and this does not necessarily depend on who is in office at a

particular moment. This type of trust is commonly associated with so-called **diffuse support** (Easton 1975): you trust that the system itself performs well, is fair and ensures continuity. Second, there is trust in elected representatives or people working within the system at a certain moment in time, the so-called **specific support** (Easton 1975). Diffuse support and specific support are related, but they are not exactly the same thing.

The object of political trust - i.e. what type of institutions do we trust? - can vary according to what type of institutions we refer to. In general, we refer to local (i.e. City Hall) and national (i.e. the Parliament) political institutions, because our lives are directly affected by their functioning. Nevertheless, **we also refer to international institutions, because they also can influence our rights and obligations.** For example, the United Nations is an international organization including most countries in the world, and it works extensively on defining human rights around the world. Another example is the European Union. Within the EU, our lives are not only influenced by local and national political institutions, but also by what the European Commission and various other European-level institutions decide. Therefore, it is useful to think of political trust as processes of evaluating the performance of various institutions, from local, through national, to international.

While political trust is important in every system, it becomes critical in democracies. This is the case because democracies only perform if the people get involved in politics, minimally through voting, or in more substantial ways (such as protest, campaigning, influencing the political agenda, etc.). **If people do not trust the institutions in a democracy, then they will not participate; if people become apathetic, the system loses legitimacy.**

Finally, although we now know that there are different types of trust, it is worth noting that in real life, the way we trust our peers, or other people in general, or some institutions in our political system, or even democracy in general are all interconnected. Consequently, the way we acquire political trust depends not only on the performance of political institutions, but also on the overall climate of trust existing in a community.

## **B. Trust in national political institutions and international organizations**

Slovakia is a unitary parliamentary republic. The institutions of the state are designed according to the principle of the separation of powers, and they should function based on rules set in the country's own *Constitution* (signed in 1992, last amended in 2023). They should also function in agreement with the values, principles and obligations that derive from the European Union (EU) and United Nations (UN) membership, as well as from the international agreements to which Slovakia is part.

In this part, we first explore trust in the major institutions of the Slovak state - the Presidency, the Government, the Parliament, the political parties, and the judicial system. We then look at how Slovaks trust the European Union and two of its best-known institutions - the European Parliament and the European Commission. In the final section, we turn our attention to the trust that Slovak respondents put into the UN.

### **B.1 The Presidency**

The President is the Head of State. Although the President is a person, they **represent and steer** the institution of the Presidency of the Republic.



The President of Slovakia is elected directly by Slovak citizens for a 5-year term that can be renewed only once. Any Slovak citizen who is at least 40 years old can candidate. The candidate with most votes wins, but to establish the final results a second round of elections may be required if in the first round the top candidate did not obtain the majority of all eligible votes. Once elected, the President must represent the interests of the Slovak state and population, and not the interests of the MPs or the political party who nominated or voted for them.

According to the Slovak Constitution, the powers of the President are quite limited. The most significant role is to sign or veto laws passed by National Council. In this way, the Presidency is an institution that provides an additional control and verification mechanism for ensuring that elected representatives do not abuse their powers.

Here are some other notable functions of the President:

- in certain cases (established by the constitution) can dissolve the parliament
- convenes the first session of a newly elected National Council
- appoints and recalls the Prime Minister and other members of the Government and, when the case arises, accepts their resignation
- appoints the high officials of the state, judges of the Constitutional Court, the Chief Justice and Chief Prosecutor of the State, rectors of universities, professors and army generals
- pardons and mitigates penalties imposed by the court
- represents Slovakia with respect to other countries
- negotiates and ratifies international treaties
- confers and awards state decorations
- is Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces

Some of the decisions of the President must be countersigned by the Prime Minister (or another member of the Government that the Prime Minister authorizes) and the responsibility for those lies with the Government.

Trust in the institution of Presidency is highly dependent of the performance of each President but also of the relation between the Presidency and the other main institutions of the state.

## B.2 Government

The Government is the main holder of **executive power**. This means that it is responsible for executing law and implementing policies. The Slovak Government also has exclusive legislative initiative in terms of the state budget.

Usually, the term Government refers to all the bodies of the central administration of the state (e.g. ministries, national agencies), the civil servants employed in them and the

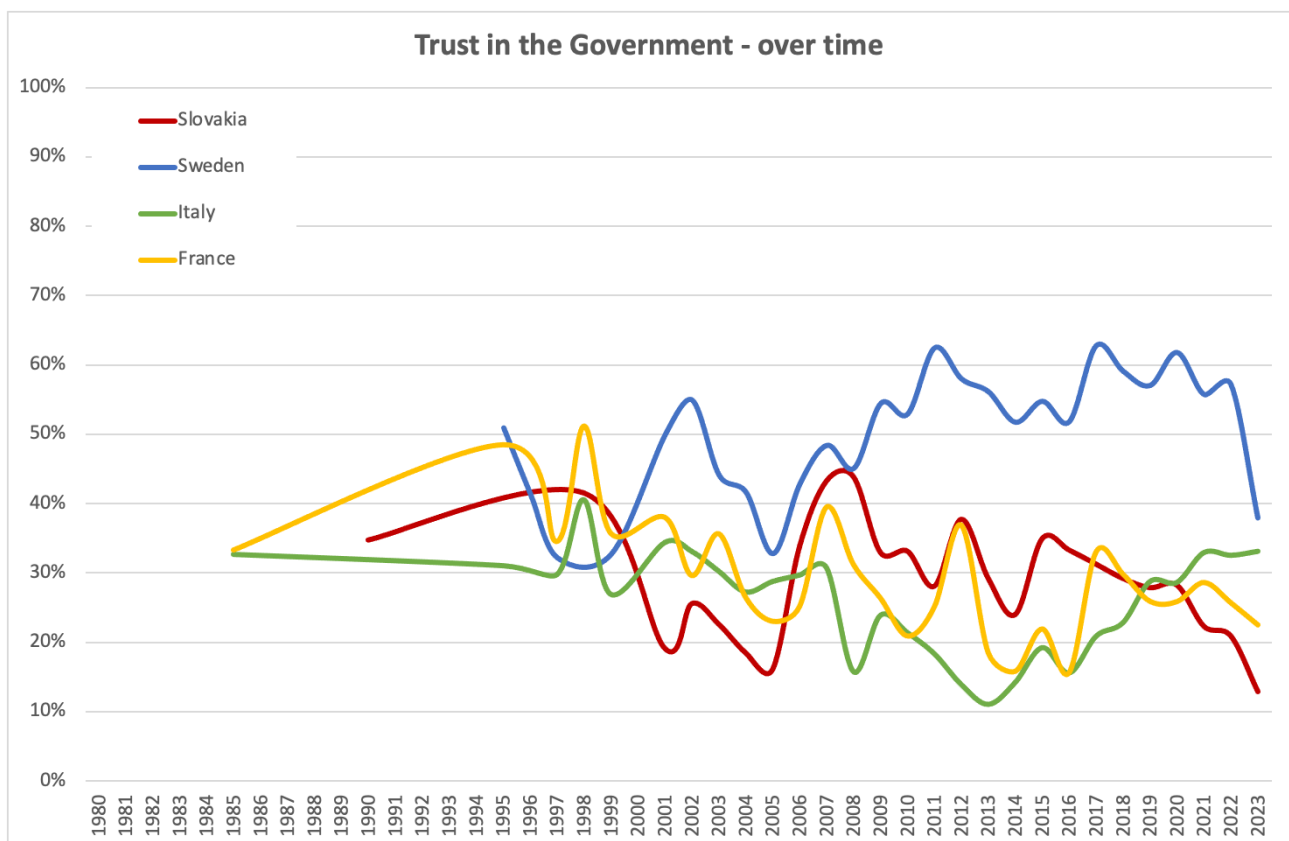


Cabinet that leads this administration. The Prime Minister and the Ministers form the **Cabinet**, who is the main institution responsible for the general coordination and the management of the central administration throughout the entire territory of the state. **Pay attention!** People may employ the term Government to refer only to the Cabinet. The selection of the Prime Minister and the composition of the Cabinet are the result of political negotiations in the Parliament following

elections or the dissolution of a previous Cabinet. This means that the Cabinet may include representatives from one or more parties. In the former case, if the party is not the one that holds the parliamentary majority, the resulting Cabinet is often called **minority government**. If more parties are represented in the Cabinet, it is often called a **coalition government**.

Once agreed, the Prime Minister and its proposed Cabinet members are officially appointed by the President of the Republic, but they are accountable to the National Council. At the request of the Prime Minister or by their own initiative, deputies may express their vote of confidence in the respective Cabinet. Apart from elections, since deputies are representatives of the citizens, this vote is one of the most significant and visible expressions of public trust in the leadership of a state institution.

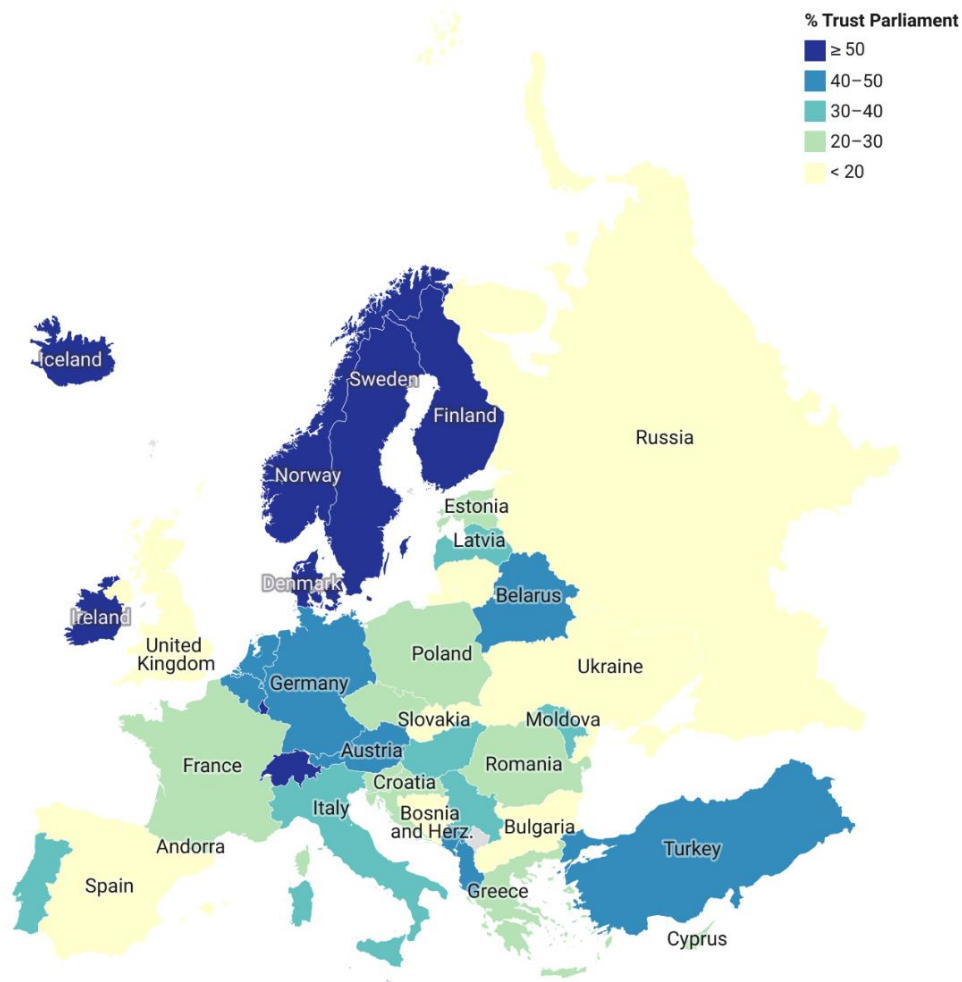
Let's explore together some of the data that currently exists on the trust that Slovaks have in the Government as an institution, and then reflect about it. The chart below shows the evolution of trust in Government from 1995 to 2023 for Slovakia, together with three other countries which are presented for comparison. The red line, indicating the percentage of people who declared in each year in which they were surveyed that they do have trust in the Government, shows a decline - increase - decline pattern: trust in the Government decreased from 1998 to 2005, it increased from 2005 to 2008, then decreased again, reaching a very low level, almost 10%, in 2023. This shows that, with minor exceptions, the majority of Slovaks decided **not** to trust the Government.



By comparing Slovakia with the other countries represented on the chart, the evolution of trust in Government in Slovakia is quite like the one recorded in France. Trust in Government among Italians, by contrast, shows a significant dip from 2007 to 2013, most likely as a response to the economic crisis of 2008-2009, which had a worse effect on Italy than on Austria or Sweden. We see that some countries have similar trajectories of trust in Government, while others have diverging trajectories. An interesting question, then, is trying to identify what causes differences and what causes similarities. Are there common factors that could work in all countries and influence the level of trust in the government? Or, rather, the correct answer could be that events that happen in one country influence the level of trust in Government in that country, without affecting the level of trust in other countries? This might be an interesting group discussion to continue in the classroom, among groups of students.

## Trust in Parliament, 2023

(% trust)



Source: TRUEDEM • Created with Datawrapper

The map of European countries shows the level of trust in Government, by country, for 2023. The legend on the map tells us how to interpret the colors of the countries: countries colored with light yellow have the lowest levels of trust in the Government in Europe, less than 20% of their citizens having trust in the Government. This group includes Bulgaria, Slovakia, or Ukraine. Countries with darker colors have more citizens that trust in the government, in some cases (the dark blue countries, such as Finland, Ireland, or Norway) the percentage passing the 50% threshold. Overall, in 2023 Slovaks had a very low level of trust in the government among European countries.

## B.3 The Parliament

The main role of the Parliament in a democratic system is to create and modify laws. This feature is called **legislative power**. The Parliament also has other powers, such as voting the budget of the state and approving the most important international agreements to which the country intends to be part.

The Slovak Parliament (the National Council) has 150 members, and it is **unicameral**, which means that its works are conducted into a single chamber. The deputies are elected for a 4-year term via **universal, direct, secret, and free vote**. The deputies are elected based on the principle of proportionality, i.e. the seats are distributed based on the proportion of obtained valid votes. The minim threshold is 5% of valid votes for political parties, 7% for coalitions of two or three parties and 10% coalitions of four or more parties. Although any citizen aged at least 18 can vote in the elections, the minimum age for being eligible to be a candidate is 21.



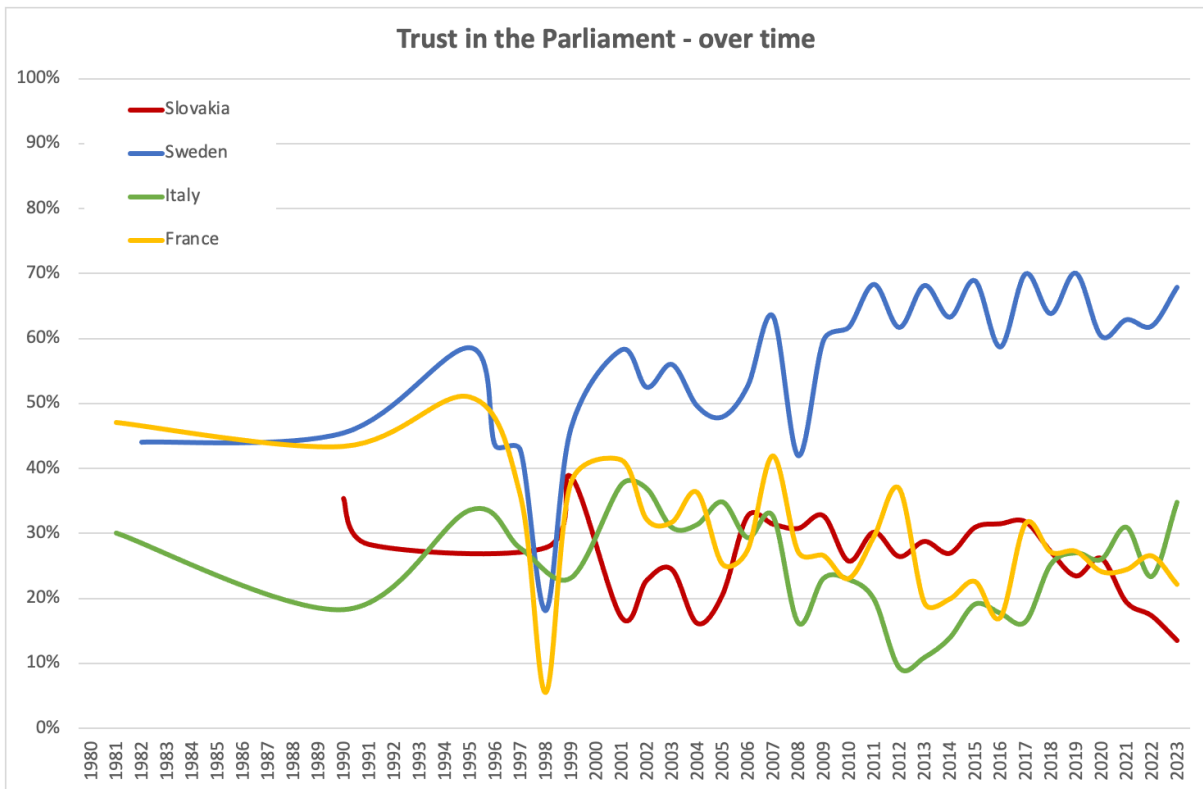
Once elected, the members of the Parliament must represent the interests of the entire Slovak population and state, and not only the interests of their constituency, of their electorate or of their party.

We may expect that people trust Parliament more when they feel they are represented. The level of trust in the Parliament may be influenced by the performance of certain members but also by the information that people get about what the Parliament does in general and the level of access that citizens have to their elected representatives and to the institution. Within this context, transparency on and accountability of the parliamentary activity become

essential.

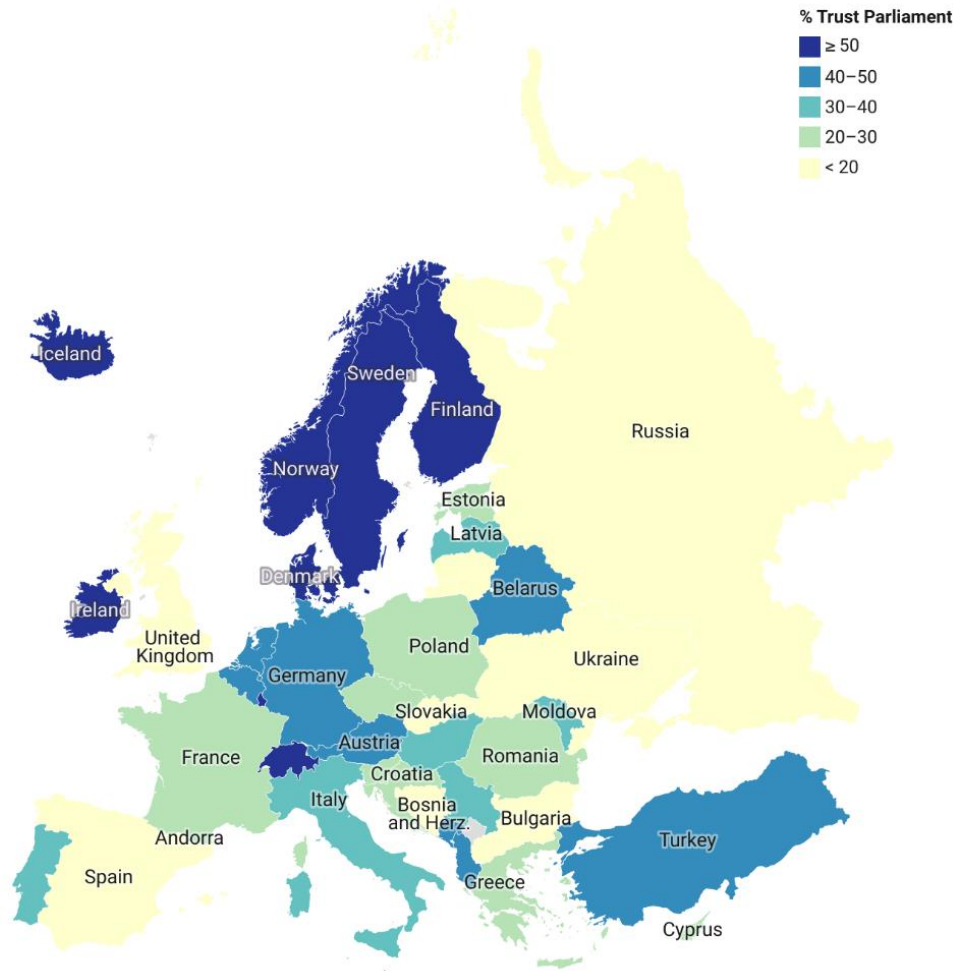
The evolution of trust in the Parliament from the beginning of the 1990s and to the present looks quite similar to what we have seen in the case of trust in the Government (see the red line, indicating the percentage of Slovaks who trust the Parliament). It makes sense that trust in Government and trust in the Parliament seem connected. After all, the Prime Minister is, usually, the leader of the largest party in the Parliament and it cannot govern effectively without the support of the Parliament. The comparison with the other countries presented on the chart shows that Austrians have less trust in the Parliament than the Swedes, but similar levels to the French and the Italians. It should be mentioned that people who study institutional trust consider having too much trust in the institutions of the state may be as bad as not having enough trust - in democracies citizens are expected to inform themselves about the actions of the institutions, evaluate them and only then decide if they deserve trust or not.





### Trust in Parliament, 2023

(% trust)



Source: TRUEDEM • Created with Datawrapper

## B.4 Political parties

Slovakia has a **multi-party system**, which means that multiple parties participate in elections and have political activity beyond the period of elections. There are several types of **regular elections** that can be organized in the country: presidential, parliamentary, European, regional, and municipal. Citizens aged 18 or more during the day of elections can vote in any of these elections. All elections are organized as universal, direct and secret suffrage.

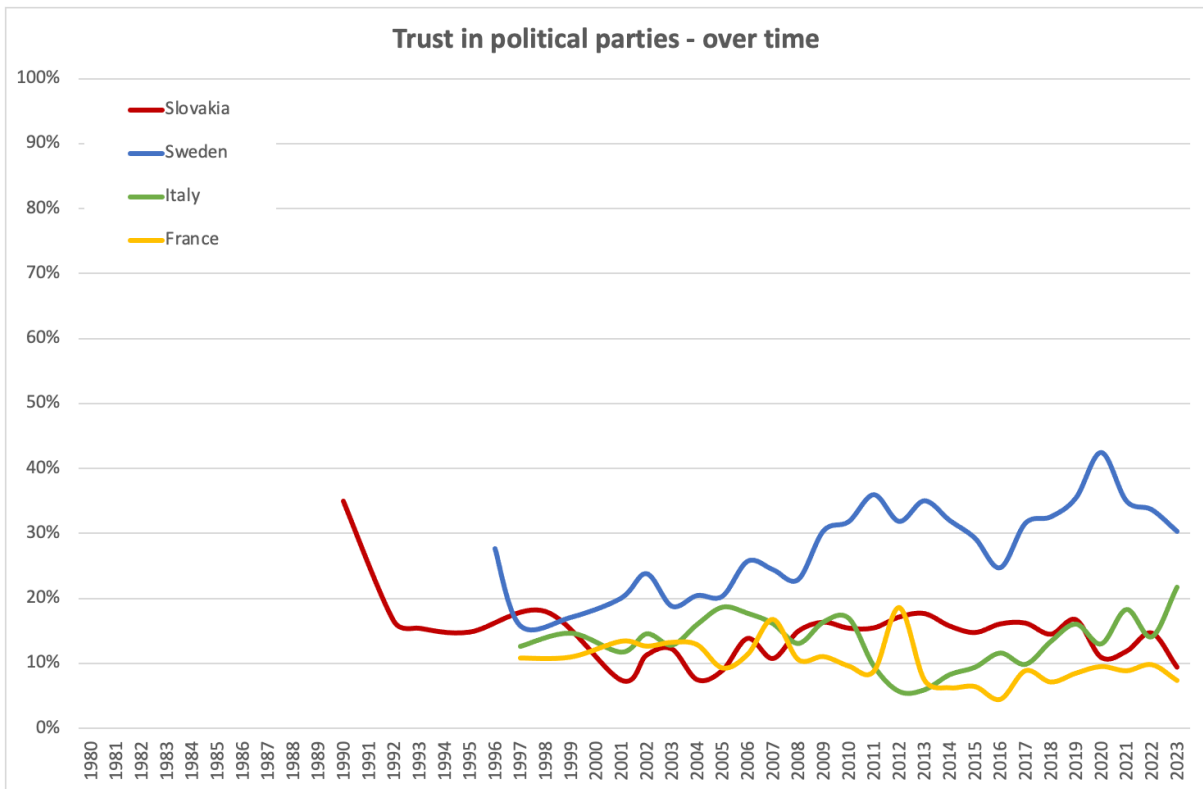
**Presidential elections** are organized to elect the head of state for a 5-year term. The candidate who obtains most votes is elected but a second round between the two top candidates may be organized if the candidate placed in the leading position does not also obtain the majority of eligible votes during the first round. The minimum age for being a candidate for this function is 40.

**Parliamentary elections** refer to the elections organized for selecting the 150 members of the National Council for a 4-year term. Political parties or coalitions of parties propose closed lists and citizens must choose from such lists. The seats are allocated proportionally based on the results of the elections, among the parties who acquire a minimum of valid votes. This threshold is 5% for political parties, 7% for coalitions of two or three parties and 10% coalitions of four or more parties. The minimum age for being a candidate for the National Council is 21.

**European elections** are organized every five years in all EU countries to select the members of the European Parliament (EP). For the 2024-2029 electoral cycle, Slovakia has 15 allocated seats in the EP. Any EU citizen of legal age can be a candidate and vote in the elections for the European Parliament, and EU citizens who reside in another EU country can vote and stand for election there. This means that Slovaks residing in another EU country can candidate and/or vote for the candidates proposed for the seats allocated to that country and that EU citizens residing in Slovakia can candidate and/or vote for the candidates proposed for the seats allocated to Slovakia. The minimum age for being a candidate in a European election organized in Slovakia is 21.

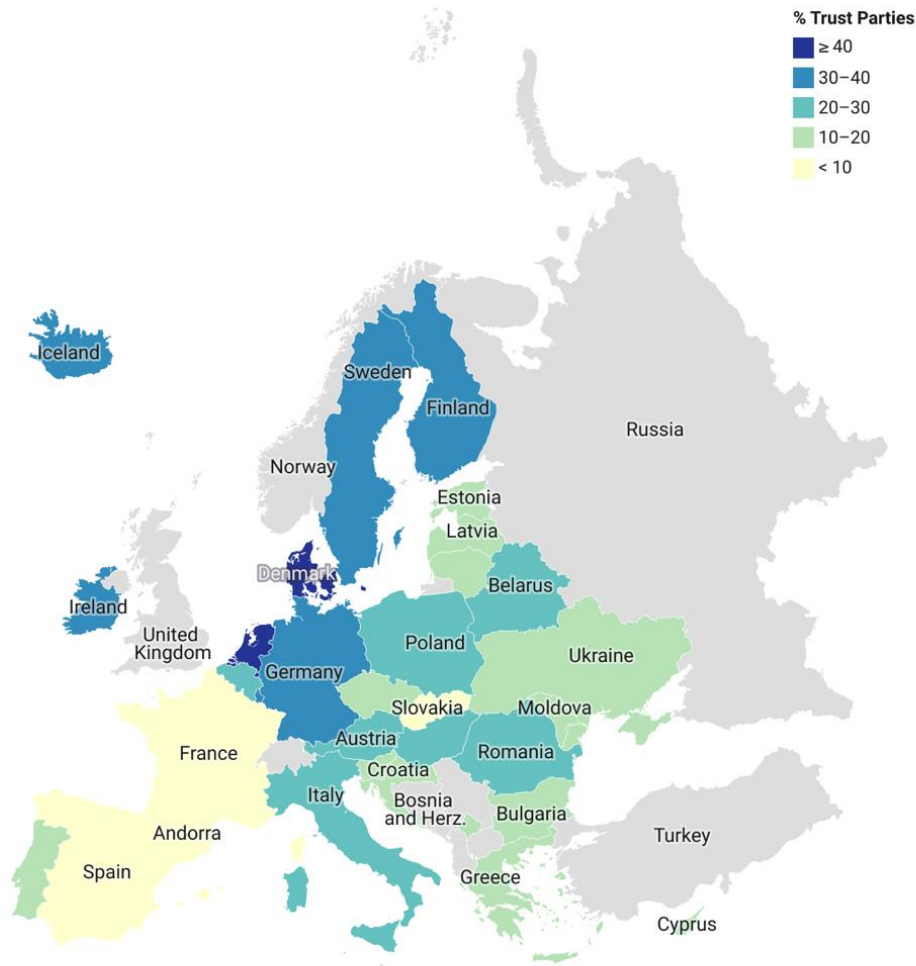
**Regional and municipal elections** are organized every four years for the selection of the regional councillors and regional governors (*župans*), and of the municipal councillors and mayors, respectively. The minimum age for becoming a candidate is 18 for councillors, and 25 for governors and mayors.

Currently, there are several dozens of political parties in Slovakia but only a handful of them dominate the political landscape. The existence of multiple political parties expressing different ideological views is essential for democratic competition. The most visible role of political parties is to organize candidates for competing in the various types of elections that are organized in the country. Usually, political parties group people who share and promote similar political views or policy goals. From this perspective, different political parties may express different viewpoints that exist in the society on matters that are relevant for the public agenda. This does not preclude the existence or the election of independent candidates or of parties that do not have a well-defined ideology or policy goals.



## Trust in Political Parties, 2023

(% trust)



Source: TRUEDEM • Created with Datawrapper

When asked about their trust in political parties, people may confuse or connect it with the trust in one particular party or in similar political parties. For this reason, it may be sometimes quite challenging to assess it. At the same time, data collected in different countries and different periods often show that political parties are in general one of the least trusted political institutions. Therefore, when studying the level of trust in political parties we may have different expectations about what certain levels might indicate in that specific national context.

As mentioned above, trust in political parties is lower than trust in the Government or in the Parliament. The percentage of Slovaks declaring they do trust political parties varies between 10%-20%, significantly lower than the trust registered in the legislative and the executive. We see similar levels in France and Italy and higher levels only in Sweden. An interesting question for discussion: if the Parliament is composed of people nominated by political parties and elected on party lists, how is it possible that Slovaks have twice as much trust in the Parliament than in political parties?

The 2023 data presented on the map of Europe show that with respect to trust in political parties, Slovakia is in the group of countries with the lowest levels of trust, a group that also includes countries such as France or Spain. Are there any other groups of countries that stand out on this map?

## B.5 The judicial system



In Slovakia there are several types of courts. **Ordinary courts** decide on civil, criminal or administrative matters. These courts are organized hierarchically, from the lowest to the highest authority in *district courts* (*okresné súdy*), *regional courts* (*krajské súdy*), *administrative courts* (*správne súdy*), the **Supreme Court** (*Najvyšší súd Slovenskej republiky*) and a **Specialized Criminal Court** (*Špecializovaný trestný súd*). In addition, for cases involving military activity there are military district courts and a Higher Military

Court.

Districts courts are courts of first instance for civil and criminal cases, while regional courts court of appeal for civil and criminal cases. Administrative courts (in Košice, Banská Bystrica and Bratislava) decide on administrative cases. The Specialized Criminal Court deals with criminal cases, especially those related to corruption and organized criminality. The Supreme Court ensures that law is interpreted and applied consistently and in a uniform manner within the entire judicial system across the country. For this purpose, it is an appeal court against decisions of the ordinary courts, as well as of military courts. It can also issue opinions on the interpretation and application of law, and it evaluates the legality of the institutions of the central administration of the state.

**The Constitutional Court** (*Ústavný súd Slovenskej republiky*) is a specialized court outside the system of general courts in Slovakia and its role is to ensure the development of the legal system is consistent with the Slovak constitution.

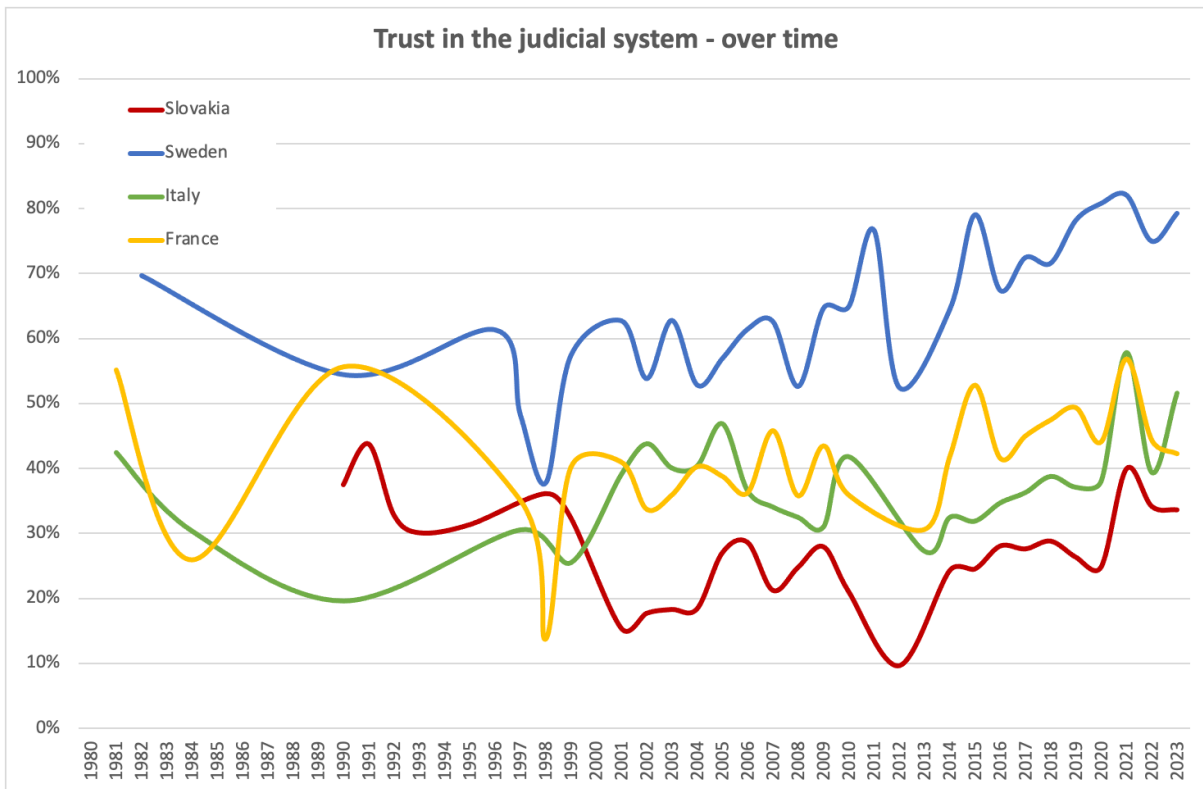
When they aim to provide a solution to a legal case, judges consider primarily the provisions of the Constitution and of the **legislation** that is currently into force. However, for coherence purposes, they also need to consider previous decisions on similar cases (i.e. **jurisprudence**) or **principles of law** that derive from practice and/or the **scholarly work** in the field of legal studies.

In countries that are democratic, such as Slovakia, judges and everyone else must also respect the **rule of law**. Simply put, this means that no one is above the law. This should not happen only when the laws are enforced but also when the laws are designed; therefore, those who create the laws should also obey them and should not grant privileges that would place themselves above it. Institutionally, to avoid the potential of conflict, those who apply the law should not be the same as those who design it and those who design or are required to implement the law should not be the same as those who interpret and judge how the law is applied. This is the principle of the **separation of powers**, and it is necessary to ensure the **independence of justice**.

Like other democracies, Slovakia is also part of a larger network of international agreements that created international norms and standards with effects also at national level. The two most significant such sets of norms are related to the EU legislation and human rights, respectively.

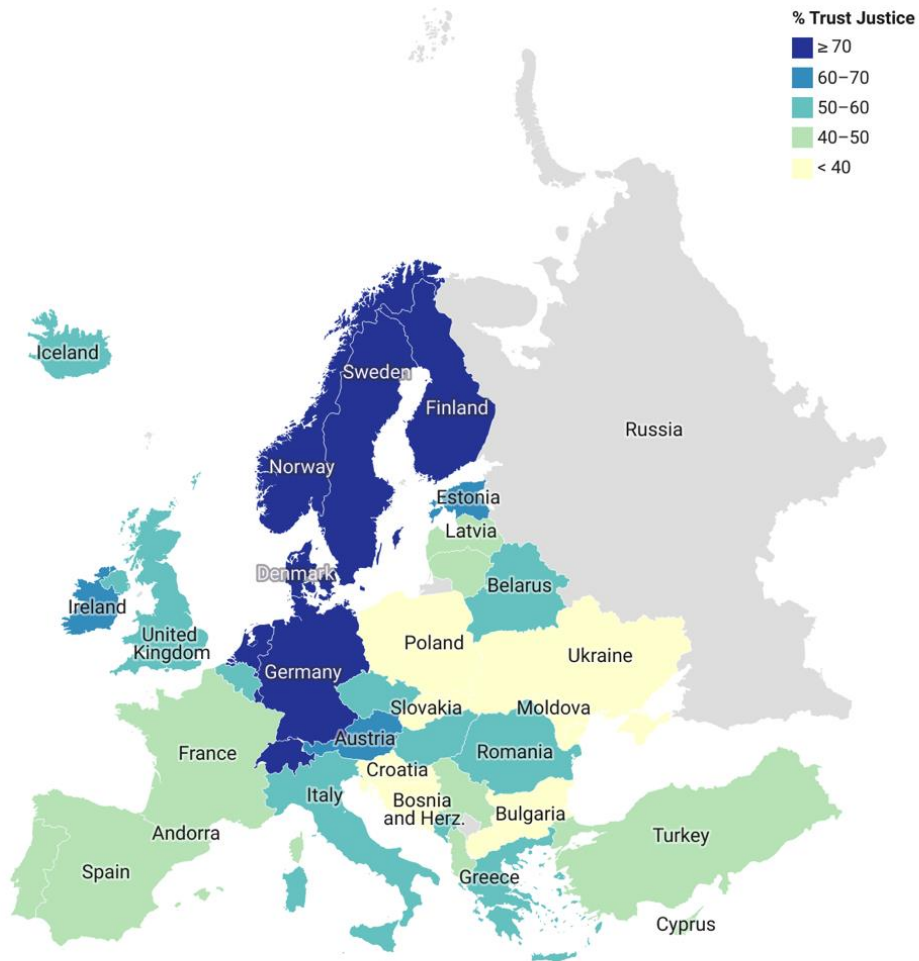
As part of the European Union, Slovakia must respect all EU legislation. Consequently, Slovak judges also need to **apply EU law**, whenever they assess a case, if such EU norms exist in the specific area under scrutiny. If an EU norm is in contradiction with the national norm, the former prevails. This principle of **EU legislation precedence** applies in all EU countries and ensures the coherence and functioning of the European Union, as well as an equal protection for all people on the territory of each EU member state, including Slovakia. At the same time, it expresses the fact that the EU legislation is always created with the direct participation of the governments of all EU member states, of the European Parliament which is composed of directly elected representatives of the citizens of each EU member state, as well as with the consultation of all major social and economic stakeholders from each EU member state.

Slovak judges must also always consider **human rights** aspects, especially if they relate to principles and jurisprudence deriving from the practice of the **European Court of Human Rights (ECHR)**. Slovakia is a member of the Council of Europe and as such, it is a signatory of the *European Convention on Human Rights*. The highest authority for the interpretation of this convention is the ECHR, the judicial organ of the Council of Europe. If a Slovak citizen considers that their human rights were violated and they exhausted all the possible means of seeking justice through the national judicial system of Slovakia, they can submit their case at the ECHR. If the ECHR judges in the favour of the plaintiff, Slovakia must apply the decision and, in some cases, it must also pay significant fines for every day of delaying the application of the decision.



### Trust in Justice, 2023

(% trust)



Source: TRUEDEM • Created with Datawrapper

When people express their trust in the Slovak judicial system, they might not necessarily express satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the system itself or the legal professionals, but very personal experiences related to unjust situation in which they found themselves that may not even be related to how justice administered through Slovak courts functions. They may also express reactions related to larger democratic aspects such as the perceived independence of justice or how the rule of law principle is applied, for example. Not least, when assessing their trust in the Slovak judicial system, different people may have different levels of knowledge of it or of the relation of the Slovak legal system with the European Union law or with the international regime of human rights.

According to the data presented in the chart, Slovaks do not have a lot of trust in the judicial system. The level of trust has declined from the beginning of the 1990s to 2012, then reversed the trend and started to increase, reaching 34% in 2023. When evaluating the state of a democracy, the level of trust in the judicial system is one of the most important indicators. Trust in the Government and the Parliament are also important indicators, but trust in those institutions can be influenced not only by their performance, but also by the ideology of the parties that are controlling them. People are known to evaluate the same institution, the Parliament for instance, better if the Parliament is controlled by their favourite political party, or worse if their favourite party is in opposition. Trust in the judicial system, by comparison, is less influenced by who is in power and who is in opposition, and it is based more on evaluating how the judicial system works. From this perspective, it is better for a democracy to have high levels of trust in the judicial system.

The most recent data, from 2023, place Slovakia at the bottom of the ranking of countries according to the level of trust in the judicial system, alongside other countries, such as Ukraine, Poland, Croatia, or Bulgaria.

## B.6 European Union

The European Union is an international organization, a unique system of governance, as well as an open project of political and economic integration within Europe.

As a **project**, it was politically launched in the 1950s by six European states (i.e. Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands) through the establishment of **initially three distinct international organizations** - the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Community of Atomic Energy (Euratom). Their initial role was to facilitate the economic reconstruction and diminish the chances of new military confrontations in the aftermath of World War II, while **(re)building trust among the member states**. For this purpose, the founders put in practice a very bold idea for those times: instead of the usual attitude of isolating internationally those who lost the war, the project brought former rivals together and created a **supranational governance system** which allowed that the resources and industries that could facilitate the development of weapons were commonly supervised and used primarily for the economic development of all members.



From the very beginning the three organizations shared common goals and, shortly after their establishment, also their entire institutional structure. Initially, this structure consisted of just four main organs - the **European Commission (EC)**, the **European Parliament (EP)**, the **Council of Ministers** and the **European Court of Justice (ECJ)**. Each of these organs was designed to fulfil a specific function - the EC is the supranational supervisor which ensures that the mission of the project and the organizations that

express it is respected; the EP represents the interests of the citizens of the members states; the Council gathers the representatives of states at the level of ministers in the fields relevant for the scope of the ECSC, EEC and Euratom; and the ECJ ensures the legal coherence of the institutional and policy development of the entire system.

In the **1960s**, this unique legal and institutional arrangement of three different international organizations developing a common supranational governance system started to be known informally as the **European Community**. In the **1980s** and **1990s**, as the members extended and enhanced their political cooperation also in the fields of foreign and security policies, as well in matters of police and judicial affairs, the project further reformed institutionally and adopted officially its current name - the **European Union (EU)**. Around the same time, to further facilitate economic integration, the members started harmonizing their economic policies and eventually, most of those who were economically prepared to do so, adopted a common currency - the EURO. This ongoing process of economic integration is known as the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), while the political, policy and institutional aspects are sometimes referred to collectively as the political union. In **2009**, following more institutional reforms necessary due to the increasing complexity of this governance system, EU transformed into a **legally distinct international organization**.

As the cooperation between the members proved successful, other countries became interested in joining this project and some eventually did. Since its establishment, there were several expansions in membership (i.e. **enlargement waves**): in 1973 (Denmark, Ireland, UK), 1981 (Greece), 1986 (Portugal, Spain), 1995 (Austria, Finland, Sweden), 2004 (Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia), 2007 (Bulgaria, Romania) and 2013 (Croatia). Currently, following the exit of the UK from the Union in 2020, there are **27 members** and nine other countries (Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey, Ukraine) are candidates for accession.

The **accession criteria** were initially limited to a small set of technical economic requirements and the political agreement of the already existing members. However, in the 1990s, as a significant number of countries showed their interest in joining the arrangement and the project became increasingly complex, a more comprehensive set was developed. Currently widely known as the Copenhagen criteria (after the place where the high level meeting establishing these rules took place in 1993), these can be grouped



into three categories - **political criteria** (i.e. existence and stability of the institutions that guarantee democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities); **economic criteria** (i.e. a functioning market economy that has the capacity to cope with competition and market forces); and **technical criteria** (i.e. administrative and institutional capacity to implement the already existing corpus of EU legislation and to fulfil all obligations that derive from it).

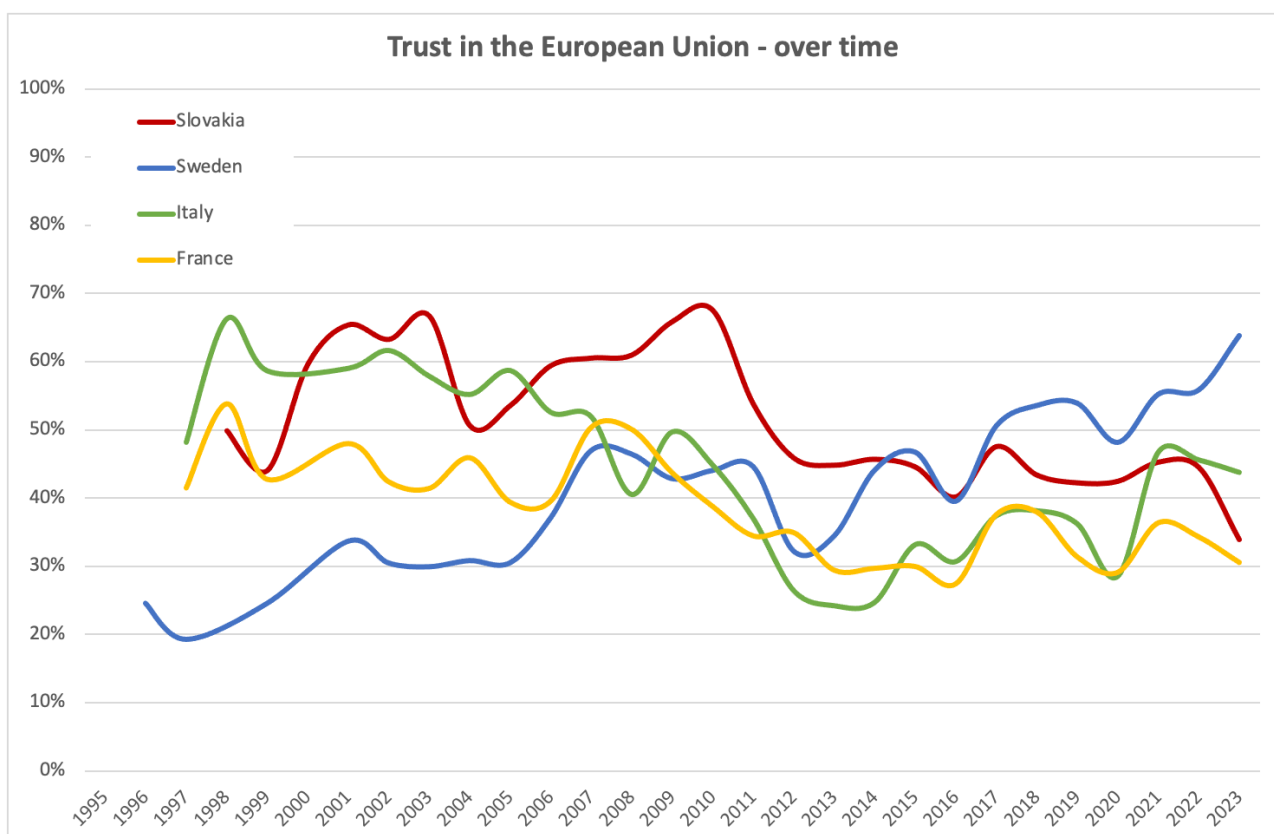
These criteria are deeply related to the **values and principles** upon which EU was founded: democracy, rule of law, freedom, equality, human dignity, human rights, the promotion of peace, the well-being of its citizens, social solidarity, strict observance of international law, as well as scientific and technical progress. Additional values and principles also emerged as new challenges were identified. For example, we are currently more aware of our environmental impact and of the intricate relations between the environment, economy, and society. For such reasons, in the European Union we now also aim to develop in more sustainable ways which consider not only economy growth but also social and environmental concerns. However, all these values and principles, as well as the efforts to put them in practice, do not impact only the almost half a billion citizens of the EU. For instance, the Union is one of the largest economies and markets in the world, attracting a high number of trade partners. If these want to access the EU market, they must comply with the EU standards and regulations. The EU is also the largest donor of development and humanitarian assistance in the world, and it conditions the disbursement of its development funds on the respect of its values and principles. Similarly, the Union also currently has the highest standards at global level in terms of private data protection and the protection of consumers. As such, these standards not only may serve as model for other countries and thus influence the global agenda on the matter but also must be adopted by the international companies that want to operate within EU. From this perspective, the reputation of and trust in the European Union cannot be understood as limited only to the territory of the EU member states or the EU institutions.

Due to various international agreements, other countries also partially benefit from the system of governance and the standards of the EU. Particularly notable for the economic integration of the European continent is the **European Economic Area (EEA)** - an agreement between, on the one hand, the EU members states and, on the other hand, Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway. Entering into force in 1994, this created a larger single market between the EU members and the three additional countries. In other words, like within EU or within a national market, people, goods, services, and capitals move freely within the EEA area, from an economic point of view. For example, the principles of the freedom of movement for people guarantees that any citizen of any EU or EEA member state has the right to move, reside and work in any another EU/EEA member state and to be treated on an equal footing with nationals of that member state. This provides more development opportunities to people from all these countries, while also stimulating cross-learning, cooperation, and innovation, and allowing for more flexible adjustments of the labour market, for instance. Similarly, the freedom of goods implies the elimination of customs duties between EEA member states, which ultimately translates into cheaper goods for each of us living in EU or the larger EEA area.

These four freedoms of movements - of people, goods, services, and capitals - should not be confused with the **physical freedom of movement**. EU has incorporated within its legal framework an agreement that allows the abolishment of border controls at the mutual borders of the members, as well as a common visa regime for international travellers. The territories of all the participating states are cumulatively known as the **Schengen area** and this space currently includes most but not all of the EU members, as well as Iceland,

Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland. Due to their geographical location, special agreements with some EU members or their own visa regime, free access into and from Andorra, Monaco, San Marino, and Vatican is also possible. While border controls may be reinstated in case of emergency, the general rule is that within the Schengen area there are no customs controls. Although this seems to benefit primarily individuals who need to travel, the largest impact is for the entire EU. For instance, the elimination of internal borders controls saves billions of hours of waiting for the trucks transporting goods, facilitating thus more economic exchanges and economic growth, while the environmental impact on the areas where these borders are located may be also smaller.

Not all benefits that the European Union membership brings may be easily visible or immediate. Additionally, the EU is often faced with different challenges, and it may take time to find solutions and mechanisms to address them. For such reasons, the EU constantly searches to adapt and improve its existing institutional, legal and policy framework. This also reinforces the fact that, beyond being an international organization and a unique governance system based on democratic values and principles, the Union is an ongoing project. However, its success depends not only on the performance and speed in adapting to older or newer challenges, but also on the trust we put on it.



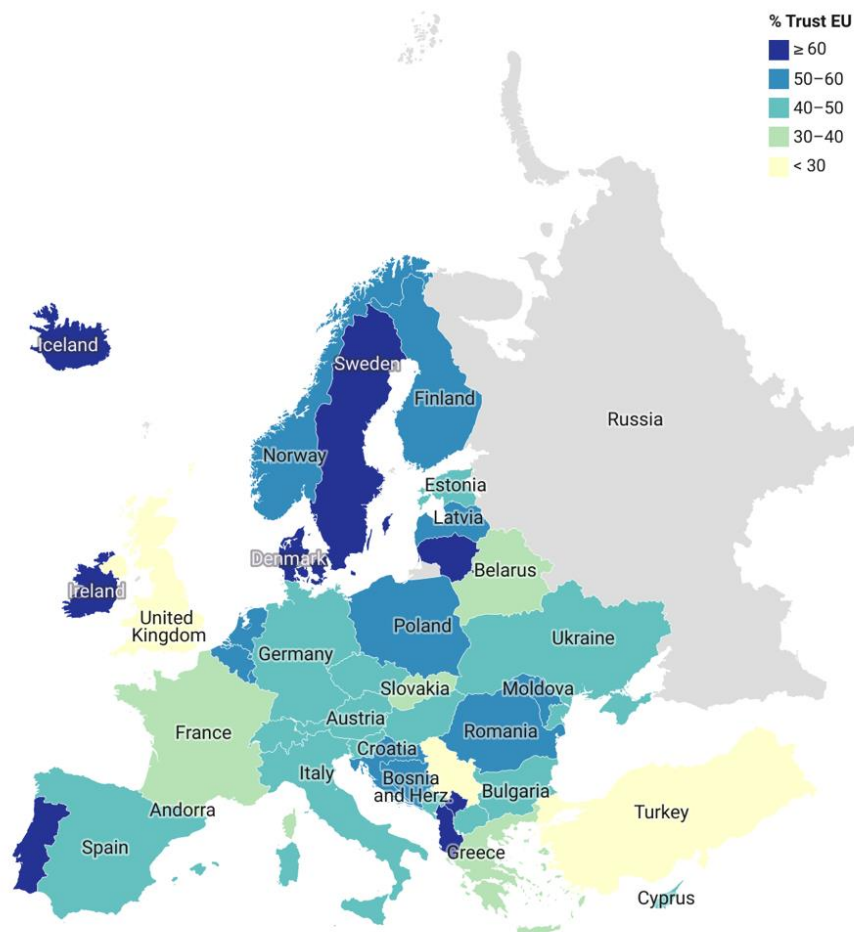
Many factors can influence this trust, including some which are not directly related to how the European Union performs. For example, the manner in which what the EU and its institutions do is communicated and reaches the wider population may significantly impact the level and accuracy of knowledge about EU and about its performance. The existence and prevalence of discourses distorting or inventing facts, or that amplify possibly legitimate concerns but in ways that create fear and hatred affect the level of trust, which in turn can diminish the strength of the Union and its capacity to defend its values and principles effectively. Not least, trust in the European Union can refer to many different things to different people, depending for instance on their age or their exposure to different economic, social and/or environmental concerns.

As it is usually the case for countries that have joined the European Union during one of the enlargement waves, in Slovakia, too, trust in the EU is higher before becoming a member country, after which trust in the EU declines. This is the pattern indicated by the red line, which shows the percentage of Slovaks trusting the EU declining from a high of almost 67% in 2010 to a low of 34% in 2023.

Comparisons with other countries indicate both commonalities and differences. The pattern in Slovakia is similar to the evolution of trust in the EU in France, while it differs from the patterns in Italy or Sweden, where trust in the European Union increased after the global economic crisis of 2007-2010.

### Trust in the European Union, 2023

(% trust)



Source: TRUEDEM • Created with Datawrapper

The 2023 data for trust in the European Union show that Slovakia, together with France and Greece, among others, belongs to a group of countries with rather low levels of trust. Those who will compare this map with the maps indicating trust in national institutions will probably observe a number of interesting differences. For instance, one might notice that trust in the EU tends to be higher in post-communist countries, such as Poland, Romania, or the Baltic states. It also tends to be higher among countries that are not yet members of the EU, but would like to join it, such as Albania, Moldova, or Ukraine. To some extent, this can be explained by the fact that these countries have more to gain from being part of the EU. At the same time, some of the founding EU members (France, Italy, Germany) have medium to low levels of trust in the European Union in 2023. What are some of the factors that might explain that the founding members have less trust in the organization they created than the newer members?

## B.6.1 European Parliament

The European Parliament (EP) is one of the four core institutions of the European Union, alongside the European Commission, the Council, and the European Court of Justice. It has primarily **legislative, budgetary, and supervisory powers**. More specifically, together with the Council, which represents the interests of the governments of the EU member states, the EP adopts the EU legislation and votes the annual budget of the European Union. It also monitors and supervises the work of other EU institutions, most notably of the European Commission, which is the main executive body of the Union.

Established initially as a parliamentary assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), the European Parliament got its name when it became the common parliamentary organ of the European Community, the predecessor of the project and organization that nowadays we call the European Union.

Until 1979, the members of the European Parliament (MEPs) were designated by the parliamentary parties of each of the member states, i.e. by the parties who were represented in the national parliament following elections for the national parliament. The distribution of seats allocated to each country would reflect proportionally the political composition of the national parliament.



Since 1979, the population of the member states can directly elect the MEPs, through **universal and free suffrage**. European elections are organized **every five years** in each member state for the MEPs from that member state. The seats allocated to each country are distributed proportionally to the parties and candidates who participate in the respective round of European elections in that country.

Recently, discussions about the possibility of a transnational list emerged and several legal steps were taken for allowing this option to be put into practice. This would mean that in addition to the seats allocated for each country, EU citizens could also vote for EU-wide lists, which would include candidates from different countries but for the moment this proposal has not yet materialized.

Any EU citizen can be a candidate and vote in the elections for the European Parliament. EU citizens who reside in another EU country can vote and stand for election there. These rules apply in all EU member states. Each country may also have additional or specific rules about the eligibility of the candidates, the minimum voting age, or the electoral algorithms for filling in the seats allocated to the respective member state. However, national regulations on European elections should not contradict the common EU-wide elections rules.

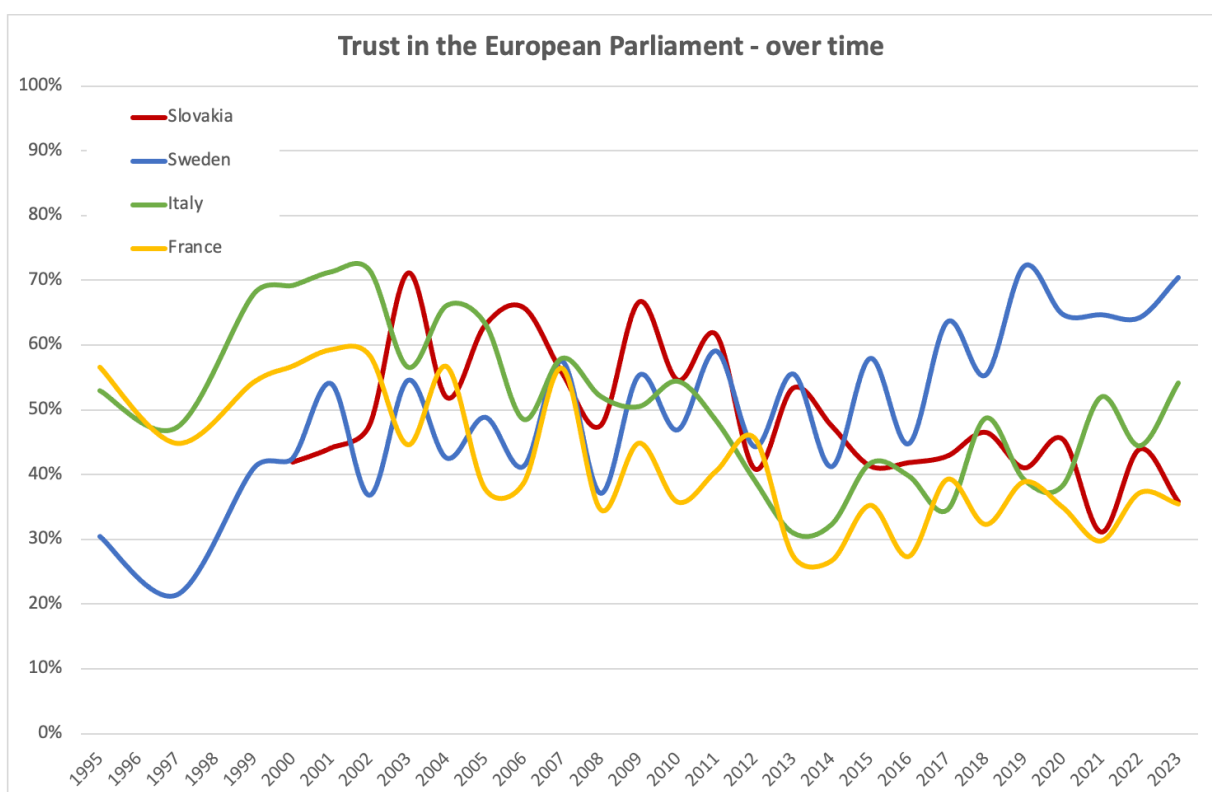
The total number of seats in the European Parliament cannot be higher than 751 and they are open for elections at the same time. For the period 2019-2024, the EP had 705 seats. For the 2024-2029 term, 720 seats are open for election, of which 15 are allocated to Slovakia. The number of seats that is allocated to each EU member state is decided before

each election, proportionally to the size of the population. This means that states with larger populations have more seats, while smaller countries have fewer seats. For instance, in the 2024-2029 electoral cycle the minimum number of MEPs allocated to a country is 6 and the maximum is 96.

Unlike in the case of most parliamentary assemblies of international organizations, in the European Parliament it is not the governments who are represented but rather the citizens of the member states. In fact, from the very beginning, the EP has resembled more a national parliament than a parliamentary assembly of an intergovernmental organization and it is currently considered the **world's only directly elected transnational assembly**.

In practice, this means that once elected, MEPs must represent the interests of all EU citizens and of EU at large and not only the interests of their constituencies. At the same time, instead of seating based on national affiliation, MEPs group primarily based on a **political party family**, i.e. a specific political ideology. In the European Parliament, the political party families are recognized through the establishment of official **political party groups**, which require at least 23 MEPs from at least a quarter of the member states. Currently there are seven such groups, three of them having been represented continuously since the establishment of the EP. The EP can also include members who are not affiliated to any group.

In addition to political party groups, the European Parliament is structured into committees and delegations. The work in the **committees** is at the core of parliamentary activity, as it is here that the MEPs can **propose, amend, and adopt legislative proposals or reports**. Committees are dedicated primarily to specific policy areas which are relatively the same from one parliamentary term to another, but temporary or new committees can also be created. Each committee meets twice a month, and their works are public. As part of the **delegations** of the European Parliament, MEPs are responsible for maintaining **relations between the EP and non-EU countries or international organizations**. In all these activities, MEPs must uphold the EU values and principles.

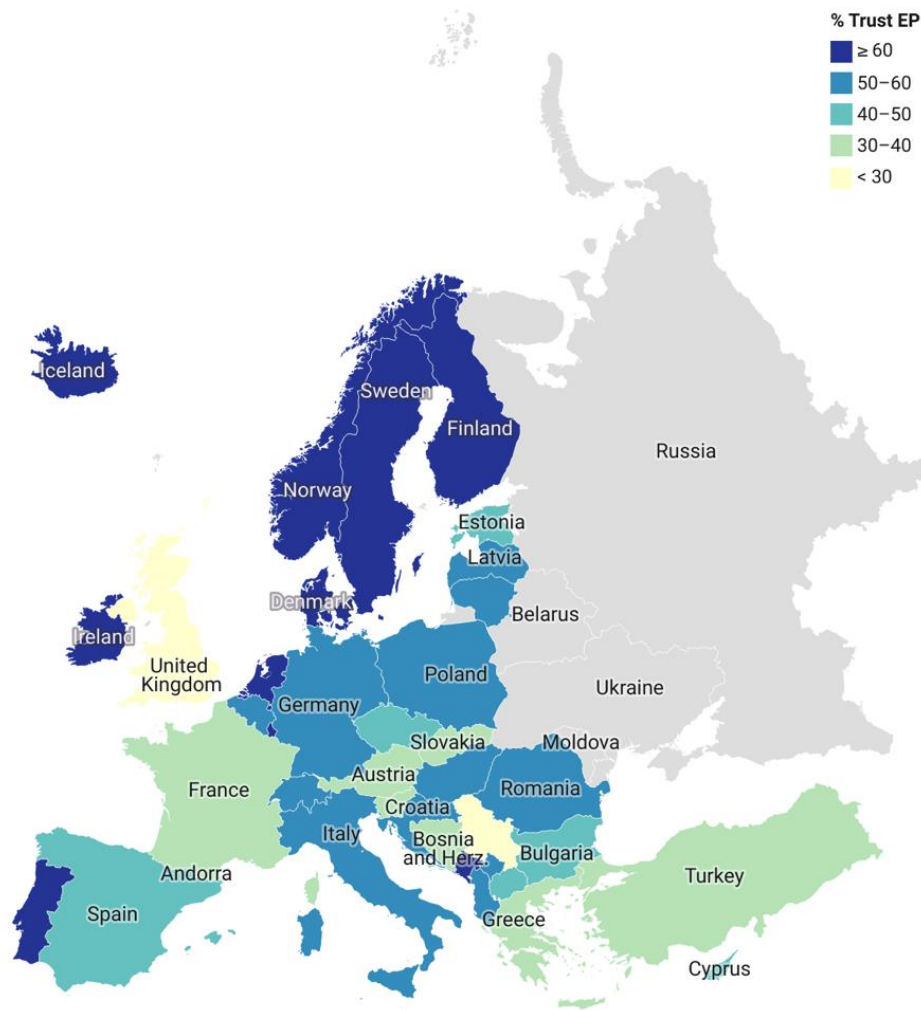


The political coordination and the public representation of the entire institution is ensured by a **President**, elected for a renewable term of two years and a half. The President and the leaders of the political party groups form the **Conference of the Presidents**, which is a political structure that organizes the main work of the EP, as well as the political distribution of committees and delegations.

The activity of the European Parliament, as well as of each MEP, including of all those from Slovakia, should be transparent. All EU citizens are granted the right of access to the EP's documents and the most important documents are available in all EU languages, including Slovak. The contact details of all MEPs and of their staff are public and EU citizens can address questions to any MEP. The EU also has a public transparency registry for lobbying activities, which is used by the European Parliament, as well as by the European Commission and the Council. No organization can engage in lobby activities with MEPs without being registered first in this platform and the basic details of the meetings between MEPs and such organizations are public through this registry.

### Trust in the European Parliament, 2023

(% trust)



Source: TRUEDEM • Created with Datawrapper

As people have different political sympathies, as well as different experiences and expectations about the role of MEPs, trust in the European Parliament can refer to different things. The performance of the political parties in national parliaments or the visibility of the EP President can also influence the perception on the performance of the European Parliament. In addition, not all people who have an opinion about the European Parliament may know much about its activities and some other factors may influence the attitude towards it.

Slovakia is a member of the European Union since 2004. Since then, in addition to small year-to-year variations, trust in the European Parliament among Slovaks has declined, from more than 60% to under 40%. From a comparative perspective, Swedes seem to have a higher level of trust in the European Parliament, while Slovakia shows a level of trust that is comparable to the ones registered in Italy or France.

The 2003 map shows an image that is similar to the one indicating trust in the EU. Trust in the European Parliament is slightly higher in countries that have joined the EU later in the process. At the same time, Germany and Italy have a more positive attitude towards the European Parliament than towards the European Union as a whole.

## B.6.2. European Commission



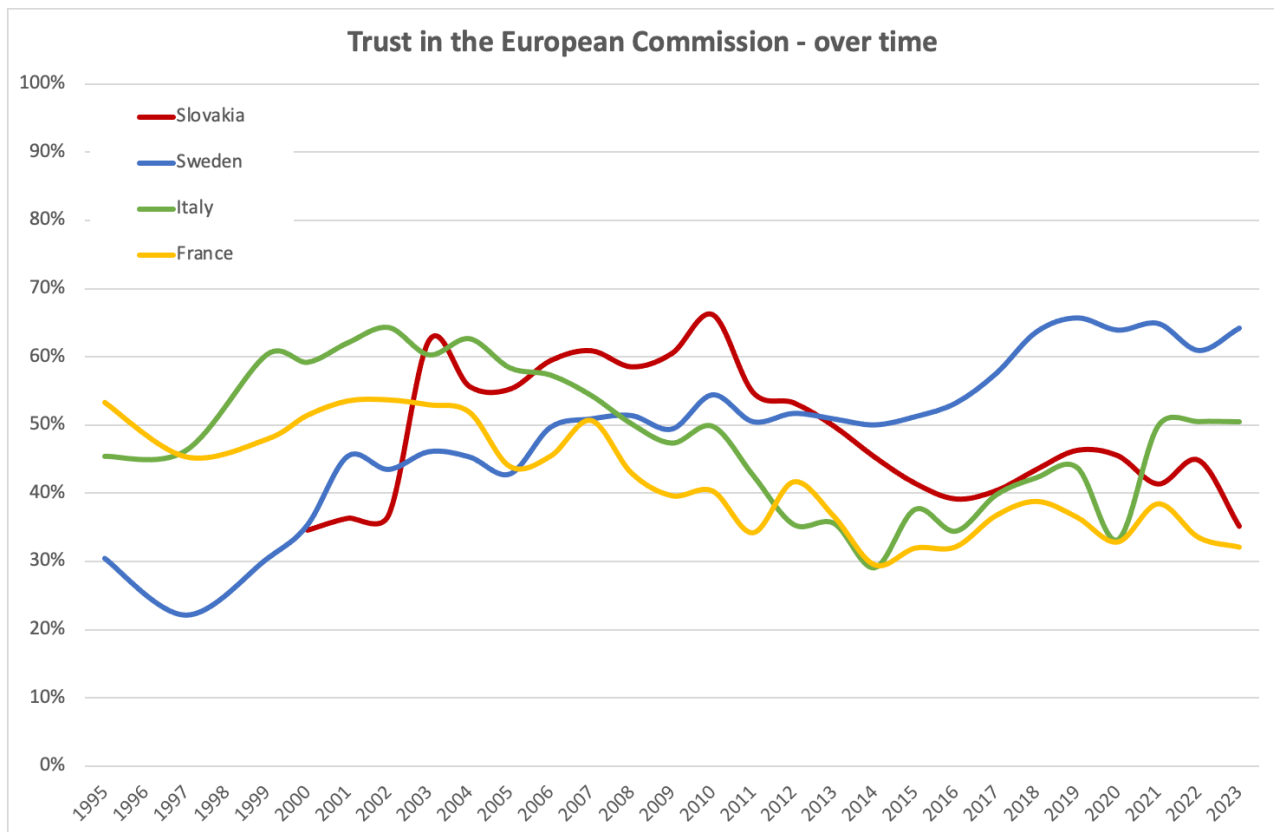
The European Commission (EC) is one of the four core institutions of the European Union, alongside the European Parliament, the Council, and the European Court of Justice. It has primarily **executive powers**. This means that it oversees the application of EU law and, based on the general directions set out by the Council, it shapes the EU strategies and proposes the new EU legislation and policies. Together with the member states it also implements the EU budget. At the same time, it has a significant role in managing the **international relations of the European**

**Union**, most notably in designing the international cooperation policy, delivering humanitarian and development aid to other countries, coordinating the work of EU delegations in the world, and serving as main contact point for the diplomatic missions of other countries or international organizations to the EU.

The European Commission is composed primarily of **public servants from all EU member states**. Currently there are about 32 000 permanent and temporary staff. This includes a significant number of translators - the European Union has 24 official languages, and most documents need to be available in all of them. For efficiency reasons, the Union also has three working languages - English, French and German, with the former two being the most used in the daily works of the Commission.

Most of the work within the EC is structured around policy areas which are coordinated by departments called **Directorates-General (DGs)**. These are partly similar to ministries in national settings. Administratively, the Commission is coordinated by the **Secretariat-General**, which is responsible for the overall coherence of the institution's activity, in

agreement with the EC's politically appointed leadership. Politically, the Commission is led by a **College of Commissioners**, which is headed by a **President**. The President is elected by the European Parliament through political negotiations quite similar to how Prime Ministers are elected in many national parliaments across Europe and the world. The commissioners are selected by the President based on nominations received from each EU member state and considering the major principles of diversity and inclusiveness, including gender balance. Each of the **27 commissioners** currently belongs to a different EU member state but they should represent the overall interests of the European Union and of all its citizens, in general and in the areas for which they are responsible, without discrimination.



When referring to the European Commission, some may think about the public appearances of the President or of the Commissioners, while others may think about initiatives originating within this the EC. Since the EC represents the overall interests of the European Union, many people may often equate the activity of the Commission with the activity of the EU, even if the Commission has mostly executive not political powers and the decision-making mechanisms of the Union involve several institutions and complex mechanisms of consultations across the entire EU and with a large number of stakeholders. Within this context, trust in the European Commission may refer to different things to different people. That is why, when attempting to assess the public opinion on this institution, it is important to formulate the questions in ways that are as clear as possible about what the object of the evaluation is (e.g. activity of a particular President, College of Commissioners, or the European Commission in general) and do not create additional confusion.





## B.7 United Nations



The United Nations is an **international governmental organization (IGO)** established in 1945 as the core of a framework for international interaction aiming to provide more safety and a better quality of life for the world population, without discrimination. For this purpose, the UN has developed a **rule-based international system** that aims to facilitate the maintenance of international peace and security, while also encouraging states to address - through international cooperation, good neighbourly relations, and the respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms - the economic, social, cultural, and humanitarian challenges faced by people across the world.

The UN is part of a complex system of related organizations and institutional structures. Within the UN itself, there are six main bodies - the General Assembly, the Secretariat, the International Court of Justice, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council, the Trusteeship Council.

Many people heard mostly of the Security Council because news about the UN is often related to how the organization handles international conflicts, especially those who have the potential to escalate into widespread violence. However, international conflicts are in general rare and most of the UN activities are in fact connected to cooperation on social, economic, and cultural matters, as well as to the development of international norms and institutions that could peacefully solve the ongoing challenges that the world population faces on a daily basis. From preventing and handling famine emergencies to building mechanisms that ensure fairer and wider access to digital technologies and innovation, this type of cooperation is less visible to the public but essential for most people in the world. The activities of this type of cooperation are often implemented through or with the support of UN specialized agencies, programs, funds, or related organizations such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Health Organization (WHO) or the World Bank, impacting thus in various ways the visibility and reputation of the UN as a distinct organization.

Data on trust in the UN collected in different countries often shows that in the areas in which the UN is present through different initiatives, especially those that aim at social and economic development, the level of trust in the UN is higher. At the same time, when violent international conflicts emerge, the level of trust in the UN may easily fluctuate, especially in countries in which the activities of the UN are less known. Not least, when assessing their trust in the UN, different people may refer to different activities, institutions, or aspects of the organization and of the larger system of related organizations.

Slovakia is a UN member since 1993. However, its precursor state - Czechoslovakia - was a founding member. Trust in the United Nations among Slovaks is characterized by a slow decline over time, from more than 60% in the beginning of the 2000s to only 33% in 2023. The evolution of trust in the UN in Slovakia is similar to the one observed in countries such as Italy and France. Sweden seems to be the exception in this case, given that trust in the UN among Swedes remained stable at around 60%-70% of the population.



## B.8 Institutional trust in Slovakia

We finish the discussion on trust in Slovakia by bringing together trust in the four national institutions (the Government, the Parliament, political parties, and the judicial system) and trust in the four international organizations (the European Union, the European Parliament, the European Commission, and the United Nations) in a single graph summarizing the level of institutional trust in Slovakia in 2023.

This is called a radar or a spider chart and it allows a very easy comparison of the level of trust in multiple institutions at the same time. The higher the level of trust, the closer to the outer edge of the graph the line will be. The lower the level of trust, the closer to the center of the graph the line will be.



At a glance, we can draw a series of conclusions with respect to institutional trust in Slovakia. First, we can talk about an unbalanced trust in the Slovak society, combined with a preference for international organizations over national institutions. The Parliament, the Government and political parties are evaluated rather harshly and fail to gain a lot of trust from the citizens, while the international organizations and the judicial system have twice the trust of the national institutions. Second, in line with how political trust manifests in many other countries, trust in political parties records lower levels than trust in other institutions and organizations. Finally, the judicial system is the most trusted institution among the eight included in this analysis. As discussed in the section devoted to the judicial system, this is an indicator for the quality of democracy in a country and Slovakia, despite the fact that trusts the judicial system the most, still has a rather low score on it.

## C. Classroom activities

This set of exercises can be used in classroom in order to familiarize pupils with the concept of political trust.

### C.1 How do you build trust? (20 minutes)

The class is split in groups of 4-5 pupils. It is preferable to create groups in such a way that in each group there are pupils that are not necessarily close friends, but rather colleagues. Alternatively, the creation of groups can also be realized randomly. Within each group, students are asked to talk about the notion of trust, as they see it. Questions that may guide their discussions are the following:

- Do you trust the people in your group? If so, why? What makes you trust/distrust them?
- Do you remember how this process started? How did you start to build trust in your colleagues?
- Do you trust your teachers?
- In general, do you trust your school (as an institution)?
- In everyday life, who/what do you trust? Why?

The main goal of this exercise is for each group to create a blueprint of how the “trusting” process unfolds. Basically, each group will present, at the end of the exercise, how they think trust is acquired, and how important reciprocity, predictability, expectations, and common values are. The instructor is in charge of debriefing.

### C.2 How to build trust (I)? (30 minutes)

The class is split in two groups that have to work on similar scenarios. Each group will be told that they represent a political party that has been just created, and, consequently, does not benefit from people’s trust. Based on each party scenario, the group will have to think about various strategies that could cultivate people’s trust, leading to vote. The instructor can create blueprints for the new political parties (if smaller groups are preferred, the instructor can create more party blueprints). It is useful that the two new parties are fairly different in terms of ideology/target audience (i.e. one traditionalist/conservative party and one progressive party). Each group will have to design a strategy for creating/increasing trust among possible voters, based on the following questions:

- Who are the main categories of potential sympathizers? How can their trust be preserved?
- Who are the categories that would probably not vote for this party? How would you attract them?
- How can you work with party volunteers to disseminate a message of trustworthiness to the broader population?

- What proposed measures/values from the party blueprint can be used to cultivate people's trust?

Each group will have to present their strategies. The instructor's role is to help pupils understand how important trust is, how it can be cultivated, how unkept electoral promises can damage trust, etc.

### **C.3 How to build trust (II)? (30 minutes)**

Three pupils in the class are given the task to be political candidates in an electoral debate (either chosen randomly or by allowing pupils to sign up for this task). Each of them has the choice of choosing one advisor. The teams of two (candidate + advisor) have 15 minutes to prepare a speech through which the candidate aims to convince the class that they would be the ideal class leader. After the discourses, the instructor asks the audience to express their option and motivate it. The emphasis will be on how trustworthiness can be communicated and how important it is for a political candidate to benefit from people's trust.

### **C.4 The connection between democracy and trust (30 minutes)**

The teacher asks the pupils to look at the graphs depicting evolutions of trust in institutions in their country, in comparison to other countries (as included in the teaching materials). The instructor makes sure that the pupils understand and correctly interpret the information. Then, the class is split in several groups (each group for one country), and students are asked to research the evolution of the democratic system in the respective countries. The groups should look into the democratic transformation of a country and aim to correlate that with tendencies in the values of political trust.

### **C.5 Trusting international organizations? (30 minutes)**

The class is split in two groups. The first group will focus on the EU, and the second on the UN. In each group, pupils have to familiarize themselves with the functioning and activities of each organization. The instructor should explain that the two organizations are different both in terms of geographical span and respective histories, but also in terms of degree of integration of countries. Each group will focus and discuss the various ways in which decisions are made within each organization. The instructor can offer relevant website links where this information is available. Then, within each group, pupils will debate whether particular decision-making processes seem fair, and whether they make them trust the respective institution. At the end, the two groups exchange views.

### **C.6 Trust through social media (20 minutes)**

Pupils are asked to use social media to find official accounts of national political institutions in their countries. After perusing them, the instructor starts a discussion whose focus is on what type of reaction pupils get from those social media entries, in comparison to social media that they would usually read. Then, pupils work together in designing social media posts for one or two national level political institutions that aim to create/cultivate trust within the population. These entries can be posted online if the pupils want, or just made as an exercise.

Prepared by:

- Luciana Alexandra Ghica, University of Bucharest
- Bogdan Radu, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj Napoca
- Claudiu Tufiş, University of Bucharest

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The following official sources were used in the documentation of this material:

- the national constitution and constitutional legislation;
- national electoral legislation;
- summaries of electoral legislation, electoral data and the functions of the main state institutions from the official websites of the government, national ministries and agencies, national electoral bodies, national courts, the Council of Europe, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE/ODIHR), the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (EU FRA) and the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA);
- summaries of data on institutional developments of the European Union and the United Nations from their respective official websites;
- official English versions of international treaties related to the development of the European Union and the United Nations, including accession treaties, available on the EU and UN websites.

All data used in the charts and maps included in this material is extracted from the Long-Term Trends of Political Trust Dynamics (1980-2023) dataset, available at <https://www.truedem.eu/resources-and-deliverables/online-data-analysis/political-trust-database>.

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