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stir Slovak
democracy**

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just got less
fictional**

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the Danube
flows, life
returns**

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EXECUTIVE SEARCH

Contents

FOCUS: Family Business

Family firms power Slovakia's economy	4
Profits under pressure: Slovakia's top family businesses in 2024	8
Which family business grew most in 2024?	10
In family businesses, trust is personal, says expert	12
The Trnava winemakers who defied the supermarkets	14
Running out of colours, not ideas: How Fytopharma stays competitive	15
From failing cannery to Slovakia's jam giant	16

OTHER TOPICS

Fico downplays violence against ethnic Slovaks in Serbia, sides with Vučić	18
Slovaks abroad build civic spaces to stay politically engaged	22
Slovak scientists help tear down two objections to Jurassic Park's premise	24
Bratislava never had a planetarium. Local families built an observatory instead	26
Life returns to a forgotten arm of the Danube	28
Pretty crazy?: How four Americans founded a Slovak newspaper that's still going strong	32
Light the Slovak fire	34




30 YEARS THE SLOVAK SPECTATOR

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The second largest family-owned company in Slovakia is active in the wholesale of drugs and medical devices sector.

Family firms power Slovakia's economy

I.D.C. HOLDING EXITS RANKINGS AFTER MAJOR SALE, TOBACCO WHOLESALER GGT AND PHARMA DISTRIBUTOR MED-ART ARE STILL TOP, DESPITE RISING COSTS AND CONSUMER CUTBACKS

Text: Jana Liptáková and Ján Pallo • Photo: Sme – Marko Erd

The Slovak Spectator, in cooperation with FinStat and the Institute of Family Businesses (IRB), has collected financial data from more than 1,300 local businesses that together generated €17.5 billion in revenues in 2024, for its annual rankings of the country's largest family firms.

Of these firms, 135 provided comprehensive data in detailed questionnaires.

Among the findings of the survey are that most family businesses in Slovakia operate in the trade sector, with a significant portion involved in the sale and maintenance of motor vehicles.

There is an average of 3.5 family members involved in each business, and families in the Bratislava region show the strongest appetite for entrepreneurship, while those in the east – in Prešov and Košice Regions – are the least active.

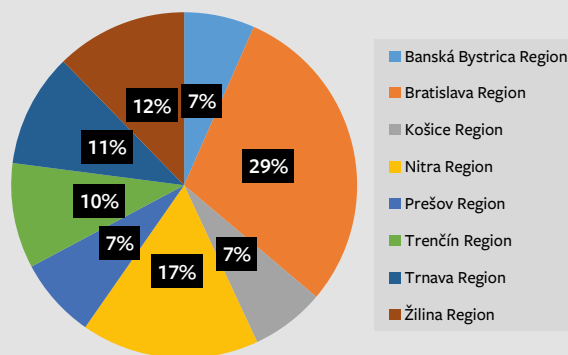
The survey's ranking of the largest family businesses in the country in 2024 was little changed from the previous year, although there was one major move: I.D.C. Holding, producer of the iconic wafer brands Horalka and Mila, dropped out of the top 10 after its sole owner, Pavol Jakubec, sold it to Ireland's Valeo Foods Group, which is owned by the US global investment firm Bain Capital. It was one of the most significant transactions in Slovakia in the past year.

In terms of revenues, the top six firms in the ranking continued to grow, while the last four shrank.

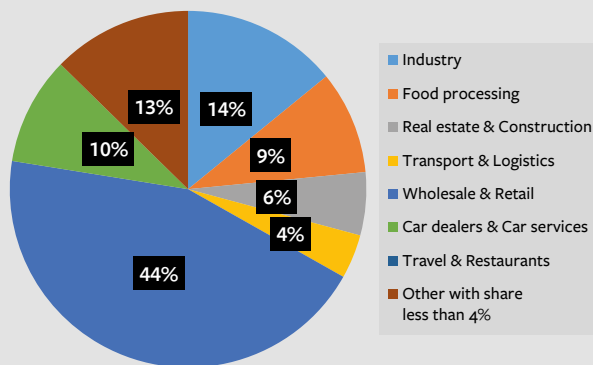
FIRST FOUR PLACES

GGT, part of Ivan Kmotřík's Grafobal Group, remains the largest family-owned business in Slovakia. In 2024, its revenues rose by €24 million year on year, while profits more than doubled to €2.38 million. Most of its income is from cig-

Family businesses by region (based on revenues)



Sectors of family business in Slovakia (based on revenues)



arette and tobacco wholesale; the company also runs the Tabak Press stationery chain.

Its outlook for 2025 is uncertain though, as Slovaks have begun to cut back on spending due to rising consumer taxes and inflation. In June alone, retail sales of food, tobacco and beverages in specialised shops fell year on year by as much as 12.7 per cent – the sharpest decline since the start of this year, according to data from the Statistics Office. Turnover in such shops has not shown growth since January.

In the case of tobacco, falling sales are expected to continue. June marked the end of the transition period during which retailers were still allowed to sell products with old tax stamps. With the introduction of a higher excise duty – part of the government’s consolidation package – the price of an e-cigarette has risen by roughly one euro, while chewing tobacco and nicotine pouches are around €1.50 more expensive.

“Inflation remains elevated at around 4 percent, and in some segments it has picked up momentum. However, purchasing power is falling, primarily due to higher costs for housing, services and energy,” explained Matej Bajzík, analyst at online investment brokerage XTB, for the *Hospodárske Noviny* daily. “When consumers decide where to cut their spending, they first target non-essential goods – such as cigarettes, alcohol and premium food products.”

Last spring, the group withdrew from the Senica-based lighting manufacturer OMS after seven years of restructuring, with Kmotřík’s 70-percent stake sold back to founder Vladimír Levársky. In recent years Kmotřík has sold the Skalica hospital, the TA3 television channel, and the Bratislava waterworks service company. Citing his age, Kmotřík has said he intends to keep only the

Definition of a family business

A family business is a company in which at least two representatives of the same family are active and the family owns more than 50 percent of the company and participates in its management.

Family members are defined as: spouses, immediate relatives (e.g. children), siblings and persons related to each other up to the fourth degree, and their spouses

most profitable parts of his empire, notably the packaging operations of Skalica-based Grafobal and its subsidiaries in the Czech Republic, the Balkans and Russia.

Now 66, and among the wealthiest Slovaks, Kmotřík is increasingly handing responsibility to other family members. As well as his elder son Ivan, positions in the group are now also held by his younger son Tomáš, his daughter Linda Mária, and, since 2023, his wife Timea. However, he continues to invest in new ventures, including plans for a €150 million incineration plant in his hometown

of Skalica. He also owns the Slovan Bratislava football club. Med-Art, the Nitra-based wholesale distributor of drugs and medical devices, retained second place in the ranking with revenues up from €522 million to €575 million. Its profit remained stable at around €4.7 million. Established in 1991, it provides services from four distribution centres – Bratislava, Nitra, Banská Bystrica and Prešov.

Hilda Némethová owns a 50 percent stake in Med-Art and has served as its managing director since the company’s founding. The other half is controlled by Ján Holec, with

the second generation of both the Holec and Németh families now also involved in the business. Med-Art ranks third on the Slovak market in the distribution of pharmaceuticals and medical supplies, claiming more than a quarter of the market, according to its own analyses. The company employs over 400 people and is known to consumers through the brand *Vaša Lekáreň*, a chain of about 300 pharmacies, according to *Forbes* magazine.

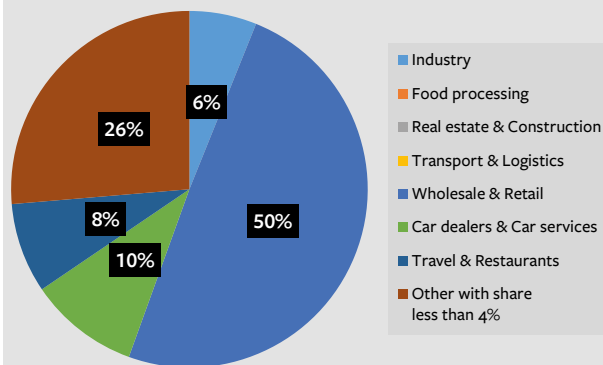
In the wholesale sector, the third-largest firm is Košice-based company *Labáš*. According to *Finstat* data, its 2024 turnover exceeded €432 million, up €26 million, but profits slipped by 1 percent to around €10.8 million.

Founded in 1992, the firm grew from

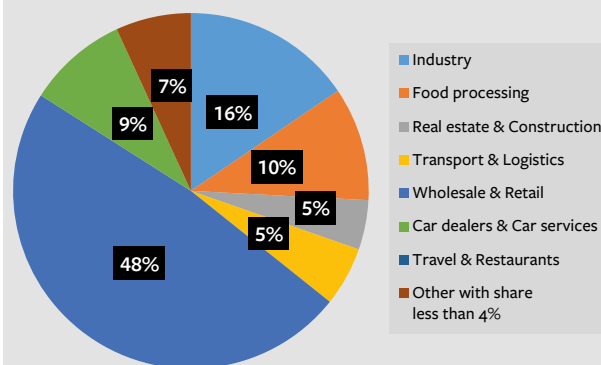
10 LARGEST FAMILY BUSINESSES IN SLOVAKIA

1. GGT
2. MED - ART
3. LABAŠ
4. T a M trans pedition
5. N I K É
6. M+M
7. Raven
8. Arimex Bratislava
9. Energie2
10. Domäsko

Bratislava Region: Sectors of family business (based on revenues)



Western Slovakia: Sectors of family business (based on revenues)



Two companies out of the 10 largest family businesses in Slovakia are active in sale of cigarettes and tobacco products.

a garage at the family home into Slovakia's largest domestic food wholesaler. In addition to wholesale, the company – named after its founder, Miroslav Labaš – operates the Fresh retail network in eastern Slovakia. Today, it has more than 650 outlets nationwide, including 34 of its own Fresh Plus stores alongside an extensive franchise network.

In June, the Labaš company unveiled its Fresh mini concept, described by *Tovar & Predaj* magazine as a smaller, more flexible store format offering a full range of groceries. The pilot partnership between Fresh and Dalioil, which operates petrol stations across Slovakia, demonstrates the model's potential. The new format is designed for businesses wishing to expand into food retail without having to build a store from scratch – making it particularly suitable for petrol stations, small local premises, or high-footfall services such as car repair shops, park-and-ride facilities, and transport hubs.

"Fresh mini proves that retail can operate efficiently even in smaller spaces – provided the assortment and logistics are well designed and the brand enjoys customer trust," says

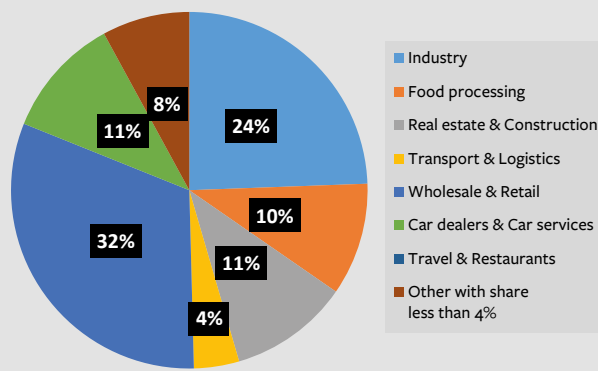
Ondrej Šušavský, Director of Potraviny Fresh. In addition to founder Miroslav Labaš, his sons Miroslav Jr. and Richard, as well as many other family members, have been working at the company for years.

T a M trans again finished fourth in the rankings with revenues up €26 million to €312 million. But profits fell by almost €1 million to €2.23 million. Active in logistics and motor fuels, the company was launched by Timea and Marian Tóth in 1996. They started in cargo transport and over time the company has expanded its activities into tyre servicing. Since 2004 it has also been building a network of gas stations under the brands Autohof and Férové pumpy. Today, it operates 24 stations in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Last year, the regulator approved its acquisition of 27 Tanker gas stations. The Tóth family's business also includes a trimodal terminal in Komárno, *Forbes* magazine wrote.

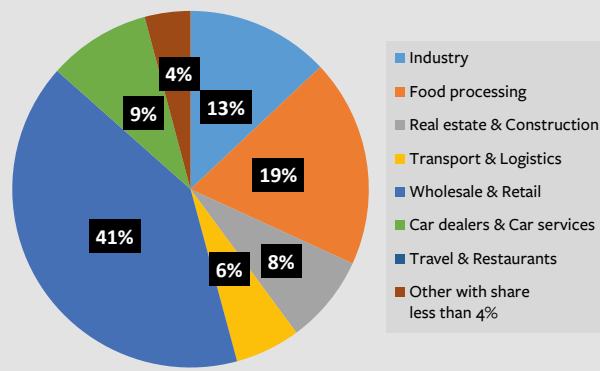
A RANKING NEWCOMER

Also featured in the Top 10 ranking is Bratislava-based Niké

Central Slovakia: Sectors of family business (based on revenues)



Eastern Slovakia: Sectors of family business (based on revenues)



– the largest privately owned betting company in Slovakia – with revenues of €254 million. It improved its position from sixth to fifth in the ranking, with revenues increasing by about €33 million and profits jumping from €25 million to nearly €42 million.

After the death of his father Otto, Roman Berger continued to lead Niké, which was founded in 1991 as the first betting company of its kind in Slovakia.

The company owns the daily newspaper Šport and is also a sponsor of various sports clubs. According to the weekly Trend, the firm operates around 700 branches. It offers a broad portfolio of services, including sports betting, online casino games and lottery products.

Like many companies across different sectors, Niké is making significant cuts to expenses this year. Berger told Forbes that cost reduction is the firm's key challenge for 2025. Whether this will involve closing physical outlets or laying off employees remains unclear.

“The cuts are essential to offset the increase in costs caused by the [government's] consolidation package,” he said.

M+M, a Nitra-based business owned by the Macega family, is one of the largest distributors of tobacco products in Slovakia. It is the only new company in the Top 10, coming in sixth. Founded as a family business in the 1990s, it supplies retailers across the country and has expanded its portfolio to include complementary goods such as sweets, beverages and small consumer items. Both its revenues and profit rose in 2024, to €237 million and €7.29 million, respectively.

In addition to Klára and Miloš Macega (each holding a 35 percent stake), Michaela Kováčik Macegová is also an owner, holding a 30 percent share. More than 40 retail outlets operate under the M+M brand.

REVENUE DROPS

Raven, active in the wholesale of hardware, plumbing and heating equipment and supplies, slipped two places in the ranking to seventh as its revenues fell €34 million to €237 million. It swung from a profit of €1.55 million in the previous year to a loss of €3.64 million in 2024.

Launched by Ľubomír Harvánek in 1993, several representatives of the family now work in the Raven group, which is active in Slovakia and across the rest of the Visegrad Group region.

Arimex Bratislava kept its eighth position, even though its revenues decreased by €9 million to €172 million and its profits dropped from €4.6 million to €2.7 million. Launched in 1992 by Jozef and Erika Rebro, and with their son Jozef Rebro Jr. today also involved in the company, it buys and sells agricultural crop production and byproducts from the industrial processing of crops. Their business also includes agricultural enterprises focused on grain cultivation, as well as facilities for storing grain and oilseeds.

Energie2, one of the top suppliers of electricity and natural gas in Slovakia, fell two places, coming in second-to-last. Revenues were down €37 million to €162 million and profits dropped from €15 million to only €3.1 million.

Domäsko, specialising in poultry farming and operating some 100 butchers' shops, remained in tenth place, with €151 million in revenues, a decrease by some €3 million. Although year-on-year revenues fell 2 percent, the result was still the second-highest revenue in the company's history, the Trend weekly pointed out. Domäsko's profits almost halved, dropping €3.82 million to €4.88 million.

Marián Brna currently serves as managing director of the company and holds a one-third ownership stake. However, two-thirds of the company is owned by relatives of controversial businessman Pavol Konkoľ. Konkoľ is known for his involvement with the Kežmarok firm Podtatranská hydina. He left behind significant debts, was alleged to have been involved in carousel fraud, and spent a year and a half in pre-trial detention, according to Forbes magazine. © TSS

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Profits under pressure: Slovakia's top family businesses in 2024

*DESPITE A 15-PERCENT SLUMP IN OVERALL PROFITS,
SOME COMPANIES DID WELL*

Text: Jana Liptáková and Ján Pallo

Data on the largest family businesses suggest that 2024 was a challenging year for many of them. The more than 1,000 companies monitored in our analysis recorded an aggregate year-on-year drop in net profit of 15.3 percent.

Below are those with the highest profits last year.

20. DYNAMIK HOLDING
NET PROFIT: €4,614,955
FAMILY: VIKOR

The company has been operating in the Slovak construction sector since 1990. It has gradually developed from a small family company into one of the most successful construction companies in the country, while maintaining its family character.

19. XIMEA
NET PROFIT: €4,628,842
FAMILY: KLIMKOVIČ

Based in the village of Marianka near Bratislava, Ximea was founded in the 1990s by Russian scientists who had come to Slovakia after the collapse of the former Soviet Union. Today it continues to be run by one of them, Vjačeslav Klimkovič, along with his son Michail. The company sells cameras to research centres and factories around the world for monitoring the operation of their automated production lines.

18. AGRO VODERADY – SLOVENSKÁ NOVÁ VES
NET PROFIT: €4,651,321
FAMILY: MAČAJ

The agricultural company belongs to Agro Mačaj, a family business group dominant in vegetable production in Slovakia.

17. MED – ART
NET PROFIT: €4,697,574
FAMILY: NÉMETH, HOLEC

The Nitra-based wholesale distributor of drugs and medical devices is owned by Ján Holec and Hilda Némethová.

16. GREENPHARM
NET PROFIT: €4,760,487
FAMILY: GUNIŠ

The Košice-based company produces dietary supplements for various Slovak and European brands. Brothers Martin and Adam Guniš have also brought their father, Jozef, into the business. He not only came up with the idea behind the business, but was their first customer and remains their mentor to this day.

15. SANACLIS
NET PROFIT: €4,858,053
FAMILY: FEŤKOVSKÝ

Nearly a quarter of a century ago, Natália Feťkovská, drawing on her extensive experience in clinical studies, founded a family business with her brother, Juraj Fecanin. The siblings established SanaClis in the early 1990s in response to demand from Western

countries for clinical trial services in Central and Eastern Europe. The company is led today by her son, Alexander.

14. DOMÄSKO
NET PROFIT: €4,881,854
FAMILY: KONKOL'

The Konkol' family-run firm specialises in poultry farming and meat retail. Over the years, it has built up a network of around 90 butchers' shops across Slovakia. By combining its own farming operations with direct retail, Domäsko ensures control over quality and freshness, and has established itself as a well-recognised brand in the Slovak food industry.

13. FINHOLD
NET PROFIT: €4,906,537
FAMILY: JAKUBEC

Finhold was the parent company overseeing the Jakubec family's confectionery business, including I.D.C. Holding. In 2024, however, I.D.C. Holding was sold to Valeo Foods Group. Following the completion of this transaction, Finhold wants to focus on seeking out and investing in new opportunities.

12. JJ ELECTRONIC
NET PROFIT: €5,324,133
FAMILY: JURČO

JJ Electronic, led by Ján Jurčo's son Tomáš, is a world-renowned manufacturer of vacuum tubes, electrolytic capacitors and high-end audio amplifiers.

11. SLOVAKIA TREND EXPORT – IMPORT

NET PROFIT: €5,404,135

FAMILY: ŽEŇUCH

A family-owned wholesale company, it has been on the market since 1992, starting quite literally as a garage business. By seizing the post-Velvet revolution demand for tools and hand equipment, it secured major contracts and rapidly expanded. Today, the firm is one of Slovakia's leading tool distributors, with long-term partners such as USSK, ŽSR, Železiarne Podbrezová, Slovenské Elektrárne, and numerous distributors nationwide.

10. PPA CONTROLL

NET PROFIT: €6,419,094

FAMILY: PAVLŮ

The company specialises in comprehensive solutions in industrial automation, control systems, electrical installations, and energy. Its services cover the entire lifecycle – from design, engineering and manufacturing, through installation and commissioning, to servicing and maintenance – of technological units for the energy sector, industry and infrastructure.

9. UMAKOV GROUP

NET PROFIT: €6,745,462

FAMILY: LACKO

With more than 30 years of experience, the UMAKOV Group specialises in manufacturing and distributing a broad range of components and semi-finished products for stainless steel, glass, and aluminium balustrades, as well as forged and aluminium gates, gate drives, staircases, glazing, canopies and solar structures.

8. M+M

NET PROFIT: €7,289,098

FAMILY: MACEGA

The company is one of the largest distributors of tobacco products in Slovakia. Founded as a family business in the 1990s, it supplies retailers across the country and has expanded its portfolio to include complementary goods such as sweets, beverages and small consumer items.

7. ŠK SLOVAN BRATISLAVA FUTBAL

NET PROFIT: €7,772,404

FAMILY: KMOTRÍK

ŠK Slovan Bratislava Futbal is the most successful football club in Slovak history. Established in 1919, it is today owned by the Kmotrík family, with businessman Ivan Kmotrík Sr. playing a key role in its operations. He was also behind the construction of the club's modern Tehelné Pole stadium.

6. LSE – LIFE STAR EMERGENCY

NET PROFIT: €8,247,526

FAMILY: MICKSI

One of Slovakia's largest private providers of urgent pre-hospital care within the Integrated Rescue System, the company offers primary emergency response, patient transfers at home and abroad, medical support for events, and first aid training.

5. MTS

NET PROFIT: €9,658,131

FAMILY: HABOVŠTIAK

One of the largest companies in Slovakia's engineering industry, MTS produces modern machinery and equipment for domestic and international manufacturers. Its portfolio ranges from manual stations to fully automated robotic workplaces, serving primarily clients in the automotive and electronics sectors. Founded in 1996 by Juraj Habovštiak and two partners in the boiler room of a family house, the company has since grown into a major player in the field.

4. STÉNIA

NET PROFIT: €10,066,681

FAMILY: SPIŠÁK

Authorised wholesale and retail distributor of the STIHL brand in Slovakia, headquartered in Košice. The company specialises in garden and forestry machinery, offering products such as chainsaws, lawnmowers, brushcutters, chippers, lubricants, protective gear, and accessories. It also provides both warranty and post-warranty servicing through its network of accredited dealers.

3. LABAŠ

NET PROFIT: €10,754,362

FAMILY: LABAŠ

Slovakia's largest domestic food wholesale company, Labaš was founded in 1992 by Miroslav Labaš as a garage startup. From those beginnings, it has grown into a business operating out of a 20,000 m² warehouse in Košice-Nad Jazerom. It distributes more than 8,000 stock-keeping units daily across Slovakia, the EU, and beyond, serving over 3,500 customers each year, including its own chain of Fresh Plus supermarkets. The founder remains the majority owner, while his sons, Miroslav and Richard, are also shareholders, responsible for PR and IT.

2. TRUSTPAY

NET PROFIT: €11,131,144

FAMILY: RINTEL

Founded in 2009, this Bratislava-based fintech company today ranks among the premier payment institutions in the region providing secure payments for e-commerce across the entire EEA. Since its establishment, it has focused on delivering innovative payment services for online businesses with both domestic and global reach. Its services include worldwide online card payment processing, modern accounts tailored to companies operating online, a wide range of local payment methods, and more.

1. NIKÉ

NET PROFIT: €41,970,681

FAMILY: BERGER

The majority owner in Niké, the oldest and largest private betting company in Slovakia, is the Berger family. The company was founded in 1991 by the late Otto Berger. His son Roman led the company after Otto passed away in 2023. Niké has two other co-owners, Robert Mardiak and Adriana Borutová, who together hold a 49 percent stake. The firm owns Slovakia's largest online sports portal, sport.sk, as well as the long-established daily newspaper Šport. It also sponsors various sports clubs.

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Which family business grew most in 2024?

FIRMS ACTIVE IN MECHANICAL ENGINEERING, LOGISTICS, CONSTRUCTION, MINTING AND SPORT WERE AMONG LAST YEAR'S RISING STARS

Text: Ján Pallo and Jana Liptáková

Fifteen family businesses with revenues over €5 million posted growth of more than 50 percent in 2024 with one – Pressburg Mint – registering a stunning expansion of more than 400 percent. And with that firm having recently significantly expanded its production capacity, the chances are high that it will see further robust growth in the near future too. However, year-on-year revenue growth in the family business sector between 2023 and 2024 was marginal, reaching 0.5 percent across more than 1,000 monitored companies.

According to Slovak legislation, family businesses are defined as firms in which families own a majority stake and at least two family members either work directly in the company or hold management positions.

15. AUTO – VALAS GROUP
FAMILY: VALAS;
REGION: KOŠICE
ANNUAL REVENUE GROWTH: 50.03%
REVENUE 2024: €31,113,025
REVENUE 2023: €20,737,594

The AUTO-VALAS family business, from the Spiš region, has been selling cars in eastern Slovakia for more than 30 years. Štefan Valas, director and co-owner of the company founded by his parents, says that while still the same family business, the company has undergone significant changes in recent years. Currently, the firm is focusing on the Kia, Toyota and Lexus brands. It runs two branches in Košice and one in Smižany.

14. ELSPOL – SK
FAMILY: ŠIMURDA;
REGION: ŽILINA
ANNUAL REVENUE GROWTH: 50.87%

REVENUE 2024: €14,545,502
REVENUE 2023: €9,640,847

Martin Šimurda and wife Renáta's firm ELSPOL-SK celebrated its 20th anniversary in mid August. The company looks to provide a wide range of services, primarily for the energy industry, as well as for development and investment projects. It offers a comprehensive package of services from consulting, preparation of project documentation, supervision and management of engineering activities, project implementation, to final approval.

13. TERMOSTAV – MRÁZ
FAMILY: MRÁZ;
REGION: KOŠICE
ANNUAL REVENUE GROWTH: 54.38%

REVENUE 2024: €25,647,080
REVENUE 2023: €16,613,098
TERMOSTAV-MRÁZ operates in the field of refractory linings and special insulation in both domestic and foreign markets. The company, owned by several Košice-based entrepreneurs led by Štefan Mráz, claims that behind every successful company there is a team of satisfied employees and that the company puts an emphasis on workers' safety and continuous growth.

14. BEST SORTIMENTS
FAMILY: HLINKA;
REGION: PREŠOV
ANNUAL REVENUE GROWTH: 55.66%

REVENUE 2024: €19,573,547
REVENUE 2023: €12,574,337
BEST Sortiments, owned by Milan Hlinka and Ella Hlinková, in close cooperation with the German firm Fermtch Biotechnologische Produkte GmbH, develops nutritional supplements for both active and passive athletes.

11. MB PANÓNSKA
FAMILY: ŠABO;
REGION: BRATISLAVA
ANNUAL REVENUE GROWTH: 60.93%
REVENUE 2024: €65,932,139
REVENUE 2023: €40,969,141

MB Panónska, owned by Július Šabo, is an authorised Mercedes-Benz dealer and service centre located in Bratislava at Panónska Cesta 31, Bratislava. The company offers sales of new and used Mercedes-Benz vehicles, car servicing, vehicle trade-in, tyre services, sales of spare parts, as well as financial and business consultancy, including insurance services.

10. J.P.V.K. SROS
FAMILY: KOZÁČIK;
REGION: ŽILINA
ANNUAL REVENUE GROWTH: 61.11%
REVENUE 2024: €8,147,417
REVENUE 2023: €5,057,055

J.P.V.K. SROS spol. s r.o. is a stable and dynamically developing construction company operating on the market since 1992. It provides comprehensive services in construction, renovation, and modernisation of various types of projects, including professional consultancy. Since its establishment, the company has positioned itself as a contractor for civil engineering projects, offering a complete turnkey service. The company also owns its own fleet of lorries, plus machinery and equipment.

9. LOGISPED
FAMILY: LAMOŠ;
REGION: ŽILINA
ANNUAL REVENUE GROWTH: 65.79%
REVENUE 2024: €11,523,871
REVENUE 2023: €6,950,736
LOGISPED is a family-owned logistics company, founded in 1995 and based in

Žilina, north-western Slovakia. It specialises in rail and combined transport solutions, ensuring smooth deliveries throughout Europe, the Balkans, the former Soviet Union, and Asia. It maintains long-term partnerships with leading European transport companies and global logistics providers, delivering personalised services, while its flexible structure allows it to adapt quickly and guarantee efficient and seamless operations.

8. GAMOTA JR

FAMILY: ZSIGO;

REGION: BANSKÁ BYSTRICA

ANNUAL REVENUE GROWTH: 74.88%

REVENUE 2024: €16,764,144

REVENUE 2023: €9,586,069

Gamota JR is a subsidiary of the Gamota Group, active in agriculture, forestry, fish farming, and international trade. Its main activity is the processing of soybeans at its plant in Malé Straciny. The company produces premium GMO-free virgin soybean oil (GamoSoy) and GMO-free soybean expeller (SoyProFat).

7. MILKING

FAMILY: ŠTEFANOVIČ;

REGION: BRATISLAVA

ANNUAL REVENUE GROWTH: 76.07%

REVENUE 2024: €14,474,100

REVENUE 2023: €8,220,759

Jozef Štefanovič's company Milking primarily designs and manufactures technology for the processing of milk and whey, and for the production of curd, yoghurt, cheese, butter and other dairy products. It also offers food-processing technology for food production, soft drinks, mineral waters, alcoholic beverages, wine, and other food products. In addition, it supplies parts and components for the cosmetics, pharmaceutical, and, to some extent, chemical industries. Since its establishment, it has completed more than 6,000 projects for operations in Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Austria, Germany, Belarus, Russia and Ukraine.

6. ROEZ

FAMILY: LECKÝ; REGION: NITRA

ANNUAL REVENUE GROWTH: 81.34%

REVENUE 2024: €50,685,154

REVENUE 2023: €27,950,468

ROEZ was founded in 2004 and since then has distinguished itself as a turnkey supplier of operating units and com-

plete industrial plant packages with an emphasis on mechanical technology in nuclear, conventional and hydro power, as well as the petrochemical and chemical industries.

5. ALPINET

FAMILY: GAZDÍK;

REGION: BRATISLAVA

ANNUAL REVENUE GROWTH: 81.44%

REVENUE 2024: €12,303,218

REVENUE 2023: €6,781,055

Since its founding in 1993, Alpinet has focused on its work as a premium supplier of buildings at home and abroad in the field of energetics, nuclear energetics, the chemical and food industries, power equipment, storage tanks and steel structures.

4. XENEX

FAMILY: ZÁKOPČAN;

REGION: ŽILINA

ANNUAL REVENUE GROWTH: 81.52%

REVENUE 2024: €19,242,712

REVENUE 2023: €10,601,070

Construction company XENEX has been on the market since 2004. The company's core business is the construction of complex civic and industrial facilities. It offers a complete package of services, including design and engineering, construction and reconstruction of buildings, facility management and asset management.

3. VEDOS

FAMILY: VEREŠPEJ;

REGION: PREŠOV

ANNUAL REVENUE GROWTH: 87.95%

REVENUE 2024: €59,786,630

REVENUE 2023: €31,809,603

With annual revenue growth of nearly 90 percent, the logistics company Vedos – which, in addition to logistics, is also engaged in construction, the rental of heavy-duty machinery, and operates concrete plants in Prešov, Košice, Lipany and Poprad – was the third fastest-growing family business in Slovakia. The history of Vedos dates back to 2010 when it was founded by Michal Verešpej with a single truck. Over the past 15 years the company, headquartered in Petrovany near Prešov, has expanded significantly and now employs more than 450 people. Two years ago, Vedos announced the construction of an

€18-million logistics centre near Prešov, later adding a residential project of 260 apartments valued at €50 million. The logistics centre in the Záborské industrial park is now set for expansion, with a planned investment exceeding €24 million.

2. ŠK SLOVAN BRATISLAVA FUTBAL

FAMILY: KMOTRÍK;

REGION: BRATISLAVA

ANNUAL REVENUE GROWTH: 104.14%

REVENUE 2024: €39,594,795

REVENUE 2023: €19,396,093

The second fastest-growing family business last year, with annual growth of more than 104 percent, was the ŠK Slovan Bratislava football club owned by the family of prominent Slovak businessman Ivan Kmotrík. He owns the club, as well as enterprises such as Grafobal Group and other companies. Founded in 1919, the club is the most successful team in Slovak football history – having won the most league and cup titles in the country. Last August, it qualified for the UEFA Champions League for the first time in 14 years.

1. PRESSBURG MINT – BRATISLAVSKÁ MINCOVNĀ

FAMILY: BEHUL; REGION: BRATISLAVA

ANNUAL REVENUE GROWTH:

461.96%

REVENUE 2024: €78,790,680

REVENUE 2023: €14,020,609

With growth of more than 460 percent, Pressburg Mint – continuing the tradition of Celtic coin minting in Bratislava, then known as Pressburg – tops the 2024 ranking. Founded in 2015 as a small “garage” family business by Ladislav Behul together with his brother Radoslav and his son Alan, the company has been jointly managed by the trio ever since. Over 10 years, they have succeeded in establishing themselves as respected players in the minting market. In the past year, they acquired minting technologies at favourable prices from the state mints of Finland and the United Kingdom, which had closed their circulation coin production. They are now building their fourth production facility, significantly expanding their capacity to include circulation coins and making them one of the largest mints in the world in terms of output. © TSS

In family businesses, trust is personal, says expert

MONIKA NAĐOVÁ KROŠLÁKOVÁ ON WHY FAMILY FIRMS MATTER, HOW THEY SHAPE SLOVAKIA'S ECONOMY, AND WHY SUCCESSION IS THEIR BIGGEST CHALLENGE

Text: Jana Liptáková • **Photo:** Archive of Monika Naďová Krošláková

When choosing a guesthouse in the mountains for a winter holiday, family business expert Monika Naďová Krošláková prefers family-run pensions.

"I know that if I wake up with neck pain from a bad pillow, they will bring me their own," she says, adding that the people behind a family business know that it is this kind of service on which the company's reputation stands or falls.

Naďová Krošláková has a vested interest in the subject of family businesses – she grew up in one in which her father first produced wine and later, after the fall of communism, moved into plastics. From a young age, she experienced both the positive and negative aspects of family business and the blending of work and personal life.

As an academic, a lecturer, and someone active in entre-

preneurial circles, she quickly realised how unique family firms were. They combine economic goals with personal values, business with family relationships, and rationality with emotion.

"I also saw how their significance is often underestimated or even invisible in society," she tells *The Slovak Spectator*. "Many family businesses operate modestly and unobtrusively, with an emphasis on quality and continuity, yet they lack the support and recognition that reflect their true impact on the economy and community life. Education, research, consultancy and public awareness are therefore key."

In an interview with *The Slovak Spectator*, Naďová Krošláková talks about family businesses in Slovakia, what challenges they face, and more.

How important are family businesses to the Slovak economy?

Family businesses play a key role. According to European statistics and analyses, for example from the European Commission, the EPP Group and European Family Businesses, family firms represent more than 60 percent of all enterprises in the EU and generate up to half of private-sector jobs. Slovakia is close to this average: it is estimated that family businesses account for around 60 percent of all enterprises here, employing more than half of those working in the private sector.

Their contribution to GDP is harder to quantify, as there was no official definition of a family business until 2023. Even now, the definition is not linked to practical incentives, so most firms have little reason to register as a family business officially. For the time being, we must rely on estimates. If we also take into account foreign family businesses operating in Slovakia through production plants or commercial representations, we estimate that the

overall contribution to GDP is roughly around 40-50 percent.

How does the family business sector in Slovakia compare to those in other countries?

In comparison with Germany, Austria, Italy and Spain, Slovakia lags in terms of systemic support, legal recognition and a professional approach to succession. In those countries, specific support tools, stable registration systems and advisory institutions are well established, whereas in Slovakia systematic development is only beginning.

What was the impact of communism on family businesses?

The socialist period left deep marks on society's perception of entrepreneurship in general. The suppression of private initiative influenced business culture for generations. Many entrepreneurial families were forced to halt their activities or operate unofficially. After 1989, entrepreneurship revived, but in an environment lacking experi-

ence, infrastructure and trust in ownership. For this reason, in Slovakia the first generation of family businesses is often the founding generation who built their companies entirely from scratch. This experience shaped their attitudes to ownership, employees and succession. Many became used to doing everything themselves, without delegating or planning for the firm's future.

Succession is often mentioned as the biggest challenge for family businesses. Could you explain this a bit more?

A large number of companies have no plan for transferring leadership or ownership, which leads to uncertainty, postponed decisions and conflicts between generations. For example, abroad, it is common for family members to step down from managerial positions around the age of 55, allowing younger family members to take an active role in the business. They may continue to serve in advisory boards, supervisory roles, or focus on philanthropy and



Monika Nad'ová Krošláková

- She is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Commerce of the Bratislava University of Economics. She is the founder of the Family Business Center, member of several international family-business related organisations and a co-owner of the family production company Novplasta and the consulting company Excellence Consulting.
- She will be one of speakers of the fourth edition of the International Congress of Family Businesses organised by the Institute of Family Business (IRB), at Château Bela on September 18 and 19.

family projects. Otherwise, the younger family members may decide on a career outside the family business. But in Slovakia it is common that the founders remain in managerial positions into much older age. Also, the first generation used to work seven days a week, but generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012, does not work this way any more, focusing on work-life balance, including working remotely and so on. Abroad, there have even been cases where parents sold the family business to their children. By having to buy the company instead of receiving it as a gift or inheritance, they tended to appreciate it much more. Moreover, they set out in family constitutions what qualifications a family member eager to work in the family business should have or which languages he or she needs to speak. This way they avoid the dangers of nepotism or insufficient expertise.

What other challenges do family businesses face?


They stem from the overlap between family and business roles. A frequent problem is informal management, the absence of professional advice, and a lack of systematic preparation of successors. Governance tools such as family constitutions, succession plans, family councils and regular assemblies are often missing. These could prevent tensions, support communication and ensure continuity after generational change. Another challenge is professionalising management: deciding when and how to involve external managers, how to set competence models for family members, and how to align family values with strategy. A growing issue is the lack of interest among the next generation in continuing the business – and in many cases, even in staying in Slovakia. Young people who study abroad often choose a different lifestyle or career, and do not always see their parents' company as attractive. These internal challenges are reinforced by external pressures

such as inflation, rising costs, labour shortages, and increasing demands for sustainability and digitalisation. Nevertheless, family businesses remain resilient in crises, flexible, and loyal to employees even in difficult times.

Could you give examples of successful family businesses in Slovakia, and what has been behind their success?

There are many – Minit Slovakia, Baník & Syn, Idona, Kellys, Kompa, Matador Group, Maspoma, Dynamik Holding, Tomark, Galvex, Homola, Wyvar, MTS Krivá, Krošlak and 101 Drogerie have all managed to adapt, innovate and preserve their family culture. Their success is often rooted in a long-term vision, open communication within the family, well-prepared successors and a willingness to professionalise management. Many have introduced mechanisms such as family councils, family constitutions, external mentors and formal succession plans.

Why did you establish the Family Business Center at the Bratislava University of Economics?

The centre was created in response to the lack of systematic support for family firms in Slovakia. Its purpose is to connect research, practice and education. It serves as a research and advisory workplace, but also as a platform for networking and exchanging experience between entrepreneurial families, experts and students. Our long-term goal is to strengthen family firms' professional foundations and contribute to their sustainability, stability and generational continuity. 



Vladimír Mrva (left) and Peter Stanko in the wine cellar of their Víno Mrva & Stanko winery.

The Trnava winemakers who defied the supermarkets

THEY CREATED AN AURA OF UNIQUENESS AROUND THEIR WINERY

Text: Jozef Tvardžik • Photo: Lukáš Klčo

On the edge of Trnava stands a modern winery with stylish cellars, a guesthouse and a restaurant. Two courtyards bear the names of the winery's founders, Vladimír Mrva and Peter Stanko, who together built one of the most modern wine production facilities in Slovakia. Their wines are respected internationally, though the average Slovak may not know the brand well.

From the outset they chose not to sell through supermarket chains. Their main customers became hotels, restaurants, wine shops and, above all, companies wanting to gift wine to their business partners.

"In that, we were pioneers," says Stanko. "Firms are interested in wines that cannot be bought in supermarkets, wines with a certain exclusivity."

Around their brand they cultivated an aura of uniqueness, which helped them survive in a market dominated by imports. Their marketing rests on subtle but powerful community building – 300 tastings a year that attract both corporate and private clients.

TAKING INSPIRATION FROM AUSTRIAN WINEMAKING

Mrva, a winemaker to his bones, worked in Austria in the early 1990s.

"In Austria I saw a completely different culture of drinking and serving wine," he recalls. They could talk about it for hours.

The experience shaped his vision: wine as quality and emotion rather than bulk litres without value.

When he met Stanko, an economist who had launched an advertising agency, they quickly saw the potential bene-

Félix Business Award

A business prize promulgated by the INDEX magazine and Slovenská Sporiteľňa bank in cooperation with partners. It is awarded to inspiring and socially responsible companies and municipalities for activities that contribute to the prosperity and modernisation of the country. Three companies have been nominated for the award this year. The winners will be announced in October.

fits of joining forces. Their first vintage, in 1997, yielded just 12,000 bottles that were produced in a family cellar that soon proved too small. They moved repeatedly into larger rented premises, investing heavily in renovation only to face rising rents. Finally, in 2000, they bought land on the edge of Trnava and, with bank loans secured against their own homes, built a winery with a shop, tasting rooms, restaurant and guesthouse. Production rose to 300,000 bottles a year, where it remains.

REMODELLING WINE CULTURE

Their modern approach reshaped Slovak wine culture. While the 1990s market favoured heavy, sweet wines, they introduced lighter, fruitier styles that appealed to a broader audience. Their bestseller is Grüner Veltliner Kryo, which uses cryomaceration to make a fresh, easy-drinking wine. Also popular is their premium Wine-maker's Cut range, made from unique Slovak varieties bred by Dorota Pošpíšilová. A bottle costs €10-40.

"The price has to be fair, but at a level that leaves room for company development and building reserves," says Stanko.

Revenues reach €2.6 million annually, with profits of about €220,000; 95 per cent of sales remain in Slovakia.

STILL A FAMILY BUSINESS

The company is still a family affair, with Stanko's daughter Mária working in finance and Mrva's son Michal founding a related wine startup. The founders agree that if anyone were to take over the company, it would likely be Stanko's nephew Jozef, who has been working with them for over 15 years.

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Running out of colours, not ideas:

How Fytopharma stays competitive

THE SLOVAK TEA PRODUCER THRIVES ON BRAND RECOGNITION IN PHARMACIES, DIVERSIFIES INTO COSMETICS, AND BETS ON FAMILY LEADERSHIP

Text: Jozef Tvardzík • Photo: Lukáš Klčo

When entering the industrial site of Fytopharma in Malacky, one can still feel its socialist past. The austere complex near the hospital has seen several owners and business stories over the decades. Today, it belongs to Martin and Janka Valigurský, the married couple behind this family firm that has been producing herbal teas for 25 years. Its portfolio is so broad that CEO Martin Valigurský half-jokingly says they ran out of colours during a recent packaging redesign. In one of the buildings they also run a laboratory, testing dried plants and developing new products.

“Competition is strong, so we try to offer what customers demand,” says Valigurský. With more than 30 employees, Fytopharma remains financially sound: last year revenues neared €3 million, and profits exceeded €220,000. Yet profits have been stagnant, and the couple – Martin as CEO, Janka as CFO – are looking to expand beyond teas. Founded in 2001 by Martin’s father Ján and partner Pavol Čupka, the company took over premises once belonging to Liečivé Rastliny Malacky, a branch of Slovakofarma dating back to 1970. The plant once processed over 1,000 tons of herbs annually, largely for export. After the Velvet Revolution it was privatised. Ján Valigurský’s other business, Calendula, later became one of Fytopharma’s main suppliers of herbal extracts and oils.



Martin and Janka Valigurský.

Martin joined later, after 10 years at Metro Cash & Carry and running his own firm, Fyto Trade. In 2013 he became CEO of Fytopharma.

“From an organisational point of view, production didn’t require radical changes, so I focused on strengthening sales. We bought new technologies, developed new products, and reached out to new customers.” His father, now chair of the supervisory board, remained a mentor.

Fytopharma sells mostly through pharmacy chains such as Dr. Max and Benu,

with distribution via major wholesalers. “Business is more complicated than it used to be, because big pharmacy players promote their private labels at the expense of ours,” notes Valigurský. Still, the brand’s recognition helps, and the company has also secured space in Kaufland and Billa.

Its portfolio spans around 100 teas, from single-herb to blends for digestion, sleep, detox and respiratory support. Some legacy products, like Perospir or Tatranská priedušková zmes, date back to Slovakofarma days. Beyond teas, the firm offers digestive drops, cosmetics and lozenges. Herbs are sourced from Slovak suppliers such as Nákupňa Rosa, and every batch is lab-tested before blending and packing.

Fytopharma has invested in automation but avoids full robotisation, which it considers too costly.

“Last year, we bought a new automatic packing machine and are now saving for the maintenance of older machines and repair of older buildings,” says Janka. The couple prefer to fund growth from their own resources, occasionally drawing on EU funds.

While stable, the company faces rising competition and pressure from partners. As in previous years, the crucial months will be autumn and winter, when customers seek warming teas against the cold.

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The founders of Riso-R (from left): Michal Demeter, his father Štefan, Nadežda Demeterová and Rastislav Demeter.

From failing cannery to Slovakia's jam giant

*RISO-R PRODUCES JAMS THAT ARE SUPPLIED
TO ALL THE MAJOR RETAIL CHAINS*

Text: Jozef Tvardzík • Photo: Lukáš Klíčo

Štefan and Nadežda Demeter transformed a failing cannery in Rimavská Sobota into Slovakia's largest jam producer. Their family company, Riso-R, now produces over 3,000 ton of jam annually, made from fresh and frozen fruit.

"Our unfulfilled dream is to have our own orchards – to grow our own fruit and make jam from it," says founder Nadežda Demeterová, who, together with her husband, has been in the business for three decades.

From the start, their sons Michal and Rastislav have been part of the company. Today, the family of four still manages it together: Nadežda oversees finances and HR, Štefan handles technology and maintenance, Michal leads sales, and Rastislav procures raw materials. This unity has paid off: in the past two years, turnover has doubled and profits have increased fivefold.

The parents were not originally food producers. Both studied mechanical engineering; Nadežda worked in education and elderly care, while Štefan was responsible for machinery at a state agri-food company. After the regime change, they joined three other families to buy the neglected cannery, but foreign imports and supermarket dominance forced them to sell in 2005. When

the investor who acquired the property abandoned production, the Demeters restarted operations on rented premises under the new name Riso-R.

Jam production proved a strategic choice: unlike in other sectors, competition was minimal.

"We wanted to do something where we wouldn't be in anyone's way," recalls Nadežda. Starting with modest capital, the family built up capacity and reputation.

Fruit supply remains a challenge. Much comes from Hungary and Moldova, as Slovakia lacks sufficient growers.

"I feel that these days people have become spoilt. What we used to grow ourselves, we now buy," notes Nadežda.

Prices fluctuate sharply – raspberries are expensive one year, the next it's sour cherries – forcing flexibility in sourcing. Production peaks before Easter and Christmas, when demand for baking jams surges.

Competition is tough, not only from foreign producers but also from households making their own jam. Yet Riso-R stresses quality: jams are cooked at 70°C in vacuum boilers, which preserves their vitamin content.

"I have always claimed that our jam contains more vitamin C than homemade jam," says Nadežda, and labora-

tory tests have confirmed their jams retain 20 percent more vitamin C than homemade equivalents.

Most sales go to supermarkets under both the Riso-R brand and private labels. Private-label contracts, though price-sensitive, keep production lines running at capacity, thus lowering costs. Around 56 percent of sales are domestic, with the rest mainly in the Czech Republic and Austria.

Like much of Slovak food production, Riso-R faces higher costs than its foreign rivals due to smaller scale and older technologies.

To stay competitive, the firm has invested in fillers, pasteurisation equipment, new packaging lines, and modern boilers. Automation is their next priority.

"In the next stage, we would like to focus more on automation to reduce dependence on manual labour, as we struggle to find suitable workers," says Štefan.

Today Riso-R employs 54 staff, nearly double the number from just a few years ago. Investment continues gradually, supported partly by subsidies – though the family worries Slovakia lags behind its neighbours in state support.

"Our competitors abroad enjoy far better conditions," says Štefan. 

To read the full article, please go to www.spectator.sk



Legacy meets innovation: The INPROKOM in story

From a 1950s municipal laundry to a modern family-run enterprise
INPROKOM in blends tradition with technology and sustainability

INPROKOM in proudly continues a legacy that began over 70 years ago with a municipal laundry in Bratislava.

“Following the transformation of the original state-owned operation in the 1990s, a new chapter began in 2014, when our family took over the business,” says Ingrid Drozd Janečková, representative and executive director of INPROKOM in.

The decision to do business in the laundry and dry-cleaning sector came from recognising the potential to deliver a high-quality service in an industry that is often undervalued.

“By combining the experience of the original team with modern values – such as reliability, precision and environmental responsibility – we’ve created a service that meets today’s expectations while remaining deeply respectful of the craft,” says Drozd Janečková. Since then, the company has modernised its technologies, embraced sustainable practices and placed a strong emphasis on quality – all while preserving the roots of its long-standing tradition.

INPROKOM in is more than just a family-owned company in the legal sense – family values lie at the very heart of its operation. “They guide our relationships with both employees and customers,” says Drozd

Janečková. “Trust, stability and a personal approach form the foundation of our long-term success and client satisfaction.”

Today, INPROKOM in operates two branches – in Bratislava and Senec – and processes approximately 750 tons of laundry and 20,000 square metres of carpets annually.

“In” stands for innovation

The “in” in the company’s name symbolises innovation – an ongoing commitment to modern technologies, eco-friendly solutions and efficient processes that continuously improve service quality.

“It reflects our philosophy of staying one step ahead and adapting to the evolving needs of our clients,” adds Drozd Janečková.

Specific business

Laundry services are, by nature, highly specialised. They require a combination of technical know-how and artisanal precision. Understanding different materials, choosing the correct treatment, and building client trust are all essential.

“Today, customers expect not only cleanliness but also careful handling, environmental responsibility and flexibility – and we are proud to deliver on all fronts,” she says. The company’s service portfolio includes the laundering and dry-cleaning of linens, workwear, carpets, household textiles – and even items for pets.

INPROKOM in uses advanced technology, offers its own logistics, and places great importance on quality, sustainability and personal customer care.

In the B2B sector, their most in-demand services are for hotels – including laundering bed linen, tablecloths and staff uniforms.

“In the B2C segment, customers most often turn to us for cleaning garments such as coats, suits and home carpets – often taking

advantage of our convenient collection and delivery service,” says Drozd Janečková.

What they’re most proud of

Above all, the company takes the greatest pride in its team – the foundation of its quality and reliability.

As a family-run business with no external investors, INPROKOM in is also proud of its performance in 2024, having achieved a 13-percent increase in revenue and a 79-percent rise in net profit.

“We’ve been repeatedly awarded the AA Certificate by Bisnode/Dun & Bradstreet and received the Orly award for outstanding professionalism in our sector,” notes Drozd Janečková. “We’re also consistently recognised by the Bratislava Tax Office as a highly reliable taxpayer – a distinction we value greatly.”

Looking to the future

Looking ahead, INPROKOM in plans to expand its capacity, invest further in eco-friendly technologies, and continue the digitalisation of its services – including online ordering and parcel tracking.

“We also aim to diversify into industrial textile cleaning and further strengthen our position as a sustainable, trusted family brand in the market,” concludes Drozd Janečková.

Milestones

1950

Beginnings as a municipal laundry in Bratislava

1993

Establishment of INPROKOM Ltd.

2014

Transformation into INPROKOM in Ltd.



INPROKOM in
PRANIE A ČISTENIE ODEVOV A BIELIZNE
ČISTENIE KOBERCOV

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Fico downplays violence against ethnic Slovaks in Serbia, sides with Vučić

A SMALL PHOTO EXHIBITION IN THE SERBIAN TOWN OF BAČKI PETROVAC DOCUMENTING ANTI-GOVERNMENT PROTESTS WAS TORN DOWN BY RULING PARTY LOYALISTS. THE VIOLENCE HAS SPARKED SOLIDARITY IN SLOVAKIA – AND CRITICISM OF ITS GOVERNMENT’S SUPPORT FOR BELGRADE

Text: Peter Dlholec • Photo: Facebook – Aleksandar Vučić, TASR, Facebook – Michal Šimečka

Several hundred people gathered in the Slovak capital of Bratislava on the early evening of August 19 in solidarity with demonstrators in Serbia, after a photo exhibition in the Serbian multi-ethnic town of Bački Petrovac was violently disrupted earlier in August during the Slovak National Festivities.

The rally in Bratislava combined speeches, images from recent Serbian protests, and the public reading of a let-

ter from the visual artist Olja Triaška Stefanović sent from her home in Bački Petrovac (Bačsky Petrovec in Slovak). Serbian by birth, she married into the Slovak community in Vojvodina and studied in Slovakia – an experience that, she said, gave her the perspective of living as part of a minority herself.

In her letter, Stefanović referenced a family photograph of her grandfather sitting alongside Hungarian, Slovak and German neighbours in the summer before World War II, all drinking

spritzer – white wine mixed with sparkling water. “In a single shot I see the essence of Vojvodina,” she wrote. “There is no question of who is a minority and who is a majority – we are all neighbours.”

Vojvodina, Serbia’s multi-ethnic northern province, still recognises eight official languages, a pluralism Stefanović described as increasingly under siege. She accused Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić of presiding over a “criminal dictatorship” that for more than 15



Community life and the traditions of Vojvodina Slovaks were the central theme of the Slovak National Festivities, held in the small town of Bački Petrovac (Bački Petrovec in Slovak) near Novi Sad, Serbia, from August 8 to 10, 2025. Yet the festival made headlines mainly because of an attack that took place in the town on Saturday, August 9 by supporters of the Serbian governing party on a photo exhibition about protests in Serbia, which was not part of the official programme. Several photographs were damaged in the assault and a number of people were injured.

years has weaponised questions of minority identity.

She recalled feeling like a minority twice over: in the 1990s, when she protested the Balkan wars, and again under Vučić, when acquaintances refused to sit with her “because I was not Serbian enough”.

Now, she wrote, living among her husband’s Slovak family in Vojvodina had brought her closer to her grandfather’s world, in which identity was rooted in neighbourly bonds rather than imposed divisions.

VIOLENCE AROUND PHOTOGRAPHY

Stefanović’s testimony was prompted by the disruption on August 9 of the Bački Petrovac exhibition, which showed photographs of recent protests against the Serbian government conducted by young activists and students in villages where Slovak minorities live, including Pivnice, Kovačica, Kulpin, Padina and Hložany as well as Bački Petrovac.

The display – announced to police in advance – coincided with the annual Slovak National Festivities, the cultural centrepiece for Vojvodina’s Slovak community, who number about 42,000, according to the 2022 census. That figure has steadily declined in recent years, a trend some blame on the rule of Vučić’s Serbian Progressive Party (SNS).

The exhibition was not part of the main programme. Instead, photographs were strung on a line between three trees near the local library, a modest setting that organisers hoped would

invite quiet reflection on the reality of life in Serbia.

Titled “Life in Slovak Communities You Won’t See in Hlas Ludu” – a jab at the state-aligned Slovak-language weekly that has largely ignored the protest movement – the exhibition instead became a flashpoint for a violent political confrontation.

Organisers of the show – some of whom later attended the Bratislava gathering – said that on August 9, supporters and members of Vučić’s SNS party, including municipal officials of both Slovak and Serbian background, twice tore down images and physically assaulted participants, among them Slovaks, Serbs and even war veterans. Police, they said, stood by and did not intervene.

Serbia’s opposition parties condemned the attacks. “The photographs contain no element of hatred – only solidarity and love,” said Sara Valentik, a Serbian Slovak who studied at university in Banská Bystrica, Slovakia, and helped stage the exhibition. “This is not a problem between nationalities. It is a problem with the ruling party, which cannot tolerate independent thought.”

Despite intimidation, organisers re-mounted the show the following day. Supporters travelled from across Serbia to attend, some arriving by bicycle along back roads after police and local officials blocked main routes. Others, like Marija Srđić of the Civic Movement Bravo, came by small boats, determined to see the exhibition.

“It was a small sabotage team – but saboteurs who do not carry weapons, only strong will,” she said. “Our will is that

small sabotage, and we will always act like that.”

The photo series, shown in both Bački Petrovac and Bratislava and scheduled to travel across Slovakia, documented a wave of student-led protests that has swelled since November 2024, when the collapse of a railway station canopy in Novi Sad killed 16 people. Students blocked universities, demanding accountability and prosecutions. When their demands were ignored, they called for early elections.

Clashes with pro-government groups have since become common. Women and children have also been detained. “Dozens of women, students and even children have been arrested. This is the reality we are living in,” said Stefanović, appealing to European institutions to investigate and halt these abuses and acts of violence.

Meanwhile, Juraj Bartoš, a former journalist, told the Bratislava crowd that dissidents had launched an alternative, “free” edition of Hlas Ludu (Voice of the People) in March, to cover the student-led demonstrations against corruption and what participants describe as creeping authoritarianism.

CULTURE AS POLITICAL BATTLEGROUND

Stefanović’s letter also criticised both Belgrade and Bratislava for allowing cultural institutions to be misused for political ends. She singled out the closure of Bratislava’s Kunsthalle gallery by the government of Robert Fico while it was showing an exhibition on the alleged endangerment of Serbian cultural heritage in Kosovo, which was being



A protest event by the Open Culture! platform entitled Standing Together with Slovaks in Serbia – Photographs from Bački Petrovac Exhibited in Bratislava. The gathering took place in Bratislava on August 19, 2025.

staged with little public notice in either country.

“It was a sign of support for Vučić’s regime – the same regime that sends thugs to beat people up for telling the truth,” she wrote in her letter.

Vučić and Fico enjoy warm relations. They both travelled to Moscow in May to attend Russian World War II commemorations. After meeting there, the Serbian president posted on social media: “Serbs and Slovaks, brothers forever!” In March, as protests swept Serbia, Fico voiced support for Vučić, declaring that in a “democratic country the street must not overturn the results of free elections.” Moreover, Fico has repeatedly vowed that Slovakia will never recognise Kosovo’s independence and voiced support for Serbia’s accession to the EU. In Bratislava, Bartoš, the journalist, reminded the crowd that the recent attack was not the first of its kind. On May 31, during elections for the governing bodies of Matica Slovenská – the main cultural institution of the Slovak minority in Serbia – a similar incident took place at the Slovak National Theatre in Bački Petrovac.

“Thugs blocked those who wanted to observe the vote from entering,” Bartoš said. “The Slovak ambassador [Michal Pavúk] entered and left through a side door. But he never came outside to see what was happening.” And outside, although it did not escalate into a full fight as at the exhibition, two or three women were struck, knocked to the ground, their phones smashed, according to Bartoš.

Anti-Slovak intimidation is not new in Vojvodina. Two years ago, in one vil-

lage, a list of Slovaks marked for expulsion was posted on a church door. A year later, in Kisač (Kysáč in Slovak), the slogan “Kill the Slovak” was sprayed in ten different locations. The perpetrators were never identified.

Serbia’s Academic Plenum, an assembly of scholars, also drew attention to the Matica Slovenská election incident after the attack in Bački Petrovac. The August 9 assault, it said, was “not accidental, but direct retaliation” for the government’s defeat in those elections. “As in Nazi Germany in the 1930s, persecution begins with attacks on cultural institutions and peaceful gatherings of minority communities, inciting fear and violence. Silence in such moments means complicity,” their statement declared, demanding resignations from senior officials responsible for minority affairs.

Serbia’s Ministry for Human and Minority Rights stayed silent. But the National Council of the Slovak National Minority – a 25-member elected body that approves school directors in Slovak areas, oversees the cultural institute and publishes the weekly Hlas Ludu – issued a statement condemning what it called “a direct attempt by blockaders and opposition parties to politicise the Slovak National Festivities”.

Juraj Červenák, president of Matica Slovenská in Serbia, was among the few to speak out in defence of Slovaks in Vojvodina after the Bački Petrovac attack. Despite the tensions, he said in an interview, relations between ordinary Serbs and Slovaks remain largely peaceful. Inter-marriage is common, and Slovak schools and churches continue to function.

FICO SIDES WITH VUČIĆ

What might have been dismissed as a scuffle at a folk festival has since grown into a national controversy in Slovakia. The incident has become a flashpoint between Prime Minister Fico and critics who accuse him of abandoning ethnic Slovaks in Serbia to protect his ties with President Vučić.

On August 11, Fico’s foreign minister, Juraj Blanár, wrote on Facebook that Slovak diplomacy would “not comment on or intervene in Serbia’s internal affairs”. He accused opposition figures of politicising a cultural event and claimed the photo exhibition had not been “authorised” by police.

“The valuable culture of our compatriots from Bački Petrovac has been turned into a battleground for opposition and coalition politics,” he wrote, insisting it had “nothing to do with the Slovak community or the celebrations themselves.”

At a press conference several days later, Blanár criticised Progressive Slovakia, the largest opposition party, for raising the issue with the EU, accusing it and its MEPs of pushing a “Maidanisation of European politics”, a reference to the protests on Kyiv’s Maidan square that toppled Ukraine’s pro-Russian government in 2014. The events of that time are collectively known in Ukraine as the Revolution of Dignity, but have become a focus for pro-Russian conspiracy theorists elsewhere. He went on to describe Serbia as “a significant player in the Western Balkans” unfairly blocked from joining the EU, and accused Slovak opposition politicians of seeking to damage its accession prospects.



Progressive Slovakia leader Michal Šimečka in front of the town sign for Bački Petrovac, August 13, 2025.

Fico reinforced his foreign minister's words, both on social media and later at the same press conference. "Not even the blind can fail to see the deliberate effort to import a Maidan into Serbia with the goal of toppling a sovereign and legitimate government," he said. People in Serbia, including ethnic Slovaks, he argued, were divided like Slovaks at home, with some supporting President Vučić and others opposing him.

Like Blanár, he claimed – citing information that he attributed to Slovakia's ambassador – that the exhibition had not been "authorised". He dismissed any link between Serbia's anti-government protests and the rights of ethnic Slovaks, instead insisting: "I should thank the Serbian government for its care of the Slovak minority." The prime minister went on to accuse the Slovak opposition of trying to "import Maidanisation" from Serbia into Slovakia, the media of "hating Vučić and the Serbian government", and the EU of deliberately blocking Serbia's entry into the bloc. He praised Vučić as one of the world's "most distinct politicians" because he was "sovereign" and "has his own opinions".

Nor did the Office for Slovaks Living Abroad defend the ethnic Slovaks who organised the exhibition in Serbia. Instead, it echoed the government's position on its official channels.

On August 20, Serbian Minister of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue Demo Berisha met with the Slovak ambassador to Serbia, Michal Pavúk. A statement released afterwards made no mention of the actual

events in Bački Petrovac and seemed to blame ethnic Slovaks rather than SNS supporters for the recent incident: "such unpleasant events have nothing to do with the position of the Slovak national minority in Serbia, and they do not violate the traditionally good and friendly relations between the two countries."

THE CONTRAST WITH ORBÁN

Slovak opposition parties reacted with outrage. The Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) expressed concern for the safety of Slovaks in Bački Petrovac and demanded an investigation. Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) called Fico's response "cowardly", contrasting it with how Budapest would respond if Hungarians in Slovakia were attacked. "Can you imagine what Budapest would do if, in Slovakia, someone attacked people at a Hungarian minority festival and spread terror among the Hungarian community living here?" the party asked.

Michal Šimečka, leader of Progressive Slovakia, travelled to Bački Petrovac on August 13. "Slovaks here face attacks from thugs close to the government. They fear for their families' safety. Robert Fico and Juraj Blanár have done nothing," he said, urging Slovakia's Foreign Ministry to summon the Serbian ambassador. "It is an absolute scandal that our foreign minister defends a foreign government and its sponsored thugs instead of standing up for our assaulted compatriots – including Slovak citizens."


Meanwhile, Slovakia's ombudsman, Róbert Dobrovodský, appealed to his

Serbian counterpart, Zoran Pašalić, to investigate police conduct in Bački Petrovac. He expressed "serious concern" that officers had failed to protect victims and later blocked roads to prevent citizens from entering the town.

Slovak diaspora groups abroad also voiced dismay. The platform krajansk, which exists to connect expatriate Slovaks, called Fico's response "unacceptable" and urged Bratislava to create a joint Slovak-Serbian commission to monitor minority rights. "The protection of our compatriots' rights and dignity is not the internal matter of another state – it is Slovakia's moral and political obligation," said Andrej Probst, a Prague-based member of the platform, urging Fico to condemn the attack.

In Bratislava, the protest concluded with chants of "Pumpaj" (Keep pushing) – the rallying cry of Serbia's student movement – as participants held aloft images from demonstrations in towns across Vojvodina. It was a nod to protesters in Serbia who often raise their hands as a gesture of peaceful resistance.

For Stefanović, hope lies in solidarity. "People protesting in Serbia want to live in democracy and freedom," her letter concluded, invoking the former Czechoslovak and Czech president Václav Havel. "I believe, as he did, that truth and love will prevail over lies and hatred."

"Sadly, Europe is still a little deaf, blind, mute," Bartoš said. "But we firmly believe things will move forward, that people in Europe will begin to understand what is happening in Serbia." 



Srdcom doma is a campaign organised by Pražská kaviareň in Prague to increase voter turnout among Slovaks living abroad

Slovaks abroad build civic spaces to stay politically engaged

“WE STILL CARE” SAYS EXPATS IN PRAGUE, LONDON, KRAKÓW AND ELSEWHERE WHO WANT TO MAINTAIN LINKS AND PARTICIPATE IN SLOVAK PUBLIC LIFE

Text: Elizaveta Blahodarova • Photo: Samuel Zubo, FB - Pražská kaviareň

As Slovakia continues to grapple with political volatility, democratic backsliding, and growing public cynicism, a parallel civic movement is quietly evolving beyond its borders. In Prague, London, Kraków and other cities, Slovak emigrants are forming so-called ‘civic cafés’ (kaviarne): informal yet increasingly structured spaces for public discussion, cultural engagement and political coordination.

Although decentralised and diverse in format, these initiatives are becoming platforms for diaspora participation and civic education. Their emergence signals a shift in how Slovakia’s émigré communities perceive their role: not merely as observers, but as active contributors to public life at home.

Rather than waiting for institutional recognition, initiatives have begun mapping their own ecosystem. Using platforms such as the krajan.sk data-

base, maintained by civic leader Andrej Probst, they are charting Slovak associations abroad, facilitating partnerships and onboarding younger generations of Slovak citizens into civic life.

FROM INFORMAL GATHERINGS TO CIVIC PLATFORMS

The best-known example is Pražská kaviareň, founded in the Czech capital in the wake of the 2018 murders of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová. While the group began as a reaction to tragedy, it soon formalised into a registered civic association.

Adela Klepáková, a Košice native now living in Prague, joined the initiative in 2020 and currently serves as its vice-chair.

“We didn’t want to just sit with the news and feel helpless,” she says. “It became clear that civic responsibility doesn’t end when you move abroad.”

The group organises monthly public discussions and networking events – many of them at Kino Atlas in Prague – on topics ranging from disinformation to Slovak elections, civic memory and diaspora voting rights. Speakers include journalists, academics and former public officials.

“We want people to feel that being a citizen means more than just holding a passport,” says Klepáková. “It’s about showing up, getting involved and supporting one another – no matter where you live.”

ENCOURAGING VOTER PARTICIPATION FROM ABROAD

Some of these diaspora initiatives go beyond discussion. In 2018, Samuel Zubo, founder of Pražská kaviareň, launched Srdcom doma, a campaign to increase voter turnout among Slovaks living abroad.

“Until then, I saw no reason to participate in Slovak political life,” he recalls.



A Slovensko je Európa (Slovakia is Europe) protest in Prague on February 7, 2025.

“But when students in Bratislava began organising protests, it was a moment of clarity. If they were willing to act, we had no excuse not to.”

Zubo helped transform informal diaspora protests in Prague into a permanent civic infrastructure. Srdcom doma, his campaign to increase voter participation from abroad, played a key role in driving postal ballot reform in Slovakia and boosting turnout among Slovaks abroad in the 2020 and 2023 parliamentary elections.

“The fact that over 10 percent of Slovaks live abroad, and many have first-hand experience with functioning democracies, should be an asset to the political system, not a threat,” Zubo says. “Unfortunately, it’s often viewed the opposite way by political elites.”

NEW PLATFORMS IN LONDON AND KRAKÓW

Inspired by Prague, similar initiatives have begun to take shape in western and central Europe. In London, Londýnska kaviareň was launched by educator Renata Papcunová, who has lived in the UK since 1996. Though she resists the label “activist,” Papcunová is clear about the political implications of her work.

“This began as a space for stories, for emotional and intellectual reconnection with Slovakia,” she explains. “But we quickly realised that apathy is a major threat to democratic participation, and storytelling alone is not enough.”

Her initiative, still in its early phase, organises discussion forums and networking events, bringing together professionals, students and cultural figures. Its goal is to create a platform where political fatigue can be addressed constructively and where civic values are reinforced through dialogue.

In Kraków, Miroslav Slávik has followed a similar trajectory. Initially convening informal cultural gatherings for Slovaks in Poland, he shifted toward civic programming as political developments in Slovakia and, later, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, reshaped the local community’s priorities.

“Kraków offered a logistical advantage: a stable expat population and accessible venues,” Slávik explains. “But more importantly, it allowed us to observe stark contrasts in governance. Comparing Polish digital infrastructure to Slovak bureaucracy highlights how far behind we are.”

Krakovská kaviareň has since hosted events featuring former Slovak politicians, journalists and academics, with attendance ranging from small groups to full-capacity venues. The group now operates as a hybrid cultural-civic initiative, seeking to balance neutrality with principled engagement, especially on issues of democratic resilience.

LOOKING AHEAD

While many of the organisers behind these cafés say they have no immediate plans to return to Slovakia, they remain committed to its future. Their work is voluntary, non-partisan and often under-resourced, but it continues to grow. “Some of us left because things weren’t working,” says Papcunová. “But that doesn’t mean we stopped hoping they could.”

For now, the cafés serve as places to talk, listen, and organise. Over time, they may become part of a more formal civic infrastructure, one that spans borders and redefines what it means to be part of Slovakia’s democratic life.

“We’re not here to tell anyone what to do,” says Zubo. “We’re here because we still care, and because we believe that involvement matters, no matter where you are.”



Details of the insect remains found encased in amber.

Slovak scientists help tear down **two objections to Jurassic Park's premise**

*JUST DON'T EXPECT CLONED DINOSAURS TO
APPEAR ANY TIME SOON*

Text: Matúš Beňo • Photo: Archive of P. V.

When Jurassic Park roared its way into cinemas in 1993, it didn't just leave a lasting impression on a whole generation of researchers; it sparked a new generation of dinophiles as well. Arguably, the special effects are just as impressive now as they were back then, and the popular fascination with bringing dinosaurs – and other extinct animals, for that matter – back to life seems undimmed. The premise of the film was that a fossil of an ancient blood-sucking mosquito containing preserved dinosaur

blood had been found intact in a piece of amber. Then, using frog DNA, researchers had been able to patch the recovered fragments of dinosaur DNA in order to clone giant reptiles. Although the idea sounded intriguing, there were three main scientific objections to it – aside from the fact that the proverbial Jurassic Park contained dinosaurs that did not live in the Jurassic Period, such as Tyrannosaurus rex.

First, the DNA and blood of dinosaurs from the Mesozoic Era (which includes the Jurassic Period) would have decayed into very small fragments; sec-

ond, there was no known biting insect from the Jurassic Period, let alone Jurassic amber containing one; and third, there was no known Jurassic amber.

'Were' is the operative word here. An international team of scientists, including some from the Slovak Academy of Sciences (SAV), have shown that the latter two objections have now been overcome. Their paper was published in the prestigious National Science Review journal. Still, don't expect to see dinosaurs roaming the Earth again any time soon.

WHEN A JOKE BACKFIRES

In 2009, an amber outcrop was found near the village of Aintourine in Lebanon. Generally, amber is fossilised tree resin that is known for its yellow-orange-brown colour. It is capable of preserving parts of organisms or plants that wouldn't otherwise fossilise.

According to Slovak palaeontologist Peter Vršanský, from the SAV's Earth Science Institute, who led the team, everything started as a joke.

"When I sent then student Hemen Sendi [a co-author of the paper – Ed. note] from the Netherlands on his first trip to Lebanon in 2016, I made a joke at his expense and told him to bring back Jurassic amber, which was not yet known [to exist] at that time. When he returned, the joke was on me – he brought back a piece," Vršanský told *The Slovak Spectator*.

The Mesozoic Era spans from 252 to 66 million years ago. It is comprised of the Triassic (252-201 million years), Jurassic (201-143 million years) and Cretaceous (143-66 million years) Periods. Dinosaurs lived on and dominated the Earth for most of the era. Until the find in Lebanon, according to Vršanský, there were only two pieces of amber from the Triassic Period that contained arthropods; all other Mesozoic ones came from the Cretaceous Period.

Still, it took prompting from a foreign colleague three years later for Vršanský to actually start investigating the find, partly because he just couldn't believe it. Although the piece appeared empty at first sight, Vršanský had it polished to jewellery-like quality.

"The fun ended when a former colleague of mine, Marián Golej, called me to say that there was a microscopic particle in there," he says, adding that he ran into the lab where he and his colleagues found a 0.75-millimetre-long insect wing. They were very lucky; if Golej had cut into the amber just 0.5 millimetres from where he did, the insect would have been cut in half or not even discovered.

GETTING THE PICTURE

A team of SAV scientists was then joined by foreign experts, who scrambled to analyse the amber and form a full picture of the find.

"Using infrared laser, Helena Palková was able to find out that the amber was from an extinct family of conifers

called Cheirolepidiaceae. Júlia Kotulová [both are SAV scientists – Ed. note] was able to learn a lot about the environment," Vršanský describes parts of the painstaking process the team had to carry out.

They thus learned that the amber was formed in coastal marshes full of ferns, ginkgo bushes and tall conifer trees such as araucaria, in addition to the one mentioned. This is supported by finds of cones. Due to volcanoes and possibly lightning, there were often fires, and the high temperatures stimulated the formation of amber. The original resin oozing from the trees was very liquid, which made this otherwise very successful trap for insects ineffective.

In other words, it is extremely rare for Aintourine amber to contain insects. The team was therefore even more lucky to actually find one. Since the initial find, 11 other amber sites have been documented, but no further research has yet been published. So far, every other piece of amber was found to be devoid of insects.

Dating from between 157.3 and 152.1 million years, the amber belongs to the Late Jurassic Epoch, or more specifically the Kimmeridgian Stage. This age was supported by dating zircons from a volcano. According to Vršanský, several documented genera of dinosaurs lived in the area. So far, only 15 genera of dinosaurs are known from the Late Jurassic in the whole of Africa, then, together with Lebanon, part of the Southern Supercontinent Gondwana from the geological point of view.

AN INSECT STILL KNOWN TODAY

The team found that the insect trapped in the amber is an adult male coccid, also known as a scale insect. Today, some species are pests, which suggests that they may have been causing similar issues, like infections in trees, as early as in the Jurassic.

"The one in question had compound eyes with just a few lenses. It had a pair of wings and another pair of stunted wings which functioned like the gyroscope on a helicopter propeller. It [the male specimen] did not eat food, but the females fed on plant sap," explained Vršanský, adding that its purpose was to fertilise the female.

"The most incredible paradox is that in spite of its only purpose, the female



Palaeontologist Peter Vršanský.

can decide to completely eliminate the male's genetic information after fertilisation."

The scientist says that biting insects such as mosquitoes appeared later than the Jurassic, although some groups could have existed back then. As for potentially preserving genetic information in an insect fossil, Vršanský says it can happen, but that it would be broken into many small parts, making it impossible to put together.

"Imagine you have preserved the entirety of Wikipedia, but no text is longer than 50 characters and most of the time you only have four characters. Even if you multiply it thousands upon thousands of times, you will not be able to put the text together," he explains.

HARD TO SEE

Although the piece of amber containing the insect remains is stored in the Slovak National Museum, it is not easy to view it. Vršanský says it has been placed in a vault, and any request to see it must be approved by the museum's director.

"I'd be up for allowing the amber to be exhibited, but that would require a special, fully protected and radiation-proof display in the permanent exhibition. Scientists do have the opportunity to see a part of the amber that does not contain an insect at the Slovak Academy of Sciences," he says.

According to him, we can expect more Jurassic amber finds very soon, as more Jurassic amber pieces have been uncovered recently from other parts of the world such as Portugal, France, Italy and China.



The new observatory at Deutsche Schule
(German School) Bratislava.

Bratislava never had a planetarium.

Local families built an observatory instead

THE CITY PULLED THE PLUG ON ITS LONG-PROMISED PLANETARIUM

Text: Oscar Brophy • Photo: Deutsche Schule Bratislava, TASR

On the Revín hill overlooking the Slovak capital, a metal dome now turns quietly toward the heavens. Inside sits the city's newest – and only – public observatory, a modest yet striking addition to the German School in the Kramáre neighbourhood. Opened in April 2024, the project is the unlikely product of a determined parent, a com-

munity-wide fundraising effort, and more than €200,000 collected from families and sponsors.

Its ambassador is Ivan Bella, the first Slovak astronaut.

For a city that has long lacked a planetarium or observatory, the facility is more than just a telescope under a dome. It is a public invitation to the night sky.

“From the very beginning we wanted it to be an observatory not only for this

school, but for the whole of Bratislava and its surroundings,” explained Sven Rossbach, the parent behind the idea, to the Postoj website at the time of the opening.

FILLING A VOID

Bratislava holds the unfortunate distinction of being the only EU capital without a public planetarium or observatory – a source of frustration for

Observatory vs. planetarium

- **Observatory:** A facility with telescopes for **studying the real night sky**. Visitors look at actual stars, planets and galaxies.
- **Planetarium:** An indoor theatre with a dome where projectors or digital systems **simulate the sky**. Visitors watch shows about space and astronomy.



The observatory in Michalovce, eastern Slovakia



The observatory at Deutsche Schule Bratislava offers programmes for schools as well as the general public.

astronomy enthusiasts. The nearest observatory, operated by Comenius University in Bratislava, is located in Modra, a wine-making town about 30 kilometres from the capital.

A long-promised riverside planetarium was scrapped at the eleventh hour after Mayor Matúš Vallo, backed by the city council, redirected its funding elsewhere in 2023. Instead, the mayor traded the project for a park and preliminary documentation for the Plato Staromestská development – a scheme whose financing he has yet to explain. Vallo reportedly argued that a planetarium is not something Bratislava needs. “Many people were very angry,” astronomy enthusiasts Marián Psár and Matúš Tondriška recalled on the Spectacular Slovakia podcast.

When the idea of building an observatory at the German School was born, Rossbach approached Mayor Vallo for financial assistance, but he refused to support the project. “We also held discussions with the mayor, but there was no interest on his part in taking part in this project,” Rossbach told Postoj. As the conservative daily noted, neither Vallo nor any other city official attended the opening of the observatory. The German School observatory does not erase the absence of such a facility in the capital, but it goes some way toward addressing it: a professional-grade instrument housed in a rotating dome, open not only to students but

to anyone curious about the stars. The equipment is straightforward but effective. A solar telescope allows visitors to study the Sun’s surface, while the “go-to” tracking system locks onto planets, clusters and binary stars, following their arc as Earth turns.

MORE THAN STARGAZING

The dome is open to the public, with sessions bookable online and guides available in English. Among them are Psár and Tondriška, best known for their Slovak-language podcast *Slnecná zostava* (“Solar Gang”). Their dry humour and gift for explanation help make the cosmos accessible.

School groups arrive during the day, when the telescope is turned on nearby landmarks – the hilltop Slavín Memorial, for instance – to demonstrate its power. Events for tourists mix science with lighthearted space trivia and team-building exercises.

THE CHALLENGE OF CITY SKIES

But stargazing in Bratislava is never ideal.

“From the centre of Bratislava you might see only 50 stars – the brightest ones. But travel a few hundred kilometres away and thousands become visible,” Psár and Tondriška told *The Slovak Spectator*. Kramáre’s higher elevation helps, but weather and the turning of the seasons still dictate what is

seen, according to Psár and Tondriška. Planets appear and vanish; clusters and double stars remain a constant fallback. “We are always half-joking that we wait for a blackout in Bratislava, just to see a truly clear sky,” they said.

If the city’s skies disappoint, Slovakia’s countryside offers compensation. Poloniny National Park, near the Polish and Ukrainian borders, is one of Europe’s most celebrated dark-sky reserves, where the Milky Way spreads out in full clarity.

“Dark sky reserves are rare in Europe because of light pollution,” Psár and Tondriška noted.

Other Slovak dark-sky reserves in Kysuce and Malá Fatra, both in northern Slovakia, also draw stargazers to organised tours and lectures.

For Bratislava, the new dome marks a modest but meaningful step. Organisers plan to expand its educational programmes and tourist offerings, ensuring it becomes not only a scientific outpost but part of the city’s cultural fabric. For residents long deprived of a place to look up, and for travellers who want something beyond the castle and the cafés, the German School observatory offers a rare view of the cosmos – a reminder that even in a crowded, light-filled city, the stars are still there.

“What you can see differs from night to night, depending on the weather,” Psár and Tondriška concluded enthusiastically.



Life returns to a forgotten arm **of the Danube**

*BIRDS, FISH AND NATURAL RIVER PROCESSES ARE COMING BACK
AFTER A DECADES-LONG GAP*

Text: Jana Liptáková • Photo: Jana Liptáková, BROZ



The Foki side-arm of the Danube near Gabčíkovo is passable again



The Foki arm before revitalisation.

Look! There goes a kingfisher.” Karolína Sobeková, project manager at the BROZ conservation association, points out the small bird as it darts along just above the water’s surface, its wings shimmering blue in the sunlight.

The ten people in the boat with her – the first group of tourists to travel along the newly-reconnected Foki arm of the Danube near Gabčíkovo in mid-July – take in the bird and then, moments later, are treated to the sight of a black stork gliding overhead. Not long after, at the mouth of the old Danube’s riverbed, they spy a group of herons standing on gravel bars.

For the past 11 months, BROZ and other groups have been working on this arm of the river, reversing and removing some of the human interventions dating back many years that had led to it being cut off from the Danube’s wider system of arms.

Sobeková says the work has already begun to show visible results. Although too late in the season for native bird species to nest here, they have returned to hunt for food in and along the stretch of water. Meanwhile, fish have also found their way back into the watercourse. Conservationists say that the reconnection of the arm will bring with it a host of ecological benefits.

“We’re now past the spawning season, but in every single reconnected arm, fish began reproducing by the next season,” says Sobeková.

A UNIQUE RIVER

Vladimír Kováč, an expert on waterways and fish communities, believes that reshaping the arm and reconnecting it with the main river channel will create suitable habitats for various species, including new spawning grounds for Danube fish.

He believes the Danube is the most remarkable river in Europe.

“After the Volga, it’s the second longest river in Europe, but more importantly



Sand martins have a place to nest again

The steep banks of the reconnected Foki arm are ideal nesting grounds for kingfishers, European bee-eaters and sand martins. All three species build burrows in banks for nesting. Sand martins used to nest in this arm in the past, but are today a very rare sight on the Slovak stretch of the Danube.

The sand martin is a member of the swallow family, but unlike the barn swallow or house martin, it is less well-known, as it rarely lives near people and does not nest on buildings.

it hosts the greatest number of fish species in Europe – over 100. That’s fantastic biodiversity,” he says.

But human activity – both the Gabčíkovo hydroelectric project and other waterworks in Austria and Germany – has significantly impacted the Danube.

“Studies have shown that fish numbers – not species, but overall numbers – have dropped by up to 70 percent compared to four or five decades ago,” explains Kováč.

One major reason is the change in the Danube’s hydromorphology. Its system of arms was cut off from the main channel, so native fish populations lost their natural breeding and nursery grounds.

“It’s not an absolute rule, but spawning and feeding habitats have been significantly reduced,” he explains. “This leads to a long-term decline in fish populations. Projects like these, which re-

connect the river with its arms, help fish populations recover and maintain species diversity.”

BROZ maintains that the work to revitalise the Foki arm will give native Danube fish species – such as the streber, perch, western tubenose goby, white goby, and schneider – access to their natural spawning grounds and create conditions for the development of their young. These are rheophilic species, meaning they prefer flowing water and gravel beds.

EVERYTHING HAS A PRICE

BROZ, in collaboration with partners including Vodohospodárska Výstavba, which manages the Gabčíkovo hydropower plant, the water management company SVP, the Water Research Institute, and experts from Comenius University’s Faculty of Natural Sciences, has been working for years on reconnecting arms of the

Danube to its main channel. So far, they’ve restored the Karloveské arm in Bratislava, the Veľkolélske arm near Komárno, and the Klátovské arm – a branch of the Little Danube (Malý Dunaj).

“Foki is the first arm restored in the old Danube riverbed affected by the Gabčíkovo hydroelectric project,” says Tomáš Kušík from BROZ.

In this part of the Danube, most water is diverted into a man-made canal, supplying turbines at the hydroelectric plant. The water then returns to the river through a discharge canal.

As a result, from an original average flow of 2,000 cubic metres per second, the flow in the old riverbed is currently only 600 cubic metres per second, and in winter it drops to just 200 cubic metres. The change has lowered the water level by three to four metres, cutting off the river from its arms on both the Slovak and Hungarian sides. Fur-



Nature conservationists hope that the revitalised Foki arm of the Danube will not only attract original bird and fish species that used to be native there, but will also become a sought-after tourist destination.

thermore, due to riverbed erosion, water levels continue to fall.

“Right now, both side-arm systems are above the water level in the old riverbed,” explains Sobeková. “To retain water, linear barriers have been built in the arms.”

The Foki arm lost its water supply after the Gabčíkovo dam was built. Its intake ended up above the water level, and it gradually silted up and became overgrown. Water remained only in isolated pools. Without flow, the arm became stagnant and unsuitable for native fish.

A DIGGER AS A FRIEND

The fieldwork to restore the two-kilometre long arm took 11 months and was disrupted by repeated floods and a foot-and-mouth outbreak. A total of 80,000 cubic metres of material had to be removed.

In the preparation phase of the revitalisation, which was part of the LIFE Dy-

namic Life Lines Danube project, the riverbed was first mapped. In its upper section, including the connection to the old riverbed, invasive vegetation was cleared. The first phase focused on removing barriers, including two cross-stone embankments and three groynes – structures projecting into the river to direct flow – which were located in the old riverbed and crossed the arm.

In the second phase, a digger reshaped the entire arm and reconnected it at both ends to the old Danube riverbed.

Under an original plan the restored arm would have been 24 metres wide, but due to rising costs this was reduced, and it currently measures only 15 metres across. The total cost so far is €485,000.

Water managers would like to see the arm restored to its original 80-metre width, as the project has major flood protection significance since the old Danube riverbed is gradually silting up and has become overgrown.

“By restoring flow through the arm, we allow water to circulate continuously. This helps keep the area open and free from overgrowth, increasing the old riverbed’s capacity to safely carry floodwaters,” says Sobeková.

Conservationists hope the arm will remain functional and self-sustaining in the long-term.

It is the first arm restored in this part of the old Danube riverbed under altered water conditions. Experiences from other arms show that when the right conditions are created, nature can take over, modelling and maintaining the channel without the need for further intervention.

“Time will tell how well it works, but we believe that thanks to the way it has been designed – with an emphasis on maintaining flow even during winter, when water levels are lowest – the arm will remain flowing and not become overgrown,” says Sobeková.

Pretty crazy': **How four Americans founded a Slovak newspaper that's still going strong**

THE SLOVAK SPECTATOR THIS YEAR CELEBRATES ITS 30TH ANNIVERSARY

Text: Matúš Beňo • Photo: Archive of Daniel J. Stoll, TSS archive



An important moment in the life of The Slovak Spectator: the very first issue.



Having fun has been an inseparable part of working at The Slovak Spectator. Here a staff member "sells" the papers at a makeshift newsstand.

In March 1995, something unusual happened on the media market in Slovakia. Four enthusiastic Americans full of blind courage – Richard Lewis, Daniel J. Stoll, Rick Zedník and Eric Koomen – started publishing an independent newspaper in a country which had no real history of free press and only a handful of journalists willing to challenge authority. That newspaper was called The Slovak Spectator.

In fact, just a few weeks after the first issue came out, Slovenská Republika – the newspaper that acted as the mouthpiece of the then-governing Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), the party of infamous prime minister Vladimír Mečiar – ran a story about The Slovak Spectator, with the

headline reading “Against the Coalition” in an attempt to discredit it. Zedník recalls that for his grandmother, a die-hard supporter of Mečiar – colloquially, a “babka demokratka” (granny democrat) – this was a source of “hanba” (shame).

Starting up is difficult for any company, and The Slovak Spectator was no exception, especially against the backdrop of Slovakia at the time. The money the four founders pooled together – \$35,000 – was enough to get them through June; what would happen then was anyone’s guess.

“I went back to my family and asked them for an additional \$5,000 to throw on top of a publication that was going bankrupt after less than half a year. Not quite the easiest sell, but they did loan us the money;” recalls Koomen.

“That additional \$5,000 took us to where we are today,” he adds. This was also around the same time The Slovak Spectator landed a back-page ad from Coca-Cola, which gave them legitimacy, and other advertisers followed.

WHAT BROUGHT THE FOUNDERS TOGETHER?

Before meeting Stoll, Lewis and Zedník met at the office of the non-profit organisation Foundation for a Civil Society and were later joined by Koomen; each had their own reasons for coming to Slovakia.

“The biggest reason I came to Slovakia was because I was searching. I didn’t know what I wanted to do in life,” says Lewis, adding that his job as a press secretary for a congressional investigation bored him and he wanted to do

something radically different. When he heard about an exchange programme called Education for Democracy, he didn't hesitate. He arrived in August 1993.

"I also wanted to see this part of the world before anyone else had a chance, while it was still raw. And it was raw. I lived with a family that spoke no English in a little town called Spišské Vlachy in the east. It was a grand 'dobrodružstvo' (adventure), let me tell you," he says, adding that a year later he moved to Bratislava to be a journalist.

Stoll came to Slovakia in 1993 too, as an English teacher. A year later, the foundation opened an office in Brati-



slava and was looking for people who knew the country.

Zedník's story is a bit different. His father was born in Czechoslovakia, but left in 1968, leaving the former's grandparents behind. Zedník was born and raised in the US, not knowing anything about the country. It was only after 1989 that he could visit them and start to discover this side of the family. Their paths eventually crossed at the foundation office.

"It's pretty crazy to think that within weeks of meeting each other, we decided to start a business together. There was chemistry, we had the same values, believed in the same things. But we really didn't know each other. And so, you could say it was a risk, right? But I'm so glad I took the risk; here we are 30 years later," Zedník recalls.

IT WASN'T EASY

The idea found its roots when they briefly worked for the Slovak Mirror, a monthly English newspaper that lasted three issues. But the experience made them think that they could make something like it work. According to Stoll, they used Zedník's apartment as their base as they talked about starting their own newspaper. Friends in the expat community opened up their homes so the three could meet and write a business plan. That is when they realised they needed someone with business experience. Enter Eric Koomen, Stoll's friend who was finishing his MBA at Buffalo University.

THE SLOVAK SPECTATOR

The idea for The Slovak Spectator has its roots in late October 1994.

Lewis, Stoll and Zedník believed the Slovak market could support a larger English-language newspaper published more frequently.

Along with Koomen, they founded The Rock (publishing house), which was officially registered as a limited liability company (spol. s r.o.) on January 3, 1995.

Lewis and Zedník were co-editors, Stoll the business manager and Koomen the financial manager.

"I said, 'Eric, we always dreamed we would start a business together. So this is a little earlier than maybe we thought. How about you come to Slovakia, give it a go?'" Stoll recalls. And he came. "I would say that I came to Slovakia because of a girl, but it wasn't my girl. I had like a rock-star introduction to Slovakia. When I got off the plane there was a band playing. Well, it wasn't for me, by the way, but it looked like it was. And then we went straight to a club called Lúčnica. It was a party all night long," says Koomen.

Still, it wasn't easy. They had to pool their money. They had one laptop, no employees, no offices. They kept putting the publishing date off, and telling people it would be coming out soon. "We had a business plan that projected even how many pencils we needed to buy. It was really impressive and incredible that we were able to pull off a publication to be printed and distributed on March 1," says Koomen, with Stoll adding that they were totally unprepared to do it, but somehow did.

"When we had our first publication, we were obviously very excited. We ended up getting into the printing house and noticed a dumpster filled with our publication that we put so much work into, that we were so excited to get on the newsstand and read for the first time. We thought the government had got involved and thrown out our whole newspaper and wouldn't let us publish it. Thankfully, those fears were all made-up. It was just a bad print run," recalls Koomen.

Both Koomen and Stoll are still involved with The Slovak Spectator to this day.

THE HERITAGE

Had the then-government something to actually fear? Zedník says that the smear story run by Mečiar-aligned Slovenská Republika was like a badge of honour for them. They were determined to make sure that the kind of journalism they were bringing to Slovakia was not partisan.

"Slovenská Republika was sort of the most egregious case of partisan media at the time. Most of the media were sort of aligned with the parties, and we were determined to make a statement that we were not," he says, adding the goal was to be neither against the government, nor for the opposition, but to report on both as equally as possible.

That is actually where the name – The Slovak Spectator – came from. As Stoll puts it, "we were here to watch, not to take sides". In this spirit, from the first issue there was an opinion page called Spectrum, where people with two opposing views had space to present those views.

According to Beata Balogová, who later served as the paper's editor-in-chief and is now the editor-in-chief of the Sme daily, journalism in Slovakia in the late 1990s was a "Wild West", as many people didn't understand how to separate their opinions from the real story, often failing even to mention their sources.

"The Slovak Spectator shaped me in that it showed me the way to Columbia Journalism School, and then to the Sme daily. Now, western journalism is more common, but at the time, The Slovak Spectator was almost the only outlet that actually made use of it. Now it's also my legacy," she says.



Light the Slovak fire

OPEKAČKA IS THE QUINTESSENTIAL SLOVAK SUMMER EXPERIENCE – BURNS, MOSQUITOES AND SMOKE INHALATION NOTWITHSTANDING

Text: Eric Smillie • Photo: Freepik

It is summer, and the smell of smoke hangs in the air. As surely as you can catch the whiff of burning leaves from raked fields, so too might you taste the plumes of smoke rising from fires as families and friends opekajú.

Translated as roast, grill or toast, opekaf – the practice of cooking meat over an open fire – is as Slovak as barbecuing is American. Yet the flavours differ: the opekačka is rustic. It might happen behind your dom (house) or chata (cottage), but often it's in a woodsy area, at least a short walk down a trail.

For a taste of Slovakia, follow these steps. First, find an ohnisko, or fire pit. At my last opekačka, we sat on a cliff by Devín Castle, overlooking the Danube and Morava Rivers with Austria beyond. But scenery doesn't start the fire – you must gather twigs (vetvičky), brushwood (raždie), medium branches (konáre), and a big log (poleno).

When the fire roars and people crowd in, things get chaotic. If you ask “please pass the mustard” (“prosím si horčicu”), you may be ignored. At that moment, try the playful jab: “čo si hluchý ako poleno? Podaj mi prosím ťa horčicu!” (“what are you, deaf as a log?”).

But first you need to light the fire (zapáliť oheň) – with zápalky (matches). Then comes your ražeň, or roasting stick. Use a vreckový nožík (pocket knife) to shape a green branch of the proper length. Too short, and you risk burnt hands – and jokes at your expense.

There are Slovak tricks to roasting. The špekáčik (sausage) is sliced with an x at both ends, helping it cook evenly. Because fat (tuk) drips into the flames, Slovaks catch it on bread (odkvapkať tuk). Beyond špekáčik, people roast špek or slanina (bacon), klobása (sausage), cibuľa (onions), kukurica (corn), or zemiaky v šupke (potatoes in the skin). Even soy sausages appear.

It all takes patience – trpezlivosť ruže prináša (“patience brings roses”). Beware of food slipping into the fire: that would be škoda (a shame). And always, there is dym (smoke), which follows you no matter where you sit. Slovaks say smoke chases the unwashed.

Finally, clothes reeking, hands blackened from wood, and legs bitten by komáre (mosquitoes), you bite into your dinner. Mňam! (Yum!)

When the eating is done, the logs burn low and talk begins. If debate grows serious, you might end it with “strčil by som kvôli tomu ruku do ohňa” – “I'd put my hand in the fire for it.”

But conversations fade as does the fire, which begins to dymiť (smoke). One or two might rozdúchať (fan) the flames, but mostly you are tired, and the mosquitoes close in.

As you leave, remember: the Slovaks have their own special way to put out a fire. I'll leave that as a surprise. © TSS

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