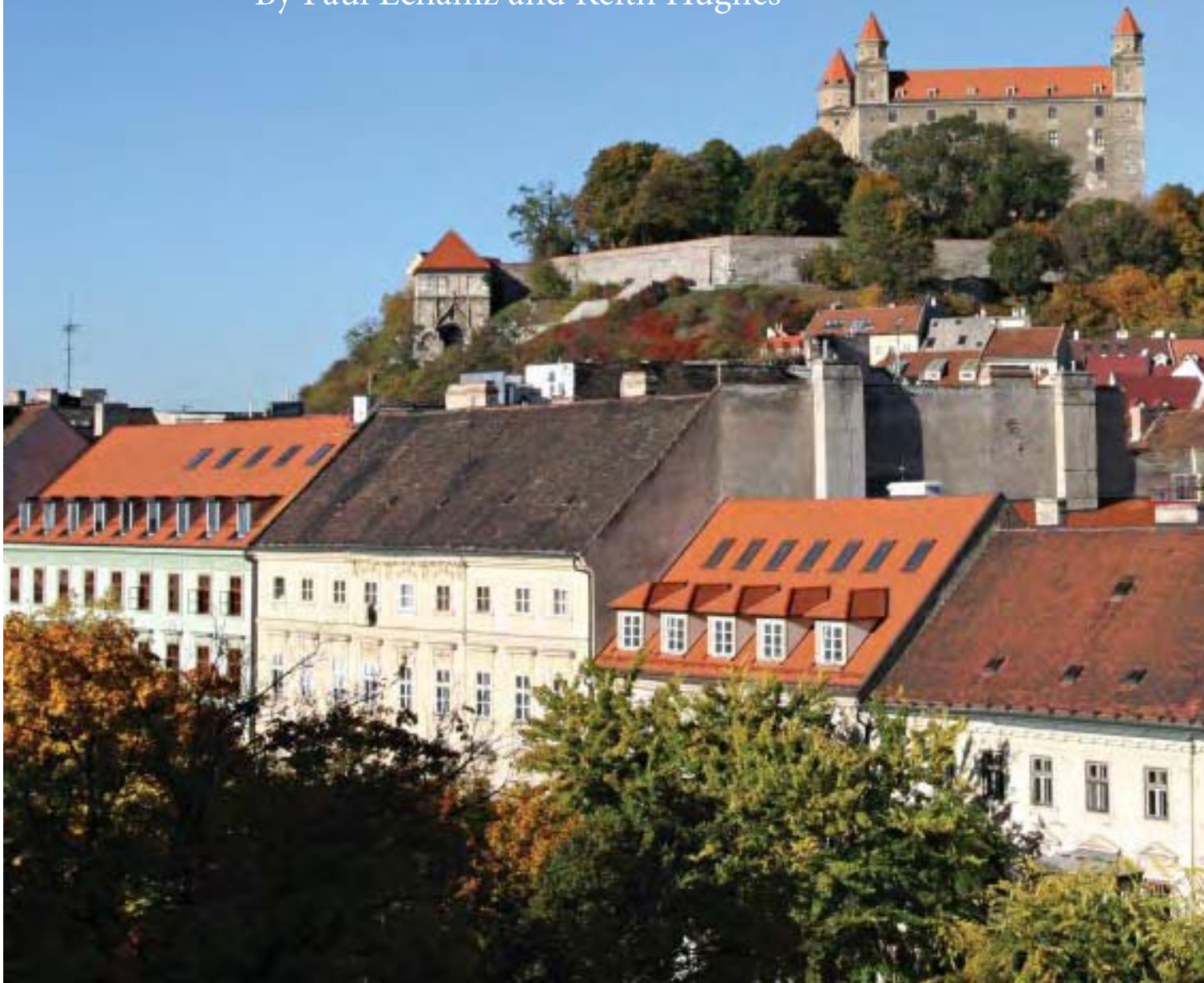


Bratislava

Creative Energy in New Europe

By Paul Echaniz and Keith Hughes





This scenic view of Old Town Bratislava features Bratislava Castle and St. Martin's Cathedral. *Photo by Igor Schneeweiss*

POST OF THE MONTH>>>

Bratislava



COUNTRY>>> Slovakia

CAPITAL>>> Bratislava

TOTAL AREA>>> 48,845 square kilometers

APPROXIMATE SIZE>>> About twice the size of New Hampshire

GOVERNMENT>>> parliamentary democracy

INDEPENDENCE>>> January 1, 1993
(Czechoslovakia split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia)

POPULATION>>> 4.5 million

LIFE EXPECTANCY AT BIRTH>>> 74.9 years

LANGUAGES>>> Slovak (official), Hungarian, Roma and Ukrainian

CURRENCY>>> Slovak koruna (SKK)

PER CAPITA INCOME>>> \$19,800

UNEMPLOYMENT RATE>>> 8.6 percent

IMPORT COMMODITIES>>> Machinery, transportation equipment and fuels

EXPORT COMMODITIES>>> Vehicles, machinery and electrical equipment

INTERNET COUNTRY CODE>>> .sk

This view from the embassy shows the Cathedral of St. Martin and Bratislava Castle. Eleven Austro-Hungarian monarchs were crowned in St. Martin's. Archaeologists have found remnants of Celtic, Roman and early Slav settlements in the castle.

A stroll down the streets of Bratislava—renowned as the coronation city of 11 Austro-Hungarian Empire monarchs between 1536 and 1830—is a visual lesson in the economic and cultural power traditionally centered in Slovakia's capital city. Historical landmarks abound, including the site of the six-year-old Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's first concert. Palaces and the U.S. Embassy are only steps from the Danube River, along which one can cycle, run or rollerblade into two other countries in the course of an afternoon.





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One of the factors making the U.S. Embassy in Bratislava an exciting and dynamic post is the entrepreneurial spirit of this 15-year-old country, which has pushed its economic growth rate into the “Asian tiger” range. Having built a democracy, strong civil society and vibrant, private-sector-led economy on the ashes of an authoritarian post-communist system, Slovaks have set their sights on being the first in their neighborhood to adopt the Euro—in early 2009.

The U.S. Embassy in Bratislava faces new challenges in gaining the support of the Slovak coalition government that came to power in June 2006. As memory fades regarding the U.S. contribution to the fall of communism and its support for Slovak membership in the European Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the embassy is gearing up to be more proactive in demonstrating the value of strong bilateral and transatlantic ties.

U.S. Investment

Facing a time of limited resources, recently arrived Ambassador Vincent Obsitnik brought a fresh pair of eyes to this challenge. Born in eastern Slovakia, he made bringing U.S. investment to that less-developed part of the country a mission priority. This is an issue on which

the embassy could cooperate with the current government, improve the foundation for building educational exchanges and demonstrate U.S. commitment to a more prosperous and democratic Slovakia.

The country’s emergence from a command economy and repressive regime gave the Slovaks unmatched, hands-on experience in developing democratic institutions and reforming the economy. The U.S. Embassy in Bratislava identified this Slovak strength and began to devote resources to support the many civil-society-building projects of Slovak nongovernmental organizations.

With the active help of the embassy, Slovaks are training Afghan journalists in the basics of journalism and Kazakh local officials in good governance. Other Slovak NGOs encourage and advise Cuban dissidents and guide Balkan governments toward Euro-Atlantic integration.

Although Slovaks do not always agree with U.S. policy, they almost universally admire the quality, innovativeness and openness of the American higher educational system. Part of the embassy’s mission is to burnish that U.S. image by establishing new ties between U.S. and Slovak universities and helping bring the best practices of American universities to the Slovak institutions that are training future political, economic and scientific leaders.



Top: Just a stone’s throw from the U.S. Embassy, the stately Slovak National Theater dominates one end of Bratislava’s most prominent square. **Above:** After an awards ceremony in which six Slovak soldiers received American military citations for service in Operation Iraqi Freedom, Chief of Slovak Armed Forces General Lubomir Bulik and Ambassador Obsitnik talk to the press on U.S.-Slovak military cooperation. **Right:** Management Officer Charles Eaton and Office Management Specialist Dohna Hovevar volunteer time with Cub Scouts in Kamzik forest near Bratislava.



Right: Vice Consul Ann Meceda is a volunteer teacher at the Economics University of Bratislava.
Below: Eva Salnerová and Zuzana Zat'ková act as masters of ceremony at the awards ceremony for the Foreign Service National Association's annual tennis tournament.



The High Tatras mountain range is a popular destination for hikers and skiers. It straddles the border between Slovakia and Poland.
Opposite page: To highlight the embassy's work on integration of minorities in Slovakia, then-Under Secretary Karen Hughes greets participants in a soccer match between Roma from the countryside and Slovaks from Venglos Academy.



PHOTOGRAPHS: IGOR SCHNEIDER

Because many young Slovaks have left to seek educational opportunities abroad, university leaders are seeking ways to keep talented students at home. At the same time, U.S. universities are recognizing that Central Europe presents an opportunity for fruitful international programs.

Reaching Out

The embassy made educational cooperation a cornerstone of the mission's outreach. Money for large-scale education programs funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development had dried up, but for the price of a few plane tickets the public affairs section brought together representatives of five American universities and of the most promising universities in Slovakia. Three university representatives have made second trips to Slovakia and are interested in creating such programs as lecture swaps via digital video conference, a business incubator and even a U.S.-degree MBA program.

The U.S. Embassy in Bratislava also spurred the creation of a program that brings Slovak-American doctors to Slovakia to give professional lectures to medical students, doctors and hospital administrators, creating further exchange opportunities.

To promote U.S. interests, the embassy took to heart Edward R. Murrow's maxim that the most important part of diplomacy is "the last three feet." On several occasions, more than a third of the officers at post, including Ambassador Obsitnik, fanned out across Slovakia to answer tough questions and present an American point of view to students at 20 different Slovak high schools. Each of these initiatives reached more than 1,000 students who normally never see Americans.

Outreach was also a key to dealing with public displeasure regarding the security upgrades to embassy buildings, located on Bratislava's most famous historic square. To counteract the image of a fortress, the public affairs section welcomed Slovaks into its multipurpose room, which had been remade as a public gallery. All post sections have redefined how they do business and accom-

modated what is now a forum for fruitful exchanges with Slovaks. The security-upgrade issue has all but disappeared.

In response to the State Department's budget situation, the post's innovative management section mapped out a strategy to save significant resources. That strategy falls under three broad headings: improving collaboration at post, mainly through extensive use of SharePoint software; working with the U.S. Embassy in Vienna to regionalize services; and reducing the number of expensive American positions by empowering talented Foreign Service Nationals and contracting out low-value services.

Regionalizing Services

The embassy is working aggressively to reduce costs by regionalizing two significant services traditionally provided at post, its ClassNet servers and the warehouse. The embassies in Bratislava and Vienna are creating a regional information programs center in Vienna. Officers in Bratislava will log onto Vienna's servers and receive the same data as in Vienna with no difference in how they use ClassNet, which can accommodate additional posts as the cost savings compels them to join the IPC.

The management section has eliminated nearly 40 percent of its workforce, allowing the FSNs who remain to take more responsibility and work as managers rather than providers of services.

These re-engineered initiatives could save nearly \$1 million over the next two fiscal years. The embassy hopes to turn some of the savings into additional programming resources.

In coming years, a more efficient U.S. Embassy in Bratislava will present opportunities for officers to advance Transformational Diplomacy efforts in a country with the experience to partner with the United States in spreading democracy and stability beyond Europe's borders. ■

Paul Echaniz is information management officer and Keith Hughes is information officer at the U.S. Embassy in Bratislava.



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