

# Safety Tips for Slovakia

## **Acknowledgement**

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### Important phone numbers

AFS Emergency Line	00421 948 676766
National Emergency Line	112
Host Family	
Local AFS Volunteer	
Local Police Department	112 or 158
Local Fire Department	112 or 150
Ambulance	112 or 155
Accidents on the road when you call from a mobile phone	112
AFS National Office	00421 948 676766
General information (telephone numbers, addresses ...)	12111

Please use the blank spaces to record other important phone numbers

## Introduction

You will encounter complex situations along the way and there is potential for confusion, fear and misunderstanding. If you are left on your own, the consequences could be very distressing. For these reasons, with the help of host families, local community, AFS contacts and project personnel, AFS has devised the system of "Program Support" for all participants providing a wide range of supportive activities and services. The purpose is to provide a "Safety Net", a consistently supportive environment in which you can ask questions, obtain advice and help.

A primary objective of experimental learning programs such as those offered by AFS is to help you learn through observation, question, dialogue, discussion and experience. From experience, AFS staff and volunteers understand that the opportunity to learn is great, but it is not necessarily easy.

AFS cannot supply all the possible answers but through our support systems, we can help to guide you towards asking the right questions.

It is not possible to try to anticipate all possible situations pertaining to individual safety concerns. Many of these issues are specific to individual countries or parts of a single country. In general, AFS recommends talking with the host family, AFS local committee members and staff from the host project soon after you arrive at the host family home about any of the information in this guidebook and any question you may have about specific personal issues.

AFS staff and volunteers know that the image of Slovakia that the international media generally portrays may not be accurate for the area in which you are hosted. Therefore, we encourage you to ask your host family to clarify any additional concerns or doubts you may have about the reality of life in your host community.

Maintaining your safety is our number one priority at AFS. However, it is your responsibility to make smart, informed decisions in order to keep yourself safe. Reading all of the information contained in this booklet as well as "Welcome to Slovakia" will help you make these important decisions. After you have finished reading, be sure to discuss any additional questions or concerns you may have with your host family or AFS contact.

**We wish you a safe and successful stay in Slovakia!**

## Practical information for living in Slovakia

We are sure that you are going to have a wonderful exchange experience and learn a lot about Slovakia and about yourself. In your own culture, you have been learning since your birth to understand the best way to behave and react in most situations. Soon you will be in a new culture, and you may not be aware of all the “clues” and signs as to what is proper and acceptable.

Many of the common sense things you do in your country will apply to your stay in Slovakia. The best thing to do is to discuss any concerns you have with your host family and local AFS volunteers. But you must also be responsible for yourself. **After spending a couple of days getting to know your family, please sit down with them and discuss the information contained here. It's important to clarify with them anything you don't understand about the advice or language and words given here.**

### The three AFS rules

There are three strict AFS rules that apply to all AFS Participants in Slovakia. They are:

- **No Driving**  
All AFS Participants are forbidden to drive cars (this rule applies to driving anywhere: private land, driveways, or parking lots). Students are also forbidden to drive trucks, motorcycles, motor scooters, mopeds and motorboats.
- **No Drugs**  
Possession and use of drugs is not allowed by AFS, unless medically prescribed. Participants have no immunity from the laws in Slovakia governing use of or involvement with illegal drugs.
- **No Hitchhiking**  
While hitchhiking may be a common form of travelling in some countries, it is considered a potentially dangerous activity. AFS participants may not hitchhike.

If you are involved in any of these forms of behaviour or break any other laws, you may have **serious legal problems**. From an AFS perspective, these rules are not debatable. **You will be returned to your home country immediately.**

### Other uncomfortable situations

- **Laws**  
AFS participants are subjected to the laws of their hosting country. Neither AFS nor the national government of the participants' home country has the power to protect the participant from punishment with respect to drugs, thefts and other legal offenses. You should also be aware that there may be differences between your home country's legal system, and that of Slovakia. In other words, you should not assume that you will receive the same legal process that exists in your own country while you are in Slovakia. In the event of an arrest, please be sure to contact AFS, so that we can help ensure that your rights are protected.
- **Drinking**  
Many countries have a 'legal drinking age' and young people are not allowed to drink if they are below this age. In Slovakia the drinking age is 18, but there are only few limitations in practice, so it is very common to find people under 18 years of age drinking. This does not mean that is considered socially acceptable in all situations, especially by parents and other adults. Excessive drinking will always be a source of problems in your relation with family school/ work and the community, and it could lead to your dismissal from the AFS program.

## Your host family

Just like your parents, your AFS host family's first concern is your well-being and safety. Some families are very strict and have "rules." Other families will tell you what they expect of you and let you make your own decisions. Your family may want you to ask their permission before you make any plans that are different from your daily schedule.

Almost all Slovak families like to know where their children are most of the time, so you should telephone if you are late for dinner or are going to visit a friend after school. You should also check with them before you make an appointment to make sure that it will not conflict with plans they might have made. We ask all our host families to review family rules and expectations when you first arrive. Please, ask questions about anything you don't understand or about anything that confuses you.

## Safety at home

In general, AFS encourages you to ask the family about how they secure their home, for example: How should you respond when a stranger calls at the door? Will you receive a house key? Who can you call if you arrive home without a key or there is no one in the house? Your neighbours? Which ones? What should you do in the event of an earthquake or some other disaster? What does your family advice about answering the door when you are home alone?

Host families will usually explain about making telephone calls, but may not realize that you may have concerns about how to answer the telephone, especially if you are not comfortable in using the host country language and are not yet familiar with people who may be calling. AFS encourages you to ask your host parents how you should respond when answering the telephone. What information should you give? What information should you not give?

### Safety tips at home:

- Keep the doors of the house locked all the time. When you are alone, always make sure the door is locked. If your home has an alarm system, learn how to use it, and memorize the alarm code.
- Never open the door to strangers, unless your family informs you that a relative/friend is coming. Ask your host family what to do when a stranger comes to your home when you are alone.
- If someone is at the door, always be sure to check who is there by looking through the peephole or talking on the intercom before opening the door. If you cannot understand what the person is saying or you are not sure who it is, ask them to come back later.
- If your host family gives you their house key, you should be careful not to lose it. Ask your host family whether you need to lock the doors and windows when you go out or at night, and when and how to lock them, be sure to follow the instructions correctly.
- Ask your host family what you should do in case you lose your house keys and you find the house locked. Ask them where you should go or who you should call.
- It is important to know who you should contact in case there is a problem when you are alone at home.
- It is a good idea to have emergency phone numbers listed near the telephone and in your personal phonebook.
- It is good to know if the family has first aid equipment at home and if they have it, ask where it is.

- Strangers may sometimes call your home and ask you over the phone for your address. Do not provide your address or other family information to any stranger. Suspicious calls that you do not understand well should be kept as short as possible.
- Never say you are alone at home if you do not know who you are talking to. Sometimes, if a stranger calls, it may be necessary for you to say you are not alone. Of course, if a close neighbour or someone you know well comes to your home when you are alone, after properly checking to see who they are, you may decide to open the door, if you think it is safe.
- If someone calls and tries to use bad, sexual, or obscene language with you on the phone, hang up. Do not give out any information; do not tell the caller where you are, if you are home alone, or what your plans are. If the caller calls back, hang up immediately. Inform your host parents of any such calls.
- Always keep your valuables as well as important documents (passport) locked in a safe place.
- Bring copies of all kind of documents you own. Keep the documents in different locations and carry important documents with you only when you need them.

### **Internet usage**

Here are some general tips for helping to ensure you and your host family's safety and privacy when using the Internet.

- Keep your passwords private, even from your best friend! Your online service will never ask for them, so neither should anyone else.
- Use only your log-in name and/or e-mail address when chatting or sending e-mail
- Never give out personal information like your name, address, or phone number
- Do not share photos of yourself, your family, or your home with people you meet online
- Always delete unknown e-mails without opening them. They can contain destructive viruses. They may contain links to pornographic material and upon accessing them you may encounter serious consequences (see below).
- If a person writes something that is mean or makes you feel uncomfortable, don't respond. Just log off and tell your host parents, who can report it to your online service provider.
- Remember that nothing you write on the Web is completely private -- including e-mail. So be careful and think about what you type and who you tell.
- Not everyone is as nice, cute, and funny as it may sound online. Never make plans to meet an online "friend" in person.
- WHEN IN DOUBT - always ask your host parents for help -- and just LOG OFF if you're not sure! You can always go back online later.

### **Safety outside of the house**

When you are going out, AFS suggests that you inform your host family about where you are going and leave a telephone number - if possible - of where you will be. Your host family knows more about the local community than you do and is best prepared to give you advice about places it would be better for you to avoid and how best to get around. In general, you should take their advice seriously and follow their recommendations. Be "street smart." You will probably look different from most Slovaks, therefore it is important that you stay relaxed and calm, also in situations which might be new for you in the beginning. Try to adapt your

clothing style to Slovaks (long jeans or pants). It is also important to observe their behaviour and do as they do as much as possible.

### **Precautions**

- Do not act or look like an easy target - look confident!
- Know what and who is around you and where you are going at all times
- If you see or sense problems on your way, just change your route and prepare to run away if necessary
- If you are unable to run away, give the person anything they ask for and try not to make him or her angry
- You should carry a photocopy of your passport in your purse or wallet, as well as the Slovak ID card (as soon as you get it). Keep your passport in a safe place at home. You can ask host parents where to keep your passport.
- Carry your back-pack in crowded streets or places in the front.
- Always change your money at a bank. Your host family or local chapter can help you with this matter. We strongly recommend that you open a bank account.
- Do not carry a lot of money with you. You should have only what you need for the day.
- Do not accept anything from unknown people in the streets.
- Do not tell unknown people how much money you own or about your properties.
- Be careful with pickpockets and thieves in crowded or lonely places.
- Do not walk alone in the streets after dark. Even during daylight try to walk with other people, if you do not know the area. Avoid empty streets.
- Avoid people on the street who look like they may be under the influence of drugs, or alcohol. These people can be unpredictable and can bring about potentially harmful situations. If they say something to you, it is best to ignore them and walk away.
- Do not give your telephone number or address to strangers who approach you in the streets.
- When friends invited you out, please obtain permission from your host family before agreeing to go anywhere. Ask your family if there is any risk related to the place you are going to.
- If a police officer insists on stopping you or retaining your documents for no apparent reason, ask him for his police batch. Inform your host family if the police escort you to the nearest police station to clear the problem.

Although people in Slovakia are generally very peaceful that does not mean that everybody lives together harmoniously. Unfortunately, racism does exist. Furthermore, as a foreigner in Slovakia, you may find different treatment will be given to you. Some people may be eager to befriend you. Others may try to take advantage of you in hopes, that as a foreigner you may not understand the Slovak language or Slovak culture. It is important that you are aware of your surroundings and the people you are talking to. Do not immediately trust people who are not well known to your host family or the local AFS volunteers.

### **Public transportation and traffic**

In Slovakia cars are driven on the right hand side of the street. The traffic is not chaotic, even though you will need to pay special and careful attention when you walk or cross the streets. In most Slovak cities and towns, the public transportation system consists of buses, trams or trolleybuses.

- Be careful when you cross the streets.
- When you go out, sometimes your host parents can pick you up when you want to come home. Sometimes, you can take a ride with AFS volunteers or a family friend. In general, taking taxis on the street is safe.

- Never ask or accept rides from strangers. Never hitchhike!!!
- **Transportation in buses**
  - When waiting for public transportation, it is a good idea to wait in a lighted area where people are within shouting distance.
  - Before you enter the bus please check where you can buy the ticket – only in some cities you can buy the ticket in the bus. In other places you are able to buy the ticket by mobile phone or from a machine at bus stops.
  - There are bus stops, even though you need to give the driver a sign to stop the bus at the bus stop by pushing a button.
  - If you carry a back-pack, keep it in your hands and never leave it unattended.
  - In buses (especially when they are crowded) you should pay special attention to your personal belongings, because of pickpockets.
- **Transportation in taxis**
  - If you want to use a taxi, the safest way to use it is to call it by phone.
  - Make sure the taxi driver is unaccompanied.
  - Ask the cab driver before you enter approximately how much he will charge for the service.
  - Make sure the taxi uses “taximeter” which is a system that counts time and distance by numbers, when you get to your final destination; you figure out the fare by comparing the numbers of the “taximeter” with a chart of prices that all taxis must have.
  - Even if the cab driver seems to be friendly, do not tell him anything about you what could make him think that you have much money.
  - Do not give the cab driver details of where you live or where you are going.

### **Getting lost**

When you are lost, the best is to ring your host family or close relative, a friend, your local AFS contact person or, ultimately, the AFS National Office or the AFS 24-hour emergency service.

### **Identification and passport**

You are required to carry a your passport (including the seal with the date you entered the country) your Slovak ID and your Medical Insurance Card with you at all times. Every now and then immigration or other authorities might request identification. Please make sure that the person who is asking for your passport is a certificated police agent. For that reason you should always carry with you these three pieces of identification. If you get into trouble because you are not carrying your identification, contact your host family, the AFS office or the AFS emergency service immediately. No authority is entitled to take your passport away from you.

Furthermore, we recommend to you always carrying the name, complete address and telephone number of your host family and close relatives with you. When traveling out of town take note of the name, address and telephone number of the family or friends you will be visiting.

### **Travelling in Slovakia**

In some cities there are some areas that are considered unsafe, especially after dark. Ask your host family, counselor and local AFS volunteers to teach you where the dangerous

areas in your city are, and how local people avoid or deal with dangerous situations. We recommend that you get to know the layout and names of these places in your area, as well as the times you should particularly avoid them.

- Always keep in touch with your host family and/or Local Chapter when traveling.
- Always inform the address and phone number where you can be reached.
- Travelling without the permission of the Slovak AFS Office might result in an Early Return.
- There is no problem regarding permission from AFS if the participant is traveling with the host family or with a group of participants and local volunteers.
- If you want to travel outside the host country without your host family, you need the permission of Slovak AFS Office.
- A phone call to inform us at the office is enough if a trip is planned for no longer than one day.
- Travelling with the Local Chapter personnel is permitted, just inform Slovak AFS office.

### Emergencies

In most countries adolescent boys are more likely than girls to find themselves being questioned by the police or other civil authority officer. AFS advises that you show respect and cooperation with authorities, even though you may be innocent of any crime and think you are being treated unfairly.

In such a situation, it is unlikely that you will understand what is being said by the authority figure. In general, the best advice would be to say that you do not understand what is happening and identify yourself as an exchange student. As a foreigner you are obliged to carry a copy of your passport, your Slovak ID and your medical insurance card all times. This is important not only in the event of being questioned by authorities, but also in the unfortunate event of a personal accident or if you become the victim of a crime and may not be able to communicate effectively.

Since you can't always predict an emergency, the best protection is to be prepared. You should always carry your identification card. That way, if there is an emergency, you can get help.

**112 – In Slovakia and whole Europe, the general telephone number used to call for police, fire, or ambulance emergency services is 112. This line is available 24 hours a day.**

- **Event of a personal emergency, accident, or sickness**
  - Call your host family, close relative or a friend first. Let them know what happened and where you are.
  - If you are unable to reach your family and you have an emergency during the week days call your local chapter representatives (Nitra 0948 676 866, Bratislava 0948 676 966)
  - If you are unable to reach that office, or if it is an evening or weekend day, you should then call the AFS National Office at **0948 676 766**. The Slovak AFS Office in Nitra is open Monday to Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.
  - After work hours or during weekends you can call the emergency mobile phone in case of an emergency. In the rare case that you do not get in touch with anybody, leave a message with your name, country and phone number where you can be reached. A staff person on duty will answer your call as soon as possible. Emergency mobile phone number: **0948 676 766**
- **Medical Emergencies**

- After your arrival, AFS Slovakia will provide you with a medical program verification card. Please, keep it with you. If you run into an emergency and you cannot contact the AFS office, call worldwide assistance for immediate help.
- In case you need to go to a doctor, you can go and AFS will reimburse you the medical expenses.
- If it is an emergency, please, call our 24hrs mobile phone and leave your phone number, a short message and we will contact you immediately.

### **Robbery**

If a stranger demands you to surrender your money and/or personal belongings on the street, please stay calm and give them what they want. Under no circumstances try to resist, your personal safety is much more important than any material belongings you might lose.

### **Natural disasters**

In case of a national emergency such as an earthquake, participants should follow the government or local authority's recommendations. The Slovak AFS office will immediately contact the students to provide any necessary help.

## **Personal safety**

Uncomfortable social situations can occur in any society. Such situations are most common among teenagers, an age group which is generally eager to try new and unknown experiences. It can be difficult to handle a new situation within your home society but, in a culture that is new to you, such a situation can seem even more confusing. By presenting you with some legal and cultural rules of Slovakia, we hope to help you make informed decisions when confronted with sexual harassment, alcohol, and other drugs.

In any situation you may encounter during your stay in Slovakia, **it is important to keep in mind that you should not compromise your personal moral values or do anything that makes you feel uncomfortable while you are here on the AFS program.** While it is important for an exchange student to be open-minded, adventuresome, and accepting of the host culture, this does not mean you should ignore everything you have learned in your home culture. It is always a good idea to observe the behavior of those around you then follow what your inner voice tells you about what you have learned concerning what is right and what is wrong.

The best general advice AFS can recommend regarding issues of personal safety is as follows:

- Get to know the host culture through questions, dialogue and discussion with your host family, peers and the AFS local contacts.
- Take seriously any concerns expressed by your host family, school and AFS volunteers and follow their advice.
- As stated in the Participation Agreement document that you signed prior to leaving home, the national AFS office will make recommendations and give guidelines for physical welfare and security. Take this advice seriously and comply with these guidelines.
- Do not ignore your instincts in any given situation or feel you have to compromise your own personal behavioral values and beliefs. These are valuable resources in making decisions about what to do.

## Know the Rules to Keep Yourself Safe<sup>1</sup>

- **Rule 1: Don't Go Out Alone.**  
THINK ABOUT IT before you go. Remember that if you can avoid situations that put you at risk in the first place, you're already one step ahead. This rule is not just for little kids, it applies to everyone. We are always safer if we take a friend, host sister, or host brother.
- **Rule 2: Always Tell an Adult Where You're Going**  
Again, THINK ABOUT IT. NEVER, EVER go somewhere with someone you don't know. This includes hitching rides. This includes baby-sitting for anyone without getting information about the family like where they live and even some reference about them FIRST. Leave a telephone number and an address with your family BEFORE you go. Letting someone know where you'll be at all times is smart. If you're ever faced with a risky situation or get into trouble, your host family and friends will know where to begin looking for you.
- **Rule 3: It's Your Body**  
During your exchange year, you will face a lot of situations that put you in uncomfortable spots. You will constantly have to make decisions for yourself and will be faced with peer pressure about anything from who your friends are – male or female – to exposure to drugs and sex. One more time: THINK ABOUT IT. You have the right to reject unwanted and inappropriate attention such as teasing, touching, and bullying.
- **Rule 4: Say NO if You Feel Threatened and Tell a Trusted Adult**  
Don't be afraid to stand up for yourself. Listen to your intuition and follow your best judgment. If your friends are making bad decisions you don't have to. Have the confidence to say NO if anyone makes you feel uncomfortable about anything. And remember, it is never too late for you to tell an adult if anything is bothering you. If someone – anyone – touches you in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable, you have the right to say no. Whether it is peer pressure about sex, drugs, or doing something that you know is wrong, be strong and stand your ground. Don't be afraid to make your feelings known.

Now you know the rules. You may have always known them, but now you can really get them. They're like bells that go off in your head when you're faced with a risky situation. They can't get you out of every tough spot, but they might keep you from getting into one.

We know that you're **smart** and **strong** and ready to **take on the world**. Go and do it, just use your head first. Know the rules. From now on, these are your rules for life in the Slovakia.

## Sex and sexual harassment

Cultures differ in their views of appropriate sexual behavior and practices between young people. Often clarification of attitudes may be necessary and here, again the advice of people you have come to know and trust is very valuable. Knowledge about the people you socialize with is important, and this is acquired best through increasing knowledge of the culture.

Equally important are your own values and beliefs regarding your behaviour. In societies where some young people are sexually active, there are also many that are not. You should not compromise your own personal values and beliefs regarding sexual behaviour.

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<sup>1</sup> Information adapted from Safety Tips for the USA-2012, "Know the Rules", The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children.

## Tips for Safe Sex and Preventing Teen Pregnancy<sup>2</sup>

As so many of you have made clear, the teen years shouldn't be about pregnancy, parenting, midnight feedings, and diapers. We hope that you find these ideas useful and perhaps see your own views and opinions reflected in them.

- Thinking "it won't happen to me" is stupid; if you don't protect yourself, it probably will. Sex is serious. Make a plan
- Just because you think "everyone is doing it," doesn't mean they are. Some are, some aren't — and some are lying
- There are a lot of good reasons to say "no, not yet." Protecting your feelings is one of them
- You're in charge of your own life. Don't let anyone pressure you into having sex
- You can always say "no" — even if you've said, "yes" before
- Carrying a condom is just being smart — it doesn't mean you're pushy or easy
- If you think birth control "ruins the mood," consider what a pregnancy test will do to it
- If you're drunk or high, you can't make good decisions about sex. Don't do something you might not remember or might really regret
- Sex won't make him yours, and a baby won't make him stay
- Not ready to be someone's parent? It's simple: Use protection every time or don't have sex

## What is “Safer Sex?”

“Safer sex” describes a range of ways that sexually active people can protect themselves from infection with all sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV infection. Practicing safer sex also provides birth control protection.

## How do I deal with peer pressure to become sexually active?

First, remember that almost everyone has to figure out how to deal with peer pressure. It doesn't happen by magic, but here are some tips for keeping the pressure off:

- Date several people and hang out with different groups of people
- Go out with a group of friends rather than only your date
- Think of what you would say in advance in case someone tries to pressure you
- Be ready to call your host mom, host dad or a friend to pick you up if you need to leave a date
- You never need to "pay someone back" with sex in return for an expensive date or gift
- Say "no" and mean "no" if that's how you feel

## Sexual harassment

You may be unsure in some situations if you are being sexually harassed or if a particular person's behaviour would be considered as normal or just friendly. An important source is your own instinct. Often your host siblings/parents and friends will be able to advise you about what is normal behaviour regarding people you do not know. Other people to whom you can turn to for advice or help are the AFS contacts within your community or at the National Office.

Sexual harassment is likely to happen in any country.

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Safety tips for the USA-2012, A Message from the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy

In case you might be subjected to an assault, try to avoid this by moving away from the person or by loudly yelling at the person to intimidate him/her. Avoid going to isolated places with people that you don't know well.

If you realize that someone is following you, try to go into a public place (a bar, a shop, and a restaurant) and ask someone for help.

### **It's all about you! Protecting yourself from sexual abuse**

During your AFS experience, you'll have many new and different experiences. Yet there are things that remain the same.

- Your body is always yours.
- You always have the right to say no.  
If you feel threatened, tell an adult that you trust. This can be your natural parents, your host parents, an AFS volunteer or staff or anyone else that you feel you can trust and rely upon.
- If something doesn't feel right to you, it probably isn't.
- Never go anywhere with a person you don't know.  
When you do go out, always let an adult know where you are, and when your schedule or destination changes.
- If a friend gives you cause for concern, get involved.  
If your friend tells you that he or she is being sexually abused, the first thing to do is listen. Be patient and respectful. Try not to judge or question behaviour. Believe what your friend is telling you. Go to an adult you trust for advice and help. Involve a parent, teacher, or another adult that you trust. You will not be 'snitching.' You'll be helping to stop or prevent your friend from being abused. Talk to your friend and try to get him or her to talk to an adult. Offer to go with him or her. Report the abuser to an adult whom you trust.

This information is designed to help you learn more about sexual abuse, how to prevent it, and where to go for help. Be sure to speak with your host family, your liaison or another adult you trust about keeping yourself safe in your community.

In the event of an assault, the participant should notify the AFS Local Chapter or/and National Office. They will be in charge of arranging medical check-ups and inform authorities. The Slovak AFS office will always be consulted regarding a police report, since it may be mandatory or optional, depending on the participant's age, nationality and other factors.

## **Final important recommendations**

Assume life in Slovakia in a mature way by following the rules and dealing with the reactions resulting from the differences and the appearance foreigners have in Slovakia.

AFS participants coming to Slovakia must be able to avoid any problems by following the rules and regulations set down by the program.

AFS participants coming to Slovakia must follow AFS procedures and recommendations, along with those issued by Foreign Embassies and Consulates.