

Žilinský kraj - Characteristic of the region

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Location, area, geographical conditions

Žilinský kraj is located in the northwestern part of Slovakia. With an area of 6,808.4 km², it occupies 13.9% of the country's total area and is the third-largest region in the Slovak Republic. The northwestern border also forms the state boundary with the Czech Republic, while to the north, it borders the Republic of Poland. The region shares borders with three other Slovak regions: Trenčiansky kraj, Banskobystrický kraj a Prešovský kraj.

The area of the Žilinský kraj is characterized by a variety of landscapes. From the valley floodplains of watercourses (Váh, Kysuca, Turiec, and Orava rivers), through agricultural and forested land, to the high mountain terrain of the ridges of the mountains Západné Tatry, Nízke Tatry, Chočské vrchy, Veľká Fatra, Malá Fatra, Javorníky and Strážovské vrchy. It is primarily a mountainous region with a low proportion of arable land, offering an attractive natural environment ideal for the development of tourism, water sports, and winter sports. Žilinský kraj has a moderately warm to cold humid climate, with the lowest temperatures in Slovakia recorded in Oravská Lesná. The main river in the region is the Váh, which is formed by the confluence of the Čierny and Biely Váh rivers near municipality Kráľova Lehota. The flow of the Váh is significantly supplemented by the largest reservoirs such as Liptovská Mara and Oravská priehrada (built on the Orava river). River network of the region includes rivers Orava, Kysuca, Turiec, Rajčianka, Revúca, Belá, and Varínka. The highest point in the region is at the peak of Kriváň (2,494.4 m above sea level), while the lowest point is along the bank of the Váh river at the boundary of the region near the municipality Maršová-Rašov (287.2 m above sea level).

The region is rich in mineral resources, with deposits of construction and decorative stone, sand and gravel, and clay for brick-making. In the area of the Malá Fatra mountain, limestone is mined for cement and lime production. In the Horná Orava region, peat deposits and wood mass reserves are found.

At the regional area are located four national parks: Tatranský národný park, Národný park Nízke Tatry, Národný park Veľká Fatra and Národný park Malá Fatra, 3 protected landscape areas – Strážovské vrchy, Kysuce and Horná Orava, 57 national nature reserves, 62 nature reserves, 40 natural monuments, 18 national natural monuments, 17 protected areas and 7 protected bird areas.

The region encompasses five natural historical regions: Horné Považie, Kysuce, Liptov, Orava and Turiec.

According to the administrative division as per Act No. 221/1996 Coll. of the National Council of the Slovak Republic, Žilinský kraj is divided into 11 districts: Bytča, Čadca, Dolný Kubín, Kysucké Nové Mesto, Liptovský Mikuláš, Martin, Námestovo, Ružomberok, Turčianske Teplice, Tvrdošín, and Žilina. The smallest district in terms of area is Kysucké Nové Mesto (173.7 km²), which makes up 2.6% of the total area of the region. The largest district by area is Liptovský Mikuláš (1,341 km²), accounting for almost a fifth of the region's territory.

The region contains 315 municipalities, 19 of which are cities. Nearly a quarter of the region's population lives in the three largest cities: Žilina, Martin, and Liptovský Mikuláš.

Demographic background

As of December 31, 2023, the population of Žilinský kraj was 687,174 persons, accounting for 12.7% of the Slovak population. The population density, at 101 inhabitants per km², was below the Slovak national average. The most densely populated district was Žilina, with an average of 197 inhabitants per km², while the district with the lowest population density was Turčianske Teplice, with only 40 inhabitants per km².

In 2023, there were 6,177 live births and 6,583 deaths in Žilinský kraj. Including migration, the region experienced a net loss of 526 inhabitants. Overall, the region's population decreased by 932 people. The mean age of the population, 41 years, placed the region among those with a younger demographic. However, since 2020, the proportion of seniors aged 65 and older has exceeded the proportion of children under 14 years. In 2023, the senior population made up 17.6% of the regional population, surpassing the child population by 1.7 percentage points. The productive population (ages 15–64) accounted for two-thirds of the population, and its share has been steadily decreasing due to lower growth rates among younger generations and higher declines among older generations.

In 2023, 3,298 couples got married, and 952 marriages were divorced. The number of marriages decreased by more than 8% year-on-year, while the number of divorces dropped by nearly 1%. In a decade-long comparison, these figures represented the second-lowest marriage and divorce rates, lower values were reached only in the pandemic year 2020.

Economic and social specifics

Žilinský kraj is one of the key economic areas of Slovakia, with a well-developed industrial sector that provides employment opportunities. In 2023, economically active residents (working and unemployed over 15 years of age) made up nearly 53% of the population. The economic activity rate, which is the ratio of economically active individuals to the population over 15, was 63.1%. The employment rate (the proportion of people aged 20 to 64 employed within the same age group) reached 80.7%, and the unemployment rate (the share of unemployed individuals among the economically active) was 3.3%. The average monthly wage was 1,540 EUR, which was 88 EUR below the national average.

In terms of business activity, by the end of 2023, Žilinský kraj was home to 33.1 thous. legal entities, 86% of which were enterprises, and 61.1 natural persons, with 95% being self-employed persons. These enterprises primarily focused on trade, industry, and construction. Nearly 37% of self-employed persons worked in construction, 16% in industrial production, and 13% in trade.

Žilinský kraj, based on creation of the gross domestic product (GDP), was classified as a medium-performing region within Slovakia. In 2023, GDP reached 13.7 bill. EUR at current prices, which accounted for 11.1% of the national GDP. GDP per capita was 19,770 EUR at current prices, which was 12.2% lower than the national average.

In terms of economic activities, the largest share of gross added value came from the industrial sector (29%). Trade, transport, accommodation, and food service activities as well as the sector of public administration, defence, social security, education, healthcare, and social assistance both contributed 15%.

Due to the extensive mountain ranges in the Žilinský kraj, the share of agricultural land, at 35%, is the lowest among the country's regions. In crop production, the region is known for growing cereals, potatoes, and fodder plants. In animal production, the region stands out for cattle breeding and sheep farming, especially in the Liptovský Mikuláš district. Poultry farming is successful in the Turčianske Teplice district.

The largest industrial company in the region is the KIA car factory near Žilina. Machinery production is developed in the Považie and Turiec areas, iron and electronics manufacturing in Orava, and paper production in Žilina and Ružomberok. Hydroelectric power plants on the Váh river are also significant. In 2023, industrial enterprises generated turnover of 23.2 bill. EUR and employed over 67 thous. persons.

Construction has a strong position in Žilinský kraj, reflected in the second-highest construction production volumes. In 2023, construction entities in the region produced nearly 848 mill. EUR value of construction work performed by their own employees and 1.64 bill. value of construction production contractually agreed. Just 2,695 apartments were completed, the most in Žilina district (577).

Region enjoys a favourable transport location in Slovakia, situated along important international and domestic routes. It is crossed by the main road from the Czech Republic to Ukraine and roads from Bratislava and Šahy to Poland. By the end of 2023, the region's road network spanned 2,063 km, of which 138 km were motorways and express roads. Almost 441,000 motor vehicles were registered, over 70% of which were passenger cars. The railway network connects the Žilina Region to the European system, with the main Bratislava-Košice line passing through Žilina, and connections to neighboring Poland and the Czech Republic. This makes Žilina an important transportation point for both the region and Slovakia. Local railway lines include Žilina–Rajec, Čadca–Makov, and Kral'ovany–Trstená. The central point is Žilina, with a newly established station in Teplička nad Váhom. International air traffic is located 10 km from the regional centre in Dolný Hričov municipality.

Education in Žilinský kraj is represented by a wide network of schools. In 2023, there were 387

kindergartens, 260 primary schools, 30 high schools, 55 vocational schools, and 2 conservatories. The seat of the University of Žilina is located in the centre of the region, the Catholic University in Ružomberok, the Armed Forces Academy of General Milan Rastislav Štefánik in Liptovský Mikuláš and the Jessenius Faculty of Medicine of the Comenius University is located in Martin.

Healthcare in Žilinský kraj in 2023 was provided by 1,659 healthcare facilities, including 9 hospitals, 1,309 outpatient health care units and 5 institutes for treatment. The region is rich in mineral and thermal waters, which are used for treatment in spas such as Rajecké Teplice (for musculoskeletal and nervous system diseases), Turčianske Teplice (for urological and rheumatic diseases), Lúčky (female reproductive diseases), and Liptovský Ján (for digestive and rheumatic diseases). Geothermal springs in Liptovský Ján, Bešeňová, Rajec, Oravice, and Stráňavy are used for recreational purposes. Mineral waters such as Budiš a Fatra are also used as table waters.

Žilinský kraj is a significant cultural region of Slovakia with a rich cultural and historical heritage. In 2023, there were 8 theatres (including small and independent ones), 17 cinemas with 31 screening rooms, 11 galleries (including branches), 43 museums, and 226 active libraries. The most famous national cultural monuments include the Bytčiansky hrad castle, originally built as a water castle, open air museum with forest railway in Vychylovka, castle in Oravský Podzámok, Slovak National Museum in Martin, the first building of Matica Slovenská (the institution for development and consolidation of Slovak patriotism) in Martin, forest railway in Oravská Lesná, the museum of Slovak poet P.O. Hviezdoslav in Dolný Kubín and the ruins of Strečno castle near Žilina. The unique folk architecture in Čičmany, the wooden nativity scene in Rajecká Lesná as well as a world unique – the wire work exhibition of the Považské múzeum, located in Budatínsky hrad castle in Žilina are also noteworthy. The UNESCO World Heritage list includes also the Vlkolínec settlement (preservation area of folk architecture) and Gothic wooden church from the 15th-century in Tvrdošín.

Not only numerous cultural and historical monuments, but its natural beauty such as Vysoké and Nízke Tatry (the High and Low Tatras), Veľká a Malá Fatra (the Great and Little Fatra) mountain ranges, and other mountains caused the second-highest number of visitors within Slovak regions. In 2023, the Žilinský kraj was visited by 1.3 mill. tourists, who could find accommodation services in 1,363 facilities. Their number was the highest compared to other regions.