



# Weekly Briefing

**Slovakia political briefing:  
Minority government in Slovakia  
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# Minority government in Slovakia

## *Summary*

*At the beginning of summer Prime Minister Eduard Heger (OLaNO) had to choose between Finance Minister and OLaNO leader Igor Matovič or the SaS party, one of four coalition parties. Its chair Richard Sulík claimed that the party would no longer adhere to the coalition deal, threatening to leave the coalition government if Matovič remains part of it after the summer holidays. The SaS party has left Slovakia's government after a two-month ultimatum asking Matovič to leave. The move came after he pushed through a package of family benefits, costing over a billion euros. These were criticized as unsystematic and were passed in cooperation with a far-right opposition party. After Finance Minister Igor Matovič refused to give up his seat, his party is now in charge of a minority government and if it fails, Slovakia's first-ever snap election could give the power to the parties accused of corruption he vowed to defeat. Prime Minister Eduard Heger announced that his Government will be a minority one due to the resignation of Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) ministers. The premier plans first to inform President Zuzana Čaputová about the names of the successors of outgoing ministers.*

## **Introduction**

Slovakia's ruling coalition lurched closer to collapse after a junior member threatened to pull its ministers out of the cabinet, depriving it of majority backing in parliament. The ruling alliance has repeatedly flirted with rupture since winning general elections in 2020 on a pledge to eradicate rampant corruption. Last year, the Freedom and Solidarity party (SaS), led by Richard Sulík, orchestrated the ouster of then-Prime Minister Igor Matovič following a disagreement over managing the pandemic.

While the reconstituted cabinet, now led by Prime Minister Eduard Heger, has stumbled along since then, Sulík is now demanding Matovič be removed as finance minister by Aug. 31, otherwise his party will abandon the coalition. Sulík accuses Matovič of betraying his ruling partners by pushing a billion-euro (\$1.003 billion) subsidy package for families through parliament without sufficient backing, and with the help of far-right lawmakers. Matovič, the leader of the largest ruling party, refuses to leave.

A breakup would cast Heger's administration into minority status and force him to seek ad-hoc support in parliament to pass laws. His government will have to address the energy crisis in the coming months, approve the 2023 budget, and pass other legislation required for the nation of 5.4 million to draw hundreds of million euros from the European Union's recovery fund. A coalition collapse would also expose the government to no-confidence motions led by two opposition groups that now lead opinion polls, and could trigger early elections. Former Prime Minister Robert Fico has launched a campaign to hold a referendum to oust the government, which President Zuzana Čaputová is considering.

### **Slovak coalition crisis ended with a minority government**

Prime Minister Eduard Heger placed the stability of his coalition government at stake due to his reluctance to remove Finance Minister Igor Matovič from his post. One of the coalition parties, Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), announced in summer that it would no longer accept the existing coalition deal (a legally non-binding document that sets out the rules and goals of the four-party coalition government) and demanded the sacking of Matovič, the least trusted minister according to polls, from the government. The party added that it would leave the government if Prime Minister Eduard Heger (OĽaNO) failed to draft a new coalition deal and have it approved by the coalition parties.

With the second highest number of lawmakers in the parliament out of the four coalition parties, the SaS remained to be the second strongest coalition party. One of the SaS' conditions was the removal of Matovič from the ministerial post. Igor Matovič is the leader of Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OĽaNO), the strongest party in the coalition government. He was made to step down from the prime ministerial post last year, swapping chairs in the government with his party colleague Eduard Heger.

Prime Minister Eduard Heger has resisted a demand to sack his least popular minister. But his decision to preserve his party's unity costed his government its parliamentary majority. The prime minister, called the SaS demand "unrealistic" and accused the party of attempting to bring his government down.

Heger's government has expressed strong support for Ukraine in different ways, led Slovakia out of the coronavirus pandemic, gained a strategic Volvo investment, encouraged the

investigation of high-profile corruption and organized crime cases to begin, and adopted an EU-backed recovery plan.

It was obvious that if Heger, a respected man among European leaders, fails to secure a parliamentary majority from September, his teetering government could put a number of planned reforms within the recovery plan and billions of euros in the EU's recovery fund at risk, among other things. This coalition crisis, which can be considered the second major clash in just over two years (the first ended with Matovič stepping down as prime minister in spring 2021), erupted in May after parliament refused to permit the arrest of Smer-SD MP and former prime minister Robert Fico when he was charged with criminal conspiracy by police. It reached its peak after parliament overrode a presidential veto to approve Matovič's so-called family package of economic measures, worth more than €1 billion, only by turning to far-right lawmakers for support.

SaS, which could have vetoed the package by voting against it, but instead agreed merely to refrain from voting for it, wanted to oust the finance minister because of what it claims was his mismanagement of the public finances, and for his constant verbal attacks on SaS and its leader, Economy Minister Richard Sulík. Last year Matovič was willing to resign as Slovakia's prime minister only after some of his coalition partners had agreed to his several conditions, one of which included the stepping down of Economy Minister Richard Sulík. This year it was different. OĽaNO is thus essentially disregarding the ultimatum issued by its coalition partner Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) in early July.

It meant that OĽaNO head Igor Matovič would not resign as finance minister, Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) ministers would leave and SaS would officially become an opposition party. The government of Eduard Heger would no longer have the majority of votes in the parliament of 150 MPs to rely on. Finally, SaS leader Richard Sulík filed his resignation as economy minister at the beginning of September, followed by three SaS ministers - Ivan Korčok at foreign affairs, Mária Kolíková at justice, and Branislav Gröhling at education department.

The remaining three parties of the ruling coalition, OĽaNO, Sme Rodina, and Za Ľudí, have already been talking about how to divide the four ministries. After the negotiations OĽaNO should be assigned the economy and justice ministries, while education should go to Sme Rodina. The smallest coalition party, Za Ľudí, is to nominate the next foreign affairs minister.

With SaS no longer supporting the coalition in the parliament, the three parties do not have the necessary 76 votes in the house, and will rule as a minority government. After SaS leaves, there will be only 70 coalition MPs. If the parliament proves unable to pass laws, notably the state budget that should be approved in the autumn, an early election may follow.

## **Conclusion**

Slovakia's government has lost its majority in parliament after a junior partner withdrew from the four-party coalition. Foreign Minister Ivan Korčok, Justice Minister Mária Kolíková, and Education Minister Branislav Gröhling, all from the liberal Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) party, submitted their resignations at the end of August. The party's leader and former Economy Minister Richard Sulík also resigned from his government post.

SaS had threatened to leave the coalition after disagreements with populist Finance Minister Igor Matovič. Matovič's Ordinary People (OLaNO) party won the 2020 parliamentary election, but he resigned as Prime Minister after acquiring doses of the Russian-made Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine without consulting his coalition partners and Eduard Heger (a close ally of Matovič and the deputy head of OLaNO) became the country's new leader in his place.

Matovič had clashed with Sulík on a number of issues, including how to tackle soaring inflation and high energy prices amid Russia's invasion of Ukraine. He has pushed forward an anti-inflation economic package that was supported by the opposition far-right Our Slovakia party. Sulík had also disagreed with the Finance Minister over the country's economic response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

After bitter personal attacks, the SaS had called on Heger to reshuffle his government and remove Matovič from office by the end of August. Heger had indicated that Matovič could resign if his proposed anti-inflation measures were first approved.

Prime Minister Eduard Heger is planning to introduce candidates soon for the four empty ministerial posts to Slovakia's President Zuzana Čaputová. The political uncertainty comes as the Slovak government has been donating arms to the Ukrainian armed forces while opening its border to refugees fleeing the war. Without SaS, the ruling coalition only holds a minority of 70 seats in the 150-seat Slovakian parliament. A potential no-confidence vote in the minority government could lead to early elections. Slovak citizens are not due to go to the polls until February 2024.

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