Slovakia political briefing:
Municipal and Regional Elections in Slovakia
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Summary

For the first time, municipal and regional elections were held on the same day in Slovakia, on October 29, 2022. The Election Day was shorter than usual, until 20:00 instead of 22:00, which was the closing time for polling stations in elections in the past. Moreover, concerns over low turnout were magnified by the timing of the elections: they took place in the middle of autumn school holidays, when people in Slovakia typically travel to visit their families and thus might not be in the place of their permanent residence. Probably, it was one of the reasons why this was the lowest voter turnout in the history of municipal elections, as only 43% of eligible voters participated.

Most regional governors will continue in their posts after the 2022 regional elections. Only one of the eight biggest cities will have a new mayor — after the previous one didn’t seek re-election. Overall, independent candidates won the most mayoral posts across Slovakia. People have chosen experienced, democratic candidates and in most cases rejected extremism and populism.

Introduction

Nearly 4.5 million people, including foreigners with permanent residence, went to the polls in Slovakia on October 29, 2022. The country, where a two-day pre-election moratorium was in force, held municipal and regional elections on the same day for the first time. Despite Ukraine being a neighbor and despite nearly 100,000 refugees with temporary protection status staying in Slovakia, candidates had avoided the topic of Ukrainian refugees in the campaign. Regional elections are not popular with people, while municipal elections fare better in terms of the turnout. Municipal and regional politics constitute one of the most important parts of the state, because they are the closest to people and respond to their requests based on what is needed in regions and municipalities.
Results of Municipal and Regional Elections

Slovakia, a country of 5.4 million people, has granted temporary refuge to nearly 100,000 refugees since the start of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The aversion against Ukrainian refugees has since increased, with most Slovaks believing that the state looks after refugees more than its own citizens. Recently it has changed.

Observers had claimed the war in Ukraine was not a topic in the Slovak municipal and regional elections, even if they were the first elections to be held in the country since the start of Russia’s invasion. The impacts of the war, like the energy crisis or the surging prices of building materials and food products, were addressed by candidates in different debates or their programs in how they affect, for example, the energy bills of schools or delay investment projects. The attitude towards solving the energy crisis might be one of the factors that influenced the election results. Local and regional governments, however, lack the competences and money to deal with these huge impacts and have to rely on the Slovak government and EU measures. Of course, the situation could differ and might be more difficult in small towns with a high concentration of refugees. In some municipalities the Ukrainian crisis might thus be a key topic because of their citizens. Today, it is not rare for the Ukrainians to be the victims of verbal attacks by people in Slovakia. Despite the massive inflow of refugees in the early stages of the conflict, the war should has not decided the results in the Slovak regions near the border with Ukraine either.

Towns and regions, and people in them, face problems other than the conflict. For example: a brain drain, shortage of doctors, low wages, lack of job opportunities, and no highways to Poland and Ukraine. It was obvious that local and regional topics indeed dominated the debates across the country before the elections and the war could be a major topic in the elections only if Slovakia would experience another big migration wave, which is not the case today.

We can confirm that the election results dispelled the worst fears. Many had concerns ahead of what was very likely the most wide-ranging set of elections that people in Slovakia have ever participated in. In the run-up, it came to seem that democracy had rarely had it harder. The regional and municipal elections – for which voting is only allowed in person, in the place of one’s residence – took place in the middle of the autumn school holidays, when people typically travel away from their homes. Election Day was noticeably shorter than usual, with polling stations closing at 20:00. Voters had to deal with four, and in Bratislava and Košice
cities as many as six, different ballots. Besides, it was the first time that voters have been asked to deliver an electoral verdict since the 2020 election, which was followed by a lot of perceived and actual hardship during the pandemic, and a lot of political turmoil since that has left many people drained of any enthusiasm for politics and even for public affairs as such.

The results of the elections of regional governors, as released by the Statistics Office, show that Juraj Droba will continue as regional governor in Bratislava Region, Jozef Viskupič will be the Trnava regional governor for the second consecutive term, Jaroslav Baška will continue in Trenčín Region, Erika Jurinová will be the Žilina regional governor and Rastislav Trnka will be the regional governor in Košice Region. Ondrej Lunter will be the regional governor in Banská Bystrica. He will take over after his father, who served as regional governor in the past term after defeating the previous governor. Milan Majerský remains the regional governor in Prešov Region. Nitra Region is the only one where the incumbent governor failed to get re-elected. Milan Belica, who has been regional governor in Nitra since 2001, will be replaced in the post by Branislav Becík, who ran with the support of Hlas and Sme Rodina parties.

The same situation happened regarding the election of mayors in the largest Slovakian cities, because the most of the mayors were re-elected. Matúš Vallo will serve another term as the mayor of Bratislava, following a sweeping victory in the municipal elections. Just like Peter Bročka in Trnava, Ján Nosko in Banská Bystrica, Marek Hattas in Nitra, Richard Rybníček in Trenčín, Peter Fiabáne in Žilina or Jaroslav Polaček in Košice. The only change has happened in Prešov, where František Ol'ha replaced the previous mayor Andrea Turčanová.

**Conclusion**

The results of regional and municipal elections in Slovakia released on October 29 showed that voters didn't use the ballot to punish the coalition government of Prime Minister Eduard Heger for high inflation driven by soaring energy prices.

The heads of six of the country's eight regions were re-elected to their posts, while one of the two new leaders is the son of the previous leader, running as an independent, according to the results released by the Slovak Statistics Office. In the remaining region, a candidate supported jointly by the ruling coalition and opposition parties won in a result that still suggested the voters preferred stability over a change.
Political commentators agree that far-right and extremist forces are the losers of the municipal elections, as only a single representative from several far-right parties were elected to the city council. Both far-right political parties, Our Slovakia People’s Party (ĽSNS) and The Republic, failed despite both of them having candidates run in all eight regions for the regional president’s office.

Regional elections in 2014 were the first elections in Slovakia, in which the far-right managed to overcome their previous poor results. Back then, Marian Kotleba, leader of the neo-Nazi ĽSNS, had been elected president of the Banská Bystrica self-governing region. Since then, Kotleba was sentenced for supporting and propagating sympathies towards the neo-Nazi movement.

The 2022 municipal and regional elections results are a victory for democratic forces and the true winners are independent candidates. Out of all elected mayors, more than 46% ran as independents. Former Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini’s social-democratic Hlas political party emerged as the strongest party in the regions with more than 9% of all mayors. The Non-parliamentary Alliance, which represents the Hungarian minority, came in second. Elections were also a failure for representatives of the government and the coalition, several of which decided to run for the municipal or regional council offices as most did not succeed.
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