



# Weekly Briefing

**Slovakia political briefing:**  
**The most important political events awaiting Slovakia in 2023**  
**Peter Csanyi**

## China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: : Feng Zhongping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

## **The most important political events awaiting Slovakia in 2023**

### **Referendum and President Čaputová's decision**

Yet the Smer-SD-led opposition has up its sleeve another possible way to get the constitutional change in question adopted. A 9-million-euro opposition-initiated referendum on shortening a parliament is set to take place on January 21, just three days before the first parliamentary session of the year. The electorate will, therefore, be the first to have its say on the constitutional change, even if the referendum is not expected to be valid due to a low turnout. Only 37 per cent of people said they will definitely cast a vote, according to an AKO poll from early December 2022.

President Čaputová – who agreed to, then called the referendum – and coalition politicians said weeks ago they would ignore it. The president claims Smer-SD is misusing the referendum for its own political ends, while others see it as merely a waste of money.

In Slovak history only one referendum has exceeded the necessary 50-per cent threshold. That concerned joining the EU in 2004. Yet if Smer-SD's referendum were to succeed, its outcome would be legally binding, meaning that any future Slovak parliament could be dismissed anytime via a referendum or a resolution adopted by just 76, not 90, lawmakers in the 150-seat parliament, which is different from the proposal waiting to be voted on by parliament.

Conversely, if the referendum becomes invalid or political parties fail to agree by the end of January (the deadline set by the president) on holding a snap election, or Eduard Heger has not got together a list of 76 lawmakers to support his next cabinet by then, President Čaputová could appoint her own caretaker government.

Unlike SaS, other political parties said they would not back an interim, caretaker government. The Slovak public does not seem much in favor of it either. A Focus poll in December shows only 22 per cent would support a caretaker government, a concept Slovakia has no experience with.

Čaputová, who is expected to announce in the spring her decision on whether she will run for re-election in 2024, would probably not want to risk a misstep in the form of appointing a government of technocrats unsupported by either parliament or the people. We should also

know the names of another candidates for the Presidential Palace during this year. In the meantime, less than one and a half year before the presidential election, we have no any presidential candidates.

If Čaputová – the country’s most trusted politician – decides on another presidential run, she would be setting out on the campaign trail round about the same time as political parties ahead of any snap election at some point this year.

### **The possibility of a snap election**

In Slovakia, the right-center minority government of Prime Minister Eduard Heger was brought down by a vote of no confidence on 15 December, 2022 meaning a snap election in the spring or fall of 2023 seems increasingly likely. Current polls suggest a tectonic shift for the highly fragmented party system if these were to happen.

Recent polls suggest Heger’s center-right OĽaNO party would face a devastating result, dropping from 25.0% in the February 2020 election to only about 7.5%. As the strongest OĽaNO is likely to be replaced by the center-left Hlas–SD party of former prime minister Peter Pellegrini, which would win 20% in its first election.

Hlas–SD split in mid-2020 from Smer-SD in opposition to its former leader and Prime Minister Robert Fico. Fico, a controversial figure, in 2016, associated refugees and Muslims with terrorism, claiming that thousands of terrorists and Islamic State fighters are entering Europe with migrants. Fico’s Smer-SD is now trailing behind Hlas-SD at about 16%, down from 18% in 2020.

Fico, who had to step down after the widespread protests after the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak, made a big comeback in the last two years. His party, Smer-SD, currently ranks second in the polls but cannot be underestimated. Even if it does not win the elections, forming a new government without it may prove difficult, although Hlas–SD leader Pellegrini appears to be wary of forming a coalition with Fico.

The liberal Progressive Slovakia party has been rising in polls over the past months, reaching 11%. In 2020, the party ran on a shared ticket with the SPOLU party, winning 6.97%. Because multiparty alliances have a higher threshold to enter parliament (7%) than single parties (5%), PS and SPOLU did not win any seats in 2020. A 2022 renewal of that alliance is unlikely, as SPOLU is now polling at less than 1%. SaS is polling at 10%.

OLaNO's coalition partners have not been able to profit from the party's collapse. The right-wing Sme Rodina party is polling at about 8%, in line with their 2020 result. The center-right Za ľudí party collapsed from 6% in 2020 to about 2%, well below the 5% threshold to gain seats in the legislative. These polling figures mean that, if correct, the current government would have less than 20% support if a snap election were to be held today.

The far-right Neo-Nazi ĽSNS party is also facing parliamentary death, with only 2% in the polls, compared to 8% in 2020. However, REPUBLIKA, a far-right split from ĽSNS, would win 6% in its first run. Analysts claim some of the votes for far-right went to the SMER-SD party, enticed by Fico's controversial rhetoric.

The center-right Christian Democrats (KDH) are polling at about 6%, meaning the party would be elected to parliament for the first time since 2012. A set of fragmented center-right parties, which claim to represent the Hungarian-speaking minority, are polling just below the threshold at around 4%.

However, snap elections would require 90 votes in the legislative. The remnants of the ruling coalition have been recently trying a new majority under the leadership of PM Eduard Heger, this time without Igor Matovič as finance minister and without Roman Mikulec (OLaNO) as interior minister. This group includes part of the ruling OLaNO, part of the former coalition party SaS and Environment Minister Ján Budaj and his platform, which used to be part of OLaNO, but left after the no-confidence vote.

President Zuzana Čaputová gave them until the end of January to find a new majority. If not parliament should allow the new elections to happen in June 2023 at the latest. There is a possibility, however, that National Council will block the new elections. In this scenario, elections would happen in spring 2024 as previously planned.

Most analysts still consider snap elections as the most likely scenario, as there is little chance a new majority will be found. The possibility of a government which would please urban, progressive, pro-western voters is close to zero after the next elections. If Fico returns as prime minister, Slovakia is likely to embark on the path of its southern neighbor, Hungary. Fico has also said if his Smer-SD is part of the next government, it will block any further support for Ukraine. Slovaks' attitudes are quite favorable to Moscow. There is a possibility, even with Pellegrini as prime minister that current pro-western policies will disappear or weaken.

## **New political parties**

In fact, up to 59 per cent of people would prefer to see any snap election take place before the summer of 2023, with only 19 per cent preferring an election in spring of 2024, according to the Focus poll.

A snap election would force small centrist and center-right parties to create coalitions to have any chance of entering parliament. It is also important to point to ex-prime minister Mikuláš Dzurinda's political project that has been talked about in the media since the autumn of 2022. At the beginning of December, Dzurinda spoke at a congress of SPOLU, a small non-parliamentary party, where he mentioned that he wants to create a political alternative to Smer-SD, the far-right parties and populists, and that the project would aim to deal with the country's problems by bringing together conservatives and liberals. According to him nowadays it is about not allowing ourselves to be pushed out of the developed world by cowardice and weakness. Mikuláš Dzurinda is a man who introduced key reforms in the early 2000s, but whose time in office was also tarnished by political corruption. Political scientists agree it is not clear what Dzurinda's ambitions are and how far advanced his plans are. There is a speculation that the Civic Democratic Platform around Ján Budaj could join this project.

Besides there is a high possibility that Lucia Ďuriš Nicholsonová (an MEP) will announce her new political party before the election.

Based on his statements about bringing all true democrats, conservative and liberal, together, Eduard Heger appears to have a similar ambition to Mikuláš Dzurinda. It's unclear how Heger thinks he can achieve this when his party boss, Igor Matovič, has repeatedly attacked liberals, the president, and the LGBT community in recent days.

Like Dzurinda and some in power, experts also express fear that any snap election could shift Slovak foreign policy and push the country back to the peripheries of the EU. A similar situation occurred in 1994 when Vladimír Mečiar's HZDS party won the first snap election held in Slovakia, whose semi-authoritarian rule earned Slovakia the name of "black hole of Europe". Experts stress that the "Tatra Tiger", Slovakia's nickname in the noughties due to its high GDP at the time, cannot start growing economically strong again without further reforms, a halt to the brain drain and support for higher immigration.

## References

AKO (2022): AKO Poll – Electoral Preferences. Available at: <https://ako.sk/>

Aktuality.sk (2023): Čo nás čaká v roku 2023: Vyriešenie Čaputovej ultimáta aj Dzurindov project. Available at: <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/nqisoT4/co-nas-cka-v-roku-2023-vyriesenie-caputovej-ultimata-aj-dzurindov-projekt/>

Dlhopolec, P. (2023): Slovakia in 2023: Seeking an end to political chaos without becoming a ‘little Hungary’. Available at: <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/23107170/slovakia-in-2023-seeking-an-end-to-political-chaos-without-becoming-a-little-hungary.html>

EURACTIV (2022): Slovakia heading to the polls in 2023? Available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/slovakia-heading-to-the-polls-in-2023/>

FOCUS-Research (2022): Focus poll – Electoral Preferences of Political Parties. Available at: <https://www.focus-research.sk/archiv/volebne-preferencie-politickych-stran-december-2022/>