



Weekly Briefing

Slovakia political briefing:

The path to overcome the political chaos in Slovakia

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The path to overcome the political chaos in Slovakia

Summary

The Slovak parliament approved plans to shorten its four-year term by five months and to hold an early election on September 30, 2023 after the center-right cabinet lost a no-confidence vote and parties failed to form a new majority administration.

The government of Prime Minister Eduard Heger lost the no-confidence vote in December after a former coalition party joined the opposition, which accuses the cabinet of not doing enough to help people with the rising cost of living. The election will see a clash between pro-Western liberal and conservative parties and two leftist formations including the Smer-SD party of ex-prime minister Robert Fico who opposes sending weapons to neighboring Ukraine and has adopted a sceptical stance on Western sanctions against Russia.

Introduction

Although Slovakia's interim prime minister, Eduard Heger, maintained that snap elections had no place in a democracy, the situation changed after parliament brought his government down in December 2022. Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLaNO), the largest coalition party that Heger is a member of, tried to argue that a democratic government should have ended its term after four years, not before.

OLaNO rode to power in 2020 on a popular anti-corruption platform, ending the eight-year rule of a succession of Smer-SD-led governments that had been tarnished by wide-scale corruption, links to organized crime, and the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová.

Despite initial hopes, OLaNO was forced to replace its conflict-seeking and stubborn leader Igor Matovič as prime minister after only a year in power – a difficult period marked by the coronavirus pandemic and internal wrangling between various coalition partners. That move was not enough, however, to save the OLaNO-led government from losing its constitutional majority and, subsequently, a majority in the 150-seat house when on December 15 most lawmakers (78) backed a no-confidence motion against Heger's government.

To replace the current OĽaNO-led interim government with limited powers, appointed by President Zuzana Čaputová in mid-December, the country's political leaders had had a task to garner the necessary 90 votes in parliament to change the constitution and, then, pass another bill with the same quorum to actually make a snap election happen.

The way out from the current political chaos - snap elections in September

After Eduard Heger lost the parliament's confidence in mid-December 2022, his government fell, he and his ministers assigned as an interim government. Heger formally submitted his resignation December 16, 2022 to President Zuzana Čaputová. One week later, OĽaNO leader Igor Matovič resigned as finance minister, as part of the agreement with the now-opposition Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), which in turn supported the state budget he proposed.

Since then, the main question had been whether Slovakia was in for an early election in 2023. While the opposition insisted that this was the only way out, OĽaNO had so far been opposed to the premature end of the current parliament's term, and Heger insisted he could find enough support in the parliament to put together a new government. However, the reality was different.

After a failed quest to form new government, President Čaputová said it was essential government now demonstrated an ability to ensure it was functioning properly in key tasks, including helping citizens with rising energy prices and those most affected by poverty, and dealing with problems in healthcare, and better implementation of the EU's recovery plan.

The President explained that the interim government had limited powers and should have ruled only as long as necessary. Interim PM Eduard Heger (OĽaNO) must cooperate with the president on several matters, including foreign policy. According to the President holding elections in the first half of the year would be better for the preparation of both the state budget and budgets of other administrative bodies, including self-governing regions. But the most important thing is that with the country facing various crises, a government with full powers was needed as soon as possible. President Čaputová was aware that an agreement on snap elections among political parties would not be easy to find. Therefore, if parties were able to find consensus only on a September election date, this was still an acceptable option for her.

However, the Smer-SD and Hlas-SD opposition parties, which currently lead in opinion polls, and other opposition parties were demanding an earlier date

To solve political turmoil in the country, lawmakers adopted a constitutional amendment that most citizens opposed. An amendment to the constitution allowing early elections to be called by a vote of parliament was approved by MPs on January 25. Under the amendment, elections can be called before the end of the normal parliamentary term, but such a move would require the votes of at least 90 MPs. MPs also supported a change, proposed by former justice minister Mária Kolíková, under which any proposal for early elections could only be made with the backing of at least 30 MPs so as to prevent any single MP from abusing the amendment.

A total of 92 MPs from the current coalition parties, as well as MPs that previously left individual parties' caucuses, backed the amendment. It allowed for parliament to trigger snap elections (the date was set for 30 September 2023). Until then, Slovakia will be governed by the interim government of Eduard Heger, whose term should have ended in 2024.

The constitutional change was adopted despite most citizens opposing a similar constitutional amendment in a referendum that failed on January 21. The referendum, initiated by opposition parties Smer-SD, Hlas-SD and Republika, brought just 27.25 percent of all eligible voters in Slovakia to the polling stations, the vast majority of whom answered 'yes' to the question formulated by Smer-SD. That asked, in effect, if a vote by parliament or a referendum should be enough to trigger a general election. Since a popular turnout of at least 50 percent is required for a referendum to be valid, this vote failed – but it is not irrelevant, and should not be inconsequential.

According to the referendum's results, only slightly over 27% of Slovaks expressed their wish that a snap election could be triggered by parliament or via popular referendum. However, compared to the two-thirds majority of 90 lawmakers now needed to trigger snap elections, the reform proposed that only 76 lawmakers would be needed. With elections now around the corner, polls point to a complete change in the political landscape.

Leading the polls are two former prime ministers: Hlas-SD leader and former Smer-SD member Peter Pellegrini, who is followed closely by Smer-SD leader Robert Fico. Smer-SD, which in the past has been involved in multiple corruption scandals, used to be the main governing party but recently began to drift from the EU on policy and has heavily criticized sanctions against Russia.

Many Slovaks (46%) believe the next likely ruling coalition to include Fico, Pellegrini, and the far-right party Republika or ĽSNS, according to a recent poll. Fico has previously expressed interest in cooperating with Republika, despite Smer-SD being a member of the leftist S&D.

Conclusion

In Slovakia, a snap election is set to take place at the end of September. It comes after the EU member's government lost a parliamentary no-confidence vote after its coalition partner joined opposition parties to defeat the cabinet. There has been anger and frustration on the streets of Bratislava at the prospect of more political upheaval. Heger had not completed a full year in office before he was forced to call for new elections. In the past decade, Slovakia's government has changed every two years.

Opinion polls have given opposition parties, including the Smer-SD party of former Prime Minister Robert Fico, a lead over the current government coalition. There is speculation that if Fico returns to power, he might attempt to halt the numerous corruption investigations against him and align his country with EU neighbor Hungary, who has been critical of the bloc. Fico has also echoed Hungary's criticism of sanctions imposed on Russia following the Ukraine war.

The upcoming elections could put an end to Slovakia's pro-Western position. Given the wide-spread pro-Russian sentiment among the population, the next prime minister residing at Bratislava's summer palace could halt the numerous weapon deliveries to Ukraine and put the country at odds with the majority of the EU. The political turmoil comes as most Slovaks face economic challenges. The average income in this country of 5 million people is one of the lowest in the European Union, but inflation rates are among the highest.

And while Slovaks want stability, opinion polls show a majority in favor of the fresh elections, hoping they could bring change for the better.

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