



Weekly Briefing

**Slovakia political briefing:
Smer-SD and far-right gain in popularity before
the parliamentary elections
Peter Csanyi**


China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Ju Weiwei

Kiadásért felelős személy: Feng Zhongping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

Smer-SD and far-right gain in popularity before the parliamentary elections

Summary

Slovakia will hold early elections at the end of September with polls suggesting a straight fight between the nationalist-populist Smer-SD party and the liberal Progresívne Slovensko (PS) for the right to lead the next government. It looks like it is a battle pitching the past against the future. The early vote was sparked by the collapse of the dysfunctional coalition government that was formed in 2020 by four disparate parties to oust Robert Fico, who had dominated the previous decade of Slovak politics. Yet the chronic failure of that coalition and its successors has handed Fico, widely accused of using his years in the prime minister's office to turn Slovakia into a mafia state, a chance to complete a stunning comeback. Fico's campaign of hate and extremism illustrates just how much is riding on this election for the region and the whole EU, as well as Slovak democracy. The far-right political parties, especially Republika, do not lag behind this Smer-SD's rhetoric.

Introduction

For the past year, since the fissiparous coalition formed in March 2020 came apart at the seams, pollsters have been dutifully reporting the fortunes of Slovakia's political parties from the perspective of an impending early election. Inevitably, narratives have emerged.

The main story is the revival of Smer-SD. This protean party, which would like you to think of it as "social democratic", is now a right-wing populist party, one with no vision, but an extremely gifted leader.

Back in 2012 Smer-SD achieved the astonishing feat (in a fully proportional electoral system) of winning an absolute majority in parliament. It then proceeded to do precisely nothing with it, at least on the surface. Numerous investigations, prosecutions, witness testimonies and convictions since 2020 suggest that a great deal of activity was going on at the time, allegedly to corrupt parts of the police, the justice system and various organs of the state for the benefit of business tycoons close to Smer-SD's leadership. But when it came to the economy, it adopted

a 'steady as she goes' approach that left the free-market reforms of the 1998-2006 SDKÚ-led governments largely in place.

Situation less than a month before the snap elections

Smer-SD's 44 percent support of 2012 duly sank to 28 percent in 2016, which was still enough to keep it in government. However, the fallout from the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová in 2018 accelerated its decline and helped drive the party from power in 2020, when it attracted just 18 percent. After Peter Pellegrini subsequently split from founder Robert Fico to set up a new party, Hlas, many predicted Smer-SD was headed the way of the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), the electoral juggernaut of the 1990s that later evaporated. Fico, a three-time prime minister, has instead staged a remarkable comeback and, after two years during which Pellegrini seemed ascendant, regained Smer-SD's lead in the polls. It's a significant political achievement, one that has leveraged the failures of the post-2020 government(s) and some extraordinarily conspiratorial messaging.

The 2023 elections in Slovakia will not only decide who will rule Slovakia, but will show whether the rejection of aid to Ukraine could become a mainstream political position in Europe. Slovakia was the first country to send an air defense system and its old fighter jets to Ukraine. However, less than a month before the September 30 elections, the Smer-SD party and the far-right 'hostile' to the government in Kyiv are growing in popularity. Smer-SD chair Robert Fico promised to stop Slovak arms supplies to Ukraine, condemned sanctions against Russia and railed against NATO despite the country's membership in the alliance.

If Smer-SD and the far-right succeed, it "would likely turn one of Ukraine's most stalwart backers into a neutral bystander more sympathetic to Moscow". It could, but probably it will not happen. Fico is aware how important is form Slovakia the EU and NATO membership.

In addition, "it would also end the isolation of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of Hungary as the only leader in the European Union and NATO speaking out strongly against helping Ukraine". But again, Robert Fico does not want to take Orbán's "position" in this case, although he spent his last years in the opposition calling President Zuzana Čaputová an American agent, condemning "Ukrainian fascists" and criticizing the government for sending weapons to Ukraine. Fico is a major player once again and the politics he espouses is back in fashion. It is

a measure of how messy politics has become, and how much faith in liberal democracy has been eroded here in Central Europe.

Regarding the far-right political parties, it is interesting to follow Republika political party with its anti-NATO campaign. Milan Uhrík, leader of this party, has said that they plan to initiate a referendum on Slovakia leaving NATO in the coming four years. The party, which has steady support among voters and is projected to win parliamentary seats after early elections scheduled for September 30, has long been said to become a coalition partner of one of the two parties after the election, Smer-SD and Hlas.

Republika considers the Alliance to be a “relic of the Cold War” and calls for neutrality following Austria’s example. However, Hlas, which has come third in recent public opinion polls, has said that it would not enter a coalition with Republika due to its ambition to hold an anti-NATO referendum. As for Smer-SD leader Robert Fico, whose party leads public opinion polls, he claims that Slovakia’s foreign policy orientation must be preserved and Slovakia must fulfil the obligations arising from its membership in international organizations. However, Smer-SD does not agree with the recommendation of spending more than 2 percent of GDP on defense and it did not rule out that Smer-SD would hold talks with Republika if the far-right party made it to parliament.

In response to Republika’s ambition, the Defense Ministry said that a neutrality scenario would be a direct threat to Slovakia’s security and its existence. The fact is that Russia allowed itself to attack Ukraine because it was neutral and was not directly protected by the Alliance. We must add that neutrality would cost Slovakia much more than NATO membership. If we look at Switzerland it spends €6 billion on defense.

The current opposition parties have tried to use all “weapons” they have to influence the voters. Robert Fico and his populist Smer-SD party routinely warn that Slovakia's early election set for September will be manipulated, despite offering no evidence. Recently, they went even further and talking about a ‘police coup’ happening in Slovakia.

The opposition leader hardened his rhetoric almost a week after Tibor Gašpar, a police chief from the era of Smer-SD governments who was forced to step down following mass protests after the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak in 2018, was detained for two days and charged with corruption. Accused of organized crime, corruption and abuse of power in two other high-profile cases, Gašpar spent a year in custody in 2021. Today, the former top police officer is number nine on the election slate for Smer-SD.

Smer-SD is far from being the only party claiming without evidence that the parliamentary election set for September 30 will be rigged. The extremist Republika, Hlas and Slovak National (SNS) parties have adopted similar narratives. They promise to conduct parallel vote counting on the day of the election to prevent irregularities. Like Gašpar and Fico, Danko and Hlas leader Peter Pellegrini have declared that the arrest of Smer-SD's number nine candidate was designed to influence the election.

While Republika and Hlas hold seats in the current parliament and are expected to win seats in the next one, the SNS, led by Andrej Danko, a former parliamentary speaker who admires both Vladimir Putin and Viktor Orbán, currently has no seats in parliament, though its rise in the polls in the past three months has put it at or just above the 5 percent threshold.

Conclusion

With support of around 20 percent, Smer-SD has been leading the polls for many months. Fico's brand of radical populism has filled the void for many Slovaks who have been struggling through the chaos of the last three years. Hobbled by egoism and infighting, the coalition government headed first by Igor Matovič, then Eduard Heger was overwhelmed by the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the cost-of-living crisis.

Having been deposed by the mass street protests that followed the brutal 2018 assassination of investigative journalist Jan Kuciak, the Smer-SD leader has managed to keep himself in the public eye by leading anti-vax protests and tapping into latent pro-Russian sentiment in the country.

Slovakia's liberal camp is horrified by the prospect of Fico returning to power, which would very likely depend on a partnership with the far-right Republika party, currently polling in fourth place with around 10 percent.

Amid promises to end military support for neighboring Ukraine, Fico would likely stoke tension with the EU as he redirects Slovakia's western orientation to the east. A purge of the police and judiciary, which after the Kuciak murder started seeing reforms to dismantle the corrupt networks that had flourished under the Smer-SD strongman, would also be on the cards. We have to take all of these threats seriously and into consideration before the upcoming snap elections.

References

Beňo, M. (2023): Foreign media notice Fico's popularity and inclination towards Russia. Available at: <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/23213396/news-digest-foreign-media-notice-ficos-popularity-and-inclination-towards-russia.html>

Dlhopolec, P. (2023): Slovak opposition claims Sep election will be stolen - and too many believe it. Available at: <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/23207889/slovak-opposition-claims-sep-election-will-be-stolen-and-too-many-believe-it.html>

Gosling, T. (2023): Slovak election pitches past against future. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/09/05/slovak-election-pitches-past-against-future-says-democratic-contender/>

RSF (2023): Slovak parties asked to give election campaign pledge to implement EU recommendations. Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/slovak-parties-asked-give-election-campaign-pledge-implement-eu-recommendations>

Slovak Spectator (2023): Slovakia might not be a reliable ally of Ukraine after election. Available at: <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/23213551/nyt-slovakia-might-not-be-a-reliable-ally-of-ukraine-after-election.html>

Tarnok, B. (2023): The West Can't Ignore Slovakia's Election. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/07/18/slovakia-elections-fico-russia-ukraine-war-propaganda/>

Thomson, J. (2023): Land of confusion - when winning is losing and shouting better than talking. Available at: <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/23212653/land-of-confusion.html?ref=temacl>

Zmušková, B. (2023): Slovak election campaign starts with small parties risking vote waste. Available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/slovak-election-campaign-starts-with-small-parties-risking-vote-waste/>