



Weekly Briefing

Slovakia political briefing:
The 2023 Parliamentary Election in Slovakia
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The 2023 Parliamentary Election in Slovakia

Summary

The 2023 early parliamentary election was held in Slovakia on September 30, 2023. Most public opinion polls indicated that the populist Smer-SD party, led by three-time former prime minister Robert Fico, would come first. Smer-SD left office in 2020, after eight years in power, following the surprise victory in that year's parliamentary election of the self-proclaimed anti-corruption movement OĽaNO. Most of the other political parties in Slovakia's fragmented political scene tried to stop Smer-SD, a party under which organized crime thrived, from returning to government. The election campaign focused on corruption scandals, social values, political infighting, the country's economic outlook, and Slovakia's support to Ukraine following Russia's invasion. The election was won by the opposition Smer-SD (23%), followed by PS (18%) and Hlas-SD (14.7%). As no political force achieved a parliamentary majority, Smer-SD needs to find coalition partners in order to form a government. Whether Robert Fico, who expresses openly pro-Russian opinions and has lately grown increasingly close to Hungarian leader Viktor Orbán, will be able to do this remains to be seen.

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.

The election night in Slovakia began with two exit polls that predicted a win for the liberal force Progresívne Slovensko (PS) in the early election, but as the night went on, live results hinted at and eventually confirmed a different scenario: the return of Smer-SD.

The party lost the 2020 election, two years after the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée. Since then, dozens of people connected to former Smer-SD governments have been prosecuted and charged with corruption. Despite of these facts, Smer-SD, led by former three-time PM Robert Fico, who pledges to cut any support to Ukraine except for humanitarian aid, won the snap election in Slovakia.

Slovakia’s snap election result ‘disappointing’ for right

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-SD, 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 does not only decide who rules 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, before the September 30 elections, the Smer-SD party and the far-right 'hostile' to the government in Kyiv were 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.

The turnout this year was the highest since the 2002 parliamentary election, reaching 68.51 percent. The voters decided that Smer-SD won the election on September 30 with 22.94

percent. Interesting fact is that a similar figure was forecast for Progresívne Slovensko (PS) in one of the exit polls. PS ended in second place with 17.95 percent. Six single parties and one coalition party have gotten into the 150-seat parliament, according to the official results.

Hlas-SD, a left-wing party established three years ago by Smer-SD renegades led by ex-PM Peter Pellegrini, the self-declared anti-corruption movement OĽaNO chaired by ex-PM Igor Matovič, the liberal party SaS, as well as two returnees, the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) and the ultranationalist party Slovak National Party (SNS), will sit in parliament as well. This election was not short of political surprises such as the end of the far-right movement Republika and the populist movement Sme Rodina, led by Speaker Boris Kollár, in parliament.

The parties that gained at least 3 percent of all the votes in the September 30 early election will receive a state contribution. In total, the parties will receive more than €92 million in contributions from the state budget. Among these are the far-right movement Republika and Hungarian minority party Aliancia. Moreover, the parties that gained more than 2 percent of votes will get back their €17,000 deposit for running in the election. Find out how much money individual parties will receive.

In the coming days, Robert Fico is expected to form a government. There are several options: he may form a coalition government with Hlas-SD and SNS (what is the most likely option). Besides, with KDH, such a coalition would reach the constitutional majority. Smer-SD could swap SNS for KDH, which would grant the Smer-SD-led government 81 seats in the National Council. In 2010, when Fico won his second parliamentary election, most parties refused to cooperate with him and he did not become the prime minister. If the situation happened again, Progresívne Slovensko could try to form a liberal-conservative government with KDH, SaS, and Hlas-SD.

It is also interesting to look at the final exit-polls before the election. The results were slightly different, but would have also brought a different negotiation positions for some political parties. According to the Focus exit poll seven political parties might get into parliament: Progresívne Slovensko came first in the poll receiving 23.5 percent, followed by Smer-SD with 21.9 percent. The left-wing party Hlas-SD, the populist conservative coalition party OĽaNO-KÚ-ZĽ, the liberal party SaS, the far-right party Republika and the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) would have also won parliamentary seats, getting over a 5-

percent threshold (7 percent in the case of OĽaNO-KÚ-ZĽ). The populist party Sme Rodina and the ultranationalist Slovak National Party (SNS) would not have on any seats, either.

Table 1: Results of Parliamentary Election in Slovakia

Political Party:	Percentage %:
Smer-SD	22,94%
Progresívne Slovensko (PS)	17,96%
Hlas-SD	14,7%
OĽaNO-KÚ-ZĽ	8,89%
Christian Democratic Movement (KDH)	6,82%
Sloboda a Solidarita (SaS)	6,32%
Slovak National Party (SNS)	5,62%

Source: Statistics Office

Now, Robert Fico has an advantage, because Smer-SD's first place in the election means that he will be given the first chance to form a government. He will certainly do everything he can to make it a success. However, a government with Smer-SD is not the only option. Hlas-SD will have the main say, fulfilling a scenario that commentators have been talking about for months.

Many more variables enter into the decision-making of all the players. But the situation is not so deadlocked that it is likely to end in a stalemate. Some kind of coalition will almost certainly emerge. If we were to go only by the statements made before the elections, the Smer-SD + Hlas-SD + SNS coalition with 79 seats is, as I mentioned, probably the most likely scenario. Fico has been repeating for months that the future government will be founded on the cooperation between Smer-SD and Hlas-SD. For the Slovak National Party (SNS), this would be the dream coalition that Andrej Danko has been talking about for months.

President Zuzana Čaputová has announced that she will ask Smer-SD leader Robert Fico to form a government following his party's first-place finish in the parliamentary elections.

Less than three weeks previously, Čaputová launched personal legal proceedings against Fico over lies that he continues to spread about her – among others, that she is a foreign agent.

Table 2: Distribution of seats in the National Council

Political Party:	Seats:
Smer-SD	42
Progresívne Slovensko (PS)	32
Hlas-SD	27
OĽaNO-KÚ-ZĽ	16
Christian Democratic Movement (KDH)	12
Sloboda a Solidarita (SaS)	11
Slovak National Party (SNS)	10

Source: RTVS

Today the whole country is waiting for Fico's next steps. According to him Slovakia has bigger problems than the war in Ukraine and that he does not support any further military aid to his country's eastern neighbor, resolved not to start post-election negotiations with other political parties before the president calls him. If he becomes Prime Minister for a fourth time Fico promises to not turn Slovakia's foreign policy upside down. Yet he said he is ready to criticize the EU if necessary – and support cooperation among the Visegrad Group, which also includes Hungary and Poland, as well as Czechia – and that he will sack the current police chief and special prosecutor. The two men are in charge of ongoing investigations and prosecutions of people linked to Smer-SD and its former governments, including Fico himself. He also added that if Smer-SD is part of the next government, they would adopt a decree to restore controls on the border with Hungary due to the illegal migration, and Slovakia would use force to tackle the migrant issue.

A pro-Russian former prime minister, who is loyal to Moscow and rejects military aid to Ukraine is returning to power in Slovakia. Reports with similar wording appeared in several pro-government Russian media outlets immediately after the Slovak election. The Russian media also talk about the "traditional warmth of many Slovaks towards Russia", about fatigue

with the war in Ukraine, but also about the fact that Russia should be even more concerned with Slovakia after the election, in order to win it over to its side – or at least make it neutral towards Moscow.

Robert Fico's victory could undermine European unity towards Ukraine and it could put an end to military aid. He campaigned on a pro-Russian and anti-American message. His views reflect the traditional warm feelings of many Slovaks towards Russia, which have grown on social networks since the beginning of the conflict in Ukraine. Fico's promise to stop supplying arms to Ukraine and to push for peace talks, bringing him closer to the Hungarian PM, Viktor Orbán.

On the other side, The Party of European Socialists (PES) is considering expelling the Smer-SD party from its faction amid the latter's threats to stop military support for Ukraine as it defends itself against Russia's invasion. European Socialist chair Stefan Löfven says that if Smer-SD's rhetoric continues and becomes policy when the party forms a government, he will look into the expulsion of the party. Smer-SD chair Robert Fico described Löfven's words as 'undemocratic, authoritarian', adding he had expected congratulations, not threats.

The election was a test for the small Eastern European country's support for neighboring Ukraine in its war with Russia, and a win by Fico could strain a fragile unity in the European Union and NATO.

The likely return to power of three-time former Prime Minister Robert Fico in Slovakia's snap election would signal a potentially significant crack in European support for Ukraine. While the contours of a Fico-led coalition remain uncertain, his Smer-SD party and its likeliest coalition partners all represent voters with a nationalist outlook, affinity for Russia, and skepticism about Slovakia's Western orientation. Fico has promised them to oppose sanctions on Russia as well as military aid and NATO membership for Ukraine.

Today, debates about the foreign policy impact of Fico's expected return to power center on his "pragmatism." Many points optimistically to his earlier terms in office, during which, despite his pugnacious rhetoric at home, he sought to position Slovakia within the "core" of the EU and as a reliable NATO ally. Fico's focus, in any case, has always been at home.

Nevertheless, expecting Fico to revert to form on foreign policy could prove disappointing. The world has changed since Fico was last in power in 2018, and he is a master

at adapting to political context. Factors that could drive Fico toward a more contentious relationship with Allies and fellow EU members, especially on Ukraine.

While the war in Ukraine will decide few votes, it has animated the pro-Russia voters who support Smer-SD and its likely coalition partners. This public will easily grasp the binary nature of military support for Ukraine, sanctions against Russia, and NATO membership for Ukraine, thus constraining Fico's room to diverge from his rhetoric. Over the five years since Fico last led Slovakia, the populist style of politics has burgeoned globally. Fico, long practiced in the style, has exploited the trend. He fueled his remarkable political resurrection with issues inflaming global disinformation—COVID, the Ukraine war, and, an old standby, migration.

When Fico and Hungarian PM Orbán overlapped earlier in power, their relations suffered from their competing nationalist attitudes towards Slovakia's history in the Hungarian kingdom and its large, present-day ethnic Hungarian minority. Relations are now much closer, with each publicly expressing respect for the other. On Ukraine/Russia and perhaps other issues, Fico and Orbán could wind up shielding each other from isolation within the EU and NATO. The Orbán factor informs debate about whether a Fico government could or would pursue an authoritarian domestic agenda putting it at odds with other Western governments. Fico, for example, has long had a fiercely antagonistic relationship with Slovakia's dynamic independent media. His earlier governments did not do so, even when Smer-SD ruled alone from 2012 to 2016. But, again, the global political landscape has changed. One factor that has not, however, is the resistance Fico would face from Slovakia's formidable civil society. Slovak activists and NGOs cut their teeth in response to Slovakia's authoritarian government of the 1990s and demonstrated their enduring strength after the Kuciak murders in 2018.

If Slovakia's next government is indeed a Fico-led coalition of nationalist, Russia-favoring parties, the tangible impact on Ukraine might be modest. Slovakia has limited weapons stocks left that it could transfer to Ukraine, significant EU sanctions are already in place, and NATO accession lies down the road. A modest tangible outcome on Ukraine would not, however, be trivial. The turnaround in Slovak government rhetoric brought by a Fico government would in itself weaken international cohesion in support of Ukraine. Slovakia's Western friends must be ready for what may prove a more difficult relationship with Slovakia ahead.

Conclusion

Slovakia was going to the polls to choose its fifth prime minister in four years after seeing a series of shaky coalition governments. On September 30, 2023, voters elected the 150 members of Slovakia's National Council. The left-wing and pro-Russia Smer-SD party finished first and the pro-Western Progressive Slovakia was second. The two parties exemplify the political polarization in the country. The Hlas-SD party emerged early as potential kingmaker.

A Smer-SD-led government could have serious consequences for the region. Slovakia is a member of both NATO and the European Union, was among the handful of European countries pushing for tough EU sanctions against Russia and has donated a large amount of military equipment to Ukraine. However, this will likely change under Robert Fico, who has blamed “Ukrainian Nazis and fascists” for provoking Russia’s President Vladimir Putin into launching the invasion, repeating the false narrative Putin has used to justify his invasion.

Fico previously served as Slovakia’s prime minister for more than a decade, first between 2006 and 2010 and then again from 2012 to 2018. He was forced to resign in March 2018 after weeks of mass protests over the murder of investigative journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancée, Martina Kušnírová. Kuciak reported on corruption among the country’s elite, including people directly connected to Fico and his party Smer-SD.

While in opposition, Fico became a close ally of Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, especially when it came to criticism of the European Union. There is speculation that, if he returns to power, Fico and Orbán could gang up together and create obstacles for Brussels. If Poland’s governing Law and Justice party manages to win a third term in Polish parliamentary elections next month, this bloc of EU troublemakers could become even stronger. Meanwhile, the liberal PS party had been pushing for a completely different future for Slovakia – including a continued strong support for Kyiv and strong links with the West.

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