



Weekly Briefing

**Slovakia political briefing:
Slovakia's New Government
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Slovakia's New Government

Summary

Slovakia's leftist former Prime Minister Robert Fico and his Smer-SD political party beat his progressive rival in a parliamentary election on September 30, 2023 after campaigning on a pro-Russian and anti-American message and to end military aid to Ukraine. Robert Fico and his party's campaign were at the center of the attention of foreign observers mainly due to concerns that a potential Fico-led government would mean a reversal in Slovakia's support for Ukraine.

In post-election talks, populists and liberals were battling for the support of Hlas – sociálna demokracia in order to form a government and set the course for Slovakia over the next four years. When Hlas rejected the liberals, Fico had a smooth path to his fourth premiership. He formed a parliamentary majority by signing a coalition government deal with the leftist Hlas political party and the ultranationalist Slovak National Party.

As soon as Slovak President Zuzana Čaputová appointed the new Slovak government, the now four-time premier Robert Fico of the Smer-SD party outlined what politics he will plough on with.

Introduction

Former strongman Prime Minister Robert Fico returned to power on September 30, 2023 when he won parliamentary elections in Slovakia, defeating his liberal rivals by some margin. His victory has many ramifications for the Central European country and will likely weaken Western unity regarding Ukraine.

He was also helped by a chaotic three years since Smer-SD was ousted from office. Incompetence and backbiting meant that the center-right coalition that emerged from the 2020 elections could not cope with the coronavirus pandemic, war in Ukraine and cost-of-living crisis. A no-confidence vote in December 2022 ultimately doomed the coalition government, leading to this year's early election.

Fico persuaded Slovaks that Smer-SD was capable of stable governance despite the corruption and lawlessness that flourished under his previous rule. His promise to end military support for Ukraine fits with public opinion polls that say around half of Slovaks support Russia in their war in Ukraine. Pledging that not a single bullet will cross Slovakia's eastern border, the populist politician has also suggested he may seek to block any further European Union sanctions against Russia.

Worries that a Smer-SD victory would lead to the isolation of Slovakia from Western partners and damage its fragile democracy saw support for the Progresívne Slovensko (PS) surge as the election approached. Early exit polls had suggested the liberal party had won, but as counting continued through the night, the margin of Smer-SD's victory became clearer. The disappointment among the country's liberals was palpable, with many devastated at Fico's return.

Forming a coalition government

Hlas leader and ex-prime minister Peter Pellegrini promised to respond to a generous offer given to him by Progresívne Slovensko (PS), a liberal party that came second in the September election. The liberals offered Pellegrini the possibility of becoming prime minister and his party an equal partner in the potential government. PS was even willing to negotiate on who should become the next interior minister. PS was refusing to give up on this post before.

PS has attempted to form a government with Hlas, which came third in the election, the liberal party Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) and the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH), in order to prevent Smer-SD from taking power again. However, Pellegrini's responded differently as PS had expected. His party decided to continue further negotiations with Smer-SD and Andrej Danko's ultranationalist Slovak National Party. Danko, another politician with pro-Russian views, thinks that Putin is a friend of Slovakia.

As the election winner, Robert Fico was asked by President Zuzana Čaputová to start formal negotiations on forming a coalition government with other political parties. In this, Čaputová, who is suing Fico over lies he continues to spread about her, decided to follow constitutional tradition. The Smer-SD leader had until October 16 to prove to the president he could muster a majority in parliament and to brief her on who might sit in his cabinet. The president could refuse to appoint some of his potential candidates for ministers.

Fico has so far not commented on the negotiations with Hlas and the SNS. His relationship with Pellegrini remains far from friendly. After the defeat in the 2020 election, Pellegrini called on Fico to step down as Smer-SD leader. Fico refused. In response, Pellegrini and 10 well-known Smer-SD MPs, who became known as “Pelle’s Eleven”, quit the political party. Pellegrini could no longer imagine a political future in tandem or cooperation with Robert Fico in some joint project, even under different conditions and he was describing the world of Fico’s as a “world of the past”, while his was a “world of the future”. Their relationship was not great during Pellegrini’s premiership from 2018 to 2020 either. SNS leader Andrej Danko, one of Smer-SD’s then-coalition partners, complained about Pellegrini and Fico’s contradictory statements on a variety of matters.

Even, during this year’s election campaign, despite their common past and closeness on social and economic issues, Pellegrini continued to refer to Smer-SD and Fico as something that belongs to the past, while Fico suspected Hlas of cooking up a coalition with liberal parties. Danko, on the other hand, kept alive the dream of a future government that would be formed by Smer-SD, SNS and Hlas. He also managed to convince smaller ultranationalist parties to join the SNS’s slate for the election in an effort to stop “liberalism”. The tactics helped the party pass the threshold to enter parliament.

Actually, SNS will only have one MP, its pro-Russian leader and former speaker Andrej Danko. The butt of numerous jokes inspired by his way of communicating, Danko shook hands with Putin, took a selfie with Russian State Duma Chair Vyacheslav Volodin, and published an open letter several weeks before Russia invaded Ukraine in which he addressed Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov as “my dear friend”. In addition, Danko opposes military aid for Ukraine.

Pellegrini, who sees Slovakia’s future firmly in the EU and NATO, has claimed that Slovakia has not got much military material that could be donated to Ukraine left, but he supports Slovak arms companies in the production of weapons as they create jobs. Danko, like Fico, also favors the politics of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Just like Orbán, they have said that they are ready to criticize the EU and NATO whenever it is necessary to defend Slovakia’s interests.

The SNS nominally obtained 10 seats in parliament, but the remaining nine seats will be taken by people who are not SNS members and have their own parties and agendas. Some are notorious faces from the disinformation scene, others consider bears to be biological weapons

or enjoy taking pot shots at the LGBT+ community, and some have entered parliament on the slate of a far-right party in the past. After the elections, SNS announced that its caucus would be united and that the SNS would only support a government that would be led by Fico. Even SNS would also be open to supporting a Smer-SD-led government of which Hlas and KDH, not the SNS, would be members in order to stop liberal parties from taking power.

Despite of the wrangling between the potential coalition partners, especially between Smer-SD and Hlas, all three political parties has found a consensus and decided to form a coalition government. Slovakia's president swore in a new government on October 25, 2023, led by a former populist prime minister poised to end the country's military aid for Ukraine as it fights Russia's invasion. Robert Fico returned to power and took over as prime minister for the fourth time after his leftist Smer-SD party won Slovakia's September 30 parliamentary election. The party won 42 seats in the 150-seat Parliament after campaigning on a pro-Russian and anti-American platform.

Fico formed a parliamentary majority by signing a coalition government deal with the leftist Hlas party and the ultranationalist Slovak National Party. Hlas, led by Fico's former deputy in Smer-SD, Peter Pellegrini, gained 27 seats. Pellegrini parted ways with Fico after the scandal-tainted Smer-SD lost the previous election in 2020 and replaced Fico as prime minister after he was forced to resign following major anti-government street protests resulting from the 2018 killing of journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancée. The reunion of Fico and Pellegrini was key for the creation of the new government. The third partner, the Slovak National Party, is a clearly pro-Russian group; it won 10 seats in the legislature.

The new Slovak cabinet

Fico's victory may mark a dramatic turnaround in the country's foreign policy and could strain a fragile unity in the European Union and NATO. Slovakia has until now been a staunch supporter of Kyiv since Russia invaded in February last year, donating arms and opening its borders for refugees fleeing the war.

When he served as prime minister in 2006-2010 and again in 2012-2018, Fico had a career diplomat in the post of foreign minister. This time, he opted for a loyalist and his deputy in Smer-SD, Juraj Blanár, who previously served as the head of a regional government but has no experience in diplomacy. Fico vowed to pursue a "sovereign" foreign policy. He opposes EU

sanctions on Russia, questions whether Ukraine can force out the invading Russian troops and wants to block Ukraine from joining NATO. He has proposed that instead of sending arms to Kyiv, the EU and the United States should use their influence to force Russia and Ukraine to strike a compromise peace deal. Fico has repeated Russian President Vladimir Putin's claims that the Ukrainian government runs a Nazi state from which ethnic Russians in the country's east needed protection.

The new government is yet to release its policy program, but Robert Fico already suggested it will include a tough stance against migration and non-governmental organizations that receive funding from abroad. A number of the new ministers have been linked with disinformation campaigns or are known for spreading false news, including Culture Minister Martina Šimkovičová, nominated by the Slovak National Party.

Since the previous government took power in 2020 after campaigning on an anti-corruption ticket, dozens of senior officials, police officers, judges, prosecutors, politicians and businesspeople linked to Smer-SD have been charged and convicted of corruption and other crimes. Fico himself and his former Interior Minister Robert Kaliňák faced criminal charges last year for creating a criminal group and misuse of power. Kaliňák is the defense minister in the new government.

Known for his tirades against journalists, Fico campaigned against immigration and LGBTQ+ rights and threatened to dismiss investigators from the National Criminal Agency and the special prosecutor who deals with the most serious crimes and corruption. Fico's critics worry that his return to power could lead Slovakia to abandon its course in other ways, following the path of Hungary under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

Besides the post of prime minister, Fico's Smer-SD has six other Cabinet ministers. Hlas gets seven while the Slovak National Party has three. Probably the most influential ministers in the new cabinet are:

Robert Kaliňák is the Minister for Defense. He has been Interior Minister three times. The Finance Ministry will be led by Ladislav Kamenický, a former businessman and entrepreneur, who he has been a member of parliament since 2012.

Minister for Foreign Affairs is Juraj Blanár, who studied civil engineering in Slovakia, Denmark and England. He has been a member of parliament since 2002, and worked on several committees dealing with foreign affairs.

The Justice Department will be headed by Boris Susko. He is a lawyer by training, a long-time party member, and was deputy minister for the environment in 2016-2020. In Parliament, he was a vocal critic of plans to reform the judiciary.

These are some of the ministers from the ranks of the Smer-SD party, the largest in the coalition.

Ministers put forward by the second party, Hlas, are the following:

Matúš Šutaj Eštok, as Minister for Interior Affairs, will also be head of the police forces. He is a lawyer, who has worked in the departments of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Ministry of Education.

Denisa Saková, the new Economics Minister and also Deputy Prime Minister, worked for various large companies in the private sector before entering politics. She was Deputy Minister for the Interior and also briefly minister of that department from 2018 to 2020.

Zuzana Dolinková, Minister for Health, used to be part of Dobrá voľba party, but from June 2021 she is a Hlas member. Dolinková has worked in the healthcare sector for more than 15 years. She has been active as a lawyer, particularly in the field of healthcare law and legislation. In recent years, she has been primarily involved in outpatient health care issues.

Tomáš Drucker was the first to come out with a statement of intent, saying he will be a manager, not a revolutionary. The new Minister of Education has declared that he is not bringing any new reforms to education, but wants to continue the ones already in place.

Richard Raši, the new Investment Minister, studied medicine and was the Health Minister in two previous governments of Robert Fico. He dealt with investments as Deputy PM for Investments and Informatization in the cabinet of Peter Pellegrini. Raši used to be a mayor of Košice in eastern Slovakia.

The Labour Minister, Erik Tomáš, was a reporter for TV Markíza before he became spokesperson for Robert Kaliňák. In 2016, he became head of communications for then PM Robert Fico.

Peter Kmec is a deputy prime minister for the recovery plan, an important link to the European Union. He is a career diplomat who has served as ambassador to the USA.

The junior party in the coalition, SNS, has named two ministers: Tomas Taraba for the Environment, and Martina Šimkovičová for Culture. The party is also set to supply the minister for a new sport and tourism ministry, which is expected to be established in January 2024. Šimkovičová was presenter at private TV station Markíza for a total of 18 years, lastly as anchor for the main evening news. In 2016 she became member of parliament for the We Are Family party. She switched soon after to another party. Taraba became involved in politics in 2019, when he co-founded the party Christian Democracy - Life and Prosperity (KDŽP, today Life - National Party), in which he also served as chairman. Taraba worked in the parliamentary Committee for European Affairs and was also a member of the Committee for Economic Affairs.

Conclusion

After the parliamentary elections' results, former three-time PM Robert Fico had begun work very soon on the formation of the new government. The negotiations took some days, but finally Smer-SD political party signed a declaration of cooperation with the ultranationalist Slovak National Party (SNS), led by the virulently pro-Russian leader Andrej Danko, and his former political partner and now chair of the center-left Hlas political party, Peter Pellegrini. All three already ran the country during 2016-2020. Pellegrini had an opportunity to throw his hat in with a pro-Western coalition with liberal parties and the Christian Democrats and become PM, but he decided not to, because of the differences over LGBT rights and similar matters. The next government – which will see the post of PM go to Smer-SD, speaker of parliament to Hlas, and a new ministry to be established from January 2024 – was appointed by the president.

This will be Fico's fourth term in office, and follows his resignation as PM in 2018 after massive protests erupted calling for political change after the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée, Martina Kušnírová. Kuciak had been investigating the activities of the Italian mafia in Slovakia, as well as corruption in the dealings of local tycoon Marián Kočner, and was killed because of his work. Fico and other ministers in his cabinet at the time resigned after some 50,000 people demonstrated on the streets.

The cabinet formation did not go smoothly. For example, President Čaputová refused to back climate-change denier Rudolf Huliak from the rightist-populist SNS as environment minister. Fico's decision to govern with the SNS prompted the Party of European Socialists to

suspend Smer-SD from their ranks, along with its other coalition partner, the social-democratic Hlas.

Finally, Čaputová agreed to appoint the government, including Fico as prime minister, following the replacement of Huliak with SNS candidate Tomáš Taraba for the environment minister post. Taraba, like Huliak, routinely attacks non-governmental organizations and environmental activists, and was formerly a member of the neo-Nazi, far-right Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko (People's Party Our Slovakia, ĽSNS).

Robert Fico reiterated that his government will not support Ukraine militarily and will call for a peace solution instead. According to him it is naive to think that Russia, a nuclear superpower, can be defeated with conventional weapons. He and his government will support every peace plan, but they are also aware that it is unrealistic to think that Russian units will leave Ukrainian lands. Fico repeated that the war in Ukraine, in his opinion, is a conflict between America and Russia, and that the European Union has become a project that kills people in Ukraine.

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