



Weekly Briefing

Slovakia political briefing:
The Review of Slovak Political Development in 2023
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

The Review of Slovak Political Development in 2023

Summary

Probably the most important events of this year that have had an effect on the Slovak political scene were the Heger government's troubles resulted in the first technocrat cabinet in Slovakia's history and Slovakia's snap election, what brought back the Smer-SD leader, Robert Fico, to power.

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 2022 after a former coalition party joined the opposition, which accused the cabinet of not doing enough to help people with the rising cost of living. The election was expected to 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 skeptical stance on Western sanctions against Russia.

Following the resignation of Eduard Heger from the post of Prime Minister, Slovakia's President Zuzana Čaputová confirmed and appointed a technical government on May 15, 2023. The head of the cabinet, which served until the snap election in late September, was the then-Deputy President of the National Bank of Slovakia, Ľudovít Ódor. The appointed government of technocrats was meant to stabilize the situation in the country and its governing was not used by them in the electoral campaign. The new cabinet was the third one since the last elections, which took place in late February 2020, but the first since Slovakia gained independence in 1993 that was being referred to as a technical government.

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 needed to find coalition partners in order to form a government. In post-election talks, populists and liberals were battling for the support of Hlas-SD in order to form a government and set the course for Slovakia over the next four years. When Hlas-SD 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-SD 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.

The most important political events, which has had an effect on Slovakia in 2023:

the end of PM Heger's government

After PM Eduard Heger (OĽaNO) 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 then 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 had to 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. However, the most important thing was 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 led 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 then 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). 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 slightly over 27% 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% is required for a referendum to be valid, this vote failed – but it is not irrelevant, and should not be inconsequential.

Technocrat cabinet of PM Ódor

At first, acting Prime Minister Eduard Heger admitted that Slovakia was in a serious crisis, a crisis of chaos, but called on President Zuzana Čaputová not to appoint a technocratic

government. Heger blamed recent crises, including the war in Ukraine and high inflation – and, in part, himself – for the chaos that Slovakia had been enduring.

However, Heger's Agriculture Minister, Samuel Vlčan (OLaNO nom.), decided to step down over a scandal connected to a subsidy from the Environment Ministry for Vlčan's firm. The police are investigating the scandal. Another member of the government, Foreign Minister, Rastislav Káčer (Demokrati), announced his resignation following the prime minister's unscheduled televised address, in which Heger admitted that Slovakia is in 'a chaotic crisis'.

Eduard Heger's reaction to the situation was that he proposed to the president replacing Vlčan and Káčer with her own nominees to solve the current government crisis. However, the president refused the offer. Heger also offered to resign, but at the same time he wanted the president to keep the already appointed ministers in their posts. The president said no to this proposal as well.

Therefore, the prime minister asked the president to remove his caretaker government from power. The caretaker government was appointed at the end of last year after Heger's government lost a confidence vote in parliament on December 15, 2022. This cabinet had to consult the president on many matters since then.

Finally, Slovak Prime Minister Eduard Heger stepped down months before early elections planned for September 30, 2023 after his caretaker cabinet started to fall apart. Four ministers had left the stopgap administration since PM Heger lost a vote of no confidence. The latest casualty was the above-mentioned agriculture minister's troubles (a company he owns had received 1.4 million euros).

President Zuzana Čaputová was going to appoint a government of experts to be headed by then deputy governor of the National Bank of Slovakia (NBS), Ľudovít Ódor. For most Slovaks, the new prime minister was a relatively unknown figure, but in economic circles he is considered a highly-capable official and an expert in his field. From his beginnings in public administration, he emphasized analysis, data and facts. He had the ambition of bringing a more substantive debate to key areas, from education to the sustainability of the pension system, and steps towards catching up with the West. His CV shows that he participated in important reforms, the significance of which no one can explain better to the average Slovak than him. A Most-Híd party nominee, Ódor has been the NBS deputy governor since 2018.

Ódor claimed immediately that at work he always tried to separate the professional from the personal, so he had no problem cooperating with politicians from both political camps - whether it was former SDKÚ finance minister Ivan Mikloš, or his current boss and NBS governor, Peter Kažimír (formerly Smer-SD). He is the co-author of the flat tax, participated in the pension reform, the introduction of the euro, the creation of budget rules, and was behind the establishment of the Value for Money project, the subject of criticism in recent weeks for allegedly slowing down the construction of highways.

Slovakia's President Zuzana Čaputová swore in on May 15, 2023 a government of technocrats to lead the country to snap elections in September amid a political crisis. Ľudovít Ódor headed the 15-member Cabinet. Career diplomat Miroslav Wlachovský became the foreign minister, with Martin Sklenár, a former senior defense ministry official, as the defense minister. Ódor, who comes from Slovakia's Hungarian minority, was not affiliated with any political party and no member of his government ran in the snap election in September 2023.

Parliamentary election – comeback of PM Fico

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.

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 and a 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.

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-SD 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 – with a PM post for Smer-SD, speaker of parliament for Hlas-SD, and a new ministry to be established from January 2024 – was appointed by the president.

This is 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-SD.

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 the USA and Russia, and that the European Union has become a project that kills people in Ukraine.

References

Dlhopolec, P. (2023): Slovakia in 2023: Seeking an end to political chaos without becoming a 'little Hungary'. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/01/10/slovakia-in-2023-seeking-an-end-to-political-chaos-without-becoming-a-little-hungary/>

Dlhopolec, P. (2023): Slovak PM Eduard Heger resigns. Available at: <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/23165868/slovak-pm-eduard-heger-resigns.html?ref=temacl>

Dlhopolec, P. (2023): Smer wins elections, fascists are out of parliament. Available at: <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/23222383/smer-win-slovakia-election.html>

European Sources Online (ESO) (2023): Slovak parliamentary election, September 2023. Available at: <https://www.europeansources.info/record/slovak-parliamentary-election-september-2023/>

Gosling, T. (2023): Slovakia election: Strongman Robert Fico's return to power. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/slovakia-election-strongman-robert-ficos-return-to-power/a-66974208>

Henley, J. (2023): Slovakia PM quits and is replaced by caretaker as political crisis deepens. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/08/slovakia-pm-quits-replaced-caretaker-political-crisis-deepens>

Hornak, D. (2023): Slovak PM Quits, President Will Appoint Technocratic Cabinet. Available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-05-07/slovak-caretaker-premier-steps-down-four-months-before-election#xj4y7vzkg?leadSource=verify%20wall>

Johecova, K. (2023): Robert Fico to become Slovakia's new prime minister. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/robert-fico-become-slovakia-new-prime-minister/>

Official website of the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (2023): Referendum 2023. Available at: <https://www.volbysr.sk/en/>

Pleschberger, J. (2023): Slovakia tries to overcome political chaos by holding snap election. Available at: <https://newseu.cgtn.com/news/2023-01-21/Slovakia-tries-to-overcome-political-chaos-by-holding-snap-election-1gKPzPzYJpTi/index.html>

POLITICO (2023): Slovakia – 2023 general election. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/slovakia/>

Reuters (2023): Slovakia will hold early election in Sept, pro-Ukraine stance at stake. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/slovakia-will-hold-early-election-sept-pro-ukraine-stance-stake-2023-01-31/>

Slovak Spectator (2023): PM Heger admits Slovakia is 'in chaos', blames crises and his own failings. Available at: <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/23165334/slovakia-chaos-pm-eduard-heger.html>

Slovak Spectator (2023): Unofficial names start to appear as Slovakia waits for first technocrat cabinet. Available at: <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/23166548/unofficial-names-start-to-appear-as-slovakia-waits-for-first-technocrat-cabinet.html?ref=temacl>

Stoklasa, R. and Hovet, J. (2023): Slovakian president picks technocrat government after prime minister quits. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/slovakia-prime-minister-quits-2023-05-07/>

Terenzani, M. (2023): Election tested Slovakia; Fico could strain EU and NATO unity. Available at: <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/23224114/election-tested-slovakia-fico-could-strain-eu-and-nato-unity.html>

Terenzani, M. (2023): Fico is on his way to becoming prime minister, again. Available at: <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/23223005/fico-is-on-his-way-to-becoming-prime-minister-again.html>

Terenzani, M. (2023): What Saturday's referendum result says about Slovakia. Available at: <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/23118358/what-saturdays-referendum-result-says-about-slovakia.html?ref=temacl>

Tvardzík, J. (2023): Who is Ľudovít Ódor, the new Slovak Prime Minister? Available at: <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/23166505/ludovit-odor-slovak-prime-minister.html>

Zmušková, B. (2023): Slovakia paves way for snap elections in September. Available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/slovakia-paves-way-for-snap-elections-in-september/>