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Pre-election scandals are changing the Slovakian political scene

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The parliamentary election in Slovakia, scheduled for 10 March, is likely to see the government of the left-wing Smer-SD party led by Robert Fico return to power and to seal the disintegration of the centre-right camp. The ruthless electoral campaign, during which materials obtained from secret services have been used, will have a significant impact on the outcome of the election. A series of wiretapping and corruption scandals revealing both alleged and real connections between politicians, businessmen and the secret services has led to the discrediting and disrepute of almost all political parties and leaders. This situation poses no risk to the victory of the opposition Smer party, but it is significantly affecting the support levels for the right-wing parties, first of all the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union – Democratic Party (SDKÚ-DS) led by the ex prime minister, Mikuláš Dzurinda, which is significantly reducing the likelihood that a government will be formed again without the participation of the Social Democrats. In turn, new, populist parties, with anti-establishment profiles, will capitalise on the crisis in the weakened and divided political right. Their presence in parliament will reinforce the position of Fico, who after winning the election will have substantial possibilities to build a stable majority government, and will not have a reliable and strong opponent in parliament.

The ruthless electoral campaign against a backdrop of protests

The electoral campaign in Slovakia has been dominated by mutual accusations of corruption and informal links between politics and business and this has pushed the debate on European policy and socio-political issues further into the background. The turning point happened on 21 December, when documents which are believed to have originated from the Slovak Information Service were published on the Internet. According to these documents, which reportedly were created in 2005–2006 as part of the wiretapping operation, codenamed 'Gorilla', the financial group Penta had a strong informal influence on the policy adopted by the then centre-right cabinet led by Dzurinda. The head of Penta allegedly co-operated especially closely with the then deputy prime minister and minister for the economy, which included sharing bribes received for privatisations and the distribution of senior positions in Treasury-controlled companies. These documents also describe the mechanisms of the illegal financing of political parties, including both the members of the

then centre-right coalition and the opposition party, Smer-SD. Thus now they have a negative impact on Dzurinda, who was prime minister at that time, junior coalition partner the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) but also the opposition leader Robert Fico. After files from operation 'Gorilla' were leaked, more leaks were publicised in the media which cast a shadow on the other key political figures. For example, it was revealed that Richard Sulík, the parliamentary speaker from the coalition party Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), consulted his political decisions with a person linked to the criminal underworld and Prime Minister Iveta Radičová invited the head of Penta to her house. In turn, Daniel Lipšic, the minister of internal affairs, was accused of contacts with the military counter-intelligence in the 1990s.

The 'Gorilla' scandal provoked regular weekly protests, which have been organised in Slovakia's largest cities by an informal group of young activists using social networking Internet portals. Over 30,000 people took to the streets on 3 February despite the freezing weather. This protest movement is targeted against the Slovak political elite as a whole, and it has no distinct leaders or a catchy agenda. Although the scale of the protests was relatively large, they will not translate directly to the outcome of the election because they do not favour any of the political parties. This total contestation of the political scene may however result in a lower voter turnout. A demonstration peak has been announced to take place on the eve of the election, on 9 March. However, the intensity of the protests is falling off, which is the effect both of disputes between their informal leaders and attempts by the political parties to utilise the potential of public dissatisfaction.

Reshuffle on the political scene

The turbulent electoral campaign has brought about changes on the party political scene. The scandals have not affected the popularity of Smer-SD, whose support level at approximately 40% has been maintained. In turn, they have influenced the opinion of the electorate of the centre-right parties, to whom the present government promised to combat corruption and clientelism. The SDKÚ-DS led by Dzurinda has irretrievably lost its position as the leader of the political right, since support for it fell to a level close to the 5% electoral threshold in February this year. Its position has been taken by the Christian Democrat KDH party, which is led by Ján Figel, a former member of the European Commission. New political parties, 'Ordinary People' and '99 Percent – Civic Voice', which have no precise agenda and are trying to channel voters' disaffection with the present political elite, have also benefited from the scandals. 99 Percent, which was established just two months ago and has been generously financed using legal loopholes, is more reminiscent of a skilfully managed business project than a political party. Its campaign in the media is financed by Ivan Weiss, who is linked to the arms industry and who used to engage in activities of a Slovak post-communist left-wing party.

Likely developments after the election

Smer-SD looks set to win the election. It is very unlikely that Smer-SD will remain outside the new government, but it is still an open question whether this party will rule the country by itself. Smer will most likely have to find a coalition partner (only SaS and SDKÚ-DS have ruled out co-operation with it). A government led by Smer, whoever its coalition partner will be, will not change Bratislava's European policy. Slovakia's attempts to adopt a more independent and assertive policy in the eurozone ended in a conflict within the centre-right coalition which led to a government crisis in October 2011 and early elections. Fico, who is accusing the centre-right parties of having undermined the international reliability of Slovakia, is emphasising that this country, since it has strong economic bonds with the eurozone, must be engaged in close political co-operation with its largest member states, Germany and France.

Appendix

Support levels for the major political parties according to polls carried out in February by Slovakian public opinion research centres (Focus, MVK, Polis and eCall)

Party name	**Support fluctuations (%)**
Smer-SD	39.7 – 41.1
KDH	9.1 – 12.7
Ordinary People (OĽ)	5 – 8.8
Most-Híd	5.1 – 8.4
SaS	5.1 – 6.6
SDKÚ-DS	4.3 – 5.1
"99%"	3.3 – 5.2
SMK	3.9 – 4.7
SNS	3.6 – 4.7