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Slovakia: Prime Minister Fico's position is weakening

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Over the past few weeks, the media have revealed three major scandals involving contacts between Smer-SD (the left-wing party currently governing Slovakia) and business circles. On 21 April, the minister for the economy, Pavol Pavlis, handed in his resignation in response to numerous accusations of nepotism and conflict of interest. The Ministry of Agriculture needs to deal with a scandal concerning suspicious operations involving land regained in the process of restitution. Smer is also in trouble due to the financial problems of the large construction company, Vahostav-SK. This firm, controlled by Juraj Siroky, who is believed to be one of the key actors among the business circles supporting the government party Smer-SD, has failed to pay its subcontractors for over one year for work carried out predominantly as part of state investments. Prime Minister Robert Fico made an attempt to place the blame for the company's problems on one of the opposition leaders, Jan Figel, who served as minister for transport and is currently the deputy parliamentary speaker. However, the opposition blocked the motion put forward by Smer-SD to dismiss Figel from his parliamentary functions. Finally, the government, following consultations with Vahostav and its creditors, adopted a compromise solution to restructure the company, and parliament amended the Commercial Code on 23 April for the needs of this operation.

Commentary

- Smer is facing these problems less than a year before the parliamentary election and they almost entirely rule out the possibility that the party will continue rule the country alone and seriously undermine its ability to enter into coalitions. Smer's decision to attack Jan Figel, the president of the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH), has motivated the centre-right opposition parties to co-operate with each other, and this co-operation stands a great chance of continuing until the election. Before the Vahostav scandal, KDH was viewed as a potential coalition partner for Smer (in June 2014, the two parties successfully voted in favour of constitutional amendments). At present, the likelihood of co-operation between Smer and KDH is significantly reduced.
- After his defeat in the presidential election last year, Robert Fico has been at pains to regain the confidence of voters by introducing a number of welfare-state solutions (for example, raising the minimum wage and pension levels and offering free railway tickets to schoolchildren, students and pensioners). These moves are intended to prove that the left-wing government cares for the poorest. At the same time, Fico has warned that if the political right wins, the welfare benefits will be reduced. However, this rhetoric has been

more and more strongly undermined by the scandals in circles linked to Smer, which have revealed the existence of direct connections between this party and a small group of businessmen. The scandals have affected the image of Smer as a Social Democratic party, making it easier for the opposition to present the government party as an oligarchic structure.

- Even though Smer's support levels still top 30% and the party remains the most likely winner in the election next year, it cannot be sure that it will stay in power. New scandals are constantly emerging and are making it likely that the situation seen in 2010 may be repeated, when Smer won almost 35% of the votes but the government was formed by the centre-right parties. If Smer is to remain in power after the election, it will to a great extent depend on whether the Slovak National Party (SNS) returns to parliament after an absence of four years. This party, which plays on anti-Roma and anti-Hungarian sentiments, is supported by around 6% of voters and has declared its readiness to co-operate with Smer (the two groupings formed a government coalition in 2006–2010 along with Vladimir Meciar's party).