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A political earthquake in Slovakia

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The parliamentary election in Slovakia on 5 March brought an end to the majority rule of the the left-wing Smer-SD government and marked the beginning of a period of political instability. Prime Minister Robert Fico's party garnered the highest support with 28% of the votes and will have 49 of the 150 seats in the National Council (Slovak parliament). However, it will need at least two coalition partners in order to form a majority. The centre-right groupings (chief among these is the liberal party Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) led by Richard Sulík, which did best in the recent election) have equal chances of forming a government coalition. In the case of a deadlock, it may also be possible to form a technical cabinet who could rule the country until a snap election is held while Slovakia holds the presidency of the Council of the European Union (second half of 2016).

Eight groupings made it to parliament. Three of these groupings had no representation in the previous parliament: the statist Slovak National Party (SNS), the anti-system radical right People's Party Our Slovakia (ĽS-NS), and the newly-established anti-establishment grouping We Are Family. In turn, the two Christian Democratic parties, KDH and SDKÚ-DS, which were the co-authors of the Slovak reform programme implemented after the fall of Vladimír Mečiar's rule, are no longer present in parliament. The extremists from ĽS-NS will most likely be kept on the margins of the political scene, but their presence in parliament reduces the opportunity of finding a stable parliamentary majority.

The election campaign: migrants and corruption

The election campaign was focused on two issues: security in the context of the migration crisis, and state corruption and government efficiency. The first issue was being pushed for above all by the leader of Smer-SD, Prime Minister Robert Fico, who warned of Islamic terrorism. In the early stage of the campaign this allowed him to divert the gaze of the electorate away from the corruption scandals which his government has been involved in and from the growing dissatisfaction among public sector workers. Almost all groupings participating in the election rejected the mechanism of migrant relocation quotas imposed by the EU, and certain parties accused others of having adopted too conciliatory a stance on the migration crisis. In turn, the election strategy of the centre-right opposition was to draw attention to the corruption scandals and mismanagement of the government party, Smer-SD. Pointing to the scandals seen under Fico's rule, a large group of right-wing politicians had still to answer questions about the corruption scandals which broke out when they governed the country.

The political left and right

This is the fourth consecutive parliamentary election win for Smer-SD, with it maintaining a clear advantage over the centre-right parties. However, the fact that this party has lost one third of its electorate as compared to the election four years ago indicates that more and more voters are tired with Smer's rule and Prime Minister Robert Fico. A section of Smer's electorate has been taken over by the Slovak National Party (SNS), which returned to parliament after a four-years absence. Now that it has new leaders, the party has softened its anti-Roma and anti-Hungarian rhetoric, focusing on its statist economic programme and criticising foreign investors.

The best result among the centre-right parties (see Appendix) was achieved by the liberal pro-reform party, Freedom and Solidarity (SaS). Their sharp criticism of the government's social policy and the present form of European integration appeals mainly to the middle class from large cities (first place in Bratislava) and a section of the protest vote from the provinces. SaS belongs to the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group in European Parliament, and its leader, Richard Sulík, is an MEP. SaS, as a government coalition member, contributed to the downfall of the centre-right government led by Iveta Radičová in 2011 by rejecting the reform of the EU's crisis management mechanism.

The informal alliance of groupings known as the Ordinary People and Independent Personalities and NOVA party (OĽANO-NOVA), who are characterised by strident anti-Fico criticism, has also strengthened its position after the election. The moderately conservative party, the Network led by Radoslav Procházka achieved a poor result despite favourable pre-election polls. Voters were most likely discouraged by its reluctance to declare clearly that it would not co-operate with Smer after the election. The parties representing the Hungarian minority achieved the same results as in the previous election. The Hungarian-Slovak grouping Most-Híd, which has more liberal views and is open to dialogue, will have representatives in parliament. The more radical Party of the Hungarian Community (SMK-MKP), which co-operates with Fidesz, the ruling party in Hungary, will once more remain outside parliament.

New things are coming

Various factors have led to the increased popularity of extremists from ĽS-NS: disillusionment with the rule of Smer, and of a significant part of the centre-right camp; the fear of the consequences of the migration crisis, additionally stoked by the government. Far right ĽS-NS, which originates from a nationalist movement, remained on the margins of Slovak policy until 2013, when their leader, Marian Kotleba, won the direct election for *župan* (governor) of the Banska Bystrica region which has numerous social issues. In comparison to ĽS-NS, the Slovak National Party can be viewed as a moderate force respecting democratic principles. Kotleba, whose previous party was banned by the Supreme Court in 2006, has avoided explicit Neo-Nazi gestures over the past few years, but he still draws upon the tradition of the Slovak State (1939-1945), a satellite regime of Nazi Germany. Kotleba's grouping has anti-Western and pro-Russian rhetoric, wants to send the troops to protect national borders, calls for a referendum on Slovakia leaving the EU, and wants Slovakia to leave the 'criminal organisation', NATO. While it should not be assumed that the 200,000 plus who cast their vote for ĽS-NS fully support this agenda, these votes are

nevertheless an expression of acceptance of ostentatiously extreme nationalist and xenophobic views. Kotleba attracts voters mainly in areas with high unemployment rates and a numerous Roma community, who find his mix of anti-corruption, anti-oligarch and anti-immigrant slogans appealing. However, the fact that this party was the most popular (around 23%) among the youngest voters (aged 18-21) and that 70% of its electorate are under 39 proves is the existence of a disturbing trend.

The atmosphere of frustration with the elites and fear of migrants has also helped the grouping We Are Family (which was established only three months before the election) to enter parliament. Its leader, Boris Kollar (a businessman whose assets include a ski resort and a radio station), defines it as a right-wing grouping, although in his election campaign he focused above all on the liquidation of the oligarchic system and protecting the country from an 'invasion of migrants'. Kollar has declared that he is ready to back a grand alliance of centre-right parties.

Possible developments after the election

Slovakia should most likely expect complicated post-election negotiations. President Andrej Kiska, who is ideologically closer to the centre right, might play an active role in this process. On 9 March, the president gave Fico ten days to form a coalition. If he does not succeed, this opportunity will most likely be offered to the leader of SaS, Richard Sulík, the obvious candidate for prime minister in a potential centre-right cabinet. The first parliamentary session must be held within 30 days of the election. The new leaders of the National Council are usually elected during this session. There is chance that at least an outline of the new coalition will have emerged by that time. Both Smer-SD and the centre-right groupings have made efforts to bring the three groupings to their side which may tip the scales: SNS, We Are Family and Most-Híd. Smer-SD, as part of a compromise, may offer to withdraw Fico and put forward a less controversial candidate for prime minister (for example, the parliamentary speaker Peter Pellegrini or the minister of foreign affairs, Miroslav Lajčák). The form the new cabinet takes may depend on the will to co-operate between the nationalists from SNS and the Hungarian-Slovak party Most-Híd. If the negotiations are deadlocked, one likely scenario is that a technical government will be formed, especially considering the Slovak presidency of the Council of the European Union, which will begin on 1 July.

Political parties which are sceptical about enhancing European integration and oriented mainly towards the benefits offered by the common market or, as with ĽS-NS, which openly criticise the EU, have gained a majority in the Slovak parliament since the election. Furthermore, Smer-SD, which is a member of the Socialists & Democrats group in the European Parliament, over the past few months has withdrawn from close co-operation with Germany and France, an approach in European policy it clearly preferred before. However, European policy (apart from the migration crisis) was not an issue discussed in the election campaign, and the outcome of the election does not mean that Eurosceptics are predominant among the Slovak public. The annual Eurobarometer surveys prove that a definite majority (73% in 2015) of Slovaks believe that their country has benefited from EU membership. However, it cannot be ruled out that a change in discourse on the political scene will gradually affect the public mood.

Appendix

Grouping	Leader	European affiliation	Election result (in %)	Number of seats
Smer-SD	Robert Fico	Socialists & Democrats, S&D	28.3	49
SaS	Richard Sulík	European Conservatives and Reformists, ECR	12.1	21
OĽANO-NOVA	Igor Matovič	European Conservatives and Reformists, ECR	11	19
SNS	Andrej Danko	Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy, EFDD	8.6	15
ĽS Naše Slovensko (People's Party Our Slovakia)	Marian Kotleba	-	8	14
Sme rodina (We are Family)	Boris Kollár	-	6.6	11
Most-Híd	Béla Bugár	European People's Party, EPP	6.5	11
Sieť (Network)	Radoslav Procházka	European People's Party, EPP (informally)	5.6	10