

Slovakia: Robert Fico's third term as prime minister

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On 22 March the leaders of four political parties – Smer-SD, the Slovak National Party (SNS), Most-Híd and Siet' – signed a coalition agreement and presented the makeup of the new cabinet led by Prime Minister Robert Fico. Smer-SD, which until recently had ruled the country by itself, has a dominant position in the new cabinet. Its coalition partners received six of the fifteen positions in the government and were successful in including a number of their proposals in the coalition agreement. In effect, the new cabinet's agenda is a mixture of the pre-election slogans of left-wing Smer-SD, statist SNS, and the parties which until recently had been criticising Fico's government: the Hungarian-Slovak party Most-Híd and the conservative grouping Siet'. The new cabinet will continue its previous policy, in particular in the areas of foreign relations (Miroslav Lajčák will maintain his position as minister of foreign affairs) and the economy. Even though their political manifestos do not overlap, the four parties which have formed the government coalition are likely to see out a full term.

Post-election negotiations

Eight parties have entered parliament following the election on 5 March, including the anti-establishment political movement We Are Family (*Sme rodina*) led by businessman Boris Kollár and the anti-system radical right People's Party Our Slovakia (ĽS-NS) led by Marian Kotleba. The distribution of seats in parliament made it impossible to form an ideologically uniform coalition. However, the leader of Smer-SD, Robert Fico, whom President Andrej Kiska entrusted with forming the government, managed to convince two antagonistic parties, the Slovak National Party and the Hungarian-Slovak party Most-Híd, to become engaged in co-operation. Robert Fico thus prevented a centre-right cabinet from forming that would have forced his party to hand over the reins. Fico's party will have nine of the fifteen positions in the government, including the key positions of prime minister, deputy prime minister and the heads of some ministries, including the ministries of finance, the economy, internal affairs and foreign affairs. Furthermore, Smer-SD will have a deputy minister in each ministry. The Slovak National Party, which is ideologically close to Smer-SD, has been put in charge of three ministries, including the ministry of defence. In turn, the two groupings which were opposed to Fico's government until recently have been put in charge of the ministries of justice and the environment (both Most-Híd) and transport (Siet').

Siet' and Most-Híd agreed to co-operate with Smer-SD and SNS, even though there was a chance that a centre-right government could be formed. What drove them to this decision was most probably the fear of a snap election in which they would very likely achieve a

worse result than at present. A potential centre-right government would be equally incoherent (SNS would have had to participate in it) and would very likely have fallen apart before the end of the term, given the unbridled ambitions of the five party leaders. In parallel to the talks on setting up a new coalition, there was a heated debate inside Siet' and Most-Híd, some of whose members were categorically opposed to co-operating with Smer-SD and SNS. Three MPs (and over 200 members) have left Siet' and one MP has left Most-Híd in protest against the coalition being formed. This means that the government may expect support from 81 out of 150 MPs.

The government's agenda

As many as seven of the fifteen members of the new cabinet served in the previous single-party government led by Robert Fico. This will most likely mean that its policy will be continued. One of the priorities mentioned by the coalition is to maintain Slovakia's pro-European and pro-Atlantic orientation. It has also promised to "strengthen the position of the national parliaments" referring to the agreement the United Kingdom negotiated in the EU. Bratislava's firm stance in the EU's debate on migration policy will also remain unaltered. The new defence minister, General Peter Gajdoš, who is SNS's nominee, is expected to adjust the previous policy. Above all, several military equipment procurement procedures (for example, concerning multirole aircraft and radars) that would have helped reduce the Slovak armed forces' dependence on spare parts from Russia, may be challenged.

The new minister of justice, Lucia Žitňanská, will make efforts to introduce changes, especially in the area of combating corruption. Žitňanská has criticised Smer-SD over the past few years for increasing levels of corruption. The decision of Most-Híd and Siet' to co-operate with Fico's party has drawn sharp criticism from among the Slovak centre-right side of the political spectrum. Their leaders argue that they decided to join the coalition because they want to implement the new government's anti-corruption agenda. Most likely, Most-Híd and Siet' will focus on implementing anti-corruption laws, being aware of the fact that their support levels will to a great extent depend on this. This agenda may destabilise the coalition's work, but it is rather unlikely that any of the coalition parties will decide to leave the government for this reason. All of the coalition parties are most likely to achieve a worse result in the next election.

Siet', weakened by its internal dispute, will be in charge of the Ministry of Transport. This ministry controls a significant part of the European funds allocated to Slovakia. However, its competences may be limited by the deputy prime minister for investments from Smer-SD. The road-building priorities mentioned by the government for the next four years include: extending the R3 express road (running from border crossing with Poland towards Budapest) and the R4 express road (an element of the so-called 'Via Carpatia').

Possible developments

The priorities on the government's agenda, in particular those concerning tax reduction and facilitations for entrepreneurs, have been positively evaluated by the liberal opposition (SaS and OĽaNO). Since Smer-SD has agreed to implement some of the proposals put forward by

the centre right in the election campaign, it may make an effort to win the confidence of the self-employed. However, in the longer term this will not prevent the decline in support levels for this party; it may only slow it down. Smer-SD still has no competitor on the left of the political scene; its electorate, which has grown weary of Prime Minister Fico (who is presented by the opposition as a symbol of corruption), is drifting away mainly towards anti-establishment and anti-system parties. On the one hand, a change in leadership could be an opportunity for Smer-SD. On the other, it could provoke a dispute inside the party between individual interest groups.

Joining the government may prove costly to Smer's coalition partners, all of which have a political rival critical of Robert Fico's party. A more radical section of SNS's electorate may be discouraged by its co-operation with the Hungarian-Slovak grouping Most-Híd, and the radical right People's Party Our Slovakia led by Marian Kotleba, which entered parliament for the first time after the last election, may gain from this. Co-operation with SNS may also encourage some of Most-Híd's voters to support the Party of the Hungarian Community (SMK), which is more radical in protecting the interests of ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia.