

Slovakia: success for the centre-right in regional elections

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The regional elections in Slovakia on 4 November were a success for the coalition of centre-right opposition parties. Its candidates won the positions of *župans* (regional governors) in direct elections in five out of the eight regions. In two regions, the *župans* backed by the left-wing Smer-SD led by Prime Minister Robert Fico maintained their offices. Greatest publicity was given to the rivalry in the Banská Bystrica region, where an independent candidate (backed by the government coalition and the centre-right opposition) defeated the incumbent *župan*, Marian Kotleba, the leader of the xenophobic, anti-establishment People's Party Our Slovakia (ĽSNS). As regards the elections to regional parliaments, independent candidates won the greatest number of seats (162 out of 416), the centre-right opposition won 105 votes, and Smer won 97. Voter turnout was below 30%, but it was still the highest in the history of regional elections.

Commentary

- The traditionally low turnout in regional elections is a consequence of the poor knowledge of the competences of regional governments and the artificial administrative division of the country which does not match the historical map of the regions. Those who have for years benefited the most from this situation were politicians from groupings with a large hardcore electorate: Mečiar's HZDS and later Smer. A breakthrough occurred during the election in 2013, when the radical Marian Kotleba unexpectedly won the position of *župan* in the Banská Bystrica region. 'Combating fascism' and removing Kotleba from power was the slogan that strongly reverberated across the country during the most recent campaign. This goal was achieved, and at the same time, efforts aimed at improving voter turnout were more successful than usual in motivating liberal and conservative voters to participate in the election.
- For Smer, the loss of four *župan* offices was even more painful, given the fact that it was unable to mobilise its electorate in the east of the country, in the regions which until then had been considered as bastions of the political left. Smer's seasoned candidates were defeated there by politicians who had previously only been recognised on the local level. The defeated candidates also include one of the deputy leaders of the party, the influential deputy Juraj Blanár (who is also the *župan* of the Žilina region, by the Polish border). The electoral defeat has provoked a wave of dissatisfaction and mutual recriminations inside Smer. The leading politicians of the party are ever more clearly demanding a staff reshuffle that may above all affect the minister of internal affairs and

one of the vice-presidents of Smer, Robert Kaliňák. Despite suspicions of involvement in a number of scandals, he is a trusted aide of the prime minister and thus remains under Robert Fico's political protection.

- The centre-right was successful because the parties which had until recently been in competition with one another became united and put up active, sleaze-free candidates. The election result suggests that the Slovak public has a strong appetite for an overhaul of the elites. This poses a threat to the party led by Fico, who is already serving his third term as prime minister. Regardless of Smer's involvement in numerous scandals, Fico is still viewed by voters as a politician who is more trustworthy than any of the opposition party leaders. The lack of a strong competitor among the opposition offers Fico a clear advantage, especially given that Smer cherishes its image of being a monolithic party. Escalating disputes inside Smer after the election give the opposition a greater chance of success in the parliamentary elections due to be held in two and a half years' time. This time, to win, the centre-right will need to maintain not only a broad coalition but also a joint, reliable candidate for prime minister.