

Slovak local and regional elections: stability above all

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On 29 October, elections were held in Slovakia to the local governments of eight regions and over 2900 municipalities, towns and districts, including the direct election of the *župans* (regional governors) and mayors. The results largely indicate a desire to maintain the status quo. Six of the eight *župans* were re-elected. Seven of the eight mayors of provincial cities will also remain in office (the only exception being Prešov, where the former mayor did not stand). Overall, 70% of the mayors across the country were returned office. In municipal councils the strongest representation has come from independents and local candidates. The liberal coalition of the Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) party, Progressive Slovakia and activists grouped around the capital's mayor Matúš Vallo won a convincing victory in Bratislava and the capital region, where SaS's Juraj Droba will remain as regional governor. As is usual, the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) did well in the east and north of the country, while the Hungarian minority grouping recorded good results along the southern border. Two other parties with a broad base of members, the left-wing Hlas and Smer, also won many of the races for councillors and mayors.

For the first time in the history of independent Slovakia, the regional and municipal elections were held at the same time, in a move to save money and increase participation. The turnout in regional elections was the highest ever (43.7%, up 14 p.p. on five years ago), although the figure for the municipal elections, at 46.2%, in turn, was the lowest ever (2.5 p.p. less than four years ago).

Commentary

- The election results indicate that Slovaks have largely opted for stability and continuity in uncertain times, as evidenced by the lack of significant changes in support compared to previous elections, as well as the relatively weak performance of the divided far right. This is also confirmed by the lower-than-expected turnout, which proves that the opposition did not succeed in mobilising its voters (although this may also have been due to the elections being held during a 'long weekend', as evidenced by the particularly low 37% turnout in Bratislava). The nature of local government elections does not favour radical changes, because local and regional issues play a greater role in them, as does the popularity of individual local activists. Mayors are also more likely to keep their posts thanks to the voting formula itself, which does not provide for second rounds (for example, Nitra's mayor only needed 31% of the vote to stay in office).
- The left failed in its plan to score a convincing victory as a step towards its return to power at the national level. In 2017 the centre-right parties succeeded in mobilising

voters with the slogan of removing the left from power, and their good results in the regional elections at the time started the process. However, the centre-right coalition, which has now been in power for over two years, has not had a majority in parliament since September, following SaS's departure, and its politicians enjoy little public confidence. Moreover, irrespective of the nature of the local elections, it has been difficult to mobilise the electorate with anti-government slogans because the largest parties in the ruling coalition (OĽaNO and Sme rodina [We Are Family]) do not have extensive regional structures, although OĽaNO did manage to hold onto the governorships of two regions. However, several of its prominent politicians failed to win seats in the regional assemblies (which individuals can hold in addition to their parliamentary mandates). On the other hand, the left-wing Hlas and Smer, the parties which are currently first and second in the latest national polls and are led by former prime ministers, 'only' managed to hold onto a similar number of councillors and mayors in the local elections to the number they had previously obtained when running as a single entity (Hlas later split off from Smer). Despite the fall in the popularity of the government parties, voters do not seem enthusiastic about the prospect of a return to power for the left, which for many years has been associated with the capture of the state.

- The election was the first test of strength for leadership between the two left-wing opposition parties, poll leader Peter Pellegrini's Hlas (currently enjoying 19–20% support) and second-placed Robert Fico's Smer (15–16%). Hlas, a party founded in 2020 by former Smer activists, is more moderate in its demands, and is closer to the mainstream Western European left. Unlike Fico, for example, it has avoided criticising Slovakia's support for Ukraine. At the same time, however, the party has called on the government to focus more on helping the Slovak people. Hlas won this contest: it gained the most mayoral posts (9.2%, while Smer came third with 6.6%) and achieved the second-best result in terms of the number of councillors (10.1%; Smer was third with 8.5%). Moreover, Smer lost one of the last two *župans* it had had (in Nitra) to Hlas. Moreover, the left did not manage to retake the *župan* seats it had held in any of its former strongholds in 2017. Tensions between the two parties have risen due to the electoral campaign, which would make it harder for them to form a joint government in the case of early elections, which could even be called next year. Nevertheless, following the announcement of the election results, Fico's attitude has clearly become more conciliatory, presumably to lay the foundations for possible cooperation between the two groups. Whereas during the campaign the leader of Smer referred to Hlas's politicians as 'traitors', now he indicates that they are a 'sister party'.
- The local elections are an opportunity for those groups that did not get into parliament in 2020 – the Christian Democrats (KDH) and the Hungarian minority grouping (now united as Aliancia-Szövetség) – to rebuild support in national politics. The KDH won the largest number of councillors' seats (11.1%), and came fourth in terms of the number of mayoral posts it won (6.3%), with its leader defending his post as *župan* of Prešov. The party has a strong membership base in the regions, although for years it has struggled to formulate an attractive offer at the national parliamentary level: in the last two such elections (2016, 2020) it polled just below the 5-percent electoral threshold.

- Aliancia, the party of the Hungarian minority (around 8–9% of the Slovak population), which was established in autumn 2021, enjoyed success in the local elections. It consolidated the two main groupings, the right-wing SMK-MKP, which was focused on defending the rights and interests of local Hungarians, and the liberal Most-Híd, aimed at building nationwide, harmonious cooperation between the minorities (including the Ruthenians) and the majority Slovaks. In practice, after Most's defeat in the 2020 parliamentary elections and the subsequent departure of its founder and long-time leader Béla Bugár and most of its ethnic Slovak activists (who had often criticised Viktor Orbán), the new party came to be dominated by the less compromising politicians of SMK, who have traditionally maintained close ties to Hungary's Fidesz. Aliancia won 8.3% of the councillors' seats (the fourth best result) and 7.6% of the mayors' posts (the second-best result), despite unfavourable national polls. It will have the largest number of councillors in the assemblies of the Nitra and Trnava regions (where 20–22% of the population are Hungarians), and it also holds a strong position in the Banská Bystrica region. Aliancia did suffer one blow to its prestige, however, when its candidate in the border town of Komárno proved unable to defeat the incumbent non-partisan mayor.