

Slovakia: the Heger government collapses, early elections ahead

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On 15 December the Slovak parliament passed a vote of no confidence in the minority centre-right Eduard Heger government. The motion was tabled by MPs from two opposition parties, the liberal Freedom and Solidarity Party (SaS), which had been in the government coalition until September this year, and the *Hlas* (Voice) – Social Democracy party, which currently leads the opinion polls. The motion was supported by 78 MPs, two more than the absolute majority required. Prime Minister Eduard Heger (of the OĽaNO party) and parliamentary speaker Boris Kollár (of We Are Family, *Sme rodina*) have held initial talks with President Zuzana Čaputová about what to do next after losing the majority. The following day the head of state accepted the resignation of the government, while at the same time temporarily authorising it to perform its functions in a limited capacity. Actions taken within the government's remit but which derive from laws other than the constitution will require the president's signature.

Kollár said he agreed with Čaputová that early elections should be held as soon as possible, "ideally in April or May, or June at the latest". The head of state is expecting amendments to the constitution to be adopted by the end of January, which will formally allow for parliament's term to be shortened. This is a consequence of a ruling by the Constitutional Court which was made during the current parliament. Slovakia has a history of adopting so-called constitutional laws which dissolve parliament before serving its term.

Commentary

- The fall of Heger's cabinet was the last stage in a series of disputes within the Slovakian centre-right, which took power after winning the February 2020 elections on promises to settle accounts after the long-standing rule of the left and to clean up state institutions. At the core of the friction was the ideological and personal conflict between the two coalition partners: the winner of the elections, Igor Matovič's Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OĽaNO), and Richard Sulík's SaS party (for more details see '[Permanently crisis coalition: Slovakian centrist right on the crossroads](#)'). Over time, the differences between the two parties have become increasingly stark, exacerbated by the challenges posed by the pandemic, inflation and the effects of the war in Ukraine such as the wave of refugees and the energy crisis. SaS insisted e.g. on a more liberal economic policy, while OĽaNO pushed for more social spending (led by increased expenditure on pro-family policies). The growing tension first led to Matovič's resignation as prime minister after a year in office, and then to SaS leaving the governing coalition, which thus

lost its majority in parliament.

- Early elections are likely to take place between May and September 2023. Although the president could appoint her own cabinet of 'experts', in recent days she has signalled her unwillingness to implement such a solution. Most likely, she believes that doing so could harm the electoral chances of her own party (the extra-parliamentary Progressive Slovakia, PS), which has been climbing in the polls in recent months (reaching 12% according to a December poll by the AKO agency). Čaputová, the coalition's We Are Family and the parties of the left-wing opposition are pushing for as early a date as possible, i.e. no later than June. Heger and Matovič have been reluctant to make any formal declarations on the matter, but they would certainly like to postpone the election for as long as possible. Media reports suggest that elections in early autumn would be acceptable to them. Among other things, OĽaNO is counting that its pro-family campaign will have a positive impact on the electorate (see '[Słowacja: prorodzinna ofensywa rządu](#)'). The liberal SaS, however, has declared that it is not in favour of early elections. It probably wants to avoid being perceived as the party which will once again paved the way for the left to return to power (especially since a similar approach led to the collapse of the centre-right government in 2011, a big win for Smer the following year, and its subsequent eight years of rule).
- Early elections risk a serious change in Slovakia's foreign policy course, including a reduction in support for Ukraine. Whether this will happen will depend primarily on who the expected winner, *Hlas*-Social Democracy, forms a coalition with. The party has maintained stable levels of support, at about 20%; its leader, former prime minister Peter Pellegrini, has been one of the most popular politicians in the country for some years. The party traces its roots back to the scandal-ridden and discredited government of Smer, which also lost the elections due to protests following the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak. However, its differences in policy priorities mean that it will have difficulties cooperating with the parties of the broadly defined centre-right. The liberal media are currently promoting the idea of a left-liberal coalition (*Hlas*-PS-SaS) which would share certain political viewpoints, most notably on cultural and ethical issues (for example SaS, which has so far focused on economic issues, has recently been emphasising the issue of civil partnerships). Such a government would maintain a similar foreign policy to the current one, with perhaps a slight weakening of pro-Ukrainian rhetoric. Nevertheless, it cannot be ruled out that *Hlas* will form a coalition with Smer (under the controversial former prime minister Robert Fico) and the pro-public-spending We Are Family. In that case, work on the process of cleaning up the state will be reversed, and foreign policy will move closer to the line adopted by Hungary, although a future prime minister (most likely Pellegrini) would probably try to moderate the demands made by the radicalising Fico, who often echoes Russian propaganda talking points in his statements on the war in Ukraine.