

Parliamentary elections in Slovakia: Fico close to regaining power

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In the elections held on 30 September to the *Národná Rada*, the unicameral Slovak parliament, the best result was achieved by the national-left party Smer (Direction)-Social Democracy, led by the former three-time prime minister Robert Fico; the party won just under 23% of the vote. It came 5 percentage points ahead of the left-liberal Progressive Slovakia (PS), and led the centre-left party Hlas (Voice)-Social Democracy under Peter Pellegrini (who was prime minister from 2018 to 2020) by more than 8 percentage points. The winner of the previous election, the anti-corruption OĽaNO party, came fourth and will be in opposition. Politicians representing the Christian Democrats (KDH), Liberals (SaS) and Nationalists (SNS) will also sit in parliament (see Appendix). Smer won in seven of the eight regions, while the PS won in the remaining capital region (in Bratislava it clearly outdistanced the other parties, as it did in the second largest city, Košice). Fico himself had the best result individually: he received more than 530,000 of the 3 million votes cast. Pellegrini was second with just under 340,000. The turnout was 68.51%, the highest in 21 years.

In accordance with constitutional custom, on 2 October President Zuzana Čaputová entrusted the mission of forming a government to the head of the winning party; Fico now has 14 days to do this. While announcing her decision on the previous day, she noted that the long and turbulent election campaign had increased social polarisation and undermined the citizens' trust in politics and democracy (see '[Slovakia before the parliamentary election: back to the past](#)'). In his speech after the results were announced, Fico confirmed that he would run for prime minister and that his preferred coalition arrangement would be with Hlas and the SNS, which would yield a 79-vote majority bloc in the 150-member parliament. Hlas suggested that the SNS's place in the coalition should be taken by the Christian Democrats (KDH); however, that party ran under a clear commitment not to enter into an alliance with Smer, and the issue is so controversial that if they did decide to enter into a coalition with Fico's party, it could lead to the break-up of the KDH parliamentary group.

Commentary

- Smer's victory is the culmination of the party's systematic work to rebuild its support during three years in opposition, but also the result of the radicalisation of its rhetoric. It is the fifth win for Fico's party in the last six parliamentary elections. After the largest anti-government protests in independent Slovakia, held under the banner of 'For a decent Slovakia' (see '[Frustration and hope. Slovakia after Kuciak's murder](#)'), the party lost the

2020 elections. At that time, a group of leading activists led by Pellegrini left it and founded the Hlas party, which attracted a more moderate electorate. At that time Smer underwent the most serious crisis in its history; to deal with it, Fico changed his strategy and increasingly began to target his message to anti-system voters. He correctly read the mood of this part of the electorate, and highlighted the crises experienced by a succession of centre-right governments. He also criticised pandemic sanitary restrictions and the vaccination requirements and highlighted the chaotic actions of the ruling camp, but he also recognised the reluctance of a large part of the Slovak public to offer aid to Ukraine, and promised to limit it to essential humanitarian support. During the campaign he presented himself as an experienced politician who would be able to assert the country's interests in Brussels and Washington. At the same time, during the closing stages of the campaign, he increasingly emphasised the bipolar choice between Smer and Progressive Slovakia; that approach won over some potential voters of the far-right Republic party, which (despite what recent polls said) just failed to get into parliament, falling short by 0.25%. Another important element in marking the dichotomy of the choice between Smer and its liberal rival were cultural issues, where Fico presented himself as a defender of 'traditional values'.

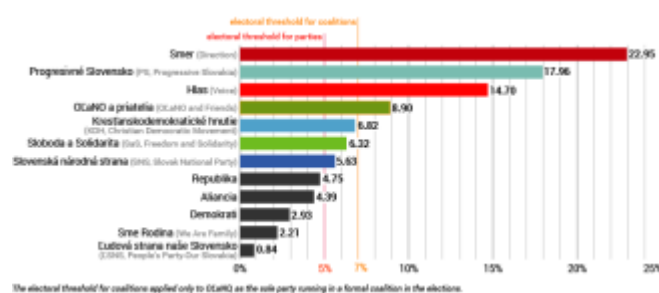
- The most likely post-election scenario is a coalition of Smer, Hlas and the SNS, which would be a near-exact recreation of the 2016–20 governing arrangement (the politicians of Hlas participated in it while they were still members of Smer). This is supported by the experience of their relatively harmonious cooperation during the aforementioned period and the significant convergence of their political platforms. A key role in the formation of the future coalition will be played by Hlas, without whom a stable governing arrangement cannot be formed. Since the last debates, Pellegrini has already made his ideological affinities with Smer increasingly clear (both formations are affiliated to the Party of European Socialists) and distanced himself from PS. A coalition with Smer is supported by Hlas's voters and a significant proportion of its leading activists, who have generally maintained friendly contacts with their former party. Even after the results were announced, Pellegrini conceded that Smer's victory was an expression of the electorate's wish for it to be in power, and that this should be accepted. He also suggested that in such an arrangement he could take over as the leader of parliament, a position he already held between 2014 and 2016. This could provide him with a springboard to run in the presidential elections in spring 2024, in which he would be one of the main favourites.
- In the new government's foreign policy, a change in approach to the Russian-Ukrainian war is to be expected. Fico will adopt a similar stance to Hungary, which does not support Kyiv militarily, and advocates bringing peace through coming to an agreement with Russia. The future government's withdrawal of military aid to Ukraine will result in a deterioration of bilateral relations, not only with its neighbour but also with the coalition of EU and NATO countries supporting Ukraine – although (as Pellegrini, for example, has pointed out) Bratislava has nothing left to offer Kyiv anyway. In relations with Russia, we may expect that in the field of energy (continuing the centre-right's policy) the government under Smer will be cautious in accepting any possible new sanctions or withdrawing Slovakia's exemptions (Bratislava is permitted to continue receiving Russian oil, and the West-led sanctions do not apply to nuclear fuel). Nevertheless Fico will want

to reassure the West after the elections, and so he will probably avoid any overtly pro-Russian gestures that could have further-reaching consequences. In European politics and Slovakia's relations with the United States – contrary to the campaign rhetoric – a more pragmatic attitude should be expected. By emphasising the issue of the EU's strategic autonomy, Fico will seek to curry favour with France (which is pushing for it) and to stabilise relations with the US, which may initially be strained due to Fico's anti-American rhetoric in the campaign. This may be helped by the delivery in 2024 of the first F-16 fighter jets, which was contracted by Pellegrini's previous cabinet. In line with past tradition, a politician with a clear pro-Western orientation will probably be appointed as foreign minister; the possible candidates include the former ambassador to the US Peter Kmec (Hlas) or Miroslav Lajčák (associated with Smer), who is currently working in the EU. This choice will be a likely signal of Slovakia's desire to continue the fundamental long-term priorities of its foreign policy.

- In domestic policy, a government of Smer, Hlas and SNS would probably try to increase state interventionism to prevent the cost of living crisis from worsening. The significant budget deficit (the Ministry of Finance expects it to reach 6.4% of GDP at the end of this year, which would be among the worst results in the EU) could become an obstacle to introducing the generous social programmes which have been promised. Both Fico and Pellegrini have announced that the head of the police would be replaced, and that the work of the criminal police (NAKA) and the special prosecutor's office would be reviewed (Fico himself has suggested taking even more radical steps). The latter two institutions have played a significant role in holding left-wing administrations to account, uncovering politicians' links to the world of organised crime and helping to convict more than 40 people from Smer's entourage, as well as indicting a further hundred. These included activists for Hlas and others linked to them. This means that further disputes with the European Commission over compliance with the rule of law are very likely to arise. However, despite the inspiration of Hungary in domestic politics which Fico has proclaimed, it can be assumed that, as before, Fico will be cautious about taking any measures that could lead to a reduction in the inflow of EU funds.
- The size of the vote for Progressive Slovakia (less than 18%) means that it is likely to become the main opposition force, as the chances of it forming a governing coalition are merely mathematical. It gained support as it became clear that it was the only party in the centre-right/liberal camp that was certain to get into parliament; thus, in the final stage, it gathered some of the votes from those who wanted to prevent Fico from returning to power. As the parent formation of President Čaputova, it also benefited from her personal popularity. Although she has a politically liberal background, she proved to be balanced in her actions, and tried to position herself as a cross-party arbiter and uphold the rule of law. This helped to mitigate the concerns expressed in conservative circles about PS's demands on social issues: this party is one of the few which support the introduction of civil partnerships. The upcoming parliament will see the first real test for this group, which lacks a coherent structure and consists of both people who are already experienced in politics and new, untried activists. Its leader Michal Šimečka has only been leading the party for a year and a half, and although he comes from a well-known family of Slovak intellectuals, he has spent most of his adult life outside the country.

APPENDIX

Chart 1. Results of the 30 September elections to the Slovak parliament



Source: *'Elections to the Národná Rada of the Slovak Republic'*, Štatistický úrad Slovenskej republiky (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic), volbysr.sk.

Chart 2. Distribution of seats in the Slovak parliament after the 30 September elections



Source: *'Elections to the Národná Rada of the Slovak Republic'*, Štatistický úrad Slovenskej republiky (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic), volbysr.sk.