

Slovakia has a new government: will Fico cross the Rubicon?

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The new government led by Robert Fico, which was appointed on 25 October, faces numerous challenges in domestic and foreign policy. The harsh campaign rhetoric used by the eventual winner of Slovakia's parliamentary elections made Europe unusually interested in this poll and the direction the new coalition will take. The coming weeks will be the first test of whether this experienced politician, who during his three previous stints as prime minister usually ended up adopting more pragmatic attitudes, will cross the political Rubicon and bring his policies closer to the isolated position adopted by Hungary in the EU and NATO. During the election campaign, Fico employed fiercely anti-Ukrainian rhetoric as he competed for votes with the far right, which – together with forming the coalition with nationalists – prompted the Party of European Socialists to suspend the membership of his Smer-Social Democracy in it shortly after their election victory.

The composition of Fico's cabinet shows that the new prime minister wants to exercise direct control over the country's foreign policy. The new governing coalition, which also includes the centre-left Hlas and the Slovak National Party (SNS), has ambitious goals to improve living standards, but its immediate emphasis on the poor state of public finances signals some uncertainty about whether it will be possible to achieve tangible results in this area. The attention of the national media and the opposition will focus on the new cabinet's first moves with regard to the judiciary and law enforcement. The steps that the new government has pledged to take in this area may put Slovakia on a collision course with the European Commission.

The post-election game

Fico has skilfully navigated the post-election process of forming a new governing coalition and achieved the optimal result from the perspective of his party's interests. He succeeded despite the fact that former Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini's Hlas party, which came third in the election, was theoretically in a better negotiating position as it could have formed an alliance with either Fico's camp or the centre-right (see [‘Parliamentary elections in Slovakia: Fico close to regaining power’](#)). After winning the election, the leader of Smer was careful to keep the talks confidential, which stood in stark contrast to the centre-right leaders who were bargaining through the media, including social media sites.

A crucial factor in Fico's efforts to build a new coalition was his gambit with the Christian Democrats (KDH), who were indispensable to forming an alternative government of liberals, the centre-left and centre-right. His meeting with KDH's leader Milan Majerský, which had been portrayed as a courtesy call, proved to be the decisive moment. Majerský later revealed that the two men had discussed issues such as the possible introduction of a

constitutional ban on the adoption of children by homosexual couples, which would have pleased the KDH's conservative voters. Immediately after this conversation, Majerský informed the media, to their surprise, that the KDH was unable to envisage forming a coalition with either Smer (as he had already declared), or with Progressive Slovakia (PS), which came second in the election and could have formed the backbone of an alternative coalition. Within the next 24 hours, the board of the Christian Democrats reiterated its readiness to form an alliance with PS and Hlas (with the addition of the liberals from SaS), but the KDH's wavering position may have convinced Hlas that a coalition with Smer was the only viable option.

Fico was equally skilful in handling the face-off with President Zuzana Čaputová over the composition of the new government. Smer nominated a number of controversial candidates to the cabinet, including Robert Kaliňák, the former long-time head of the Interior Ministry (now defence minister), and Jozef Ráž Jr. (now transport minister), but the head of state did not challenge any of these nominations. In 2018, Kaliňák stepped down as head of the ministry in charge of police operations, a decision that came in the wake of Slovakia's largest protests since 1989, under the banner of 'For a Decent Slovakia'. These were sparked by the murder of the investigative journalist Ján Kuciak; Kaliňák's resignation was one of the demonstrators' most important demands. Ráž's candidacy for the post of interior minister was rejected in 2018 by the then-president Andrej Kiska, who found him unacceptable as a close friend of Kaliňák. Both men are now back in government, as is Fico, who lost his prime ministerial post in 2018.

When making these appointments, the head of Smer rightly assumed that the president, who decided not to seek re-election in the spring of 2024 and will leave office in the middle of next year (see '[Slovakia: President Čaputová will not run for re-election](#)'), would have no desire to engage in open political warfare with his camp. This was especially true as her prerogatives to block appointments were not very strong in this case, since they were based on precedents and ambiguous interpretations by lawyers; she would therefore have risked a high-profile defeat before the Constitutional Court in any clash with Fico. At the same time, Fico amplified the narrative that it was imperative to respect the views of the electorate. Čaputová decided to challenge (successfully) only the most controversial candidate, for the post of minister of the environment, who was put forward by the nationalists.

The programme for a sovereign welfare state with ailing public finances

The leaders of the coalition parties have put their main emphasis on 'sovereign foreign policy' and improving the living standards of the Slovak people. However, the coalition agreement clearly states that the first of these goals will be pursued while maintaining the foreign policy course that results from the country's membership in the EU and NATO. Although Fico showed far-reaching pragmatism in decisions on international affairs in his three previous stints as prime minister (see '[Slovakia before the parliamentary election: back to the past](#)'), the next few months will show what stance he adopts this time.

The first test of this was the meeting of the European Council on 26–27 October. Fico was determined to complete the formation of his new government before this event, and presumably by doing so to deliver a kind of policy statement to the leaders of the EU countries, most of whom have expressed concern about the changes in Slovakia. However it is still unclear whether, and to what extent, Fico will actually change his approach on the

international stage; his domestic rhetoric will certainly retain its strong focus on sovereignty and aversion to Ukraine, although his recent speeches have contained less criticism of Slovakia's eastern neighbour and more reflections on peace and the EU's role in securing it. Smer lost its more moderate voters after the departure of the activists who went on to form Hlas, and has since tailored its message to a different group of voters; these are the people whom it needs to keep mobilised, for example in the context of the 2024 elections to the European Parliament.

Fico's tough campaign rhetoric, which was aimed at attracting anti-system voters, has already alienated European socialists from him. And if he pursues his openly expressed desire to draw inspiration from Hungary's policies, Slovakia's position in the EU could be marginalised. Should this happen, it will mark a U-turn from the aspiration to keep Slovakia in the 'core of European integration' which he proclaimed even in the most recent campaign. Unlike Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Fico has been careful not to draw the attention of foreign actors to his country; this has afforded him relative calm in domestic politics, but it has also created room for abuses, which were exposed through the investigation into the murders of Kuciak and his fiancée.

In addition to his more frequent criticism of Brussels (which, in Fico's view, has changed from a 'peace project to a war project'), another major change from Fico's previous stints in power is his choice of foreign minister. In Slovak tradition, since Vladimír Mečiar was ousted in 1998, this position has almost always been held by diplomats, the only exception being former Prime Minister Mikuláš Dzurinda in 2010–12. Now Fico has entrusted this post to a loyal but internationally inexperienced member of his party, Juraj Blanár. This indicates that Fico wants to exert more direct influence on the country's foreign policy. Smer's portfolio also includes the defence ministry, which will be headed by Kaliňák; however, this need not immediately raise alarm bells in the West. As head of the Interior Ministry, he proved to be a politician with whom the US administration was able to find common ground: in 2013 Slovakia took in three prisoners from the US Guantanamo base; he purchased US-made Bell helicopters for the Slovak police, and in 2015 the then US Secretary of State John Kerry presented him with a certificate of appreciation "in recognition of Slovakia's sustained record of excellence in advancing international cooperation in the global fight against terrorism". The new minister's first test will be the question of following up the deal to purchase 12 Viper attack helicopters under an intergovernmental agreement with the United States which his predecessors struck. Although these aircraft are expected to cost only €340 million (against their market value of around €1 billion) as a token of US gratitude for Slovakia's transfer of MiG-29 fighter jets to Ukraine, Kaliňák has criticised the offer, including since the elections.

During the election campaign, one of the main slogans used by both Smer and Hlas was to improve the living standards of the Slovak people. This was reflected in both Fico's and Pellegrini's post-election remarks and in the provisions of the coalition agreement, which defined it as the 'principal objective' of the governing coalition. Although the first specifics on how to achieve this goal should be outlined in the government's programme (which the new cabinet submits to the National Council along with a motion of confidence within 30 days of its appointment), it is worth noting that the new government has drawn attention to the poor state of public finances. Both the coalition memorandum and the coalition agreement itself stated that no Slovak government had ever faced such "devastated public

finances and growing poverty” over the last three decades. This sounds like a hedge against any difficulties in implementing pro-social solutions. However, according to Eurostat figures for the second quarter of this year, published a few days ago, Slovakia does indeed have the highest budget deficit in the Eurozone (4.8% of GDP) and the third highest in the EU as a whole after Hungary and Romania. Nevertheless, the coalition partners have insisted that the consolidation of public finances will not come at the expense of the ‘social standard’.

When Smer previously held power, it always controlled the Finance Ministry (as will be the case this time too), and most often succeeded in keeping debt levels relatively low: indeed, their previous long-time finance minister Peter Kažimír, who now heads the central bank, received international accolades for these efforts. However, contrary to the party’s public rhetoric, this was done at the expense of social policy, which was based on popular single-purpose programmes, such as free lunches in schools or train tickets for certain groups, rather than on systemic solutions; it also came at the cost of abandoning comprehensive economic reforms.

Prospects for the coalition’s sustainability

Fico’s government enjoys only a slim majority in the National Council (79 out of 150 votes), so it will be extremely important for him to maintain the cohesion of the coalition’s three parliamentary clubs. The smallest of these is the weak link in this arrangement. Although ten MPs have been elected from the list of the Slovak National Party (SNS), only its head is an actual party member (this number has increased to three after some people took over posts in ministries and vacated their parliamentary seats). The others are activists from smaller groups or formally independent; some of them have links to media that have been proven to spread disinformation. This is why there are doubts that this group can maintain discipline in voting. Nonetheless, a skilful and experienced politician like Fico may move to assert control over the situation by communicating directly with those politicians who have been elected from the SNS list, while bypassing the leadership of the party to which they do not formally belong.

Despite the difficult relationship between Fico and Pellegrini, their similarities in policy and the personal ties between Smer and Hlas should strengthen the cohesion of the new coalition. Hlas is made up of former Smer members, and both parties are affiliated to the Party of European Socialists, although it has now suspended both of them (Smer as a member, Hlas as an associated party) after they entered into the coalition with the SNS. Hlas’s nominees for ministerial posts once held important positions in Smer; moreover some politicians in Pellegrini’s faction, like members of Fico’s party, were involved in corruption scandals at that time. For this reason it will be important for the opposition to expose any attempts they make to evade responsibility for their past mistakes through changes in legislation, law enforcement or the judiciary.

On a day-to-day basis, the new government should also operate smoothly due to Fico’s dominant role in its structure; the leaders of the other coalition parties have joined the body that presides over the National Council, while the three leaders will deal with the most important issues at meetings of the Coalition Council. The fact that Pellegrini, who at present is Slovakia’s most popular political leader, has become speaker of the parliament and thus formally holds the second highest constitutional office is a convenient starting point for him to claim the ultimate prize: becoming the head of state. At the same time, this

has allowed him to avoid accusations of breaking an earlier promise that he would not sit with Fico “in one government”.

The divisions among the opposition centre-right and liberal parties will work to the advantage of Fico’s cabinet, at least in the initial period. The new prime minister has previously exploited their ideological issues for this purpose; in fact, both in the most recent campaign and after the elections, he signalled that he could continue to do so. In this way he will work to capitalise on the differences between the more conservative parties, such as the KDH and the faction of former Prime Minister Igor Matovič (now named Slovakia, previously OĽaNO), and the more liberal ones (Progressive Slovakia and SaS). Old personal grudges resurfaced in this group even before the first session of parliament. A big question mark hangs over the future attitude of PS, the biggest opposition party. A significant proportion of its MPs are made up of third-sector activists with no political experience, while its leader Michal Šimečka has followed domestic politics from abroad in recent years. His political profile is closer to that of the officials in European institutions with whom he has worked during his professional career than to the distinct style of most of the country’s political leaders.