

## **Slovakia: the Fico government has presented its platform and won a vote of confidence**

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On 21 November 2023, the National Council of the Slovak Republic voted to adopt a vote of confidence in Robert Fico's government which was formed on 25 October. The new ruling coalition, which is made up of the left-nationalist Smer party, the centre-left Hlas and the Slovak National Party, has a majority of 79 votes in the 150-seat parliament. The 78 votes cast in favour of the vote of confidence correspond almost exactly to the number of coalition MPs; 65 MPs voted against.

The government's platform was adopted on 13 November at a meeting of the cabinet and approved by parliament alongside a vote of confidence. It is entitled 'Living a Better, Calmer and Safer Life'. Its five main parts focus on the following thematic areas: "return to the normal environment of a democratic society", support for sustainable development and a competitive economy, maintaining the welfare state, "strengthening the democratic state" (this includes changes to law enforcement practice and the operation of the judiciary) and external issues. The introduction to the document contains harsh criticism of the previous governments and refers to their terms as "a period of chaos and amateurish decisions that threatened the economy, social cohesion and the quality of life of the population".

### **Commentary**

- It was merely a formality for the new cabinet to win a vote of confidence, and the coalition's cohesion, at least initially, will be facilitated by positive assessments of the first weeks of the government's work as seen by the Slovaks. According to an AKO poll conducted in the second week of November, if an election were held in the next few days, the three coalition parties would win not 79, but 87 seats. After taking power, the Fico government returned to its main campaign promises. The new government has extended (for the time being until 23 December) the stepped-up border controls with Hungary introduced by the previous technical government. It also organised an ostentatious night-time operation intended to detain individuals attempting to cross the green border. Although the police detained no one fitting that description, the government argued that this was a consequence of its actions and of the fact that it had sent a clear signal to human traffickers highlighting its intention to prevent illegal border traffic. In addition, at one of its meetings the Fico government demonstratively rejected a military aid package to Ukraine worth more than €40 mn (mainly including ammunition supplies), which had been prepared by the previous cabinet. This means that at present the total value of Bratislava's impressive military aid provided to the Kyiv administration in 2022–2023 to

fend off the Russian aggression stands at €671 mn.

- Neither the Fico government's actions carried out so far, nor its platform contain any clear hints of Slovakia's new foreign policy strategy (see '[Slovakia has a new government: will Fico cross the Rubicon?](#)'). They rather seem to indicate that this policy will be non-standard and will rely on a wait-and-see attitude and on manoeuvring, while respecting certain 'red lines'. These lines have been delineated by an explicit reference in the government's platform to NATO and EU membership as the pillars of Slovakia's foreign and security policy on the one hand, and by a pledge made to its own electorate to halt military supplies to Kyiv, and by Slovakia's opposition to Ukraine's prospective NATO membership (which was not explicitly stated in the platform document, but was mentioned in various public statements) on the other hand. The space in between these 'red lines' is a 'grey area' in which Bratislava seems to manifest its readiness to provide limited assistance to Ukraine and to make some concessions to its Western partners. This may be caused by Slovakia's intention to avoid foreign criticism over its domestic policy, where the measures it has announced and already taken appear most controversial. Members of the new government have held a number of meetings with representatives of Western countries (including the US ambassador) and European institutions (e.g. the head of the Delegation of the European Union to Ukraine, who is a Slovak national) and have assured them of Slovakia's continued "financial and political" support for Ukraine, including for the decision to start its EU accession negotiations. In this context, Fico emphasised that he viewed assistance in de-mining Ukraine's territory as humanitarian aid. The government's platform includes a pledge to attempt to engage Slovak companies in the process of Ukraine's reconstruction and in efforts to modernise the infrastructure located on the Slovak-Ukrainian border. Fico also signed the conclusions of the European Council meeting held in October, which state that the EU will continue to provide military assistance to Kyiv. The new government's reluctance to further distancing itself from the European mainstream is evidenced by Fico's statement offered at the Smer party congress (on 17 November), in which he clearly announced that his government will seek to reinstate the party's full membership in the Party of European Socialists (it was suspended as a result of the party forming a coalition with nationalists).
- The government's platform has emphasised the intention to boost cooperation within the Visegrad Group (this was also mentioned during the campaign) and has stressed its "strategic importance". This equates to a major shift in Slovakia's approach to this cooperation format compared with the stance of the former centre-right coalition which ruled the country in 2020–2023. In that period, this cooperation format was increasingly marginalised, in particular by consecutive foreign ministers (this resulted from their intention to distance themselves from Hungary and also, to a lesser degree, from Poland), and then was put to the test following the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war. There are justified concerns that this plan could effectively result in tightening of cooperation between Fico and Orbán. However, while due to its longer history and several important common policy areas at the EU level (such as the single market, cohesion policy) cooperation within the Visegrad Group will likely stand the test of time, this is doubtful as regards the Slavkov Triangle (S3). In recent years, this form of cooperation

between Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Austria has been promoted as an attempt on the part of Slovakia and the Czech Republic to distance themselves from Hungary (and also from Poland to some degree) in the field of regional cooperation. It mainly flourished at the level of foreign ministers and was largely based on their favourable working relationship. So far, in a gesture of good will towards its eastern neighbour, the Czech Republic has expressed its interest in maintaining this cooperation format. However, as a result of Slovakia's change in government, the S3 format has lost one of its driving forces and the parliamentary elections in Austria, which will be held in 2024, may result in a shift in Vienna's foreign policy.

- The government's most controversial actions and plans are linked with its domestic policy and are mainly focused on the judiciary and the law enforcement bodies. However, the new government has been making efforts not to embark on a collision course with Brussels and has presented the planned changes as attempts to restore the correct order or even as moves to defend the rule of law (in the government platform this phrase is mentioned as many as 15 times). In what seems to be an attempt to anticipate any reservations from Brussels, during a meeting with the President of the European Commission (EC) Ursula von der Leyen (on the sidelines of the recent meeting of the European Council), Fico announced his intention to carry out "profound reforms of the criminal code" and said that he was open to "consulting" these amendments with the EC. They are to be implemented in response to instances of "human rights violations" on the part of the previous governments as part of its actions targeting the then opposition led by Fico. In spring 2022, Fico managed to avoid losing his parliamentary immunity and being arrested because in a vote in the National Council the MPs cast an insufficient number of votes in favour of this motion (two more votes were required for its adoption). The motion was filed in connection with several charges being levelled against him, including the charge of having formed a criminal group. Moreover, in the sections linked with domestic policy, the titles of specific chapters of the government's platform contain the word 'democracy'. Despite this, the new government's first decisions suggest that its actions may actually stand in contrast to the principles of the rule of law. These include a decision to immediately dissolve a group of investigators who have been working on uncovering some obscure connections between members of Fico's former cabinets and criminal groups (the investigators are defending themselves in court and have accused the interior ministry leadership of illegal action) and a decision to marginalise those media outlets which are critical of the government (this includes refusing to talk to them and a plan to ban their representatives from entering the Government Office). Reporters Without Borders have interpreted the planned division of the state-controlled media organisation (RTVS) as an attempt to take over direct control of it. As regards the plan to ease criminal sanctions for economic crimes (which is presented as the "humanisation of the criminal code"), representatives of the opposition and the media view it as an attempt to reduce the risk of criminal sanctions awaiting individuals accused in trials brought against people linked with the government.
- The Fico government is likely hoping to maintain its level of support among the electorate by focusing its rhetoric on sovereignty and welfare policy. The main point of the welfare policy involves an announced rise in so-called 'thirteenth pensions' (this is an additional disbursement usually in December) from the present level, which is between

€50 and €300, to the amount of the average pension (more than €600). However, one problematic aspect of this promise is the fact that the decision to launch the payments calculated according to the new system has been postponed until 2024. Another such aspect is the decision to effectively cancel the changes to the pension system which the former centre-right government had introduced to provide additional payments to those pensioners whose children work (the so-called parental bonus). Although the most popular electoral promises of the two left-wing parties included a reduction in the price of energy, the wording of the relevant sections of the government's platform is relatively general and no specific proposals have been communicated so far, despite the fact that the new year is only six weeks ahead. While the problem of electricity prices has *de facto* been solved in a multi-year agreement signed between a previous government and the main electricity provider, the price of gas may increase twofold if no subsidies are introduced. The state of public finances will be the main obstacle to implementing a comprehensive social welfare policy. The government's advisory body (the Council for Budget Responsibility) estimates that if no extra savings or revenue are generated, Slovakia's structural deficit will increase from 4.5% of its GDP recorded in 2023 (at present Slovakia's budget deficit is the biggest in the euro zone) to 6% of its GDP in 2025–2027. Methods to improve the situation include the announced increase in taxes paid by banks, the introduction of "financial instruments" to take over a portion of the "windfall profits" earned by companies and natural persons, an increase in the tax progression and increased rates of taxes on real estate, the trade in alcohol and tobacco, and gambling.