

Slovakia: Fico's government in trouble

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People took to the streets in numerous cities across Slovakia on 23 and 24 January. These were the largest anti-government protests since demonstrations in 2018 following the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak. In the capital alone, between 35,000 and 60,000 people protested under the slogan 'Slovakia is Europe', while in Košice, the country's second-largest city, turnout ranged from 10,000 to 15,000. The demonstrations coincided with turmoil within the ruling three-party coalition. Its member, the Hlas party, expelled two of the four MPs from the Hlas rozumu (Voice of Reason) platform, who had been challenging certain government policies related to both domestic and international affairs. As a result, Robert Fico's government risks losing its majority in the National Council. This will ultimately depend on whether it can retain the two remaining MPs from the platform, as well as the outcome of negotiations with three nationalist MPs who left their parliamentary group in autumn 2024. Since then, the coalition has held the narrowest possible majority, with 76 out of 150 seats.

More than a year after returning to power, Fico's government is gradually losing support. It may lose its parliamentary majority, which could trigger a snap election. However, the real risk of losing power or parliamentary seats may push coalition partners towards greater pragmatism and compromise.

Commentary

- **Robert Fico's government, in power since autumn 2023, is experiencing its most severe internal crisis to date due to tensions within the ruling coalition.** The coalition consists of the left-wing nationalist Smer, the centre-left Hlas, and the nationalist SNS, and has been ideologically fragmented from the outset. Initially, it was strongly united by a shared goal: ensuring the personal security of party members and their business associates who had faced charges or convictions under the previous centre-right government (see: '[Slovakia: controversial changes to the criminal law, and a dispute with Brussels on the horizon](#)'). This objective was achieved through controversial amendments to criminal law and the dissolution of key investigative institutions – the Special Prosecutor's Office and the National Criminal Agency (NAKA). However, over time, personal ambitions and rivalries began to surface. In autumn 2024, three MPs left the SNS parliamentary group, demanding greater influence over government decisions. Since then, negotiations have been ongoing regarding the terms of their support for the government or their potential inclusion within it. At the same time, a dispute between SNS and Hlas has left the parliamentary speaker's position vacant since March 2024, following Peter Pellegrini's election as president. According to the deputy prime minister representing SNS, a

compromise is now emerging: the role will go to a Hlas minister, who will in turn relinquish their post to the rebel nationalists. Meanwhile, two dissatisfied centre-left MPs have been offered government and diplomatic positions. The first test for the coalition will come on 4 February, when parliament is set to convene. To open the session, which the opposition is likely to boycott, more than half of MPs must be present.

- **Fico is keen to avoid early elections, which could cost him power, but he is nonetheless mobilising his electorate as a precaution.** Since autumn last year, Smer has been gradually losing support, dropping from 23% during the elections to 20–21% in December. This decline may be driven by disappointment over the relatively limited social agenda and the fiscal consolidation programme, which, for instance, has resulted in an increase in the main VAT rate from 20% to 23%. Despite this, the prime minister continues to shape public debate effectively. The opposition's attempts to spark discussion about "Fico's high prices" – a narrative that could discourage government supporters – were quickly overshadowed by rhetoric centred on the firm defence of national interests. This has been linked to efforts to resume gas transit through Ukraine and Slovakia. Fico has framed his meeting with Vladimir Putin on 22 December and his criticism of President Volodymyr Zelensky in this context. At the same time, by tapping into ideological issues – such as proposing a constitutional amendment to define only two genders, modelled on Donald Trump's initiative – he is likely to deepen divisions within the opposition, which remains fragmented on such matters.
- **Fico's recent foreign policy moves have been a key factor in the anti-government protests.** His meeting with Putin was a major trigger, with demonstrators labelling him a 'collaborator' on their banners. Meanwhile, the prime minister has taken a harsher stance towards Kyiv, partly in response to the expiration of the Russian-Ukrainian gas transit agreement, which has had financial repercussions for Slovakia (see: '[Slovakia's actions in preparation for the expiry of the Ukrainian-Russian transit agreement](#)'). Although these steps are popular among Fico's electorate and may be part of his strategy ahead of potential early elections, he is still working to maintain good relations with Washington and Brussels (see: '[Dr Fico and Mr Hyde: Slovakia's game with Ukraine and Russia](#)'). Just before his visit to Moscow, his government announced the purchase of 13 American multirole military helicopters. Fico also frequently emphasises – at times contradicting the scepticism expressed by some of his own MPs – that Slovakia's membership in the EU and NATO remains a cornerstone of his government's foreign policy.