

ELECTIONWATCH

SLOVAKIA



Slovakia Pre-Election Watch: June 2010 Parliamentary Elections

On June 12, Slovakia will hold parliamentary elections for the 150-seat National Council. Voters will choose among 18 parties, eight of which are deemed to have a chance to pass the five percent threshold for parliament. Slovakia has a proportional system, where the country forms a single national constituency. Voters cast their ballots by selecting a party's list, but may use preference votes to support individual candidates within the list.

Since 2006, Slovakia has been governed by a coalition of three parties that span the political spectrum: Smer-Social Democracy (Smer-SD), the Slovak National Party (SNS), and the People's Party-Movement for Democratic Slovakia (LS-HZDS). The coalition has been dominated by the left-leaning Smer (which means direction in Slovak), led by Prime Minister Robert Fico, with the radical nationalist SNS and (post-) national populist LS-HZDS of former Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar as junior partners. The often-fractious parliamentary opposition camp over this period included the center-right Slovak Democratic and Christian Union-Democratic Party (SDKU-DS), the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) and the Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK).

Smer ousted Prime Minister Mikulas Dzurinda's (SDKU-DS) center-right government in the 2006 election by providing a home for two large groups of disaffected voters. The first group included those who rejected the market-liberal reforms of the Dzurinda government and were drawn to Smer after the party adopted the rhetoric of a "radical socially-oriented opposition" to the "anti-social, far-right government" of the Dzurinda coalition (to quote Smer's accusations in that year's campaign). But Smer also collected the votes of a second group: those who found themselves alienated by the combative political style and corruption allegations leveled against the "established" parties represented on the one side by the authoritarian, nationalist and populist Meciar and by his modernizing, center-right successor Dzurinda, on the other. By combining a clear radicalization on socio-economic issues with a campaign built around an anti-establishment call for non-ideological, "rational" solutions to the nation's problems, Smer succeeded in presenting a "third way" in Slovak politics and for the first time since the mid-1990s was able to consolidate a powerful force on the left side of the political spectrum.

In the aftermath of the 2006 elections, Smer drew the nationalist SNS and LS-HZDS (with its fading reputation for giving birth to independent Slovakia) into a troubled and ideologically conflicted, but ultimately stable, coalition, which was justified by new Prime Minister Fico as the best way to put into place a "strong social state" after what he called "the destructive market fundamentalist policies" of the two previous center-right governments. The notion of a "strong social state" in Smer's understanding is a more general - and diffuse - term than that found in the traditional, Western-European welfare state. In addition to the classic pro-welfare approach to social policy, under Smer this concept has also included the usually right-of-center role of protecting and defending the

national and cultural welfare of the Slovak people.

Ironically, for a government that came to power crusading against the allegedly flawed policies its predecessors, the period from 2006-2010 has been a clear period of stagnation in terms of reforms or counter reforms. With few, although admittedly important exceptions, and in a direct contradiction to its campaign promises and immediate post-election rhetoric, the Fico government has maintained a great degree of continuity with regard to the socio-economic policies introduced by Dzurinda. Driven by concerns of fiscal stability, prospects for joining the Eurozone (which Slovakia did on January 1, 2009), and probably also hindered by its own lack of specific policy alternatives, Fico's government kept in place not only the flat tax - the prime symbol of the market liberalism of Dzurinda's era - but also most of the other Dzurinda reforms. The best-known change was, however, the one that mattered most to the public at the time: Fico's decision to eliminate the nominal \$0.75 medical care co-pay Dzurinda had introduced.

In practice, the Fico Government focused mainly on symbolic actions allowing it to cover previous market reforms with a left-of-center veneer and herald the arrival of the "strong social state." The government introduced Christmas bonuses for retirees and began public debate on adding a possible 13th annual pension payment, but never implemented the policy. The Labor Code was amended to limit the flexibility of the labor market and strengthen the position of the trade unions. More importantly, the government modified the country's mixed pension system to discourage private, individually funded accounts in an effort to cover the deficit in the state-based system. The Fico Government mounted an extensive campaign to persuade citizens to withdraw their savings from private pensions, a campaign which largely failed.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of government policy has been in the realm of justice and the judiciary, where the prime minister and the coalition parties have given broad latitude to the LS-HZDS justice minister. As a consequence, the public image of and popular trust in the judiciary has fallen dramatically along with the belief that justice can be had by ordinary people in Slovakia. Finally, the coalition re-introduced ethnic considerations into policy making and into public life more broadly under the slogan of a "reasonable, state-run historicization" of Slovak society for patriotic purposes, one outcome of which were highly controversial laws regulating the use of minority languages and mandating the use of national symbols in public gatherings and facilities.

In the end, issues related to corruption and integrity in public office came to dominate the popular perception of the government - the very same issues that were instrumental in Fico's successful 2006 anti-incumbent crusade. From the beginning, the government continued a tradition of demarcating reserved spheres of interest - expressed in the division of ministerial portfolios - for the ruling parties. Originally, the most conspicuous cases of corruption were related to nominees of the two junior partners, SNS and LS-HZDS, and Fico's image as a corruption fighter and his party's anti-corruption message suffered as he tried to reign in his coalition partners. Over time, tensions within the coalition were aggravated as 12 cabinet members were replaced, most for reasons directly or indirectly related to questionable public procurement and corruption. Moreover, the more cases that were exposed, the more it became obvious that Smer members and nominees would be accused of participating in various corruption schemes.

Evolution on the Party Scene

Two important changes have occurred on the Slovak party scene since the last election. In 2008, the (ethnic Hungarian) Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK) split, with a new splinter party called Most/Hid (Bridge in Slovak and Hungarian, respectively) headed by former party Chairman Bela Bugár emerging in the aftermath. The high degree of animosity between the two Hungarian parties means their joint participation in a coalition is unlikely. While the SMK remained the party for those who support a traditional defense of the Hungarian-speaking minority in Slovakia, Most/Hid has taken a different tack by attracting ethnic Slovaks, particularly in and around Bratislava, and choosing dual-language messages as expressed by the subtext of the party name - "the party of cooperation."

The second change took place in 2009, when the new liberal party Freedom and Solidarity (SaS in the Slovak acronym) emerged, drawing originally from the environment of bloggers and other Internet enthusiasts. The party's calls for market-based economic policies are substantiated by undeniable expertise among its leaders. The party's mild but clear anti-establishment criticism of both the coalition and opposition camps in Slovak politics has found resonance among the public. Unlike several previous liberal parties, it has avoided including recycled personalities and politicians on its election lists. Its self-declaration as the party of new people and of public integrity has, therefore, not been successfully challenged. Polls suggest that the party - with a good chance to score between five and 10 percent in the elections - has drawn an equal number of supporters from among the former voters of SDKU-DS, Smer, and first-time voters.

The Campaign

Fico has been running a permanent campaign throughout his entire tenure on behalf of the coalition, but mainly for Smer. The state-affiliated media and regular cabinet press conferences have been the main tools in this campaign, which - due to the intra-coalition tensions outlined above - has targeted both the opposition and eventually Smer's coalition allies. In January 2010, Fico also launched a campaign against the SDKU-DS over party financing practices. This attack led SDKU-DS Chairman Dzurinda to step aside and pushed to the fore a number of new individuals, most importantly, the surprisingly successful 2009 presidential contender Iveta Radicová. With Dzurinda's dramatic departure and Radicová leading the SDKU-DS list, this element of the campaign against the SDKU-DS was dead in the water.

Initially, Smer launched a generally positive campaign highlighting the achievements of the PM and his ministers in building the "strong social state" it promised in 2006. But as the elections approached, Smer took a decidedly more negative and aggressive tone, warning voters that if they do not vote for Smer, they'll get the previous Dzurinda coalition back again in a slightly revised form. The reasons for this abrupt change were twofold. First, since the beginning of 2010 polls have been suggesting a mild but firm decline in popularity for Smer, but more significant declines for the two junior coalition partners, SNS and LS-HZDS. This trend threatens to preclude Fico not only from reconstituting the current coalition (which, in fact, is widely believed not to be his first preference), but also from forging a different coalition with some of the current opposition parties, namely the KDH and the SMK. As some polls suggested that a very narrow center-right majority be possible, Smer's ability to forge a viable coalition began to shrink.

Moreover, a few weeks prior to Election Day, information leaked regarding the financing of Smer itself. Documents surfaced suggesting that between 2002 and 2006, Fico signed a series of agreements with wealthy business supporters in which the party traded places on its ballot and promises of nominations for executive posts and boards of the state-controlled companies for financial support far exceeding the legal cap on campaign spending. These revelations prompted the prime minister's aggressive change of tone and focus on the threat of the return of the "anti-social government" of the right, as Smer sought to push to the background the accusation that the party was in the hands of wealthy business circles rather than in the hands of the Slovak people themselves. In the final phase of the campaign, Smer billboards used a series of slogans such as "They made us pay for health care," "They let the Hungarians into the government," and "They sold out Slovakia;" each with the refrain "And they will do it again. Stop the SKDU-KDH-SMK Coalition!"

Post-Election Prospects

In theory, as many as eight parties have a chance to be elected to the 150-seat National Council. Turnout is expected to be between 50 and 60 percent, roughly the same as in 2006. These eight include Smer-SD, SDKU-DS, KDH, SaS, SNS, SMK, Most/Hid, and LS-HZDS. As many as five of them - SMK, Most/Hid, HZDS, SNS and SaS - may not pass the five percent threshold, either because of rapidly declining or consistently low scores in the polls (for the first four) or because of a low degree of certainty to vote among supporters (for the SaS). Therefore, the construction of a post-election coalition will largely depend on which of these parties will not make it to the parliament.

A [survey by the FOCUS Agency conducted in May](#) (see below chart) projected that the current coalition and current opposition would each win half of the 150 seats. But with several of the parties poised on the five percent threshold, it is exceptionally difficult to forecast the election outcome.

Party	Percent of Likely Voters	Projected Seats
<i>Government Parties</i>		
Smer-SD	35.3	57
SNS	6.1	10
LS-HZDS	5.1	8
<i>Opposition Parties</i>		
SDKU-DS	14	23
SaS	13.3	21
KDH	8.3	13
SMK	5.9	9
Most/Hid	5.6	9

It is believed that a repetition of the current coalition is not in the interest of Smer-SD. The aggressive nationalism of the SNS is a burden Fico would probably like to shake. Although in the not-so-distant past, all parties, with the exception of SDKU-DS and SaS, would have seriously considered joining Smer in a ruling coalition, recent developments have made a "mixed coalition" scenario much more difficult. It would only be possible as long as LS-HZDS made it into parliament and the coalition were also joined by KDH or SMK. The KDH, however, has repeatedly rejected any kind of alliance with Meciar's LS-HZDS. The SMK, naturally, would prefer to stay clear of any coalition including the SNS. While the

absence of the SNS from the parliament is improbable, the prospects for LS-HZDS are much bleaker.

Moreover, as a center-right coalition became theoretically possible, and as SDKU-DS and SaS excluded Smer from their lists of potential partners, the KDH, under the new leadership of former European Commissioner Jan Figel publicly pledged not join Fico's party in a coalition. The pledge came after both external and internal pressure, as the party has been hamstrung by the issue of cooperation with Smer since the 2006 elections, with local structures pushing the party into cooperation and the leadership split on the question. Even though some have challenged the seriousness of the KDH pledge, it is clear that were a SDKU-DS, KDH, SaS coalition to be possible - preferably complemented by SMK (or Most/Hid) - all center-right parties would prefer this option to individual negotiations with Prime Minister Fico.

To make things even more complicated, recent elections in Hungary and the new Hungarian government's plan to offer citizenship to a large group of ethnic Hungarians in neighboring countries have become a major issue in the campaign and in the complex mathematics of coalition formation. Both the SNS and Smer took a decisively and vocally negative stance on the Hungarian initiative, with the opposition parties being equally firmly, but perhaps less vocally, opposed. After counter-legislation potentially depriving those who accept Hungarian citizenship of their Slovak passports was passed by the Slovak parliament, it remains to be seen whether the nationalist constituency among Slovak voters will prefer powerful Prime Minister Fico or the "professional nationalists" from the SNS as deserving of support to "deal with Hungary." If Fico manages to attract a significant nationalist vote and potentially eliminate the SNS from parliament, his party's coalition potential will increase.

Slovak-Hungarian tensions have also influenced relationships among the opposition. As the SMK was not in a position to criticize Prime Minister Viktor Orban's government's plans in Hungary (some even went so far as to suggest that the party had appealed to Orban not to postpone the legislation until after Slovak elections), the SDKU-DS said that SMK support for Hungary on this issue precluded the party from any future government in Slovakia. While this prediction may not survive election night, the possibility that SMK is slowly becoming a natural partner for Fico - provided that the SNS is out - while Most/ Hid is the apparent fourth partner in a center-right coalition, could prove crucial elements in the formation of a new Slovak government.

IRI in Europe

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