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Political Consequences of the Parliamentary Elections in Slovakia

Dariusz Kałan

The poor result of the ruling party SMER–SD, the presence in the new parliament of a party referring to fascist symbols, and the overall fragmentation of parliament make the creation of a stable coalition government in Slovakia unlikely. The elections revealed Slovaks' fatigue with traditional parties, which in the last decade have not been able to meet economic expectations, improve the quality of public services or outline positive plans for future development. Less important, as it turned out, was Prime Minister Robert Fico's anti-immigrant campaign, which contributed more to the success of radicals than of SMER–SD. Regardless of which party forms the government, the existing foreign policy priorities of Slovakia will probably not change, including its good neighbourly relations with Poland.

Slovakia's ruling party, SMER–Social Democracy (SMER–SD), placed first in the elections that took place on 5 March. For the party and its leader, Prime Minister Robert Fico, it was the fourth consecutive win in parliamentary elections and the eighth if counting local elections and those to the European Parliament. But the result, that is, the 28.3% (or 49 seats in the 150-seat parliament) it took home, is significantly lower than predicted by the polls, which said SMER–SD would have up to 35–40% of the vote. Also surprising is the second-place finish for the liberal Freedom and Solidarity party (SaS, 12.1%, 21 seats) and the fifth-place showing for the extremist People's Party–Our Slovakia (L'SNS, 8%, 14 seats). Now parliament will have eight parties altogether, the most in the history of independent Slovakia, including one coalition, the conservative alliance Ordinary People–NOVA (OL'aNO–NOVA, 11%, 19 seats). The 5% threshold was also crossed by the We Are Family party, established by celebrity billionaire Boris Kollár (6.6%, 11 seats), the Hungarian minority party Most–Híd (6.5%, 11 seats) and the centre-right party Siet' (5.6%, 10 seats). After four years out of parliament, the nationalist Slovak National Party (SNS, 8.6%, 15 seats) and its rejuvenated management will return, too, and for the first time there will not be any "christian-democratic" movements, which co-created the pro-European and reformist government of Mikuláš Dzurinda: SDKÚ-DS and KDH.

The Beginning of the End of SMER–SD? Its tally of less than 30% is a failure for SMER–SD and is the worst result since 2002, the year it took part in the parliamentary elections for the first time. It is also another signal after Fico's unexpected defeat in the presidential election in March 2014 of the possible end of a decade of SMER–SD dominance on the Slovak political scene, all the more that the party during the campaign was unable to provide any new offers on a personal or programmatic level. Its message was built on the continuation of its current policies and on political and economic stability. Its agenda lacked an ambitious plan and was accompanied by numerous scandals, the growth of political influence of businesses associated with SMER–SD, and the deepening alienation of the elite among society. Especially harmful were protests by nurses and teachers in February that went totally ignored by the government. SMER–SD also did not take tackling corruption seriously: in four years, Slovakia has dropped five places in Transparency International's index (to 50th, together with Bahrain, Croatia and Hungary). Some 75% of Slovaks in a Legatum Institute survey cited corruption as a key concern.

SMER–SD instead tried to mobilise voters with new economic incentives and harsh anti-immigration rhetoric. In less than two years, Fico's party has implemented two of three social welfare improvement packages, which include among others free train rides for students and seniors, a reduction of VAT by 10% on some goods and services, and an increase in the minimum wage. This was possible due to the country's stable macroeconomy, in particular strong GDP growth (3% in the

second half of 2015) and the influx of EU funds. As for the migrants, SMER–SD heavily exploited its opposition to the EU's proposed system of relocation of refugees and cited potential security risks associated with them. The party's mix of social and nationalist messaging turned out to be effective, but not for it, rather for the radical parties. The party may now reshuffle personnel, possibly even Fico, who has for some time been rumoured to be tired of his leadership of SMER–SD.

The Revolt against the Elites. The electoral threshold was crossed by four parties that did not take part in the previous election. The opening for new or refreshed parties (such as SNS) with charismatic leaders building their message on the loss of confidence in the state and frustration in general, was visible among voters in both urban and rural areas. People in populated areas supported the pro-market Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) party and the conservative alliance OL'aNO–NOVA; both sharply criticised Fico and promoted their parties as ones with a strong expert background. SaS also attracted the majority of Slovaks living abroad (30%). Poorer regions in central and eastern areas, in turn, chose the nationalist Slovak National Party (SNS) and the more extreme People's Party–Our Slovakia (L'SNS) headed by the governor of the Banská Bystrica region, Marian Kotleba. L'SNS openly refers to the fascist heritage of the First Slovak Republic and urges withdrawal from the EU and NATO. Indeed, it benefited from Fico's anti-immigrant campaign, but equally crucial was its radicalism on social issues, including anti-corruption, pro-social and anti-Roma demands. Dissatisfaction with the country's economy despite good macroeconomic indicators reflects the quality of life of citizens, for instance, the monthly salary of teachers is fourth from bottom in the EU in relation to the country's GDP (according to Eurydice), and the level of unemployment among young people (25%) is the highest among the countries of the V4. Among new parties, only centre-right Siet', which according to pre-election polls was supposed to be the second-largest party in parliament, did not meet expectations. Its chairman, Radoslav Procházka, who in the first round of the presidential election won 21.2% of votes, was harmed by accusations of irregularities in the financing of his previous campaign.

Closer to a Right-Wing Government. The huge fragmentation of parliament means that the creation of the government will require far-reaching compromise and suspension of personal disputes. No matter the result of the coalition negotiations, it is expected that the new cabinet will be exposed to frequent crises over responsibilities, paralysis in decision-making, and a number of conflicts based on political ambitions. The biggest source of conflict may be between nationalist SNS, which does not avoid anti-Hungarian rhetoric, and the Hungarian minority party Most-Híd. In the discussions on the appointment of the government, only Kotleba is not taking part: all parties ruled out talks with him and President Andrej Kiska did not even invite him. In the new parliament, L'SNS will be isolated.

The new government will most likely be right-wing. The leaders of SaS, OL'aNO–NOVA, and Siet' have publicly refused to cooperate with SMER–SD, while the We Are Family party announced its support for specific proposals of a right-wing cabinet without formally entering it. Most-Híd sends mixed messages, but it seems that ultimately it is closer to the right. To gain a majority, an anti-SMER coalition needs SNS, too, but it is also a potential Fico coalition partner. A right-wing government composed of the five parties, including rivals SNS and Most-Híd, would have a very fragile majority (by just one vote) if not counting the informal support of the Kollár party. Its likely prime minister would be SaS leader Richard Sulík.

In turn, SMER–SD can count on SNS to join its government. To win the support of other parties, Fico's resignation as prime minister for a more moderate politician, for instance Miroslav Lajčák, may be offered. If SMER–SD and SaS are not fruitful in their quest, the parliament has the right to shorten its tenure and President Kiska can announce a new election. Until then, the country may be run by a technical government, which could even last the entire Slovak presidency of the EU Council in the second half of this year. The same thing happened in 2009 in the Czech Republic.

Continuity in Foreign Policy. The problems with the appointment of the government are unlikely to affect the main directions of Slovakia's foreign policy, although the lack of effective decision-making can limit the effectiveness of its diplomacy. In European policy, the new cabinet—whether SMER–SD or SaS—would be interested in highlighting the differences between Slovakia and Brussels. The leader of SaS, Sulík, who is also an MEP with the European Conservatives and Reformists, has long been in favour of deep structural reform of the EU, including elimination of EU funds and a sharp reduction of its bureaucracy. It is also clear that the country's critical stance of the EU over refugees will be maintained, although the tough rhetoric may be tamped down.

A government composed of SaS will probably attach less importance in its public statements to cooperation with Russia, but in fact the targets set by Fico will be maintained. This applies to both strengthening trade cooperation and the diversification of Slovak energy sources by promoting the Eustream pipeline and interconnectors with neighbouring countries. A major test for Slovak-Russian relations will be expansion of the Nord Stream and/or Turkish Stream (Slovakia in both cases would lose its position as a transit country), and the third and fourth units at the Mochovce nuclear power plant (Rosatom may be interested in an investment). Also remaining in dispute is the return flow of gas to Ukraine. It is expected that the Slovak authorities will seek to obtain EU support in these matters. Public scepticism of NATO and the U.S. means that even with a different government, the indifference Fico held on strengthening NATO's eastern flank will continue.

As for the V4, as long as the four countries hold similar positions on migrants, one should not expect a weakening of dialogue. A return of friction with Hungary is possible, but this will depend entirely on whether Slovak leaders determine that an increase in tensions with its neighbour is needed in domestic politics. The elections will not affect the dynamics of Polish-Slovak relations. The Polish authorities should continue to build cooperation with Slovakia around specific issues, preferring tactical alliances of strategic agreement and bilateral relations focused on difficulties with their partners (e.g., the blockade of a Polish investment in a water source by the revised Slovak constitution). Greater importance should also be given to strengthening relationships at the local level in border regions; here, it mainly concerns investments in rail and road or regular bus lines.