

BULLETIN

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The Parliamentary Elections in Slovakia

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Leftist party SMER-Social Democracy will be the most likely winner in the forthcoming parliamentary elections in Slovakia. A drop in support for the centre-right ruling coalition, which for more than a year has formed PM Iveta Radičová's government, has been caused by both accusations of bribery and inefficiency in fighting the political and economic crises. If the winning party succeeds in creating a government, it would influence a change in Slovakia's foreign policy. New authorities in Bratislava would seek to strengthen relations with the biggest European Union states as well as Russia. However, the country's cooperation with the Visegrad Group and its political dialogue with Hungary may become viewed as less important.

Early parliamentary elections were called for 10 March 2012. This was the result of the centre-right government's loss in October 2011 of a parliamentary vote on the ratification of changes to the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF), which PM Radičová paired with a vote of confidence in her government. The failure to win the vote was caused by the absence of deputies from one of the coalition's parties, Freedom and Solidarity (SaS). Eventually, the EFSF reform passed with support from the main opposition party, SMER-Social Democracy (SMER-SD), but only after a vote was held to hold early elections, a demand the party had made in exchange for its support for the reform package.

The most likely winner of the elections will be leftist SMER-SD, which is expected to gain 37 to 43% of the vote, making it the party's third parliamentary victory in a row. Four central-right party-members of Radičová's government will not repeat the good results of the previous elections in 2010, when they obtained 44% altogether. Currently, the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) may receive 9 to 13% of the vote, the liberal SaS and Most-Híd, which represents the Hungarian minority, may each get 5 to 6%, and the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union–Democratic Party (SDKÚ-DS) may even fail to reach the 5% electoral threshold (it is now at 4 to 7%). However, nationalists from the Slovak National Party (SNS) may appear in parliament if the party, now polling at 3 to 5% of the vote, gets the upper range of support, as would two new movements, the conservative Ordinary People (5 to 9%) and the anti-establishment 99 Percent-Civic Voice (4 to 7%) parties.

Political and Social Context. The decrease in support for SDKÚ-DS, which was the largest party forming the Radičová's government, has been influenced by the disclosure in December 2011 of a secret-services wiretapping operation, codenamed "Gorilla". At the heart of the case lie allegations that during the time of privatizations in the period 2002–2006, the Penta investment company bribed many high public officials from various parties. Although the names of people from across the political spectrum appear connected to the case, the irregularities happened when SDKÚ-DS was in power.

The "Gorilla" case and the mass street protests that resulted are not the only examples of the country's deepening socio-political destabilization. In November 2011, media revealed that the minister of defence instructed the secret services to eavesdrop on some journalists. A few weeks later, a strike of about 2,000 doctors, who were protesting a shortage of funding and plans for the transformation of hospitals into joint stock companies, resulted in a temporary health services crisis.

Economic Context. An important reason for the decreasing level of trust in SDKÚ-DS is the weakening economic situation of the country. Although Slovakia's GDP growth in 2010 and 2011 reached 4.0% and 3.3% respectively, forecasts for the next year are less optimistic (1.2% growth in 2012). In November 2011, the inflation increased to its highest level since 2008 (4.6%) and a rise in

the unemployment rate in January to 13.6% made Slovakia the fifth highest country in the eurozone in the number of unemployed people. The drop in support for SDKÚ-DS has been quickened by a chaotic anti-crisis policy and an unfavourable external situation. Although the government introduced a number of stabilization acts (i.e., a 60% threshold for the public debt-to-GDP ratio, a bank tax, an increase in VAT from 19 to 20%), its effectiveness was weakened by conflicts between the PM and her minister of finance, as well as with the leaders of the other coalition parties. Moreover, Slovakia's economy, which is very sensitive to changes in the global situation, was influenced by the eurozone debt crisis (i.e., problems with the sale of Slovak bonds in November 2011).

Post-election Scenarios. Although SMER-SD will be the most likely winner of the election, the party may face problems in forming a government. There is no certainty that SMER-SD's previous coalition partners from 2006 to 2010 (SNS and Vladimír Mečiar's People's Party) will be in the next parliament. However, it is doubtful that the scenario from the 2010 election will happen again in which SMER-SD won the election but the government was formed from the four liberal-conservative parties. Today, differences in their political agendas and personal conflicts make the re-formation of a large centre-right coalition rather unlikely.

If that holds true, a government may be established by SMER-SD and KDH, with which SMER-SD's leaders have been conducting informal negotiations since autumn 2011. Also, Most-Híd could possibly be a part of that coalition. The leader of SMER-SD, former PM Robert Fico, has announced that his party will not be cooperating with any of the new movements. The liberal SaS is also not considered to be a potential co-partner because of its different views on European policy (objections towards intensifying EU economic integration). It is possible, though, that SMER-SD will be given an absolute majority in the parliament. According to some polls, the party may receive up to 45% of all votes, and this result would provide an opportunity to form a government with no coalition partners.

Implications for the EU and Central Europe. The SMER-SD's victory in the elections would result in significant changes to Slovakia's foreign policy, the most-challenging of which will be bilateral relations with Hungary. During the last two years, both countries have rebuilt political dialogue after tensions were heightened in 2006. During the electoral campaign, Fico avoided making unequivocal declarations about the future of the country's foreign relations; therefore, it is likely that the choice of coalition partner would be decisive for Slovakia's policy towards its southern neighbour. If SNS joins the government, a return to anti-Hungarian rhetoric can be expected. The KDH is much more moderate, although among all the centre-right parties its attitude towards Hungary's current government is the most distanced. Most-Híd's participation in the coalition may result in maintaining a conciliatory course.

Another expected shift in foreign policy is a return to the concept of "Slovakia as a bridge between West and East", which describes efforts to establish strong political relations with Germany and France and tight economic cooperation with other eurozone partners, while also improving relations with Russia. Unlike Radičová's eurosceptic government, SMER-SD supports membership in the most important EU initiatives (fiscal pact, aid to Greece). Therefore, its return to power may improve the unity of the EU's decision-making.

A pro-European orientation in Slovakia's foreign policy, though, may have a negative impact on the country's involvement in the Visegrad Group (the V4). The same was true between 2006 and 2010, when the leftist party did not pay much attention to regional cooperation, which was additionally weakened by the Slovak-Hungarian conflict. The new government will not withdraw Slovakia's support for the V4's strategic projects, but instead will focus on European forum contacts with the largest EU countries.

Recommendations for Poland. Although under a new government in Bratislava Poland may become a less important partner for Slovakia, the countries' common priorities in the negotiations on the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework (cohesion, agricultural and climate policy as well as general objections towards limits on EU funds) should remain unchanged. In connection with the rotation to the Polish presidency of the V4, it is recommended Poland seek to maintain the current consensus on the V4's most important goals, which apart from the EU financial perspective also include energy (the North-South Gas Corridor, local energy interconnectors) and socio-scientific (scholarships, expert collaboration) projects. Furthermore, it seems desirable to constantly monitor Slovak-Hungarian bilateral relations in case they radically deteriorate Poland should be prepared for possible mediation. Also, efforts directed to maintain Slovakia's interest in the Eastern Partnership must be undertaken, i.e., by convincing a new government that the EaP's priorities do not conflict with the expected warming relations with Russia. Last, it should not be forgotten that Poland and Slovakia have common bilateral interests connected to both local (cross-border projects) and economic (trade) cooperation.