



Notes on recent elections

The 2012 parliamentary elections in Slovakia



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1. Background

After the 2010 elections a centre-right government led by Iveta Radičová was formed. For the first time in Slovakia's history a woman occupied the post of prime minister. The greatest challenge for the government was to its internal stability. Though formally it was composed of four parties, in reality two other parties were involved, namely the Civic Conservative Party (in Slovak: *Občianska konzervatívna strana*; OKS) and the civic movement Ordinary People (*Obyčajní ľudia*; OĽ). Both of these had placed their candidates on the lists of bigger parties, and each elected four MPs. The stability of the government was thus questionable from the beginning.

This situation was partly analogous to the second government of Mikuláš Dzurinda in the years 2002–2006. In both cases these were centre-right cabinets with the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union – Democratic Party (*Slovenská demokratická a kresťanská únia – Demokratická strana*; SDKÚ-DS) as their strongest member. They both comprised a larger number of parties, and they also shared a similar fate, proving unable to last out the whole electoral term. On the other hand, the two governments differed vastly in their economic policies. While Dzurinda was able to enact strong liberal reforms on taxes and health care, Radičová's government was more cautious. It did not greatly modify the generous social policy of the previous government led by Smer-SD and, when dealing with the impact of economic crisis, it even planned to raise taxes on entrepreneurs and other social groups.

The critical events that led to the end of Radičová's government related to the increasing bailout powers sought by the European Union to address the Eurozone crisis. The party Freedom and Solidarity (*Sloboda a solidarita*; SaS) refused to follow its coalition partners in voting to join a permanent European Financial Stability Facility. The final vote held in parliament in October 2011 was linked to a vote of confidence and so the SaS was thus forced either to back down or to let the cabinet fall. The party chose the latter. After the vote, the other members of the government along with Smer-SD agreed to hold early elections in 2012. As for EFSF, a new vote was held shortly after the first attempt, and this time with the support of Smer-SD the idea won overwhelming support. The new campaign thus started in autumn 2011, not even eighteen months after the previous parliamentary elections.

2. Electoral system

The electoral system used for the 2012 elections remained completely unchanged. Slovakia uses a proportional representation system with a single nationwide constituency from which all 150 members of parliament are elected. Each party must cross the 5% threshold to gain seats, and this barrier is slightly higher for coalitions. The Hagenbach-Bischoff quota is used for the allocation of seats. These features together guarantee a very high level of proportionality of distribution. As for the vote itself, flexible ballots are used, and voters can cast up to four preferential votes. However, the influence of preferential voting remains limited, as most votes are given to party leaders and other highly-ranked candidates (Spáč, 2010, 65–75).

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3. Parties and the campaign

The fall of the Radičová government brought some changes in the party system but did not disrupt many of its previous features and trends. Smer-SD gained the most from the whole situation and secured its dominant position. Robert Fico used the government conflicts to present his own party as a guarantor of stability. He accused the parties of Radičová's government of being unreliable and incapable of coming to agreement on essential topics. These appeals were also reflected in public support as Smer-SD's rating stabilized above 40 percent. Indeed, the polls began to indicate a real chance that Smer-SD would become the first Slovak party after 1989 to gain a majority of seats in parliament.

The fall of the government weakened the centre-right parties, and their public support has dropped since the 2010 elections. The events of autumn 2011 were not the sole reason for this, however. Another important reason was the government's economic policy, which was a great disappointment to its voters. The moderation of Radičová's government in this area was even more striking when compared to liberal reforms made by the centre-right cabinet in 2002–2006. So the unsuccessful EFSF vote only accelerated an ongoing downward trend in the centre-right's popularity. The fall of the government also damaged morale among its members and SaS found itself somewhat isolated. Although this tension gradually eased, the centre-right parties did not enter the 2012 elections as a compact bloc.

A new rival to these parties also appeared. An unofficial member of Radičová's government, the civic movement OĽ, had got into parliament in 2010 by placing its members on the SaS ballot. Although these two parties formed a joined parliamentary group their relations were far from harmonious. When the government tried to change a controversial law on citizenship which had been passed by the previous cabinet, the leader of OĽ, Igor Matovič, refused to go along with the plan. As a result he was expelled from the parliamentary group of SaS. After the fall of the government OĽ was transformed into a political party, but one of an unconventional nature. Its main goal was to function as a platform for important personalities, most of whom were not even members of the party. This aim was proclaimed in the new name of the group, which was Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti; OĽaNO). The new party did not define its position in ideological terms, and the same applied to its program, which contained a mix of conservative, liberal, social and populist messages. However, as the party had been connected to Radičová's government, it became a direct rival mainly to the centre-right parties.

The party spectrum before the 2012 elections thus provided an interesting display. On one hand there was Smer-SD, which was without any doubt expected to be a clear winner. Against it was a fragmented centre-right group of parties, which also faced a new rival unencumbered by previous scandals. Some of these parties were far from guaranteed to make it into the next parliament. This also went for the Slovak National Party (Slovenská národná strana; SNS). In the previous 2010 elections the nationalists

had barely crossed the 5 percent threshold, as an important segment of their vote turned to Smer-SD (Krivý, 2011). As an opposition party, the SNS was unable to reverse these trends, and before the 2012 elections it was again at risk of losing its parliamentary status. Thus, while the winner was clear, there were still plenty of unknowns as the election approached.

Although less than two years had passed since the 2010 elections, the content of the campaign in 2012 was largely different. At first it seemed that the EU bailout issue would be as highly salient as it had been two years earlier. In 2010 this question was mainly associated with the case of Greece (Godársky, 2011) and it was used mostly by the centre-right parties. Their intentions before the 2010 elections were quite clear: to point to the large deficits produced by the Fico's government and to warn voters of the danger of following the "Greek road" (Deegan-Krause and Haughton, 2011). Following the EFSF vote in the Slovak parliament, the treatment of this topic became more complex in the 2012 campaign, now encompassing the whole issue of Slovakia's role in such processes. Out of all the parties the SaS was able to profit most from these debates, as it rejected outright the idea of giving such help to other EU countries. With this position it played the role of protector of the economic interests of Slovakia and its citizens.

However, the topic of EFSF was pushed into the background and replaced by the issue of corruption once after the so-called Gorilla case was revealed. "Gorilla" was the code name of an operation by the Slovak security services aimed at monitoring the activities of an influential domestic financial group during 2005 and 2006. Unofficial documents which leaked into the public domain indicated strong links between the economic and political spheres, providing the backdrop for vast corruption. Every relevant political party in existence at the time was mentioned in these documents but the greatest pressure was put on the main party then in the government: the SDKÚ-DS. Gorilla proved to be an effective campaign weapon for the new parties. OĽaNO in particular cited the case as proof of the corrupt character of the current elite, and the need to replace it with a new political generation.

The Gorilla case greatly affected the campaign. Its influence was so profound that it superseded many of the topics traditionally dominating Slovak elections. The issue of Slovak–Hungarian relations, the main theme of the xenophobic SNS in the past, was visibly less important in 2012. The same applied to issues along the socioeconomic dimension. Unlike in the 2006 and 2010 elections the parties were not primarily divided based on left-right position (Rybář, 2007; Deegan-Krause and Haughton, 2011) but instead based on their involvement with the Gorilla affair. One of the consequences of this was that the main centre-right parties did not rule out cooperation with Smer-SD after the elections, as they had unanimously done before the 2010 elections (Gyárfášová, 2012; Mesežnikov, 2012).

Another feature that set apart the campaigns of 2010 and 2012 was the presence of the civic sector. One legacy of the illiberal governance of Vladimír Mečiar and his People's Party – Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (Ľudová strana – Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko; ĽS-HZDS) in

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