The March 2016 parliamentary elections in Slovakia: A political earthquake

Marek Rybář [a, *], Peter Spáč [b]

[a] Department of Political Science, Faculty of Arts, Comenius University Bratislava, Gondova 2, 81499 Bratislava, Slovakia
[b] Department of Political Science, Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University in Brno, Joštova 10, 602 00 Brno, Czechia

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ABSTRACT

The 2016 parliamentary elections in Slovakia brought important changes to the composition of parliament and resulted in an innovative four-party government. The leftist Smer-SD came on top but suffered substantial losses compared to 2012. It managed to form a government with three other parties, one of them representing the traditional Slovak nationalists while another being the leading representative of Slovakia's largest ethnic minority. The new coalition government downplays its internal divisions and claims it can provide stability in difficult international political situations, innovative policies in fighting corruption, and rejection of political extremism and radicalism. The opposition is fragmented and divided: it is composed of the two new radical right parties and two more moderate conservative-liberal groupings.

1. Introduction

High levels of electoral volatility and the regular electoral success of new political parties have characterized Slovak party politics since the early days of post-communist competitive democratic politics. Parliamentary parties come and go, yet the two-camp logic of party competition and government formation have provided some level of stability and predictability. In this sense the parliamentary elections that took place on March 5, 2016 represent a turning point and an electoral earthquake, even by East European standards: they produced many losers, a few and mostly unexpected winners, opened up new divides, and led to a highly fragmented parliament and an innovative four-party coalition government.

2. Background

In the 2012 general election, the leftist party Smer — Social Democracy (Smer-SD) gained a majority in parliament and a single-party government was formed for the first time in Slovak modern history. The party won the general election for the third time in a row with a clear margin over its rivals. The centre-right parties who participated in the previous cabinet of Iveta Radičová, now joined by the new populist and anti-establishment movement Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLaNO), lowered their previous gains and ended up in opposition (Rybář and Spáč, 2015).

The electoral results allowed Smer-SD to gain substantial control over daily politics. Backed by its loyal parliamentary group of 83 MPs (out of 150) the party was able to pursue its priorities (Mišík and Plenta, 2014) without any obstacles and to place its nominees into several key state institutions. Since its emergence in 1999, Smer-SD showed considerable internal stability and this did not change after 2012 election. In contrast to the previous centre-right government, the cabinet led by Robert Fico was rather absent of any internal clashes and this was promoted to the voters as a crucial advantage over coalition bargaining from the past. As its key objectives, the government promoted the country's economic growth, lowering the impact of the economic crisis and enhancing social well-being of citizens.

Although Smer-SD maintained a high level of support among voters during most of its term, some signs of the weakening of its dominance can be observed. At the end of 2013, Prime Minister Fico announced that he would run for president in March 2014. Despite the initial polls indicating his victory, Fico lost to non-partisan Andrej Kiska in the run-off (Rybář et al., 2014). The government also faced several scandals, mainly in the area of healthcare. In autumn 2014, after one instance of such corrupt behaviour was revealed, some figures from the ruling party, including the Speaker of Slovak Parliament and vice-chairman of Smer-SD Pavol Paška,

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: marek.rybar@gmail.com, marek.rybar@uniba.sk (M. Rybář), spac.peter@gmail.com (P. Spáč).

were forced to resign. The ruling party reacted to the decrease in its support by adopting a series of so-called social packages, i.e. sets of social measures predominantly aimed at helping lower income groups and, after summer 2015, by stressing the topic of migration crisis (see below).

In contrast to Smer-SD, which managed to absorb smaller leftist parties more than a decade ago (cf. Kopeček, 2007), the opposition consisting of centre-right parties remained fragmented after the 2012 election. Despite their poor showing in the election, only a few made any personal changes. Mikuláš Dzurinda, former Prime Minister and long-time leader of Slovak Democratic and Christian Union − Democratic Party (SDKU-DS), resigned. Out of all of the parties, SDKU-DS was crippled the most when the so-called Gorilla scandal, a case which unveiled corrupt practices during the SDKU-DS reign, came to light. The party selected a new leader, Pavol Frešo, however its profile was too damaged and its support continued to fade. Other centre-right parties did not follow suit and kept their leaders in office. The opportunities for further cooperation in the opposition camp were also disturbed as most of the parties blamed the liberal Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) and its leader Richard Sulík for an early end of the previous cabinet led by Iveta Radičová.

To add to the fragmentation of the opposition, two new parties had emerged during the previous electoral term. Several months after the general election, Daniel Lipšic, a prominent representative of the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH), left its ranks and created his own party, New Majority (NOVA), with stress on appeals of anti-corruption and justice. In the beginning of 2013, KDH lost another elite figure. After an unsuccessful attempt to reform the party, Radoslav Procházka, a prominent lawyer and MP, left KDH and shortly after announced his candidacy for president. Although he did pass into the runoff, his encouraging result led him to start his own party, Network (Sieť), in summer 2014. Hence, compared to the monolithic Smer-SD, the centre-right opposition consisted of seven subjects, each of them well behind the ruling party in the polls.

Unlike most of the centre-right, the nationalist Slovak National Party (SNS) underwent major changes: in a "hostile takeover" Andrej Danko replaced its long-time leader Ján Slota. Under his leadership the party officially claimed to rid itself of its past loaded with corrupt behaviour and scandals. The new leadership even expelled Ján Slota from the party, citing misuse of party finances. Although the ideological and personnel transformation of SNS was rather verbal in character, its support started to improve and since 2015 the polls have showed the party steadily above the five per cent threshold. For the ruling Smer-SD this meant a higher probability of staying in government even after the 2016 election, as its former junior coalition partner was on its way to becoming a parliamentary party again.

3. Electoral system

The electoral system experienced no changes since the last general election. Slovakia uses a PR system with the threshold set at five per cent. In 1998, the country adopted a single nationwide constituency from which all 150 MPs are elected. The enormous magnitude of the constituency guarantees very proportional results towards all parties able to cross the threshold. Party ballots are flexible and voters are allowed to cast up to four preferential votes. With ballots consisting of up to 150 candidates, however, only a limited amount of nominees can obtain seats based on preferential voting. Mainly due to the size of the lists, voters tend to support top listed candidates and thus tend to back the ranking provided by parties (cf. Spáč, 2016).

4. Campaign

In the previous two decades, party competition evolved around two main themes: the role of the market and issues related to national identity (Deegan-Krause and Haughton, 2012). Since about 2010, an anti-corruption agenda strongly supplemented these party divides. Smer, mastering a single-party majority in the 2012−2016 parliament, campaigned on the economic successes of its government: decreasing levels of unemployment, its ability to attract doses of foreign direct investments, and the growth of real wages.

The centre-right opposition objected that these economic results were achieved at the expense of a growing budget deficit and were thus unsustainable. Moreover, they utilized the growing number of suspicions of corrupt behaviour in various public bodies to highlight the incompetence of the Smer-led government. Smer reacted by replacing several of its top representatives, including the Speaker of Parliament and the Minister of Healthcare, in an effort to pre-empt public dissatisfaction. In addition, the party promised it would expand free public services and increase public spending in the subsequent electoral period. The so-called "social package" promised, among other things, to create 100,000 new jobs, more subsidies for public transport and to spend more on low-income groups like pensioners, disabled and young people and teachers.

The main electoral message of Smer, however, seems to relate to the questions of national identity and its protection. While in the previous elections the party did not shy away from scapegoating ethnic minorities, especially ethnic Hungarians, protection of people against what it called "uncontrolled migration of Muslims to Europe" dominated the 2016 campaign. Smer leader Fico claimed that a majority of migrants were economically motivated, that they represented a security threat and that his government would do everything to prevent their settlement in Slovakia. His government resented the agreed-upon EU mechanism to relocate asylum seekers among EU countries and filled a complaint to the European Court of Justice. Most of the opposition parties agreed that EU-wide "migrant quotas" were inefficient but criticised the government for what they perceived were activities harmful to Slovakia's external relations. They also claimed Smer was misusing the migration crisis to divert attention from more pressing domestic issues.

Probably the most damaging to the Smer campaign were the activities of dissatisfied teachers and nurses from public hospitals who started their protest activities just weeks before the elections. They demanded higher wages and more investments into education and healthcare. Smer politicians stuck to their main campaign message - focus on migration - and offered little concessions to the intransigent protesters. Even though relatively few teachers and nurses actively took part in the protests, a considerable share of the population supported their activities and regarded government responses as unsatisfactory. In this atmosphere, the SaS and OLaNO parties repeatedly stressed they would not consider a coalition government with Smer after the elections. The former presented an elaborate programme of economic liberalisation, while the latter focused almost exclusively on the anti-corruption agenda, an image reinforced by the presence of publicly known anti-corruption activists and whistleblowers on their party list. Sieť and Most-Híd were less clear on the issue of future cooperation with Smer and focused on anti-corruption measures and general competence and trustworthiness, respectively.

Slovak Nationalists refrained from their traditional anti-minority themes, and emphasised their novelty and newly found moderation. SDKU, whose parliamentary caucus ceased to exist due to the defection of its members to other parties, did not articulate any distinctive themes. Their Christian Democratic (KDH) colleagues waged a campaign that was rather unfocused: their