Briefing on

Parliamentary Elections in Slovakia

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68.51%
voter turnout

25
running political entities

150
seats in the
National Council

About the elections

Early elections on 30 September were held to outstrip the regular parliamentary elections originally scheduled for the first months of 2024. During the ninth elections (fourth early elections) since the founding of the state in 1993, a total of 150 members of the National Council were elected for another four-year term. 25 registered political entities had nominated their candidates for parliament, nine of which had a real chance of receiving seats in the future National Council. A total of 76 seats were required to secure a majority in parliament.

Unlike some other European countries, Slovakia does not allow voting through embassies, consulates or representative offices abroad. The voter's card thus entitles its holder to vote only in any other polling station in Slovakia. Voting abroad is facilitated by postal voting, allowing electors with permanent residence in Slovakia who are outside its territory at the time of the elections to send their vote by post. 72,993 citizens applied to vote by post this year – of which 26,926 are from Czechia (almost 37%). In 2020, 55,253 applications were submitted. Any citizen of Slovakia who will be 18 years old on the day of the election can cast their vote.
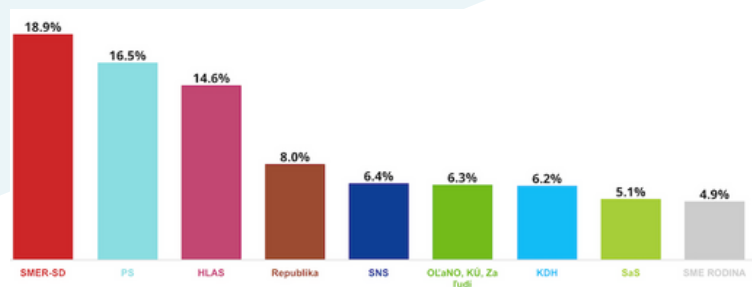
The running political entities

Out of 25 running entities, eight political parties and one coalition were predicted to surpass the threshold of 5% and 7% respectively according to the opinion polls. According to them, Slovaks place little trust in the parties that formed the government coalition that ruled Slovakia after the elections in February 2020 – all of them were on the edge of the electoral threshold. Instead, the parties that have been in opposition for the past three years were the ones to whom the hopes of a highly polarised Slovak society were turning.

Firmly at the top of the election charts with 19,4% was the social-democratic party SMER-SDD of longtime Prime Minister Robert Fico, who was experiencing a political resurgence after being swept away in the political storm following the 2018 protests. Following closely behind with 18% was the liberal Progressive Slovakia party led by Michal Šimečka, vice-president of the European Parliament. The HLAS-Social Democracy party, founded by former SMER-SSD politicians and headed by Peter Pellegrini, was in third place with roughly 15%. The other parties with a real chance of obtaining seats in the parliament by reaching over the electoral threshold were the far-right Republika party, the national-conservative

Slovak National Party (SNS), the three-coalition composed of the OĽANO party (Ordinary People and Independent Personalities), the Christian Union and the For the People party (Za Ľudí) as well as the We Are Family party (Sme Rodina), the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) and the Freedom and Solidarity party (SaS).

After three years of political turmoil

The early parliamentary elections were the result of the political instability of the past three years under the government coalition led by OĽANO party of Igor Matovič. Although his tenure was exceptionally challenging, as his government faced the Covid-19 pandemic and its implications, the war in Ukraine and related migration waves, followed by economic and energy crises, the ultimate collapse of his governing coalition was caused by internal ideological and personal conflicts amongst coalition party leaders. These tensions, coupled with the crises, led to a vote of no confidence and to several coalition partners and ministers resigning from their positions in the past months. This sequence of events culminated in the formation of an expert government in June, tasked with leading the country until early elections set for 30 September.

Like in many other European countries, Slovak society is deeply polarised, which is also reflected in a highly fragmented political spectrum. This reality is also mirrored in the coalition potential of individual parties, which will make post-election negotiations and the creation of a future government complicated. With the continued support of Fico's party and the growing popularity of Progressive Slovakia, which had been getting closer to the SMER-SDD party in the polls every week, an imaginary struggle between autocracy and democracy had crystallised in the weeks before the elections. This is why many considered these elections to be one of the most pivotal in the country's history.

Opinion polls, September 2023

Source: Štatistický úrad SR

Return of old suspects

Discontent with recent Slovak domestic and international policies, declining living standards due to persistent crises and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, coupled with disillusionment with the tumultuous government of the last three years, have led many in the Slovak population to lean towards the SMER-SSD party. This party was viewed as a beacon of stability and order reminiscent of the period prior to 2018. A strong position of the SMER-SSD party in the future coalition could hinder the cultivation of liberal democracy in the country. Many saw the revival of the SMER-SSD party as a resurgence of party members associated with corruption, clientelism and controversial political practices. Moreover, due to Fico's recent radicalisation, Slovakia might align more closely with the ideologies and practices being implemented by Hungary's Fidesz party or the PiS party in Poland.

These elections held significance not only at the national level but also in a regional and European context. Should Fico be given the opportunity to take up the role of prime minister role again, Slovakia might shift towards an EU-sceptic and anti-Western approach in its foreign policy. This change could lead Slovakia to significantly cut back or even halt its military support to Ukraine. Additionally, there could be a marked resistance to EU sanctions on Russia, emphasising Slovakia's move to build friendly relations with the Russian Federation.
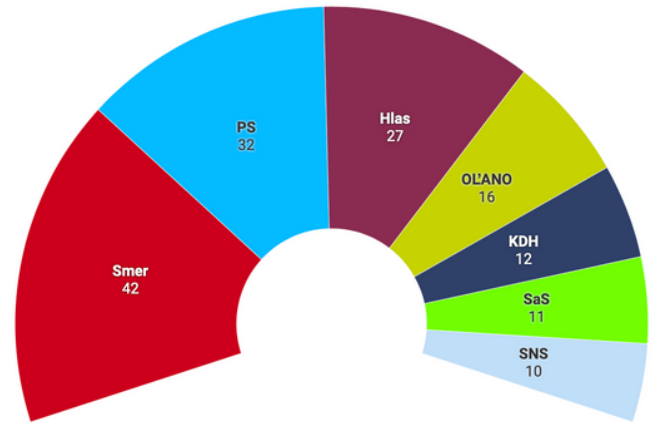
Fico is not only a key proponent and disseminator of pro-Russian narratives in the country, but he also does not hide his support for Orbán's style of neutrality.

Changing Central Europe

Despite the possible members of a future government coalition consistently questioning Slovakia's membership in the EU and NATO, the country would remain firmly anchored in Euro-Atlantic structures even after the election. However, the power dynamics in the region could undergo a transformation. Following the elections, Central Europe could witness a shift in dynamics, with Slovakia potentially joining the so-called neutral states with more impartial foreign policy, such as Hungary and Austria, if it discontinues its military aid to Ukraine. This might lead to a reshuffling of alliances within the currently dormant Visegrad Group.

Consequently, two distinct factions could form; one backing Ukraine with both military and humanitarian aid (Czech Republic, Poland) and the other refraining from supplying weapons while seeking friendly ties with Moscow (Hungary, Slovakia). This shift could further strain the cohesion of this once-prominent Central European cooperation format.

Post-election composition of parliament

Source: Štatistický úrad SR

POST-ELECTION SITUATION

The 2018 protests forgotten

Even 3 hours after polling stations closed, only 30% of votes had been counted; and the result, when it came, revealed the exit polls to once again be entirely misleading. Nonetheless, certain aspects of the election outcome were already clear four days after the elections. On the one hand, no party of the Hungarian minority will be represented in the future parliament; on the other, the neo-fascist, far-right Republika party failed to gain a seat in the National Council as they also did not succeed in passing the 5% threshold. The voter turnout was the second highest in the history of the Slovak Republic since 1993, with more than 68% of the population casting their vote.

In complete contrast to the exit polls published shortly after polling stations closed, which favoured Progressive Slovakia, the SMER-SSD party became the clear winner of the election. The result is seen as a political resurrection of the party and its members, some of whom are facing criminal charges on suspicion of corruption and other crimes. It was these findings that were the main reason for the fall of Fico's government five years ago, something that seems to have been forgotten by the Slovak population. The political style of a strong leader and the promise of stability and order offered by Robert Fico was a successful pre-election strategy leading to the victory of the SMER-SSD party.

Two weeks of negotiations

President Zuzana Čaputová entrusted the SMER-SSD party's leader Robert Fico with forming a government within fourteen days. With by far the strongest mandate (22.9%), Fico has the advantage of the first attempt to form a coalition. Whoever will form the future government, one thing is certain: without the participation of the HLAS party, which finished in third place (14.7%), it is impossible to create a future coalition.

If the HLAS party refuses to cooperate with both SMER-SSD and Progressive Slovakia, new snap elections would be announced. Although Peter Pellegrini, the leader of the HLAS party, publicly presents himself as open to cooperation with both parties, making the post-election negotiations even more exciting and dynamic, it is no secret that the members of the HLAS party would prefer a coalition with SMER-SSD than with Progressive Slovakia.

The decisive position of the HLAS party as kingmaker presents two possible scenarios for the formation of a future coalition government. These reflect the pre-election analysis described above, i.e. the scenario where SMER-SSD forms a coalition with HLAS and SNS, thereby achieving 79 seats and a majority in parliament (76 seats). The second scenario would occur if Fico was not able to reach a political agreement even after two weeks of negotiations. In such a case, Čaputová would entrust Michal Šimečka, leader of the liberal Progressive Slovakia party that landed in second place (17.96%), with the task of forming a government. In that case, a coalition of Progressive Slovakia together with HLAS, the Freedom and Solidarity party and the Christian Democratic Movement might be on the cards, achieving 82 seats in the National Council. Although Progressive Slovakia will most likely be in the opposition, it nonetheless recorded historically the best result of a liberal party in Slovakia and will be the second strongest entity in the parliament.
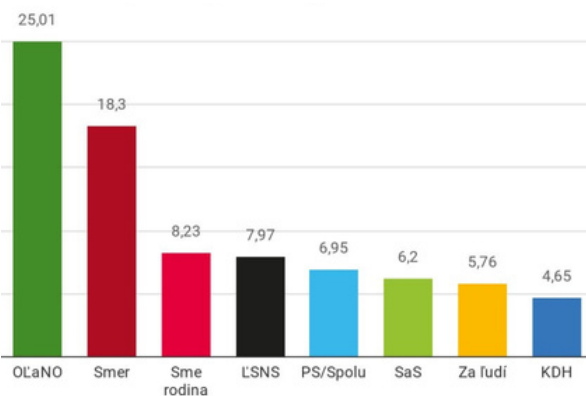
Deterioration of relations with Ukraine

Robert Fico campaigned as an experienced politician, focusing on the country's interests in international relations and emphasizing the stark choice between his party, SMER-SSD, and Progressive Slovakia, while positioning himself as a champion of "traditional values" to distinguish SMER-SSD from its liberal rivals.

One of the offers that Fico can make to Peter Pellegrini in exchange for being able to remain prime minister as the leader of the winning party is to make him speaker of the National Council (a position Pellegrini already had in 2014-2016) and support him in his presidential bid next spring.
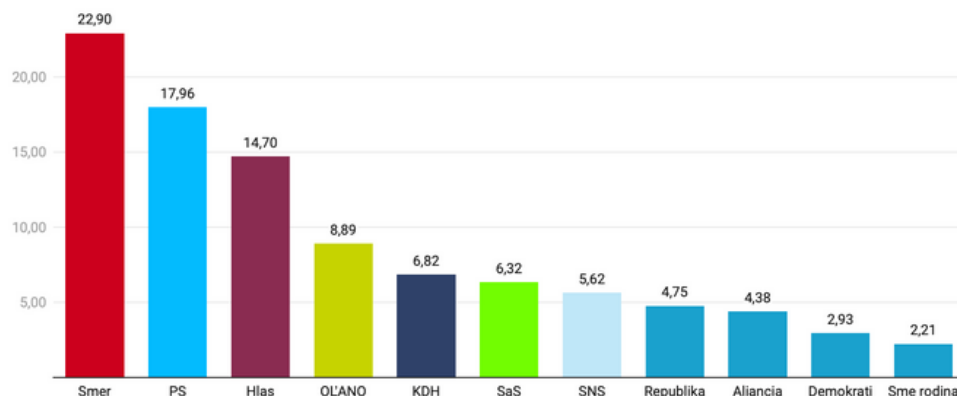
As described above, the new government's foreign policy will likely shift its approach towards the Russian war in Ukraine, aligning with Hungary's stance of seeking peace via an agreement with Russia, instead of supporting Kyiv militarily. This change may deteriorate Slovakia's relations with both Ukraine and the coalition of EU and NATO countries backing Ukraine. Despite campaign rhetoric, Fico will adopt a pragmatic approach in European and EU politics, as well as in Slovakia's ties with the US: a pro-Western foreign minister is expected to be appointed, signalling Slovakia's intent to maintain its foundational foreign policy priorities.

Robert Fico's Slovakia returns

In domestic politics, Fico's coalition will likely increase state intervention to address the cost-of-living crisis. The anticipated budget deficit, potentially among the EU's highest at 6.4% of GDP, might hinder the introduction of the promised social programmes. Both Fico and Pellegrini have already indicated plans to replace the police chief and scrutinize the criminal police and special prosecutor's office, entities instrumental in the investigation of the SMER-SSD party members since 2018. Given the history of these institutions in revealing political ties with organized crime and indicting numerous people associated with SMER-SSD and HLAS, many worry about the possible conflicts over the rule of law that might attract attention at the EU level.

Ultimately, while the last three years allowed for the materialization of a protest momentum in the wake of the government crisis of 2018, Igor Matovič's rule (2020-2023) will likely go down in history as a short break in the otherwise solid leadership of Robert Fico in Slovakia.

Election results 2020

Source: Štatistický úrad SR

Election results 2023

Source: Štatistický úrad SR

The running political entities, their main candidates and political orientations

Political entity	Main candidate	Political ideology	European party
Direction (SMER-SSD)	Robert Fico	Social democracy, left-wing populism	S&D
Progressive Slovakia (PS)	Michal Šimečka	Social liberalism	RENEW
Voice (HLAS-sociálna demokracia)	Peter Pellegrini	Social democracy	S&D
Republic (Republika)	Milan Uhrík	Far-right, neo-fascism	NI
OĽaNO & For the People & Christian Union	Igor Matovič, Veronika Remišová, Anna Záborská	Conservatism	EPP
Slovak National Party (SNS)	Andrej Danko	National conservatism	-
Christian Democratic Movement (KDH)	Milan Majerský	Christian democracy, social conservatism	EPP
We Are Family (Sme Rodina)	Boris Kollár	National conservatism, right-wing populism	ID

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In the framework of a panel discussion series, the **Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe** analyzes parliamentary elections in the countries of Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe. The event is jointly organised with the Political Academy of the Austrian People's Party and the Karl-Renner-Institut.