

Slovakia After The Elections

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After three years of internal chaos and nine months of anti-democratic uncertainty, it seems that the future path of the Slovak Republic is now clear. Although many people in Brussels and Washington hoped the country would remain on the road of progressive liberalism. This has not been the case. Unquestionably, they must surely be disappointed. Slovakia has made a choice, and in doing so, the population has put its own national interest first. Although it is not yet clear what composition the next government will take, it seems inevitable that patriotism will play a more crucial role than compliance with external actors or needs.

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Twenty-four hours after the elections last Saturday, the return of three-time prime minister Robert Fico seems probable. According to the election results, he can establish a stable, three-party government with his former colleagues and the right-wing Slovak National Party, which is ideologically close to them. There is still a mathematical chance of forming a new government bypassing the SMER party; however, it would only be achieved through a Christian-liberal compromise and by overriding everything the parties had previously announced or promised.

How did we get here?

The previous parliamentary elections in Slovakia were held on 29 February 2020. To the surprise of many, by achieving more than 25 percent of all votes cast, it was won by the party OĽANO (Ordinary People and Independent Personalities), and the former political troll, Igor Matovič, could form a government and lead the country.¹ During the election campaign, he had promised to eradicate corruption. Although he achieved partial success in doing so, posterity will not remember him for untangling the entanglement of organized crime in high politics. Matovič created a four-party coalition, which, despite its constitutional majority, struggled with constant internal problems. Uncomfortably, he was usually at the center of these. As Prime Minister, he even survived the scandal that his diploma, which he had achieved as a university student in Bratislava more than two decades earlier, was plagiarized.² Although such falsification is considered a cardinal sin both in the academic world and in most EU countries' public life, he did not resign. His fall, however, was just a matter of time. Ironically, the final nail in the prime minister's coffin was for something he might have been praised for in other countries. In early 2021, when the COVID-19 virus was raging, and no available Western vaccines were on the market, with the help of Hungarian FM Péter Szijjártó, he secretly traveled to Moscow and managed to procure a relatively large number (200 thousand pieces) of the Russian-made Sputnik-V serum.³ Some of his liberal coalition partners could not forgive him for this action, forcing him to step down.

To keep the coalition alive, Matovič succumbed to the pressure and resigned. While moving to the background, he still tried to stay in power. He considered the conflict surrounding his personality resolved by changing positions with his party partner, Minister of Finance Eduard Heger. From 1 April 2021, Heger became the Prime Minister of Slovakia, while Matovič continued as Minister of Finance.⁴ Slovakia's Minister of Economy meanwhile remained Matovic's long-time opponent, the president of the SAS party (Freedom and Solidarity) Richard Sulík. Everyone remembered that Sulík had already overthrown a coalition government before.⁵ It was only a matter of time before history repeated itself. On 13 September 2022, Richard Sulík and his SAS comrades left the government. On 1 December 2022, they announced the submission of a motion of no confidence in the government to the National Council.⁶ Heger tried to save his bureau, to no avail. At the vote of no confidence in Heger's government on 15 December 2022, 78 of the 102 present (out of 150) voted in favor; thus, the proposal was accepted, and the government failed.⁷ The next day, President Čaputová dismissed the government and, at the same time, temporarily entrusted it with the further implementation of its mandate to a limited extent until further notice. Heger stayed in power. While the opposition demanded early elections as soon as possible, the President, who has strong ties to the liberal party PS (Progressive Slovakia), first wanted to hold elections in the first half of the year but later began to buy time and finally announced them only to the end of September.⁸ Although there was no reason for more than nine months to pass between the fall of the government and eventual elections, Čaputová still considered this delay acceptable. According to her critics, this is how she tried to help progressive forces to gain strength. Other voices believe that the president and her Western allies did not dare to put Ukraine's support at risk by giving an opposition party a chance to win the election. It is important to note that Heger's government handed over⁹ thirteen Mig-29 fighter jets to its Eastern neighbor. Some lawyers criticized the

decision, saying that the caretaker government did not have the right to enter into international agreements according to the constitution. So, as commissioned PM, Heger remained in office but without a majority in Parliament. However, internal tensions did not subside, and as a result, several ministers resigned. Subsequently, on 7 May 2023, Heger asked the president to revoke his authority to run the government.¹⁰ The President complied with the request and appointed a caretaker technocratic government headed by the National Bank of Slovakia vice-governor Ľudovít Ódor. Although many questioned the democratic nature of the President's decision, we are still discussing a historic event since it was the first time an ethnic Hungarian was appointed the Slovak prime minister. At the time of writing, the technocratic government is still leading the country, although the elections have already occurred. Moreover, before the elections, the bookmakers considered it most likely that Ódor would be prime minister on the first of November. There is little chance of that today.

The September Elections

Although the parliamentary election on 30 September 2023 did not bring any significant differences in the ranking of the main parties, there is reason to be surprised when looking at the proportion of votes. Although the polls during the last months usually forecasted Robert Fico's party, SMER – Slovenská sociálna demokracia (Direction – Slovak Social Democracy), as the winner, shortly before the elections, there were also polling institutes predicting that the liberal Progressive Slovakia might be able to form a government. Moreover, the exit poll also supported the latter opinion. Today, we know that Fico won the race with an advantage of 4.99 percentage points. Still, his once ally, former Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini, decides whether he qualifies as the real champion.

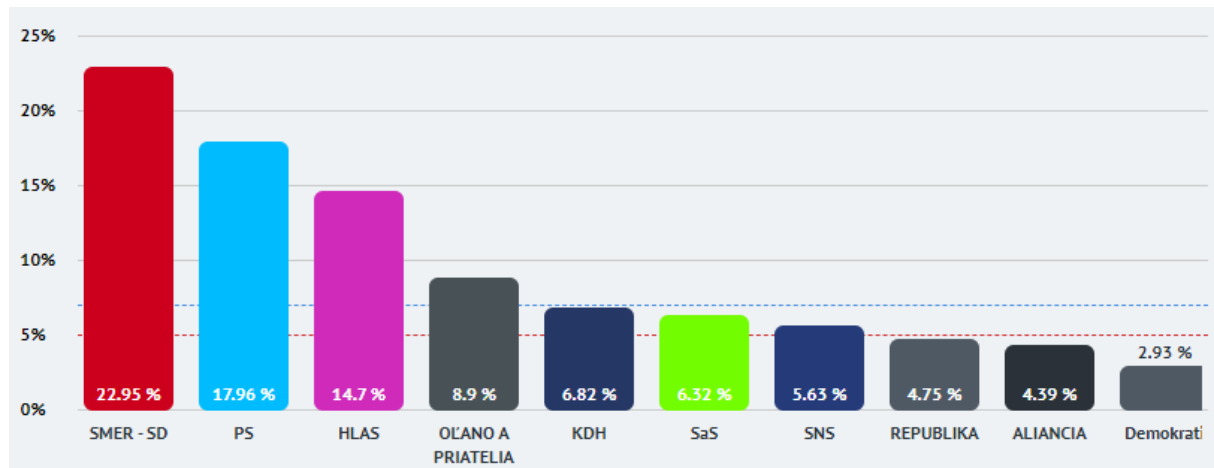


Figure 1: Final election results. Source: Aktuality¹¹

With a voter turnout of 68.51 percent, the National Council of the Slovak Republic will consist of seven parties. They are the ones who were able to meet the five percent parliamentary threshold. Citizens did not give a vote of confidence to several key politicians of the past three years. Former PM Eduard Heger, Speaker of the House Boris Kollár, and Defence Minister Jaroslav Nad' will remain outside the new parliament. Fico's left-wing party *SMER - SSD* reached 22.95 percent, equivalent to 42 seats in the 150-member parliament. Liberal party, *Progressive Slovakia*, finished in second place but fell short of pollsters' expectations in terms of vote share. With their 17.96 percent result, they will occupy 32 legislative seats. Robert Fico's former ally, Peter Pellegrini's party, *Hlas-Social Democracy*, took third place, collecting 14.70 percent of the votes, i.e., 27 parliamentary seats. The winner of the previous elections, *OLANO a priatel'ia* (Ordinary People and Independent Personalities and Friends), will also enter the parliament with their 8.90 percent results (16 seats). The long-established KDH (Christian Democratic Movement) will obtain 12 seats thanks to their 6.82 percent result. The liberal SAS (Freedom and Solidarity) and the radical SNS (Slovak National Party) also made it to parliament. The former will occupy eleven seats (6.32%) and the latter ten seats (5.63%) in the National Council.

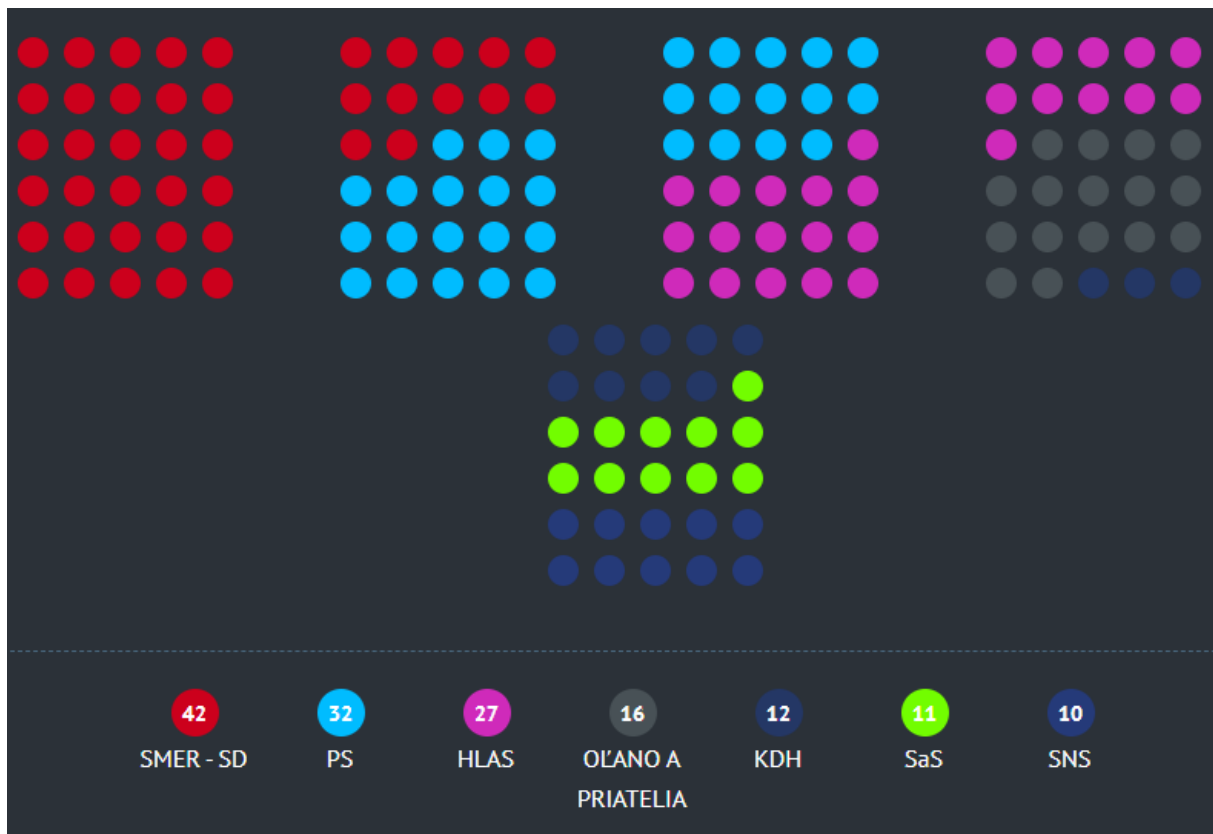


Figure 2: The division of the 150-member Slovak National Council according to parliamentary parties. Source: Aktuality¹²

Who Will Form a Government?

The government formation negotiations have already started. Based on customary law, President Zuzana Čaputová appointed the winner of the elections, Robert Fico, to form a government within the next two weeks. Fico is in a better position than was expected based on opinion polls since, with the help of his former ally, Peter Pellegrini, he can even choose whether to ask the KDH or the SNS party as a third government actor. Furthermore, the coalition could obtain a constitutional majority if a four-party government is formed. In the hypothetical case, Pellegrini was not to side with his former party partner; mathematically, a government could still be created, but at the same time, it would require deals hard to imagine, and stability, which Slovakia had longed for, would be under constant jeopardy. In this case, despite profound worldview differences, a Christian-liberal coalition needed to be formed backed by the party Hlas. If not

that, then there is an even more unlikely scenario where the two most antagonistic figures of Slovak politics, former PM Igor Matovič and his then Minister of Finance Richard Sulík, who had already brought down two governments, should agree on cooperation and be able to do so in practice. Given the history of the two, it seems impossible. Moreover, Matovič has already announced that he will join the opposition in the following term.

Public opinion polls came to light not long before the elections, according to which Peter Pellegrini would probably be able to participate in next year's presidential election. Although it is not known whether he has presidential ambitions, considering that Zuzana Čaputová will not be standing, it is conceivable that he will receive the position of presidential candidate in exchange for supporting Fico in forming a government.

Hungarians Lost Again

Although the Hungarian party organized on the ethnic principle, the Aliancia – Szövetség (Alliance), achieved a better result than three years prior, it still did not manage to enter the parliament. While 112,662 people voted for the party in February 2020¹³, this number increased to 130,183 in September 2023.¹⁴ It has been seen for years that the five percent threshold makes it impossible for a political actor organized on an ethnic basis to enter parliament. However, the verge of entering the National Council is not expected to be lowered anytime soon. The future political path of the Hungarian community in Slovakia is uncertain for the time being. There are voices according to which this election proved once and for all that getting organized based on ethnicity no longer gives a realistic chance of becoming included in decision-making. On the other hand, if the work started earlier will continue in the next four years, a later successful performance cannot be ruled out.

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