

Presidential elections in  
Slovakia – evaluation and  
prospects

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# Presidential elections in Slovakia – evaluation and prospects

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*After a turbulent period in Slovak domestic politics, the first round of presidential election was held on 23 March 2024 when none of the candidates obtained more than 50 percent of the votes which – according to Slovak regulation – has to be obtained by a candidate, otherwise a second round has to be held. Ivan Korčok, former Minister of Foreign and European Affairs won this first round with 42.51 percent of the votes. The second-best result was achieved by Peter Pellegrini, the President of the Slovak Parliament and the second-largest government party, Hlas-SD, with 37.02 percent. The second round of elections was held on 6 April and it ended with the victory of Pellegrini who will take over the duties of Head of State from Zuzana Čaputová on 15 June. Pellegrini received 53.12%, while Korčok 46.88% of the votes. Compared to the first round of the elections, in the second round, the voter turnout was almost ten percent higher (61.14%).*

**Keywords:** *presidential election, 2024, Slovakia, Peter Pellegrini, Zuzana Čaputová, Hlas-SD party, Robert Fico*

## Introduction

In Slovakia, similarly to many other countries, the President of the Republic is directly elected for five years; therefore, the presidential elections took place in March-April 2024 in the country. According to the Slovak regulation, if none of the candidates obtains at least half of the votes of the eligible voters in the first round of presidential elections, a second round has to be organized. In the second round, it is no longer necessary to obtain 50 percent of votes, but the votes of the majority of voters are sufficient.<sup>1</sup> Regarding the powers of the Head of State, he/she plays a similar role in the Slovak political system as, for example, in Hungary, but by being directly elected, he/she more often appears as a counterweight to the incumbent government in domestic politics. However, since the presidential veto is also similar to the Hungarian, the role of the Head of State is more symbolic.

In the first round of the presidential election, held on 23 March, it was possible to vote for nine candidates; the voter turnout was 51.9 percent, similar to the previous few presidential elections, where the turnout was between 40 and 50 percent. According to the data of the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (SÚSR), the participation rate was slightly higher in cities (53.1 percent) and lower in rural settlements (50.4 percent) than it has been the previous average.<sup>2</sup>

**Ivan Korčok**, former Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of Slovakia from 2020 to 2022, running as an independent candidate, won the first round of the elections with 42.51 percent of the votes. The second-best result was achieved by **Peter Pellegrini**, the President of the Slovak Parliament and the second largest government party, Hlas-SD (Voice – Social Democracy), who won 37.02 percent of the votes. As far as none of the candidates won the absolute majority in the first round, two weeks later, on April 6, another round has taken place.

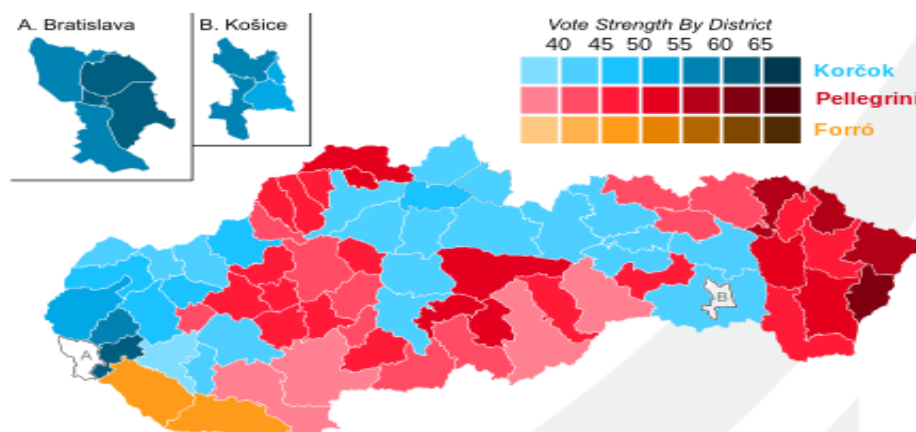
In the first round, four others won more than one percent of votes. Third place went to Stefan Harabín, former President of the Supreme Court (11.7 percent), and fourth place to Krisztián Forró, President and presidential candidate of the Hungarian party in Slovakia, the Magyar Szövetség (Hungarian Alliance; 2.9 percent). He was followed by former Prime Minister Igor Matovič (2.1 percent) and former Minister of Foreign Affairs Ján Kubiš (2 percent).

After winning the first round, Ivan Korčok highlighted that in the second round, he aims to speak more intensively to the entire political spectrum of the electorate. Korčok, being an Atlanticist, emphasized the importance of stronger support for Ukraine. During his foreign ministry, he was also famous for his anti-Hungarian statements. He aimed to reach those voters

who did not agree with the current government’s political lines. Peter Pellegrini described his promotion to the second round as a success, noting that they had achieved their primary goal. He pointed out that the results of the first round proved that the majority of voters do not want the country to have a liberal-progressive president, but a Head of State who stands up for the protection of national interests and does not drag the country into the war in Ukraine but aims to promote peace.<sup>3</sup>

By the customs of recent years, a Hungarian candidate also took part in the presidential election as a candidate, this time *Krisztián Forró, President of the Hungarian Alliance (Magyar Szövetség)*. The nomination of Hungarian candidates for the Slovak presidential election is not motivated primarily by the reality of winning the election but by raising the attention of the Slovak public to issues affecting the Hungarian community. For instance, in 2014, the Party of the Hungarian Community candidate, Gyula Bárdos, obtained 5.1% of the votes. Although, he was far from entering the second round, he implemented an extremely successful campaign that thematized the issues crucial for the Hungarian community and mobilized the Hungarian voting camp.<sup>4</sup> Forró, as highlighted above, received 2.9 percent of votes in the first round.

In his first reaction to the results, he emphasized that the outcome did not reflect their expectations, they could not mobilize the Hungarian community in certain districts, but the party has to learn from the outcomes. He also stressed that in spite of the results, the Hungarian community represented itself on the election, Hungarians “showed themselves”. Forró pointed out that during the next period, the party will focus on the European Parliament election, so that the Alliance could achieve the best results to regain representation in the European Parliament.<sup>5</sup>



*Figure 1: Results of the first round of elections by districts. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2024\\_Slovak\\_presidential\\_election#/media/File:2024\\_Slovak\\_presidential\\_election\\_-\\_Vote\\_Strength.svg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2024_Slovak_presidential_election#/media/File:2024_Slovak_presidential_election_-_Vote_Strength.svg)*

## The second round of presidential elections

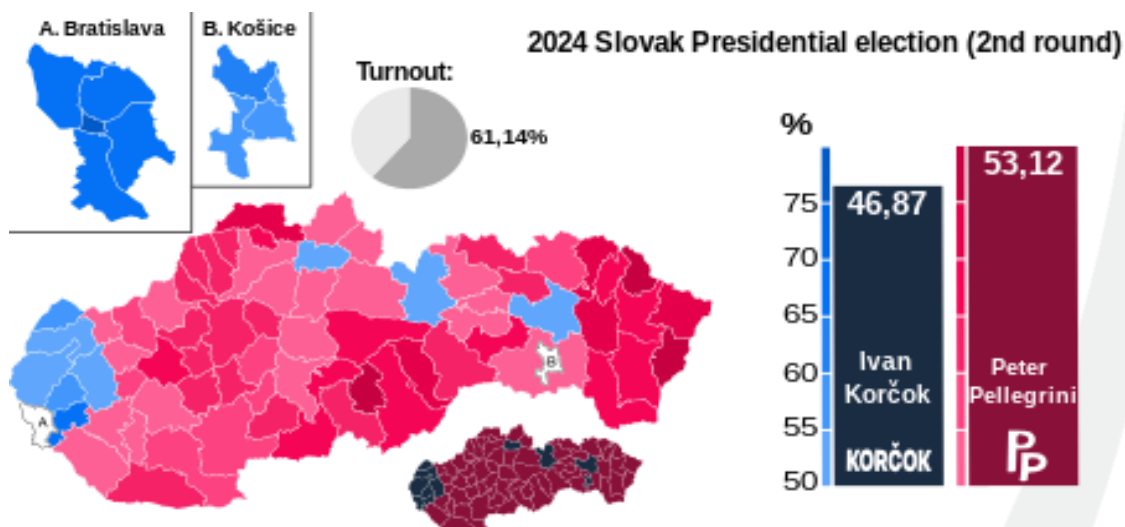
The public opinion polls before the election predicted that the second round would be highly competitive. Ivan Korčok won the first round with a more significant than expected advantage of 5.5%; however, Peter Pellegrini was supported by several former presidential candidates. Therefore, the question in the second round was which candidate will be able to mobilize more voters.

The mobilization efforts of Pellegrini were more successful, and finally, he won the second round of elections, held on 6 April. *Pellegrini received 53.12%, while Ivan Korčok 46.88% of the votes*, and compared to the first round, in the second round, the voter turnout was almost ten percent higher (61.14%).<sup>6</sup> This result is outstanding in Slovakia since in 2019, it was only 41.7% and in 2014, only 50.4% in the second round of elections. Pellegrini will take over the duties of Head of State from Zuzana Čaputová on 15 June.

In general, in the second round, more than 570,000 people voted for Pellegrini than in the first round, which means that he could retain his first-round supporters and collect the majority of the support of citizens who voted for another candidate in the first round. He also received the support of voters who did not attend the ballot boxes in the first round. Pellegrini also triumphed in the districts with a Hungarian majority despite previously Korčok winning in several southern districts. In the second round, the participation in the southern, Hungarian-populated areas of the country was slightly higher. However, participation rates in these districts were still significantly lower than the national average. Korčok won in Bratislava, in Košice and around Bratislava. However, in most of the districts in rural Slovakia won Pellegrini that was more than enough for the victory.

Pellegrini was the Prime Minister of Slovakia from 2018 to 2020, served as Minister of Health from December 2019 to March 2020, was deputy Prime Minister (2016–2018) and Minister for Education and Science (2014). He spent two years as Speaker of the National Council between 2014-2016. Previously, he was a member of the Smer-SD (Direction – Social Democracy) party, but after the party lost the parliamentary election in 2020, he left it and co-founded and led the Hlas-SD (Voice – Social Democracy) party. He led the public opinion polls until the beginning of 2023, but in the early elections on 30 September 2023, the party could only get the third most votes, and Hlas-SD became the second-largest party in the Fico-led government coalition. Since September 2023 until now he served as the Speaker of the National Council.

In his speech after the victory, Pellegrini thanked his voters for their trust, explicitly highlighting the support of minorities living in Slovakia. He appreciates their vote and aims to protect and defend their interests in the long run. He also repeated the essential message of his campaign: “I will do everything to ensure that Slovakia is on the side of peace, not war“, declaring that his victory was a satisfaction for the attacks during the campaign. At the same time, he underlined that, despite his election as a Head of State, the governing coalition will remain strong, and his party will remain a member. Regarding his appointment, he pointed out that he will support the government in fulfilling his program. At the same time, he stressed that he will not be an uncritical admirer of the government from which he came and promised to always be on Slovakia's side.<sup>7</sup>



*Figure 2: Results of the second round of elections by districts. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2024\\_Slovak\\_presidential\\_election#/media/File:2024\\_Slovak\\_Presidential\\_election\\_2nd\\_round.svg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2024_Slovak_presidential_election#/media/File:2024_Slovak_Presidential_election_2nd_round.svg)*

### Evaluation of the period of Head of State Zuzana Čaputová

The mandate of the current President, Zuzana Čaputová, expires on 15 June 2024. Zuzana Čaputová took office in 2019 in a period of domestic political upheaval. The election of the Head of State took place about a year after the 2018 murder of a journalist, which failed several actors of the then prevailing Smer-SD Party (Direction-Social Democracy), including Prime Minister Robert Fico and Minister of Interior Robert Kaliňák. In Slovakia, a wave of demonstrations has started, and the presidential election of 2019 was also about whether a new opposition president could limit the power of the Smer-SD mafia government.

The period between 2020 and 2023 can be characterized as a period of permanent government crisis in Slovakia; therefore, during her term in office, Čaputová was more involved in party politics than usual by solving multiple government crises by appointing an expert government, for which she assumed political responsibility.<sup>8</sup>

From 2020, the coalition partners not only had to face the challenges caused by the pandemic, economic crisis, inflation, energy crisis and the Russian aggression against Ukraine but also had to fight internal conflicts with each other constantly. The possibility of a coalition crisis was coded into the coalition government initially. The first vote of confidence was held three months after the new government took office due to the plagiarism scandal of the Speaker of the Parliament, Boris Kollár. It turned out that more than half of his master's thesis was plagiarism. Kollár did not resign from his position; he only promised not to use his title during his political career. In the autumn of 2020, the management of the pandemic during COVID-19 collapsed, which also showed the tensions of the coalition. This was most evident in the debates between Prime Minister Igor Matovič (Simple People and Independent Personalities, OĽaNO) and Minister of Economy Richard Sulík (Freedom and Solidarity, SaS). In March 2021, SaS ministers also resigned from their positions in the government. This situation was resolved by replacing Igor Matovič with then Minister of Finance Eduard Heger, so the SaS ministers eventually returned to the government.

The next major coalition crisis peaked in September 2022, as a result of which the SaS party left the government again, but this time their return was not solved. The Heger government led a minority in September, which resulted in several political challenges that Prime Minister Heger could not handle. In December 2022, the Slovak legislature withdrew trust from the government, and it became clear that early elections were inevitable for the country's viability. To ensure the work of the government, the Heger government remained the executive cabinet in the country. Still, the political debates continued, the coalition could not govern, and finally, Heger resigned from his post. Subsequently, Čaputová appointed a government of experts. The main problem with this government stemmed from its political legitimacy, as it was appointed by the Head of State and not due to elections and the bargaining of the political parties. However, it should also be emphasized that only a few other political solutions were available.<sup>9</sup>

In May 2023, Čaputová appointed a caretaker government in Slovakia on 15 May 2023, after Prime Minister Eduard Heger submitted his resignation following the long-term crisis of the coalition. The caretaker government led the country until the government took office after the



early elections at the end of September, led by Lajos Ódor, Slovakia's first Hungarian Prime Minister, and two other ministers of Hungarian nationality took part in the board of officials. The list of names of the expert government was determined jointly by Čaputová and Ódor.

On 30 September 2023, the early elections resulted in the victory of the populist-social democratic SMER-SD led by **Robert Fico** (with 22.94 percent of the votes). The second place was won by the Progressive Slovakia (17.96 percent) and the third by Hlas-SD (14.7 percent) led by Peter Pellegrini. The Hungarian Alliance, the ethnic Hungarian party of Hungarians in Slovakia, did not enter the Parliament (4.38 percent of votes).<sup>10</sup>

Before the elections, in June 2023, Čaputová announced that she will not run the following spring's elections for the Head of State again. Explaining her decision, she said that the quality of fulfilling the duties of the Head of State is greatly affected by whether someone has enough power to do so, and she did not feel she had this power any more. She also pointed out personal and family reasons for her decision. Čaputová also emphasized that the four years since she took office was the most challenging period of her life, as the country was hit first by the Covid pandemic, inflation, the war in Ukraine and the energy crisis.<sup>11</sup> At the time of her mandate, five governments were in office.

In case Čaputová would run the presidential election, she probably could not be defeated, as she is the most popular politician and the most trusted President of Slovakia since taking office, and according to IPSOS, she is a popular politician with a confidence index of 42.9%. According to this, the confidence in the Head of State peaked in September 2020, when 66 percent of the population trusted him.<sup>12</sup> Subsequently, the state's confidence index declined substantially as the COVID-19 pandemic progressed. However, her international recognition is also proven because her name has already been mentioned among potential NATO Secretary-General candidates. It should also be noted that the southern Hungarian districts also contributed to the victory of Čaputová in 2019. The last five years have convincingly proved that she did not go beyond the empty gestures towards the Hungarian community and that the protection of the rights of the Hungarian community in Slovakia did not improve.

### Conclusion - prospects with Pellegrini as a Head of State

Regarding the next period, due to Pellegrini's victory, he has to resign as a chairman of the Hlas-SD party and his successor as a Speaker of the Parliament has to be elected. The new President also affects the country's foreign policy orientation; however, as already emphasized,



the Constitution gives the Head of State more symbolic than actual political power. Therefore, the shaper of the Slovak foreign policy will predominantly be the Slovak government led by Robert Fico, and Pellegrini, as President, will instead be the implementer of their policy strategies. In the past, Pellegrini represented the "Western" political values and lines in the Smer-SD party. Thus, it is likely that he will continue to support these policies and objectives as Head of State.

He will likely maintain good relations with Hungary and the Hungarian government, considering that not only the Hungarian Alliance party in Slovakia but also the Government of Hungary assured him of their support during the second round of his campaign.<sup>13</sup>

It has to be noted as well that Prime Minister Robert Fico won twice with the election of Pellegrini: not only will a candidate campaigning with his messages take the place of the liberal Čaputová in the position of the President of the Republic, who supports him in his program, but the current result may essentially involve the absorption of Hlas party which left Smer party in 2020. Although the Hlas party, formed by Pellegrini, will continue to exist, with the departure of its founder and President, the leadership has to be handed over to someone else, and its future cannot be predicted yet. Therefore, it is questionable to what extent the Hlas will be able to distinguish itself from Smer, and it may occur that Fico's party can once again dominate the left wing of Slovak politics. Therefore, Pellegrini's victory cemented Fico's grip on power by giving him and his allies control of central strategic posts since Slovakia's President picks the Prime Minister after parliamentary elections, swears in the new government and appoints constitutional court judges. In addition, the President can veto laws, though Parliament can override the veto with a simple majority, and also has the right to pardon convicts.

Critics point out that Slovakia, under Fico, is highly likely to abandon its pro-Western course and follow Hungary's direction under its populist Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán. This worry is based on the experience that the new Slovak government last year immediately halted any arms deliveries to Ukraine, which was followed by protests in Slovakia against Fico's pro-Russian and other policies, including plans to amend the penal code and take control of the public media. Slovakia had been one of Ukraine's staunchest allies before Fico came to power in October 2023 on a pledge to halt supplies of Slovak Army military stocks to Kyiv. Fico also called for an end to Western military support for Ukraine, an immediate ceasefire, and peace talks with Moscow. He argued several times that President Vladimir Putin had been unfairly demonised and thinks that admitting Ukraine to NATO would mark the beginning of a third world war.<sup>14</sup>

Pellegrini, as an ally of Fico, shares the PM's dovish attitude towards Russia, and his campaign echoed some of that Moscow-friendly rhetoric, accusing his opponent Korčok in the first round of being a warmonger who would send Slovak soldiers to fight in Ukraine. With Pellegrini replacing Čaputová, Ukraine has now definitively lost a voice of support in an EU and NATO capital. Regarding other issues, only the future will tell whether the next five years of Pellegrini will be similar to Čaputová's period of government crises or a more peaceful era in the domestic politics of Slovakia. At the same time, considering international issues and actions, Pellegrini can probably count on eventful and stirring years and many issues to be resolved in the long run.

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