

## Parliamentary elections in Slovakia: Bratislava closer to Moscow?

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### Abstract

Summary of the pre-election period and elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic, which took place on 30 September 2023. As a result, there have been changes in the Slovak political scene, as well as opportunities to create a new parliamentary majority.

**Keywords:** Slovakia, parliamentary elections, National Council, Robert Fico, *Smer*, *Progressívne Slovensko*

### Wybory parlamentarne w Słowacji: Bratysława bliżej Moskwy?

#### Streszczenie

Podsumowanie okresu przedwyborczego i wyborów do Rady Narodowej Republiki Słowacji, które odbyły się 30 września 2023 roku. W ich wyniku doszło do zmian na słowackiej scenie politycznej, a także zarysowały się możliwości stworzenia nowej większości parlamentarnej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Słowacja, wybory parlamentarne, Rada Narodowa, Robert Fico, *Smer*, *Progressívne Slovensko*

On September 30th, 2023, parliamentary elections for the National Council of the Slovak Republic were held. Twenty-five parties or political coalitions participated, but only 7 of them received enough votes to enter the parliament. The Slovak political scene has been characterised by great pluralism and fragmentation for years.

### Pre-election political sine wave

The party *Direction – Social Democracy* (sl. *Smer-SD*), led by former Prime Minister Robert Fico, has been leading in polls measuring support for political parties since March 2023. The increase in the popularity of this group resulted from several aspects. First

of all, there was a permanent political crisis within the (centre-)right coalition, which emerged a few months after the parliamentary elections in 2020. As a result, frequent changes within the government occurred, and even the collapse of the government coalition happened. Meanwhile, there was a COVID-19 pandemic, and immediately after its weakening, Russia–Ukraine conflict began. In such troubled times, personal conflicts were the biggest problem for Slovak politicians in the government. Ultimately, the constitution was changed to allow early elections, and Slovakia was able to form its first technocratic government. During this turmoil, Robert Fico began to actively advocate a pro-Russian foreign policy, which he claimed was a response to the problems of Slovak society. Thanks to his cooperation with Moscow, the promise of a drop in electricity prices appealed to Slovaks. He also promised not to send "a single bullet" to defend Ukraine. He also used extremely aggressive language, attacking, among others, President Zuzana Čaputová and her children. In this aspect, he was joined by politicians from other parties, including the right-wing ones.

The second political force was *Progressive Slovakia* (sl. *Progresívne Slovensko*, PS), led by Michal Šimečka, who is the President's party leader. There is no doubt that this party ran the most substantive campaign (the rest of the groups debated for a long time about the shooting of bears), although pro-European liberals were under attack by all other groups. The popularity of the party was boosted by strong public support for the president, the most popular political figure in the country. It is worth adding that in the last two polls before the 2023 parliamentary elections, the party advanced to the lead. In 2020, however, the party did not cross the electoral threshold for the coalition.

Stable third place was held by *Voice* (sl. *Hlas*) – a breakaway from *Smer*, which left the party after the great corruption crisis and the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová. The face of the party is also former Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini. The group is more Euro-enthusiastic than *Smer*, but it manoeuvres in its politics.

The other parties fought to get into parliament, and it was not clear if they would succeed. *Freedom and Solidarity* (sl. *Sloboda a Solidarita*, SASKA) fought to remain in the National Council. Their participation in the center-right coalition turned out to be a burden. The party's idea to solve the bad PR problem was rebranding – a change of acronym for SASKA and a new colour identification. It is worth noting that the group has been strongly emphasising social issues, not only economic ones, lately. The party advocated LGBTQI rights, and the issue of legalising same-sex relationships was related to freedom and tax justice.

The far-right and pro-Russian *Slovak National Party* (sl. *Slovenská Národná Strana*, SNS) saw a relative increase in support, although it was not in parliament after the 2020 elections. As a result of internal conflicts, the neo-Nazi faction disintegrated, claiming the heritage of the 1st Slovak Republic and the Marian Kotleba movement, and a large part of its activists joined the existing but marginal party *Republic* (sl. *Republika*), which could expect 8% support in the polls.

*Christian Democratic Movement* (sl. *Kresťanskodemokratické Hnutie*, KDH) returned to the political mainstream. Christian democrats, like the SNS, were out of the parliament

as a result of the recent elections. The winners of the previous elections, *Ordinary People and Independent Personalities* (sl. *Obyčajní Ľudia a Nezávislé Osobnosti*, OĽaNO), who competed in the coalition as *OĽaNO a Priatelía* were not certain of their success. It was not clear whether they would cross the electoral threshold.

## Tatra political landscape after the elections

Despite the exit polls, which showed a more or less decisive victory for *Progresívne Slovensko*, *Smer* eventually won the election. Pro-European liberals secured the second place, and the podium was completed by *Hlas*. No major surprises occurred as *Slovenská Národná Strana* and Christian democrats from KDH returned to the parliament. Despite the initial uncertainty, the National Council also included *OĽaNO a Priatelía* and SASKA.

The failure of *Republika* to surpass the electoral threshold, not expected by almost any survey, was the biggest surprise of the elections. The votes of the pro-Russian party were probably transferred to *Smer* on the final stretch. There is also no room in the National Council for the party *We are a Family* (sl. *Sme Rodina*), whose leader, Boris Kollár, a member of the center-right coalition government and the chairman of the National Council, admitted to bullying his girlfriend. An important element is that the politician wanted to defend "normal Slovakia" while having 12 children with 10 women.

Electoral geography pointed to *Smer's* dominance in most of the country, especially in the east. In the west (mainly in Bratislava) and in large cities, PS was more popular. Christian democrats won in two high-altitude counties in the north of the country; in the previous elections, their residents voted against *Smer*. An attempt to create a government is currently underway – President Čaputová entrusted this mission (in accordance with the constitution) to the winner of the election, Robert Fico. The head of state, however, was also in talks with leaders of other groups in order to try to create an alternative majority in parliament. The new parliamentary majority depends on *Hlas*, but this party eventually decided to join the government with populist *Smer* and the far-right-wing SNS.

As a result of the social democrats' decisions, the *Party of European Socialists* and the *Socialists & Democrats Group* at the European Parliament decided to suspend members of both parties. Political commentators are worried about the rule of law and democracy under the new government. Robert Fico has been increasingly moving away from the ideals of European social democracy in recent years.

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