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Notes on Recent Elections

The parliamentary election in Slovakia, June 2006

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The parliamentary election was held on 17 June, 2006. For the first time since 1920, a left party won in free and fair elections; and for the first time since the end of communism, the new government is dominated by the left. Direction–Social Democracy (*Smer-Sociálna demokracia*, SMER) emerged as the dominant party, controlling key positions in the executive and the parliament. However, SMER will have to deal with two junior coalition partners with a controversial past and dubious reputations, and to face an experienced centre-right parliamentary opposition. The election was unusual because, again for the first time, socio-economic themes were prominent in the electoral campaign. Even so, other issues, especially nationalism, remained crucial for a significant portion of the electorate.

1. Background

The 2002 election resulted in a four-party centre-right government led by Mikuláš Dzurinda, which initially controlled 78 of the 150 seats in Slovakia's unicameral legislature, the National Council (*Národná rada*). With the defection of several deputies from the Prime Minister's Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (*Slovenská demokratická a kresťanská únia*, SDKÚ) and the Alliance of the New Citizen (*Aliancia nového občana*, ANO), one of its coalition partners, the government lost its parliamentary majority in late 2003. A few months after the 2002 elections, the

opposition also fragmented, when eleven parliamentarians left the parliamentary faction of the Peoples' Party-Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (*Ľudová strana-Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko*, HZDS). Hence, the government was able to carry out its liberal economic reforms only due to the support of several 'independent' parliamentarians occupying a grey zone between the government and the opposition.

In summer 2005 ANO disintegrated in a dispute about its leadership style, and the party was formally expelled from the coalition government. The new equilibrium lasted only until February 2006, when the Christian Democratic Movement (*Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie*, KDH) officially left the government, quoting the Prime Minister's unwillingness to submit to the cabinet a draft of the so-called 'Vatican treaty'. The treaty, a political priority for the Christian Democrats, was to regulate the right of citizens in some professions to refuse activities that conflicted with their religious beliefs (such as carrying out abortions or teaching sex education). Following KDH's decision, the parliament agreed to hold an early election in June 2006, three months before the scheduled election.

2. Electoral law

The electoral system did not differ from the one used in the 2002 parliamentary election: i.e. a list-based proportional representation system with a 5% national threshold with the whole country constituting a single electoral district (Fitzmaurice, 2004). However, there were important changes to the *electoral law*. Most importantly, a system of preferential voting

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was strengthened considerably, with consequences for the election campaign (see below). Previously, voters could give up to four preferential votes to candidates from the party list they voted for. For the preferential votes to count, a candidate had to receive at least 10% of the total votes cast for the party. In 2006, the threshold was lowered to 3% of the party vote, so providing a realistic chance to change the composition of the parties' parliamentary delegations.

Unlike all previous parliamentary elections—held over a two-day period (Friday afternoon and Saturday morning)—the 2006 election was held on a single day (Saturday). Another novelty was that Slovak citizens residing abroad and those abroad on election day could vote via a postal ballot.

Each party had to pay a deposit of 500 000 Slovak crowns (€12.500) that would be returned only to parties that received at least 3% of the vote. A largely ineffective campaign spending limit of 12 million Slovak crowns (€300,000) was abolished (Rybář, 2006b); so was the moratorium proscribing electoral campaigning within 24 h before the polling stations opened.

3. Political parties

The number of parties participating in the election declined slightly from 26 in 2002 to 21 in 2006. As in 2002, no formal electoral alliances were formed, but, informally, candidates from various political groupings were placed on the lists of several lesser parties. According to the pre-election polls, eight parties stood a realistic chance of crossing the 5% threshold (see e.g. Focus, 2006).

The two main contenders, SMER and SDKÚ, had their origins in the fragmented 1998–2002 parliament. SDKÚ was the leading government party of the centre-right and the main representative of socio-economic policies introduced after 2002. SMER was the principal critic of the government, which merged with three small leftist parties (including the communist-successor Party of the Democratic Left) in 2004. Thus it inherited membership in the Socialist International and increasingly presented its policy proposals and criticism of the government from a leftist position. In addition to its core support base (notably a high proportion of young voters, as evidenced in the 2002 election), SMER's vigorous criticism of social and economic reforms attracted considerable attention from disillusioned voters who had previously supported HZDS (Gyárfá-šová, 2003, 2006). Once a dominant party, HZDS struggled to break out of its political isolation after being voted from power in 1998. In an effort to become

more 'coalitionable', HZDS significantly modified the composition of its parliamentary party group, moderated its stance towards the centre-right, and even signalled its readiness to cooperate with the government. The party's leadership eventually made HZDS more acceptable to other parties at the expense of a decline in its support base, both within the electorate and among the powerful interest groups.

SMK and KDH have been the most stable political parties in Slovakia. Both have a clearly defined electoral support base, relatively distinct policy profiles, and well-developed organizational structures (Rybář, 2006a). SMK has profiled itself as the champion of Hungarian minority rights, and under a politically moderate leadership the party had been a member of the government since 1998 when it controlled portfolios in charge of several expenditure policies. Both material and symbolic goods were delivered to the party's constituency: businesses close to the party received lucrative public procurement contracts and other public spending schemes; the establishment of the Hungarian university represented a significant cultural gain for Slovakia's Hungarian community. In addition, the party, together with SDKÚ and the Christian Democrats, became one of the cornerstones of the Slovakia's centre-right, at the national level and in the European Parliament.

KDH, also in government since 1998, controlled several ministries dear to the party's ideology and interests. It considerably strengthened its law-and-order image by managing justice and interior ministries. These ministries also held to a rather Eurosceptic line in the EU's Council of Ministers, opposing the alleged intrusion of EU regulation into Slovak family and immigration legislation. In addition, KDH tried to pursue its Catholic conservative agenda in the education portfolio, even though the credibility of the ministry suffered due to a few ill-prepared educational policies. Hence, traditional morality, law and order, and soft euroscepticism have dominated the Christian Democratic programme since the early 2000s.

Euroscepticism has also been ascribed to the Slovak National Party (*Slovenská národná strana*, SNS), but the party is better defined by its radical nationalistic rhetoric. The party broke up shortly before the 2002 election in a dispute over the party's leadership; none of its two successors won any parliamentary seats. Before the 2006 election, however, the party re-united and quickly regained electoral support due to its radical anti-minority, especially anti-Hungarian, appeals. Among the lesser parties, only the Free Forum (*Slobodné forum*, SF), a breakaway faction of the SDKÚ, and the hard-line Communist Party of Slovakia

(*Komunistická strana Slovenska*, KSS) oscillated around the 5% support (Focus, 2006) needed to guarantee parliamentary representation. On the other hand, the ANO, formerly an influential junior coalition member of the Dzurinda government, looked almost certain not to be re-elected to the parliament.

4. Campaign

The 1998 election was dominated by issues of democracy and the rule of law (Malová, 2001); in 2002, the main theme was the ability of parties to guarantee Slovakia's integration in the EU (Haughton, 2003); in 2006, social and economic issues constituted the core themes of the campaign. SDKÚ stood on the economic record of the Dzurinda administration, pointing out that increased foreign direct investment and expanding employment were direct results of labour market reforms and a simplified taxation system. The main economic reforms were the 19% flat tax and a new labour code, both heavily criticised by the opposition. Nevertheless, in the campaign, SDKU moved to the centre by emphasising 'sensitive solutions' to social problems and the need to increase investment in education.

SMER, on the other hand, strongly criticised the social consequences of government policies. It promised to lower taxes on basic goods and to introduce progressive taxation, with higher rates for people with 'exceptionally high incomes' and for natural monopolies. Other promises included increasing the minimum wage, higher social and healthcare spending, and the abolition of largely symbolic but unpopular payments for medical treatment.

The two parties set the tone of the televised debates and their leaders' duels dominated public discourse in the election campaign. Other parties, while active in the debates, failed to impose their agenda. The Christian Democrats' emphasis on traditional morality and family values, for example, was clearly limited to the party's core electorate; so was the almost invisible campaign by the Communists. The Free Forum (SF) suffered due to intra-party tensions that broke out in the course of the campaign; moreover, SDKÚ's move to the centre seemed to pay off and win over hesitant SF supporters. HZDS deliberately pursued an uncontroversial and low-key campaign, confirming that the party's main goal was not to provoke confrontation. The Slovak nationalists, on the other hand, aggressively aired their key message: to replace the Hungarian SMK in the government by the (ethnic) Slovak SNS. This strategy was helped by the fact that HZDS's campaign abandoned nationalist voters who had voted for the party in the past.

Most of the parties invested in public rallies and massive billboard presentations, the traditional means of campaigning in Slovakia. However, the KDH preferred face-to-face meetings in the streets to big rallies; and the Communists were the only (relevant) party that did not use billboards on a massive scale. SDKÚ ran the most expensive campaign, investing in a very professional three-wave billboard campaign and well-arranged public rallies. Compared to 2002, when the party's aggressive style backfired, SMER's public rallies in 2006 were a well-balanced cocktail of critical as well as positive political messages and entertainment by sympathetic professional comedians.

All national channels organised debates between party leaders, with more television coverage of the 2006 campaign than in 2002. This was due to changes in the law that enabled commercial TV stations to air political advertisements. Compared to the 1998 and 2002 elections, non-governmental organisations engaged in very limited campaign activity. In part, this reflected a shift among Slovak NGOs from political issues to other matters, but the main reason was the absence of funds from the foreign donors (West European countries and the US) who had provided financial grants for previous campaigns. This reflected their confidence in the democratic consolidation of the Slovak polity.

One major innovation was the campaign of individual candidates. As the weight of the preferential votes increased, individual candidates invested more than ever in their personal campaigns. Several SMK and KDH politicians with strong regional backing were able to secure parliamentary positions only due to preferential votes. The individual campaigns helped to raise the personal profiles of two would-be successors of HZDS's leader, whilst preferential votes showed that among SDKÚ voters two other politicians were more popular than Prime Minister Dzurinda, the party's leader.

5. Results

Turnout in the election was less than 55%, the lowest in modern Slovak elections. One reason may be that, unlike previous elections, in 2006 the NGOs were not active in mobilising voters. The low turnout did not hurt SMER, the most popular party throughout the 2002–2006 electoral cycle according to opinion polls, with support oscillating around 30%. This seems to confirm a trend towards the consolidation of SMER's electoral base. SDKÚ also did well, winning over 18% of the vote, about five points more than pre-election polls suggested. This confirmed (as did the 2002 parliamentary and 2004

Table 1
Results of the parliamentary election in Slovakia, 17 June 2006

	2006		2002	
	Vote (%)	Seats	Vote (%)	Seats
Smer − Social Democracy (Smer)	29.1	50	13.5	25
Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKU)	18.4	31	15.1	28
Slovak National Party (SNS)	11.7	20	3.3	0
Party of Hungarian Coalition (SMK)	11.7	20	11.2	20
People's Party − Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS)	8.8	15	19.5	36
Christian Democratic Movement (KDH)	8.3	14	8.3	15
Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS)	3.9	0	6.3	11
Free Forum (SF)	3.5	0	–	0
New Citizen Alliance (ANO)	1.4	0	8.0	15
Other parties	3.2	0	14.8	0
Total	100.0	150	100.0	150

Eligible electorate: 4,272,517; valid votes: 2,303,139; invalid votes: 32,778. Turnout: 54.7%. Source: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (http://www.statistics.sk).

European Parliament elections) that SDKÚ is very successful in mobilising its potential support base.

As shown in Table 1, the real winner in the election was the radical nationalist SNS, gaining almost 12% of the vote after it had spent four years outside parliament. The SMK achieved an almost identical result, its best since the party was established in 1998. HZDS and KDH, on the other hand, received only about 8% of the vote, less than pre-election polls had suggested. Other parties received less than 5% of the vote, including the Communists and ANO, two relevant groupings in the previous parliament. Even more significant, for the first time since 1990 no new party gained parliamentary representation; together with the 2004 European election (when only five parties crossed the 5% threshold), this may signal the consolidation of the party system.

6. Post-election coalition negotiations

After SMER's leader, Róbert Fico, secured the president's authorisation to lead the coalition negotiations, SMER started consulting with all the parliamentary parties about forming a new government. Before the election SMER repeatedly stated that the new government was likely to be composed of the parties from both the previous government and the opposition. The consultations confirmed that, with the exception of SDKÚ, SMER considered all the other parties as potential coalition partners.

Two combinations seemed most likely: SMER-SMK-KDH and SMER-SNS-HZDS. The first was abandoned, since, as later explained, it would be difficult for SMER to carry out its priorities in government with two centre-right parties. Moreover, the Christian Democrats were deeply divided over cooperation with SMER; indeed, the coalition talks resulted in a serious power struggle within the party.

After two weeks, SMER announced it would form a government with SNS and HZDS. SMER took the majority of cabinet portfolios (including prime minister, foreign affairs, and finance), as well as Speaker of the National Council. However, SNS was given only three ministerial portfolios and HZDS only two; and neither the leader of SNS or HZDS occupies a leading position in the cabinet or the parliament. The strong position of SMER is due to the fact that, for both SNS and HZDS, the alliance with SMER was the only realistic way to secure ministerial positions, whilst SMER could gain concessions by credibly threatening alternative coalition partners. An alternative centre-right coalition government composed of the SDKÚ, SMK, HZDS, and KDH did not materialise, despite the effort of SDKÚ, since the Christian Democrats refused to take part in a government with HZDS. The result was the first government since the end of Communist rule in which a left party dominates.

7. Conclusion

SMER's decision to invite into the government the radical nationalist SNS met with strong criticism among both Slovakia's leftist intellectual circles and SMER's partners in the Party of European Socialists. SMER's justification stresses that its best chance of carrying out its social and economic priorities is the present coalition government. SMER has also pointed out that the controversial leaders of its junior partners are not represented in the cabinet, and that the official government policy manifesto will determine SMER's activities, not the rhetoric of its partners. Hence, the main question facing the new Slovak administration is whether it will be able to fulfill its own ambitions and the expectations of its voters. In endeavouring to do so, SMER will have to deal with controversial coalition partners and face criticism from an experienced centre-right parliamentary opposition.

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The general election in Singapore, May 2006

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The 10th general election in Singapore was held on 6 May 2006. This was the first election held under the new Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong, the eldest son of the city-state's founder, Lee Kuan Yew. Although the younger Lee had promised a more liberal environment, elections in Singapore are still not generally free and fair. The opposition is severely restricted by law and Singapore's conservative political culture. Since independence in 1965, the People's Action Party (PAP) has governed Singapore, leading political scientists to refer to it as a 'single party' or 'soft authoritarian' state − even as a 'nanny' state (Trocki, 2006). The opposition won its first seat only in 1981; since then the opposition has never won more than two seats in parliament.

1. Electoral system

Voting is compulsory in Singapore, with non-voters expunged from the electoral register.[1] The electoral system is first-pass-the-post, inherited from British colonial days. Under certain conditions, Singaporeans living in the USA, UK, Australia, Japan, and China (including Hong Kong) may register to vote. Singapore's parliament is unicameral; in both the 2001 and 2006 general elections, the total number of seats was 84. The 2006 election was the first time that more than half the electorate was born after 1965 − the post-independence generation.

The electoral system has three unique features: the Group Representation Constituency (GRC), the Nominated MP (NMP), and the Non-Constituency MP (NCMP). The GRC's are multiple-seat constituencies,[2] in which at least one minority candidate (defined as 'Indian' or 'other minority') is required to stand for election. In practice, the effect of the GRC is to make it harder for the opposition to contest such constituencies as they usually have difficulty attracting credible minority candidates. The NMP scheme was introduced in 1990 and allows for the appointment of up to nine non-elected MPs. The provision was designed to allow citizens without a party affiliation to contribute to

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[1] Non-voters can apply to be reinstated on the electoral register. If the reason for not voting is considered not valid, non-voters are fined before reinstatement (see www.elections.gov.sg).

[2] A GRC can have 3−6 wards within its boundary. GRCs are created by the delineation committee under the Department of Elections; see www.elections.gov.sg.