



Notes on recent elections

The 2012 parliamentary elections in Slovakia



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1. Background

After the 2010 elections a centre-right government led by Iveta Radičová was formed. For the first time in Slovakia's history a woman occupied the post of prime minister. The greatest challenge for the government was to its internal stability. Though formally it was composed of four parties, in reality two other parties were involved, namely the Civic Conservative Party (in Slovak: *Občianska konzervatívna strana*; OKS) and the civic movement Ordinary People (*Obyčajní ľudia*; OĽ). Both of these had placed their candidates on the lists of bigger parties, and each elected four MPs. The stability of the government was thus questionable from the beginning.

This situation was partly analogous to the second government of Mikuláš Dzurinda in the years 2002–2006. In both cases these were centre-right cabinets with the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union – Democratic Party (*Slovenská demokratická a kresťanská únia – Demokratická strana*; SDKÚ-DS) as their strongest member. They both comprised a larger number of parties, and they also shared a similar fate, proving unable to last out the whole electoral term. On the other hand, the two governments differed vastly in their economic policies. While Dzurinda was able to enact strong liberal reforms on taxes and health care, Radičová's government was more cautious. It did not greatly modify the generous social policy of the previous government led by Smer-SD and, when dealing with the impact of economic crisis, it even planned to raise taxes on entrepreneurs and other social groups.

The critical events that led to the end of Radičová's government related to the increasing bailout powers sought by the European Union to address the Eurozone crisis. The party Freedom and Solidarity (*Sloboda a solidarita*; SaS) refused to follow its coalition partners in voting to join a permanent European Financial Stability Facility. The final vote held in parliament in October 2011 was linked to a vote of confidence and so the SaS was thus forced either to back down or to let the cabinet fall. The party chose the latter. After the vote, the other members of the government along with Smer-SD agreed to hold early elections in 2012. As for EFSF, a new vote was held shortly after the first attempt, and this time with the support of Smer-SD the idea won overwhelming support. The new campaign thus started in autumn 2011, not even eighteen months after the previous parliamentary elections.

2. Electoral system

The electoral system used for the 2012 elections remained completely unchanged. Slovakia uses a proportional representation system with a single nationwide constituency from which all 150 members of parliament are elected. Each party must cross the 5% threshold to gain seats, and this barrier is slightly higher for coalitions. The Hagenbach-Bischoff quota is used for the allocation of seats. These features together guarantee a very high level of proportionality of distribution. As for the vote itself, flexible ballots are used, and voters can cast up to four preferential votes. However, the influence of preferential voting remains limited, as most votes are given to party leaders and other highly-ranked candidates (Spáč, 2010, 65–75).

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3. Parties and the campaign

The fall of the Radičová government brought some changes in the party system but did not disrupt many of its previous features and trends. Smer-SD gained the most from the whole situation and secured its dominant position. Robert Fico used the government conflicts to present his own party as a guarantor of stability. He accused the parties of Radičová's government of being unreliable and incapable of coming to agreement on essential topics. These appeals were also reflected in public support as Smer-SD's rating stabilized above 40 percent. Indeed, the polls began to indicate a real chance that Smer-SD would become the first Slovak party after 1989 to gain a majority of seats in parliament.

The fall of the government weakened the centre-right parties, and their public support has dropped since the 2010 elections. The events of autumn 2011 were not the sole reason for this, however. Another important reason was the government's economic policy, which was a great disappointment to its voters. The moderation of Radičová's government in this area was even more striking when compared to liberal reforms made by the centre-right cabinet in 2002–2006. So the unsuccessful EFSF vote only accelerated an ongoing downward trend in the centre-right's popularity. The fall of the government also damaged morale among its members and SaS found itself somewhat isolated. Although this tension gradually eased, the centre-right parties did not enter the 2012 elections as a compact bloc.

A new rival to these parties also appeared. An unofficial member of Radičová's government, the civic movement OĽ, had got into parliament in 2010 by placing its members on the SaS ballot. Although these two parties formed a joined parliamentary group their relations were far from harmonious. When the government tried to change a controversial law on citizenship which had been passed by the previous cabinet, the leader of OĽ, Igor Matovič, refused to go along with the plan. As a result he was expelled from the parliamentary group of SaS. After the fall of the government OĽ was transformed into a political party, but one of an unconventional nature. Its main goal was to function as a platform for important personalities, most of whom were not even members of the party. This aim was proclaimed in the new name of the group, which was Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti; OĽaNO). The new party did not define its position in ideological terms, and the same applied to its program, which contained a mix of conservative, liberal, social and populist messages. However, as the party had been connected to Radičová's government, it became a direct rival mainly to the centre-right parties.

The party spectrum before the 2012 elections thus provided an interesting display. On one hand there was Smer-SD, which was without any doubt expected to be a clear winner. Against it was a fragmented centre-right group of parties, which also faced a new rival unencumbered by previous scandals. Some of these parties were far from guaranteed to make it into the next parliament. This also went for the Slovak National Party (Slovenská národná strana; SNS). In the previous 2010 elections the nationalists

had barely crossed the 5 percent threshold, as an important segment of their vote turned to Smer-SD (Krivý, 2011). As an opposition party, the SNS was unable to reverse these trends, and before the 2012 elections it was again at risk of losing its parliamentary status. Thus, while the winner was clear, there were still plenty of unknowns as the election approached.

Although less than two years had passed since the 2010 elections, the content of the campaign in 2012 was largely different. At first it seemed that the EU bailout issue would be as highly salient as it had been two years earlier. In 2010 this question was mainly associated with the case of Greece (Godársky, 2011) and it was used mostly by the centre-right parties. Their intentions before the 2010 elections were quite clear: to point to the large deficits produced by the Fico's government and to warn voters of the danger of following the "Greek road" (Deegan-Krause and Haughton, 2011). Following the EFSF vote in the Slovak parliament, the treatment of this topic became more complex in the 2012 campaign, now encompassing the whole issue of Slovakia's role in such processes. Out of all the parties the SaS was able to profit most from these debates, as it rejected outright the idea of giving such help to other EU countries. With this position it played the role of protector of the economic interests of Slovakia and its citizens.

However, the topic of EFSF was pushed into the background and replaced by the issue of corruption once after the so-called Gorilla case was revealed. "Gorilla" was the code name of an operation by the Slovak security services aimed at monitoring the activities of an influential domestic financial group during 2005 and 2006. Unofficial documents which leaked into the public domain indicated strong links between the economic and political spheres, providing the backdrop for vast corruption. Every relevant political party in existence at the time was mentioned in these documents but the greatest pressure was put on the main party then in the government: the SDKÚ-DS. Gorilla proved to be an effective campaign weapon for the new parties. OĽaNO in particular cited the case as proof of the corrupt character of the current elite, and the need to replace it with a new political generation.

The Gorilla case greatly affected the campaign. Its influence was so profound that it superseded many of the topics traditionally dominating Slovak elections. The issue of Slovak–Hungarian relations, the main theme of the xenophobic SNS in the past, was visibly less important in 2012. The same applied to issues along the socioeconomic dimension. Unlike in the 2006 and 2010 elections the parties were not primarily divided based on left-right position (Rybář, 2007; Deegan-Krause and Haughton, 2011) but instead based on their involvement with the Gorilla affair. One of the consequences of this was that the main centre-right parties did not rule out cooperation with Smer-SD after the elections, as they had unanimously done before the 2010 elections (Gyárfášová, 2012; Mesežnikov, 2012).

Another feature that set apart the campaigns of 2010 and 2012 was the presence of the civic sector. One legacy of the illiberal governance of Vladimír Mečiar and his People's Party – Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (Ľudová strana – Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko; ĽS-HZDS) in

the 1990s was a connection between the centre-right parties and domestic intellectuals and artists. This link still proved to be functioning before the 2010 elections, when many well-known personalities spontaneously became involved in the campaign, mostly in order to oppose Robert Fico. For example, the caricaturist Shooty from the popular gazette *Sme* launched a public collection for funds that were then used to pay for hundreds of billboards, postcards, and stickers with overt political messages against Smer-SD and its coalition partners SNS and ĽS-HZDS. Before the 2012 elections such activities were largely absent, further emphasizing the disappointment with Radičová's government.

4. Results

Turnout in the elections was just over 59%, almost the same as in 2010. As expected, Smer-SD won the elections with 44.4% and, as Table 1 shows, the victory was overwhelming. Compared to its performance in previous elections, the party as led by Robert Fico did even better and in fact achieved the best result in terms of vote share for any party in Slovakia since 1989. As for absolute numbers, Smer-SD received 1.13 million votes, bettered only by ĽS-HZDS in 1992 with 1.14 million. Although Smer-SD did not obtain 50% of votes, it was able to achieve a clear majority of 83 out of 150 seats due to the effect of the legal threshold which prevents parties under 5% from entering parliament. The dominance of Smer-SD was also visible in geographical terms. While in the past this party had been slightly weaker in the biggest cities including the capital Bratislava, and in regions with a larger proportion of ethnic Hungarians (Madleňák, 2012: 82–88), in 2012 the party polled more consistently across the map of Slovakia. The campaign of Smer-SD under the slogan “Securities” proved to be well suited to an era of world economic crisis and its consequences.

The 2012 elections confirmed the decline of the centre-right parties, especially SDKÚ-DS. Mikuláš Dzurinda's party was hard hit by the Gorilla affair and in the last months before the elections its support radically diminished. Its

result of 6.1% was a real disaster, as the previously dominant force on the centre right was forced to accept the role of a small party. The parties Bridge (Most-Híd) and Christian Democratic Movement (Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie; KDH) also failed to score well, the Christian democrats in particular falling short of their anticipated vote share. Most-Híd could at least be gratified by the fact that it remained the only parliamentary party directly representing the Hungarian minority, as the once-powerful Party of Hungarian Coalition (Strana maďarskej koalície; SMK) got only slightly more than 4% of the vote. A significant decline was also suffered by the SaS, which was the weakest party to cross the 5% threshold. Although its result of 5.9% could be considered a failure, the liberals were at least able to avoid the fate of many of the new Slovak parties that have failed to retain their parliamentary status after entering government.

As in the 2010 elections, likewise in 2012 a new party entered the parliament. In this case it was OĽaNO which, with more than 8.5%, came in third after Smer-SD and KDH. The image of a party clean of financial scandals proved to be an attractive one, especially for the disappointed voters of the centre-right parties. Meanwhile, the SNS ended up out of parliament as it got only 4.6% of the vote. The nationalists could not prevent their voters from moving to other parties, especially Smer-SD. The elections also confirmed the long-term decline of Mečiar's ĽS-HZDS. Formerly the dominant political actor in Slovakia, it gained less than 1% of the vote, which led to discussion of whether or not to dissolve the party. Another unsuccessful party was the 99% – Civic voice (99% – Občiansky hlas), whose name alluded to the “We are the 99%” slogan of Occupy Wall Street protestors in USA. During the campaign the party was accused of faking petition signatures in order to allow candidates to compete in the elections. Even without this scandal, however, it seems unlikely that 99% would have made it into parliament, since it won only 1.5% of votes.

Compared to previous elections, the preferential voting element of the system played a more important role. Altogether 15 MPs got into parliament thanks to preferential votes, the largest number since the introduction of

Table 1
Results of the parliamentary elections in the Slovak Republic, 10 March 2012.

Party	Votes	Votes (%)	Change 2010	Seats	Change 2010
Smer-SD (Direction-Social Democracy)	1,134,280	44.4	9.6	83	21
KDH (Christian Democratic Movement)	225,361	8.8	0.3	16	1
OĽaNO (Ordinary People and Independent Personalities)	218,537	8.6	8.6	16	16
Most-Híd (Bridge)	176,088	6.9	–1.2	13	–1
SDKÚ-DS (Slovak Democratic and Christian Union – Democratic Party)	155,744	6.1	–9.3	11	–17
SaS (Freedom and Solidarity)	150,266	5.9	–6.3	11	–11
SNS (Slovak National Party)	116,420	4.6	–0.5	0	–9
SMK (Party of the Hungarian Coalition)	109,483	4.3	0	0	0
99% (99% – the Civic Voice)	40,488	1.6	1.6	0	0
Other parties	227,059	8.8	4.8	0	0
Total	2,553,726	100	0	150	0
Parties not crossing threshold	493,450	19.3	3.4		
Turnout		59.1	0.3		

Source: Slovak Statistical Office (2012).

the nationwide constituency. This indicates that voters are to some extent able to enforce their will against the parties. On the other hand, there is no need for excessive optimism in this regard. First, four of those 15 MPs were the leaders of OĽaNO. They were placed on the last four positions of the party's ballot deliberately, and this step was understood as a part of their marketing. The outcome of the preferential voting was also strongly determined by the fragmentation of the centre-right. Five parties got into parliament with less than 10% of the vote and so were not entitled to many representatives based on a purely proportional allocation. This meant that their candidates were more dependent on preferential votes. For example, three candidates each from SDKÚ-DS and SaS won seats in parliament thanks to preferential voting. If these parties had the same vote share as in 2010, all six candidates would have become MPs even without any preferential votes.

The electoral results made the formation of a government easy. The only dilemma was whether Smer-SD would form a one-party government or seek coalition partners. This question was quickly resolved as the other parties refused to cooperate with the Smer-SD, realizing that its position in any such partnership would be dominant. Smer-SD thus formed its own government at the beginning of April, being Slovakia's first single-party majority government since 1989. However, it seems that the absence of political partners to share responsibility with Smer-SD will be mitigated by bringing nonpartisan collective actors – such as the trade unions, employees, and other representatives of various groups – into policy making. The one-party government of social democratic Smer-SD may therefore move Slovakia toward a more neo-corporatist model.

5. Implications

The 2012 Slovak elections brought many interesting moments. For the first time, a single party gained a majority in parliament and formed a one-party government. In just ten years of existence, Smer-SD succeeded in becoming the dominant party in the system. Its showing in 2012 is undoubtedly a success but raises the question of whether Smer-SD will be able to maintain such levels of public support. Single-party government allows Smer-SD to implement its programme at will but also means that it will have to take full responsibility for the government's policies and their consequences. However, when compared to Mečiar's ĽS-HZDS which was once in a similar position, Smer-SD has better prospects of living on as a dominant force. Its advantage is that it is a clearly defined social

democratic party, and is largely accepted as such by voters, unlike the ĽS-HZDS which never succeeded in becoming a party connected to a certain ideology – its support depended mainly on its leader.

The 2012 elections were a great failure for the centre-right parties, and this had clear consequences. Mikuláš Dzurinda, leader of SDKÚ-DS since it began in 2000, refused to run again for the position. Popular KDH vice-chairman Daniel Lipsic, who got the most preferential votes of all the party's candidates, left the party. In September 2012 he founded his own party called New Majority, which is expected to be a relevant rival to the current opposition. Thus, although the elections highlighted the decline of the Slovak centre-right, they also may be the starting point for a thorough reconstruction process.

The last point concerns the electoral system. In Slovakia only a simple majority in parliament is required to change it, which means that Smer-SD in effect has control of this system. In the past Robert Fico has declared that the threshold for smaller parties to enter parliament should be higher, and has leaned towards the idea of a majority or a mixed system. Although after the 2012 elections Smer-SD stated that no major changes in the electoral system will be made without the agreement of the parliamentary opposition, this assurance should be taken with some caution. It will be interesting to see whether Smer-SD tries to push through an electoral reform leading to higher disproportionality, especially if its public support begins to decline.

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