

The presidential election in Slovakia, April 2004

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In April 2004, for the second time, Slovakia's citizens elected the head of state in a direct election. The election was held, as scheduled, at the end of the five-year presidential term, and took place shortly after Slovakia became a member of NATO, and only days before it gained full membership of the European Union. Thus, the election symbolically opened a new chapter in the domestic and foreign policy development of the country.

1. Background

The president is directly elected. Candidates are nominated by either at least 15 members of parliament or a petition of at least 15,000 voters. If no candidate receives an absolute majority of all eligible voters in the first round of the election, the top two contenders compete in a second round majority run-off. The first direct presidential elections took place in April 1999. A thorough constitutional revision in 2001 brought about, among other changes, a reduction of presidential powers (Malová and Láštík, 2001).

Although the Slovak constitution provides for the direct election of the president,¹ executive authority remains in the hands of the prime minister and his cabinet. Nevertheless, the presidency is not merely ceremonial. The president's most important power is to appoint the prime minister, and, following the latter's proposal, cabinet ministers. Secondly, the president has the right to appoint various high public representatives, including judges on the Constitutional Court and Slovakia's ambassadors. Thirdly, the president has the right to negotiate and ratify international treaties on behalf of the Slovak Republic. However, all these formal powers have been limited by informal constraints, political traditions, and by other constitutional provisions. The power to choose a prime minister is circumscribed by the composition of the parliament, as the government needs a vote of confidence.

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¹ The 1992 constitution provided for the parliamentary election of the president, but the 1999 constitutional amendment introduced the direct election of the president. This did not substantially change the powers of the presidency.

The right to appoint high public officials is constitutionally shared with — or conditioned by the assent of — other state institutions, including parliament and the cabinet. Finally, since 1993 (when Slovakia became independent) presidents have delegated their powers in foreign policy matters to the government, a possibility also foreseen by the constitution.

2. Presidential candidates

Following the September 2002 parliamentary election, a four-party centre-right coalition government was appointed, composed of the Slovak Democratic Christian Union (SDKÚ) of Prime Minister Mikuláš Dzurinda, the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH), the ethnic minority Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK), and the New Citizen Alliance (ANO) (see [Haughton, 2003](#)). Dzurinda had also been Prime Minister in the previous broad-based coalition government (1998–2002) that replaced the semi-authoritarian coalition government led by Vladimír Mečiar's Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), which was in power 1994–1998. In the 1999 presidential election Mečiar was defeated by Rudolf Schuster, who stood with the support of the government parties in what was widely perceived as an informal referendum about the extent of democratic change since 1998.

During his presidential term, Schuster had come into conflict with both of Dzurinda's cabinets. He frequently used his veto powers to block legislation enacted by the parliament,² and was especially critical of the austerity measures taken by the centre-right government elected in 2002. However, Schuster's Party of Civic Understanding (SOP) disappeared after a crushing defeat in the 2002 election, and none of the opposition parties seemed ready to support his presidential bid. Opinion polls indicated that Schuster belonged to a group of second-rank candidates, together with the former Speaker of Parliament, František Mikloško (KDH), former Slovak ambassador to the USA Martin Bútora (no political affiliation), Ľubomír Roman (ANO), and Ivan Gašparovič. Until 2002, Gašparovič had been a close ally of Mečiar's, and, as the Speaker of Parliament (1992–1998), was heavily involved in the country's democratic backsliding, particularly during Mečiar's third government (1994–1998). After Mečiar dropped him from his party list for the 2002 parliamentary election, Gašparovič left HZDS to form his own party, the Movement for Democracy (HZD). Whereas HZD failed to cross the 5% electoral threshold, Gašparovič was able to retain considerable popularity among voters who were not of the centre-right. Nevertheless, nearly all polls put Foreign Minister Kukan (SDKÚ) in the lead, followed by Vladimír Mečiar (HZDS). The remaining six candidates had no realistic chance to influence the result; their main hope was to make their parties and personalities more visible to the public.

The parties of the centre-right government flirted with a possibility of nominating a single presidential candidate, but this ended when the SDKÚ announced in early 2003 that it would nominate Kukan as its candidate. In reaction, KDH and ANO

² The presidential veto, however, can be overturned by an absolute majority in parliament.

also presented their own candidates. Of the governing parties, only the SMK did not nominate a candidate, but decided, instead, to support Mikloško. However, shortly before the first round, the ANO candidate withdrew and asked his supporters to vote for Kukan. The other candidate drawing from the centre-right electorate was Martin Bútora. Of the three parliamentary opposition parties only HZDS nominated its own candidate. The Slovak Communists (KSS), in parliament for the first time since the communist regime ended, made no formal recommendation to voters, whilst Smer, Slovakia's most popular party since early 2003, supported Gašparovič. In contrast to 1999, when Magda Vašáryová came third with some 6% of the vote, no woman entered the presidential election in 2004.

3. Election campaign

Slovak electoral law limits the presidential campaign to 15 days prior to the first round of the election, and campaigning is proscribed during the 48 hours prior to the election. The law also specifies a spending limit of 4 million Slovak crowns (€100,000) per candidate for each round. No spending limits, however, apply to the period before the start of the official campaign, even though the candidates must not openly canvass for votes; they are only allowed to “inform” voters about their preferences and attitudes. The SDKÚ candidate Eduard Kukan started a massive billboard campaign in late 2003, and his general popularity, combined with his reputation as an uncontroversial diplomat, made him the favourite.

Private TV stations are not allowed to broadcast campaign commercials for parliamentary elections, but in presidential elections each private TV station may allocate up to 10 hours for such broadcasts. However, all candidates have to be offered equal access and no candidate is to have more than 60 minutes of advertising time. The Slovak public TV station decided not to air political advertisements; instead, they conducted 30-minute interviews with individual candidates, but with no debate and no discussion of the candidates. This was heavily criticised by political analysts, and by some of the contenders, for being utterly uninteresting for viewers. Since few candidates used their space for private TV adverts, the presidential campaign in the electronic media was limited to a handful of debates on a few private TV channels. Given this framework, face-to-face meetings with voters and billboard advertisements were the principle campaign instruments.

Since the Slovak presidency has no policy-making power, candidates do not publish election manifestos. Rather, the campaigns tend to revolve around the capacities of the individual contenders. Two of the main issues of the campaign focused on the activities of the candidates during the communist past and their “acceptability” abroad. In this respect, KDH's Mikloško and independent Bútora — as opponents of the communist regime — had the best chance of profiting from discussion about the candidates' past.

A complication in the presidential election was that a referendum had been called by the President following a petition initiated by the Trade Union Confederation (KOZ) and Smer, who were dissatisfied with the policies of the centre-right

government. They collected between them almost half a million signatures (350,000 are required) calling on the parliament to dissolve itself and hold a new election. While the results of such referendums are not legally binding, they represent a strong political pressure on the parliament. However, the result of any referendum is only valid if turnout is higher than 50% of all eligible voters (Láštic, 2001). Hence, the leaders of the governing parties had to communicate a rather difficult message to their voters: Not to take part in the referendum, but to vote for their presidential candidate. The opposition's message was much simpler: Vote for an opposition candidate and say no to the current government in the referendum.

4. Election results

Turnout in the first round was just under 48%, an historic low for any nationwide election since 1989. It fell even lower, to 43.5%, for the second round. Most politicians, and political commentators, attributed the decline to voter fatigue, as this was the fourth election in less than 20 months in Slovakia. The election brought a surprising victory for Ivan Gašparovič, the leader of HZD, which was not even represented in parliament. Mečiar won the first round convincingly, with 32.7% of the vote. Gašparovič came second with 22.3%, only narrowly eliminating Kukan, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, who was generally considered to be the favourite. Kukan, with 22.1%, was probably most damaged by the widespread feeling of the inevitability of a run-off — given the unrealistic conditions for an outright victory in the first round — combined with the confusing message delivered by the governing parties. The incumbent President, Schuster, came fourth with 7.4%, seemingly confirming that candidates without the backing of a political party are unlikely to succeed. Bútora and Mikloško both won 6.5% of the vote; other candidates received less than 1%. See [Table 1](#).

The ruling parties entered the second round by either urging voters to ignore the run-off (SMK and KDĽ) or claiming not to support either of the two candidates (SDKÚ and ANO). The second-round campaign focused almost exclusively on which of the two candidates had the better reputation abroad. Gašparovič stressed that criticism from abroad focused almost exclusively on Mečiar as the former prime minister, whilst Mečiar tried to downplay that theme by emphasising the chance of a new beginning for Slovak politics after Slovakia's successful integration into NATO and the EU. Gašparovič, however, was able to confirm his position as “a lesser evil” in three debates held by the private TV stations, while Mečiar did little to convince his opponents that he had become more acceptable over time.

In the run-off, Gašparovič won almost 60% of the vote, an increase of more than 600,000 in absolute numbers, while Mečiar's gains were only just over 70,000 votes. These results suggest that, while Mečiar's electorate was disciplined, it had little potential for significant growth; Gašparovič, by contrast, could still mobilise voters by portraying his opponents as a threat to democracy and prosperity. The results were a considerable shock to the leaders of the ruling parties, provoking a bitter exchange among them about who was to blame for the opposition's victory.

Table 1
Results of the presidential election in Slovakia, 3 April and 17 April 2004

Candidate	First round votes	First round %	Second round votes	Second round %
Mečiar, Vladimír	650,242	32.7	722,368	40.1
Gašparovič, Ivan	442,564	22.3	1,079,592	59.9
Kukan, Eduard	438,920	22.1		
Schuster, Rudolf	147,549	7.4		
Mikloško, František	129,414	6.5		
Bútora, Martin	129,387	6.5		
Králik, Ján	15,873	0.8		
Kalman, Jozef	10,221	0.5		
Kubík, Július	7,734	0.4		
Šesták, Jozef	6,785	0.3		
Bernát, Stanislav	5,719	0.3		
Roman, Ľubomír ^a	1,806	0.1		
Turnout	2,015,889	47.9%	1,828,307	43.5%
Electorate	4,204,899		4,202,597	
Invalid votes	29,675	1.5%	26,347	1.4%

Source: Štatistický úrad Slovenskej republiky, <http://www.statistics.sk>.

^a Candidate withdrew in March 2004.

5. Implications

The results of the election suggest several conclusions. First, even though the “authoritarian–democratic” divide in Slovak politics — induced by Mečiar — may be fading (Rybář, 2004), the electorate seems to perceive Mečiar as too controversial to be entrusted with an important public office. This is also a powerful message to the leaders of the centre-right Dzurinda government. Some Slovak commentators have suggested that the leaders of the governing parties did not openly campaign against Mečiar in the second round because they hoped to ensure the support of his HZDS for Dzurinda’s minority government. However, such a scenario now seems rather unlikely. Although precise numbers are not available, it is likely that Gašparovič was supported in the second round by a considerable number of electors who had previously voted for the ruling parties (see Krivý and Gyárfášová, 2004); and that these voters supported Gašparovič only to prevent Mečiar being elected. Thus they are unlikely to welcome cooperation between the ruling parties and Mečiar’s HZDS.

Secondly, the presidential election and referendum were a combined defeat for Smer. The party claimed it had not put forward a presidential candidate in order to focus on the referendum, but the Smer-KOZ referendum initiative failed. Hence, Smer emerged from the election empty-handed. Thirdly, it is unlikely that Gašparovič’s election will result in the presidency becoming a firm ally of the opposition. Gašparovič not only gave up his party membership, but also pledged impartiality (as did his two predecessors) and acknowledged the support he received from the governing parties’ voters.

One major question remains open, however: the use of presidential powers on foreign policy issues. President Gašparovič has indicated that, unlike his predecessors, he might not delegate these powers to the government. Such a step would represent a major departure from existing practice and would require a new approach to the administration of foreign policy as between the presidency and the cabinet. Also of some interest may be how the new president will come to terms with his political past as a representative of the 1994–1998 period when Slovakia became a pariah regime in Central Europe.

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The federal election in Canada, June 2004

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When Paul Martin succeeded Jean Chrétien as prime minister in December 2003, the expectation was that he would lead the governing Liberal Party to an easy election victory, even a landslide majority. A popular former finance minister, Martin straddled the ideological center of the party and seemed to have appeal in all

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