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# The March 2016 parliamentary elections in Slovakia: A political earthquake

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## ABSTRACT

The 2016 parliamentary elections in Slovakia brought important changes to the composition of parliament and resulted in an innovative four-party government. The leftist Smer-SD came on top but suffered substantial losses compared to 2012. It managed to form a government with three other parties, one of them representing the traditional Slovak nationalists while another being the leading representative of Slovakia's largest ethnic minority. The new coalition government downplays its internal divisions and claims it can provide stability in difficult international political situations, innovative policies in fighting corruption, and rejection of political extremism and radicalism. The opposition is fragmented and divided: it is composed of the two new radical right parties and two more moderate conservative-liberal groupings.

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## 1. Introduction

High levels of electoral volatility and the regular electoral success of new political parties have characterized Slovak party politics since the early days of post-communist competitive democratic politics. Parliamentary parties come and go, yet the two-camp logic of party competition and government formation have provided some level of stability and predictability. In this sense the parliamentary elections that took place on March 5, 2016 represent a turning point and an electoral earthquake, even by East European standards: they produced many losers, a few and mostly unexpected winners, opened up new divides, and led to a highly fragmented parliament and an innovative four-party coalition government.

## 2. Background

In the 2012 general election, the leftist party Smer – Social Democracy (Smer-SD) gained a majority in parliament and a single-party government was formed for the first time in Slovak modern history. The party won the general election for the third time in a row with a clear margin over its rivals. The centre-right parties who

participated in the previous cabinet of Iveta Radičová, now joined by the new populist and anti-establishment movement Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLaNO), lowered their previous gains and ended up in opposition (Rybář and Spáč, 2015).

The electoral results allowed Smer-SD to gain substantial control over daily politics. Backed by its loyal parliamentary group of 83 MPs (out of 150) the party was able to pursue its priorities (Mišík and Plenta, 2014) without any obstacles and to place its nominees into several key state institutions. Since its emergence in 1999, Smer-SD showed considerable internal stability and this did not change after 2012 election. In contrast to the previous centre-right government, the cabinet led by Robert Fico was rather absent of any internal clashes and this was promoted to the voters as a crucial advantage over coalition bargaining from the past. As its key objectives, the government promoted the country's economic growth, lowering the impact of the economic crisis and enhancing social well-being of citizens.

Although Smer-SD maintained a high level of support among voters during most of its term, some signs of the weakening of its dominance can be observed. At the end of 2013, Prime Minister Fico announced that he would run for president in March 2014. Despite the initial polls indicating his victory, Fico lost to non-partisan Andrej Kiska in the run-off (Rybář et al., 2014). The government also faced several scandals, mainly in the area of healthcare. In autumn 2014, after one instance of such corrupt behaviour was revealed, some figures from the ruling party, including the Speaker of Slovak Parliament and vice-chairman of Smer-SD Pavol Paška,

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were forced to resign. The ruling party reacted to the decrease in its support by adopting a series of so-called social packages, i.e. sets of social measures predominantly aimed at helping lower income groups and, after summer 2015, by stressing the topic of migration crisis (see below).

In contrast to Smer-SD, which managed to absorb smaller leftist parties more than a decade ago (cf. Kopeček, 2007), the opposition consisting of centre-right parties remained fragmented after the 2012 election. Despite their poor showing in the election, only a few made any personal changes. Mikuláš Dzurinda, former Prime Minister and long-time leader of Slovak Democratic and Christian Union – Democratic Party (SDKU-DS), resigned. Out of all of the parties, SDKU-DS was crippled the most when the so-called Gorilla scandal, a case which unveiled corrupt practices during the SDKU-DS reign, came to light. The party selected a new leader, Pavol Frešo, however its profile was too damaged and its support continued to fade. Other centre-right parties did not follow suit and kept their leaders in office. The opportunities for further cooperation in the opposition camp were also disturbed as most of the parties blamed the liberal Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) and its leader Richard Sulík for an early end of the previous cabinet led by Iveta Radičová.

To add to the fragmentation of the opposition, two new parties had emerged during the previous electoral term. Several months after the general election, Daniel Lipšic, a prominent representative of the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH), left its ranks and created his own party, New Majority (NOVA), with stress on appeals of anti-corruption and justice. In the beginning of 2013, KDH lost another elite figure. After an unsuccessful attempt to reform the party, Radoslav Procházka, a prominent lawyer and MP, left KDH and shortly after announced his candidacy for president. Although he did pass into the runoff, his encouraging result led him to start his own party, Network (Sieť), in summer 2014. Hence, compared to the monolithic Smer-SD, the centre-right opposition consisted of seven subjects, each of them well behind the ruling party in the polls.

Unlike most of the centre-right, the nationalist Slovak National Party (SNS) underwent major changes: in a “hostile takeover” Andrej Danko replaced its long-time leader Ján Slota. Under his leadership the party officially claimed to rid itself of its past loaded with corrupt behaviour and scandals. The new leadership even expelled Ján Slota from the party, citing misuse of party finances. Although the ideological and personnel transformation of SNS was rather verbal in character, its support started to improve and since 2015 the polls have showed the party steadily above the five per cent threshold. For the ruling Smer-SD this meant a higher probability of staying in government even after the 2016 election, as its former junior coalition partner was on its way to becoming a parliamentary party again.

### 3. Electoral system

The electoral system experienced no changes since the last general election. Slovakia uses a PR system with the threshold set at five per cent. In 1998, the country adopted a single nationwide constituency from which all 150 MPs are elected. The enormous magnitude of the constituency guarantees very proportional results towards all parties able to cross the threshold. Party ballots are flexible and voters are allowed to cast up to four preferential votes. With ballots consisting of up to 150 candidates, however, only a limited amount of nominees can obtain seats based on preferential voting. Mainly due to the size of the lists, voters tend to support top listed candidates and thus tend to back the ranking provided by parties (cf. Spác, 2016).

### 4. Campaign

In the previous two decades, party competition evolved around two main themes: the role of the market and issues related to national identity (Deegan-Krause and Haughton, 2012). Since about 2010, an anti-corruption agenda strongly supplemented these party divides. Smer, mastering a single-party majority in the 2012–2016 parliament, campaigned on the economic successes of its government: decreasing levels of unemployment, its ability to attract doses of foreign direct investments, and the growth of real wages.

The centre-right opposition objected that these economic results were achieved at the expense of a growing budget deficit and were thus unsustainable. Moreover, they utilized the growing number of suspicions of corrupt behaviour in various public bodies to highlight the incompetence of the Smer-led government. Smer reacted by replacing several of its top representatives, including the Speaker of Parliament and the Minister of Healthcare, in an effort to pre-empt public dissatisfaction. In addition, the party promised it would expand free public services and increase public spending in the subsequent electoral period. The so-called “social package” promised, among other things, to create 100,000 new jobs, more subsidies for public transport and to spend more on low-income groups like pensioners, disabled and young people and teachers.

The main electoral message of Smer, however, seems to relate to the questions of national identity and its protection. While in the previous elections the party did not shy away from scapegoating ethnic minorities, especially ethnic Hungarians, protection of people against what it called “uncontrolled migration of Muslims to Europe” dominated the 2016 campaign. Smer leader Fico claimed that a majority of migrants were economically motivated, that they represented a security threat and that his government would do everything to prevent their settlement in Slovakia. His government resented the agreed-upon EU mechanism to relocate asylum seekers among EU countries and filled a complaint to the European Court of Justice. Most of the opposition parties agreed that EU-wide “migrant quotas” were inefficient but criticised the government for what they perceived were activities harmful to Slovakia’s external relations. They also claimed Smer was misusing the migration crisis to divert attention from more pressing domestic issues.

Probably the most damaging to the Smer campaign were the activities of dissatisfied teachers and nurses from public hospitals who started their protest activities just weeks before the elections. They demanded higher wages and more investments into education and healthcare. Smer politicians stuck to their main campaign message - focus on migration - and offered little concessions to the intransigent protesters. Even though relatively few teachers and nurses actively took part in the protests, a considerable share of the population supported their activities and regarded government responses as unsatisfactory. In this atmosphere, the SaS and OLaNO parties repeatedly stressed they would not consider a coalition government with Smer after the elections. The former presented an elaborate programme of economic liberalisation, while the latter focused almost exclusively on the anti-corruption agenda, an image reinforced by the presence of publicly known anti-corruption activists and whistleblowers on their party list. Sieť and Most-Híd were less clear on the issue of future cooperation with Smer and focused on anti-corruption measures and general competence and trustworthiness, respectively.

Slovak Nationalists refrained from their traditional anti-minority themes, and emphasised their novelty and newly found moderation. SDKU, whose parliamentary caucus ceased to exist due to the defection of its members to other parties, did not articulate any distinctive themes. Their Christian Democratic (KDH) colleagues waged a campaign that was rather unfocused: their

**Table 1**  
Results of the parliamentary elections in the Slovak Republic, 5 March 2016.

Party	Votes	Votes (%)	Change 2012	Seats	Change 2012
Smer-SD (Direction-Social Democracy)	737,481	28.3	–16.1	49	–34
SaS (Freedom and Solidarity)	315,558	12.1	6.2	21	10
OĽaNO (Ordinary People and Independent Personalities)	287,611	11.0	2.5	19	3
SNS (Slovak National Party)	225,386	8.6	4.1	15	15
ĽSNS (People's Party Our Slovakia)	209,779	8.0	6.5	14	14
We are Family	172,860	6.6	6.6	11	11
Most-Híd (Bridge)	169,593	6.5	–0.4	11	–2
Sieť (Network)	146,205	5.6	5.6	10	10
KDH (Christian Democratic Movement)	128,908	4.9	–3.9	0	–16
SMK (Party of the Hungarian Community)	105,495	4.0	–0.2	0	0
Other parties	108,874	4.2	–4.6	0	0
Total	2,607,750	100	0	150	0
Parties not crossing threshold	343,277	13.1	–6.2		
Turnout		59.8	0.7		

Source: Slovak Statistical Office (2016).

traditional agenda, i.e. support for traditional (family) values, was diluted by the presence of several high-profile pro-life activists on the party lists of other opposition parties. Thus, KDH struggled to take a clear stance on many pressing issues. Among the non-parliamentary opposition parties, ĽSNS (Peoples Party Our Slovakia), a radical right party, campaigned on an anti-immigration, anti-EU and anti-establishment themes. Another protest party, We Are Family, was founded just a few weeks before the elections by controversial millionaire Boris Kollár. It campaigned on an anti-establishment ticket, emphasizing its own newness and cleanliness, its anti-immigration stance, and it demanded measures aimed at helping low-income people.

## 5. Results

Nearly 60 per cent of eligible voters participated in the election. The turnout was very similar to the general elections in both 2010 and 2012 and stabilized around 60%. On the other hand, the results of parties show a rising dynamics in the party system (Table 1). As in three previous national elections, the leftist Smer-SD also won in 2016. However, the party suffered substantial losses as it obtained merely less than 30 per cent of votes and lost the majority in parliament with, only 49 seats. The final results thus confirmed the trends suggested earlier by polls published in previous months about the decline in support for Smer-SD. Compared to the 2012 general election, the party lost nearly 400 thousand votes.

The elections brought disastrous results for established opposition centre-right parties: For the first time in their history, both KDH and SDKU-DS remained out of parliament. While the Christian Democrats did not pass the threshold by a hair, SDKU-DS which had, even in 2010, held the position of the strongest rightist party in Slovakia, gained less than one per cent of votes. The party Bridge matched its results from the previous election, but still lost two seats. The election was a disaster for the new party, Network, that positioned itself as the leading opposition force against the party Smer-SD, but ended with below six per cent of votes. Unlike these parties, the election was a success for SaS and OĽaNO-NOVA. Both parties scored substantially better than in polls and increased their parliamentary caucuses. Hence, the voters rewarded those centre-right parties that strictly excluded any cooperation with Smer-SD, while they turned back to the others.

Alongside with Sieť, two parties gained seats for the first time. The new party, We are Family, led by entrepreneur Boris Kollár, succeeded with its anti-establishment appeals and got more than 6 per cent of votes. A true surprise was the result of the extremist ĽSNS. This party had been able to secure some electoral gains in

second tier elections, but until 2016 it was marginal in national elections. Compared to the general election in 2012, it got five times more voters and gained 14 MPs. Finally the nationalist SNS confirmed the expectations from the polls and after four years reclaimed its parliamentary status.

## 6. Government formation

With eight parties in parliament, most observers expected a prolonged government formation process and perhaps even early elections. A two-party cabinet by Smer and SNS, expected before the elections as the most likely result, and apparently a solution that Smer leader Robert Fico had in mind before the elections, turned out to be unrealistic: the two parties did not control a majority in the parliament. All parties ruled out extreme-right ĽSNS as a coalition partner; in addition, We are Family announced it would not enter any government but did not rule out its parliamentary backing of a government without Smer-SD. A centre-right government led by SaS leader Richard Sulík would require both the participation of SNS and the support of We are Family. Under these circumstances, SNS became a pivotal party. At first, its leader Andrej Danko declared all options were open for his party. However, a week after the elections, at a congress of his party, he ruled out government cooperation with the We are Family and OĽaNO parties, thereby burying the prospect of a centre-right government. Instead, he accepted invitation of Smer-SD to start coalition negotiations. Most-Híd and Sieť followed suit, citing the unfeasibility of any alternative majority government.

Despite expectations of prolonged and difficult negotiations, the policy priorities of the new government were agreed upon within three days and the coalition talks were concluded within a week. President Andrej Kiska appointed Prime Minister Robert Fico and his new government on March 23, just 18 days after election day. In a post-election poll, a majority of voters of Smer-SD and SNS were satisfied with the new coalition government, while a majority of Most-Híd's and Sieť's supporters opposed it. The leaders of the two junior coalition partners claimed the newly formed coalition government was the only feasible option for the country, which was to take the EU Council Presidency on July 1, 2016, and that all other outcomes, including a caretaker government and early elections, would only strengthen the extreme-right parties. To protest the decision of their parties, three (out of ten) Sieť parliamentarians left the party and a Member of Parliament elected on the Most-Híd ticket took the same step and left his party.

The new administration represents a departure from the pattern of party competition and government formation in that it

comprises parties from the two camps that have never cooperated before. Most significantly, the party of traditional Slovak radical nationalism (SNS) now governs with politicians representing the largest ethnic minority (Most-Híd). This move has been facilitated by moderating changes in the SNS, as well as by the fact that Most-Híd is, unlike its predecessor Party of Hungarian Coalition, not an exclusive representative of the Hungarian minority but is comprised of a significant share of ethnic Slovak politicians (and voters). In addition, no Slovak government since 2002 has contained parties with such divergent economic orientations: Smer-SD and SNS have pursued paternalistic and redistributive policies while Most-Híd and Siet' have been more pro-market and liberal formations. The new coalition government downplays its internal divisions and claims it can provide stability in difficult international political situations, innovative policies in fighting corruption, and rejection of political extremism and radicalism.

## 7. Implications

The Slovak party political scene in 2016 sharply differs from its recent form. As an illustration, none of the subjects of the four-party coalition government that had governed just ten years prior to the elections is now represented in parliament. Siet', an erstwhile hope of liberal voters, whose political leaders aspired for a leading role in the centre-right, started to collapse on the eve of entering the new government. Smer-SD, even though still the strongest party, suffered serious electoral losses. Together with the defeat of its leader Robert Fico in the 2014 presidential elections and the less than impressive results in the 2014 European Parliament elections, it calls into question its long-term ability to mobilise voters. The centre-right opposition has transformed radically: instead of SDKU and KDH, the moderate peoples' parties, it is now composed of liberal eurosceptic SaS led by the controversial Member of European parliament Sulík, and an amorphous OLANO-NOVA grouping, itself a conglomerate of various political streams and individuals. While SDKU is generally considered a dead party, Christian

Democrats may return to parliament after the next elections, as they failed to gain parliamentary representation by only a tiny margin. To their right, the parliamentary space is occupied by two protest and radical-right parties that represent people disenchanted with the current political and economic situation. One of the main rationales for the creation of the new left-right government was to prevent instability, arguably a fertile ground for the growth of the radical parties. It remains to be seen how well the new administration will deliver on their promises and how this will impact the prospects of the opposition parties, both mainstream and more radical.

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