

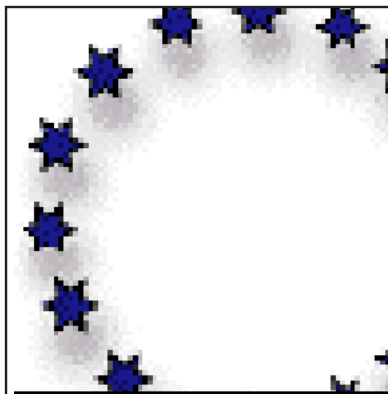
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THE SLOVAK PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION OF 3/17 APRIL 2004

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Key points:

- An unexpected presidential election result surprised both Slovakia and the international community on the eve of its joining the EU with Ivan Gašparovič – a close colleague of Vladimír Mečiar – until 2002, and chair of parliament during the notorious second and third Mečiar governments – becoming Slovak president.
 - Gašparovič won nearly 60 per cent of the vote in a second-round run-off against Mečiar, in which many reluctant voters opted for him as the 'lesser evil'.
 - Low turnout and government disunity were decisive in the first-round elimination of the leading candidate in opinion polls – foreign minister Eduard Kukan, proposed by prime minister Mikuláš Dzurinda.
 - The victory of Gašparovič, with the support of the prominent populist-left opposition party *Smer*, indicates that the left-right divide is becoming increasingly important in Slovak politics.
 - A fourth electoral defeat in a row may threaten the political future of Vladimír Mečiar.
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Background

The Slovak Republic has a parliamentary system of government, and the 1992 constitution determined that the president should be indirectly elected by a three-fifths majority of parliamentary deputies. However, the polarization of the Slovak political scene during the third Mečiar government (1994–8) meant that parliament was unable to agree on a successor to the first Slovak president, Michal Kováč, whose five-year term in office ended at the beginning of March 1998. The country remained without a president until the direct election of Rudolf Schuster in May 1999, following a change in the constitution in January 1999.

The unexpected result of the second presidential election in 2004 – with the election of Ivan Gašparovič, a close colleague of controversial ex-prime minister Vladimír Mečiar – provoked much debate within Slovakia about the state of the country's politics, but surprisingly little discussion of whether or not it had been a mistake to change the constitution and remove the selection of the president from the hands of the parliamentary deputies. The idea of directly electing the president in a popular election was conceived by the then opposition in 1996, when it was first anticipated that parliament would fail to elect a replacement for Kováč in 1998. When an opposition bill to change the constitution and directly elect the president was rejected by parliament in December 1996, the opposition began collecting the 350,000 signatures necessary to call a referendum on the subject. The referendum petition was eventually signed by over half a million citizens and President Kováč – an erstwhile party colleague of Mečiar's who had become a staunch opponent after entering the presidential office – called the referendum for May 1997. However, the government, through its control of the interior ministry, sabotaged the referendum and Slovakia eventually ended up without a president when Kováč left office.

This situation was not resolved until Mečiar's government was defeated in parliamentary elections in September 1998. The new four-party coalition government had the three-fifths majority of deputies necessary to elect a new president, and it was agreed when the government was formed that Rudolf Schuster, a one-time communist whose recently established 'Party of Civil Understanding' had managed to get into parliament, would be their joint candidate for president. However, by this time the government parties had spent so long telling the electorate that it would be a good idea to directly elect the president that they had convinced themselves in the process, and found it impossible to backtrack. Consequently, their 60 per cent parliamentary majority was used to change the constitution, and they all supported Schuster (with different levels of conviction) in direct elections in May 1999. Schuster failed to obtain 50 per cent of the popular vote in the first round of the election, but defeated ex-prime minister Mečiar in the second round.

This 1999 presidential election showed two of the problems of directly electing the head of state. First, the spectre of Mečiar becoming president nine months after his defeat as prime minister had kept the international community and foreign press speculating about whether Slovakia had really overcome the political problems

that had plagued it for most of the 1990s. Although his presidential bid failed, the fact that the ex-premier obtained 42.8 per cent of the popular vote in the second round run-off scarcely suggested that 'Mečiarism' was safely dead and buried. Secondly, bolstered by democratic legitimacy as well as his own self-confidence, the new President Schuster managed to cause considerable inconvenience to the first and second Dzurinda governments despite the fact that he lacked any real legislative or executive powers.

The third problem of direct presidential elections emerged in 2004. Such elections can only have one winner, so they are in essence majoritarian, and thus more likely to produce unexpected results that exaggerate swings in public opinion than the proportional representation system Slovakia uses for parliamentary elections. Since the Slovak president is non-executive, the election is also a second-rank, mid-term election, and hence prone to both low turnout and anti-government 'protest' votes. These can also lead to an unexpected result. The rather unexpected débâcle of the 2004 Slovak presidential contest was therefore in part due to the decision in the late 1990s to change the constitution and elect the president directly.

Party competition in the 2004 presidential election

The September 2002 parliamentary election had produced a four-party centre-right government that was more coherent, in terms of its programme, than any previous Slovak government. Despite its failure to unite forces before the election, the centre-right obtained a majority – 78 of the 150 seats – with only 42.52 per cent of the vote. This was because both the nationalist and the left-wing sectors of the party spectrum were in even deeper disarray.

Most fatefully for the later presidential election result, Vladimír Mečiar's Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) split just before the 2002 election when Mečiar excluded the second most popular politician in the party, former parliamentary chair Ivan Gašparovič, from HZDS's list of candidates. Gašparovič immediately formed his own party, the Movement for Democracy (HZD). It failed to cross the 5 per cent barrier necessary to get parliamentary seats, but HZDS was substantially weakened by the general disorientation of its voters caused by the split. HZDS's one-time coalition partner, the Slovak National Party (SNS), had also split into two parties. They both failed to enter parliament, although together they took nearly 7 per cent of the vote.

The left – which in Slovakia lies between the nationalist right and the centre-right in the party spectrum – was in an even worse state of flux. The post-communist Party of the Democratic Left (SDL'), which had been in every previous Slovak parliament, split and failed to gain any seats. It was superseded by a populist centre-left party, *Smer* (Direction), that had been founded by a popular SDL' defector, Robert Fico. *Smer* gained 13.46 per cent of the vote, and entered parliament as the second largest opposition party after Mečiar's HZDS. Part of the left-wing vote also went to the unreformed Communist Party of Slovakia, which entered parliament for the first time with 6.32 per cent of the vote.

This already chaotic party scene was exacerbated by further splits in the parliamentary parties after the election. By the time of the presidential election, Mikuláš Dzurinda's centre-right government had lost its majority and could only pass legislation with support from either the opposition parties or some of the 22 independent deputies, who were a motley group originating from both the government and opposition camps. In spite of this, the Dzurinda government had succeeded in implementing some rather overdue economic reforms at a speed that left part of the population reeling from the social consequences. Encouraged by Smer, the trade union movement had collected the 350,000 signatures necessary to call a referendum demanding early parliamentary elections. The left-inclined President Schuster called the referendum for the same day as the first round of the presidential election, in which he was himself standing for re-election. The referendum required a 50 per cent turnout in order to produce a valid result; this led to government appeals to boycott it. Although it was not clear whether its result would be legally binding, the possibility that the government might be ousted by the referendum complicated the presidential election campaign. The only reassuring thought for the Slovak electorate (though not the international community) was that Slovakia was joining NATO five days before the first round of the presidential election, and the EU two weeks after the second round.

Twelve candidates legally registered for election as president. Of these five may be discounted since they were non-starters doomed *a priori* to obtain less than 1 per cent of the vote (see Table 2). The front-runner was foreign minister Eduard Kukan, of Dzurinda's Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKÚ), who since 1998 had overseen Slovakia's success in achieving European integration. Close behind was Vladimír Mečiar, founder of the independent Slovakia in 1992. For most of the previous decade he had topped the polls as both the most trusted and also the least trusted politician in Slovakia, and he still retained the loyalty of a hard core of 20 per cent of the electorate. A second rank of candidates whose vote might go into double figures was formed by the incumbent President Schuster, who eventually decided to stand again although his performance as president had won him few friends, and Ivan Gasparovič, who believed in his own popular appeal despite the fact that his HZDS breakaway party had failed in the parliamentary elections. The third rank of candidates had 4–8 per cent support. Two of them were proposed by other parties in the government coalitions: František Mikloško of the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH), and L'ubo Roman of the Alliance of the New Citizen (ANO). Martin Bútora, an independent, was well known for his work in the citizens' movement and NGO sector, and his successful four years as Slovak ambassador in Washington during the crucial post-1998 period when Slovakia achieved NATO membership.

Of the seven parliamentary parties, four had proposed their own candidates for the presidency. The consolidation of party support behind the men standing (no women in sight) was therefore of particular importance in the pre-campaign period. On the government side, the only party that did not propose its own candidate – the Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK), which

represented the 10 per cent Hungarian minority – decided at the end of February to recommend the Christian Democrat Mikloško, after giving careful consideration to Bútora, who, like Mikloško, was free of any communist past. The decision to back Mikloško was rational insofar as there was a strong Christian Democratic stream in SMK. However, the Slovak KDH also had some background of ethnic Slovak nationalism and Euroscepticism that was unattractive to ethnically Hungarian voters; moreover Mikloško's strong Catholicism was not well suited to what was effectively a catch-all party for an ethnically defined community. SDKÚ's Kukan was unacceptable to them, despite his contribution to achieving Slovakia's European integration, because he had been a Communist Party member for almost 30 years from 1961, and as foreign minister he had opposed Hungary's controversial law on support for ethnic Hungarians living in neighbouring countries. However, in mid-March, Kukan gained the support of ANO, which withdrew its candidate Roman in his favour. Meanwhile, the newly formed Free Forum (SF), which had broken away from SDKÚ and thus had a number of high-profile parliamentary deputies, put its backing behind Bútora.

On the opposition side, the Communist KSS decided to make no recommendation, while Smer – in the most crucial decision of the election campaign – decided to throw its support behind Gasparovič. The decision was allegedly programmatic, in that Gasparovič satisfied Smer's criteria of being both nationally and socially oriented. Strategically, however, Gasparovič was also the most promising choice. Smer's main priority was achieving early parliamentary elections that might propel its leader Fico to the premiership and the real nexus of power. Fico had nothing to gain by proposing a candidate of his own, who would both compete with his dominant position as party leader and risk tainting the party with failure in a second-rank election. Gasparovič was perfect for a tentative 'king-making' gambit because he was not identified with a competing parliamentary party; he was sufficiently independent from Smer for the party to distance himself from his defeat; and within the slightly nationalist leftish middle ground of Slovak politics, he looked stronger than the incumbent Schuster.

The major problem in the presidential race, which was to be a crucial factor in the outcome, was overcrowding on the right side of the party political spectrum. Of the four centre-right parties comprising the government, three had observers with the same party group in the European Parliament. Consequently, they had a dangerous tendency to compete with each other instead of with the opposition. This intra-governmental competition was accorded higher priority than the tactically rational goal of deciding on a joint presidential candidate. While Kukan had long appeared a not unlikely choice as government candidate, Dzurinda made the mistake of declaring him publicly as the SDKÚ candidate before gaining the tacit support of his coalition partners. It seems Dzurinda assumed that the government should then have discussed which of the four parties' candidates should be jointly adopted. A real consensus politics approach would have required each party to enter negotiations with several candidates in mind, and then agree on the one who satisfied everyone's minimal criteria. However, by late 2003 the

government was operating on competitive rather than consensual principles. Even if Dzurinda's tactics had been more skilful, it is doubtful whether the government parties had the will to agree on a common candidate. Consequently, the centre-right entered the presidential race split between three candidates: Kukan, Miklosko and Bútora.

The excess of centre-right parties was matched by a paucity of party choice on the left. The left was sandwiched between the democratic centre-right and the nationalist right, which had dominated party competition ever since the founding of independent Slovakia in 1992. As Fico had recognized, this neglected middle ground – nearly a third of the Slovak electorate— was the domain of the floating voters and had a tremendous potential force. In the 2004 presidential elections, this middle ground was contested only by two second-rank candidates, Schuster and Gasparovič, neither of whom came from a parliamentary party.

The final camp in Slovak politics, the nationalist part of the political spectrum, was more clearly defined. Its sole candidate was Mečiar, who was supported by HZDS and two versions of the Slovak National Party (although the bizarre legal battles in SNS meant that others supported Gasparovič, as did the People's Union parliamentary deputies who had defected from HZDS since the previous election). This concentration of forces made it a viable competitor in the electoral race. The problem of the centre-right was that it relied on Mečiar ultimately being defeated by majority aversion, when he met Kukan in the second round of the election. This battle never took place.

The campaign

The campaign that led up to the first-round vote on 3 April was frequently described as boring. There were three main reasons for this. The first was the nature of the non-executive presidency. Since presidents do not make policy, there were few substantive issues to discuss. Debate centred around questions such as explaining their communist pasts (all four leading candidates had one), and who had most diplomatic experience or spoke most foreign languages. The second reason was that public opinion polls were fairly consistent in showing Kukan in the lead, with Mečiar second (see Table 1). Most discussion was prompted by a

single poll, published two and a half weeks before the election, in which Mečiar was slightly ahead of Kukan. However, this finding was not confirmed by later polls, and in any case Mečiar was unlikely to pick up as many extra votes in the second-round as Kukan. There was also a single poll that showed Gasparovič ahead of Mečiar. This was potentially more significant, since, being a less controversial and more centrist candidate, he would have had a chance of slipping past Kukan in a second-round run-off. Finally, the election did not seem that important. Even if Mečiar or Gasparovič were elected, the worst they could do was slow down the government's economic reforms by vetoing laws, necessitating a new vote in parliament in which half of all deputies had to vote in favour (a rather high hurdle for a minority government). This was nothing compared to the threat of exclusion from NATO and the EU with which the Slovak electorate had been faced in the 1998 and 2002 parliamentary elections. The voters had also been dragged to the ballot box less than a year previously for the referendum on EU accession, which required a 50 per cent turnout to be valid. Arguably, they were suffering from over-mobilization.

Apart from the formal campaign, political events in the two weeks prior to the election were slanted towards undermining Kukan's campaign. Having the support of prime minister Dzurinda and the SDKÚ – a party that now attracted well below 10 per cent of voters in opinion polls – was increasingly a liability rather than an asset for him. Ten days before the election the prime minister hit the Slovak headlines in a negative light when the procurator general decided that a complaint Dzurinda had made about a mysterious 'group' undermining the security service and his party was unfounded. Three days before the election, accusations were leaked in the press that SDKÚ's official list of donors to the party contained the names of people who denied they had given any money. In other words, it appeared that the party had actually been receiving money from unknown sources it wished to conceal. Even Dzurinda's and Kukan's triumph – Slovakia's joining NATO at the beginning of the election week – managed to backfire. A large celebration held in Bratislava the day before the election attracted negative comment because neither Kukan's competitor Bútora, who had done so much as Slovak ambassador to Washington, nor the Christian Democrat chair of parliament, Pavol Hrusovský, had been invited. This led to accusations that SDKÚ was

Table 1: Opinion poll predictions of the Slovak presidential election result (%)

| Candidate/ Poll + date | MVK 10–16.2 | FOCUS 11–17.2 | SRO 17–23.2 | DICIO 25.2–1.3 | ÚVVM 1–9.3 | SRO 9–15.3 | Markant 16–22.3 | MVK 22–26.3 | ÚVVM 27–29.3 |
|---------------------------|----------------|------------------|----------------|-------------------|---------------|---------------|--------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| Kukan | 26.3 | 27.5 | 27.9 | 28.4 | 25.4 | 27.0 | 30.3 | 30.1 | 27.6 |
| Mečiar | 21.5 | 23.1 | 22.4 | 25.1 | 26.7 | 24.2 | 23.3 | 20.5 | 26.0 |
| Gasparovič | 15.7 | 13.7 | 15.8 | 15.8 | 12.7 | 17.1 | 19.7 | 21.1 | 18.1 |
| Schuster | 15.7 | 17.5 | 15.5 | 12.0 | 17.1 | 13.0 | 9.7 | 7.7 | 10.8 |
| Miklosko | 6.9 | 4.7 | 6.7 | 5.7 | 8.8 | 8.7 | 4.4 | 7.3 | 7.6 |
| Bútora | 6.2 | 6.1 | 6.3 | 4.0 | 3.4 | 6.5 | 5.5 | 8.5 | 5.9 |
| Total of 6 | 92.3 | 92.6 | 94.6 | 91.0 | 94.1 | 96.5 | 92.9 | 95.2 | 96.0 |

Sources: *Sme* 26.02.2004, 03.03.2004, 10.03.2004, 15.03.2004, 31.03.2004; *Pravda* 27.03.2004; *Live!* 29.03.2004.

presenting the government's successes as achievements of their party alone. The cost of Kukan's campaign, which had the most ubiquitous billboards, was also criticized.

Finally, the all-important TV debate may have played a role in the outcome. While the public STV station broadcast dull half-hour interviews with each of the candidates, the independent *Markíza* channel held a live debate with all four leading candidates on the Wednesday before the election. Gasparovič got off to a good start because the first question was on communist party membership; he had the most satisfactory answer, having joined during the Prague spring of 1968 and then been thrown out shortly after the Soviet invasion. While Kukan also appeared unflappable, his lack of charisma was painfully evident in the debating environment, and would have done little to convince floating voters.

Although the campaign took place less than two months before Slovakia joined the EU, the issue was largely absent in the presidential contest. Membership was so near that it was taken for granted, and Kukan was unable successfully to project himself as the mastermind behind Slovakia's integration achievements. The prevailing general political consensus on membership also left little to argue about. The major battlefield, therefore, was the left-right divide over the effects of the government's economic policies. However, this battle centred around the referendum on the early elections, and not the choice of president. Given that if the referendum turned out to be valid, the result would be a real change in power in Slovakia, the presidential election was bound to seem slightly tame in comparison.

The election result (first round)

Saturday 3 April 2004 was a sunny day, and many Slovaks, having been exhorted by the government not to take part in the referendum, decided not to bother with the presidential election either. Less than 48 per cent of the electorate voted, although turnout was above 50 per cent in the four of Slovakia's eight regions where HZDS was traditionally strongest. Mečiar thus once again confounded the opinion pollsters and gained nearly a third of the vote. Gasparovič came second in the four regions with the highest turnout, and ended up beating the favourite, Kukan, by 3,644 votes. The turnout topped 60 per cent in only one of Slovakia's 79 districts – Gašparovič's home town of Poltár.

The government parties were appalled by the result, and could console themselves only with the fact that the turnout in the referendum on early elections was even lower, at 35.86 per cent. This meant that it was invalid, and the government did not have to call early elections, even though 86.78 per cent of participants voted 'yes'. The 'yes' vote was undoubtedly so high because many of the government's supporters had abstained deliberately so that the referendum would fail. However, three-quarters of the citizens who had voted in the presidential election also took part in the referendum (assuming that almost everyone voting in the referendum had also cast a vote for the president).

Table 2: Results of first round of Slovak presidential election, 3 April 2003

| Candidate | Supported by | Votes | % vote |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------|--------|
| Vladimír Mečiar (HZDS) | HZDS, SNS, PSNS | 650,242 | 32.73 |
| Ivan Gasparovič (HZD) | Smer, HZD, L'Ú, 'SNS', 'PSNS', SNJ | 442,564 | 22.28 |
| Eduard Kukan (SDKÚ) | SDKÚ, ANO | 438,920 | 22.09 |
| Rudolf Schuster | | 147,549 | 7.42 |
| Frantiaek Mikloško (KDH) | KDH, SMK | 129,414 | 6.51 |
| Martin Bútora | SF | 129,387 | 6.51 |
| Ján Králik | | 15,873 | 0.79 |
| Jozef Kalman | | 10,221 | 0.51 |
| Július Kubík | | 7,734 | 0.38 |
| Jozef Šesták | | 6,785 | 0.34 |
| Stanislav Bernát | | 5,719 | 0.28 |
| Total | | 1,986,214 | |
| Turnout: 47.94% | | | |

Source: *Statistický úrad Slovenskej republiky, www.statistics.sk.*

Party key:

| | |
|--------|---|
| ANO | <i>Aliancia nového občana</i> (Alliance of the New Citizen) |
| HZD | <i>Hnutie za demokraciu</i> (Movement for Democracy) |
| HZDS | <i>Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko</i> (Movement for a Democratic Slovakia) |
| KDH | <i>Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie</i> (Christian Democratic Movement) |
| L'Ú | <i>L'udová únia</i> (People's Union) |
| PSNS | <i>Pravá slovenská národná strana</i> (Real Slovak National Party) |
| 'PSNS' | Contenders to the title PSNS, unregistered, led by Ján Slota |
| SDKÚ | <i>Slovenská demokratická a kresťanská únia</i> (Slovak Democratic and Christian Union) |
| SF | <i>Slobodné Forum</i> (Free Forum) |
| SMK | <i>Strana maďarskej koalície</i> (Party of the Hungarian Coalition) |
| SNJ | <i>Slovenská národná jednota</i> (Slovak National Union) |
| SNS | <i>Slovenská národná strana</i> (Slovak National Party) |
| 'SNS' | Contenders to the title SNS, unregistered, led by Anna Máliková |

This meant that nearly two-thirds of the voters who participated in the presidential election voted *against* the continuation of the second Dzurinda government. The government was clearly far from popular.

No exit polls were conducted during the presidential election and referendum, so it is hard to correlate voting choices with voters' political views and demographic characteristics other than by looking at the demographic spread of the vote. However, four tentative conclusions may be drawn from the election results.

First, turnout matters. This was already well known in Slovakia, and both the 1998 and 2002 elections had been preceded by large NGO campaigns to 'get the vote out'. Although nominally non-political, attempts at voter mobilization had a political background. It was known both that Mečiar had a loyal core of voters with high electoral participation rates, and that turnout tended to be low among younger voters, who were generally anti-Mečiar. Higher turnout therefore benefited

Meciar's opponents. With no voter mobilization campaign accompanying the presidential election, turnout slumped. Although much lower than the 73 per cent turnout in the first round of the 1999 presidential election, 48 per cent was not outstandingly low for a 'second-rank' election. Direct presidential elections will always tend to favour parties with loyal core voters.

Secondly, ethnic minorities matter. In April 2004, the Hungarian minority, which generally has an above-average turnout in elections, withdrew from Slovak politics for the first time. The two lowest turnouts – 20.22 per cent in Dunajská Streda and 22.39 per cent in Komárno – were in districts that had recorded votes of 86.18 per cent and 74.63 per cent respectively for the Party of the Hungarian Coalition in the 2002 parliamentary elections. If these two districts alone (disregarding other areas with substantial Hungarian minorities) had produced average turnouts in 2004, there would have been a good 40,000 more government party voters at the ballot box. Given the narrow 3,644 majority by which Kukan lost to Gašparovič, this would easily have swung the election.

Thirdly, the Slovak political scene is not polarized into two camps, but rather split into three: centre-right, nationalist right and left. The three centre-right candidates – Kukan, Mikloško and Bútorá – gained a total of 35.13 per cent of the vote, compared to 32.74 per cent for Meciar on the nationalist right and 29.71 per cent for the two more leftist candidates, Gašparovič and Schuster.

Fourthly, coalition strategies matter. The centre right relied too heavily on the fact that Meciar and HZDS are 'uncoalitionable', and had been unable to gain government power in two successive parliamentary elections where they had been the largest single party. In fact, SDKÚ and KDH are themselves equally powerless without coalition partners, and the majoritarian nature of a presidential election showed this clearly. The strategy of 'Fico the Kingmaker' in the leftist middle ground was more successful. However, whether his presidential election move could be repeated in a parliamentary election is less clear. Exploiting government unpopularity in a mid-term second rank election is not the most difficult of political feats.

The election result (second round)

The second round of the presidential election represented a nightmare for many in the Slovak intelligentsia, who had to decide whether Gašparovič was a 'lesser evil' than Meciar, or whether each was as bad as the other. The government parties washed their hands of the public's dilemma within 24 hours of the first-round result by refusing to give any guidance. KDH and ANO advised their supporters not to vote, while SDKÚ and SMK refused to support either candidate and told their voters it was up to them what they did.

No opinion polls were conducted during the two weeks before the second ballot, partly because the Easter bank holiday fell in the middle, but in the main because it was clear that no poll could be accurate. The carefully conducted polls before the first-round ballot had all been badly wrong, and after the first round it was palpable that many people did not know what they

would do and would probably make up their minds in the last few days before voting.

What was clear was that turnout would again be crucial. It was assumed that Meciar's loyal followers would all go and vote again, but that he would be unlikely to gain many additional votes, since the first-round candidate whose supporters were most likely to find him acceptable – Gašparovič – was still in the race. Over 15 per cent of the total registered electorate had voted for Meciar in the first round, so he was certain to win if there were a second-round turnout of 30 per cent, but the nearer it went to 40 per cent, the better were Gašparovič's chances. Government encouragement to boycott the vote was therefore considered by Gašparovič supporters to be a tacit campaign in favour of Meciar. One of Meciar's more bizarre statements after his eventual defeat was to claim that although the government parties had publicly called on the electorate not to take part, they had actually issued instructions at local level that people should vote for Gašparovič.

The calculations among government supporters about whom to vote for were tortuous. Gašparovič played heavily on the fact that he was more acceptable than Meciar internationally, although he had himself, when chair of the parliament, been a major actor in one of the most widely criticized events during the third Meciar government, when a HZDS parliamentary deputy was stripped of his mandate after leaving the party. Gašparovič certainly did not share Meciar's notoriety. However, the international community generally refrained from comment, being aware that the Slovak presidency was not a particularly powerful office.

There was also speculation that Meciar's election as president could be beneficial as it would remove him from parliamentary politics and therefore weaken HZDS. His desire to show that his party was 'coalitionable' might also curb his desire to delay the government's legislative programme by returning laws to parliament. Gašparovič, on the other hand, if acting on Fico's behalf in return for Smer's support in his election campaign, might be more disruptive and hostile to the government. The difficulty was that no-one could predict with certainty what kind of president either might become. The omens were not all bad. President Kováč, originally an HZDS nomination for president, had shown fierce independence once in office and done all he could to curb abuses of power during the second and third Meciar governments, and it was possible that Gašparovič might follow this model. Likewise, Meciar might use the presidency to forge for himself a more positive image in future history books than the one he had created during his international failures as prime minister.

In the event, the result was a much clearer victory for Gašparovič than had been expected. Meciar's vote was 11 per cent higher than in the first round, but Gašparovič's vote increased by 143 per cent. More than 70 per cent of the voters who had chosen one of the other nine candidates in the first round switched to Gašparovič in the second round, while only 8 per cent had transferred to Meciar. Crucially, the turnout, at 43.50 per cent, was only ten per cent lower than in the first round. In one district – Gašparovič's Poltár – the already high turnout actually increased, with 77 per

Table 3: Results of second round of Slovak presidential election, 17 April 2004

| Candidate | Votes | % vote |
|------------------------|------------------|--------|
| Ivan Gašparovič | 1,079,592 | 59.91 |
| Vladimír Mečiar | 722,368 | 40.08 |
| Total | 1,801,960 | |
| Turnout: 43.50% | | |

Source: *Statistický úrad Slovenskej republiky, www.statistics.sk.*

cent in favour of the local candidate. Encouragingly, this suggested that Gašparovič was a man more inclined to make friends than enemies among people who knew him.

The lack of exit polls again makes it hard to present a clear picture of how voting patterns shifted. Anecdotal evidence suggests that more young people were seen at polling stations. This might merely be linked to the bad weather, in that there were fewer distractions. There is also clear evidence that cities voted against Mečiar. The Gašparovič vote more than quadrupled in Bratislava, with over 80 per cent of voters who had originally opted for the other nine candidates switching to him. A number of interlinked factors affected his strong vote in the second round. The first is that voters on the centre right did not rely on cues from government politicians. Given the total failure of the government parties' strategy in presenting candidates for the first round, the electorate's lack of trust in their judgment is understandable. The second is that after the experiences of the 1990s, aversion to Mečiar among the majority of Slovak voters is very strong, even without external help from NGO campaigns and political leaders. Parts of the Slovak elite appear to be uncoupled from the general public, who had less trouble than many politicians and commentators in working out what to do after the first-round result. The third is that Mečiar was his own worst enemy. His performance in the second-round television debates brought back vivid and disturbing memories of the 1990s for many viewers, and showed how little his manner and instincts had changed. He even seriously claimed in one debate that he had received support in his election bid from Bill Clinton, which showed that he still had as little understanding as ever of what could reasonably be said about foreign leaders, or believed by the ordinary voter. The prospect of a Mečiar presidency being one long embarrassing nightmare for Slovakia just when it had finally gained international acceptance, as well as genuine respect and admiration for some of its policies, was just too horrible to contemplate. Gašparovič, on the other hand, really did not make any mistakes in the election campaign, which boded well for his ability to behave with dignity as president.

The aftermath

The immediate aftermath of the election showed that it could have two major implications. First, Mečiar's undignified behaviour on the day after the election, in which he refused on TV to congratulate Gašparovič or shake his hand, prompted many of the other leading figures in HZDS, including parliamentary party chair Viliam Veteska, to criticize him. His declaration that HZDS would in future display 'a more emphatic differentiation' from both government and opposition parties in parliament (i.e. cease any kind of cooperation) was a policy change made without consultation with party colleagues. However, given the centrality of Mečiar's charisma to both the foundation and popularity of HZDS, it is doubtful whether the movement would survive if he were forced to withdraw from the leadership, or stormed off in a huff of his own accord.

Secondly, there were signs of party consolidation on the left of the political spectrum, and a strengthening of the left-right axis in Slovak party competition. As Gašparovič became president and resigned from the leadership of HZD, there was speculation that the party would unite formally with the 'People's Union' (*L'udová únia*) that had been formed from HZDS defectors in the 2002–04 parliament, and with which HZD was running in the European Parliament elections. There was also speculation that they might then merge with Smer, which had already incorporated small non-parliamentary parties on the left in its European Parliament candidate list. Since HZDS had always displayed a mix of left-wing and right-wing characteristics with a nationalist overlay, the shift of some of HZDS's erstwhile politicians and voters leftwards to Smer seemed to represent a movement towards the 'normalization' of the Slovak party system. However, the left that was emerging appeared to be social national rather than social democratic in character.

Meanwhile, the centre-right government remained wracked by tensions between all its four member parties. There was also still uncertainty about its long-term relationship to the pariah nationalist right under Mečiar, which desperately wanted to be accepted as a respectable European people's party, but seemed as far away from that goal as ever.

Despite apparent movement in the Slovak party system, an important caveat must be made. Premature accounts of the demise of Mečiar and HZDS have been a frequent occurrence for a number of years. The fact remains that HZDS has obtained the largest party vote in every nationwide Slovak election since it was founded in 1991, and on 3 April 2004 nearly one-third of Slovak voters chose to give their vote to Mečiar personally when they had a wide choice of other candidates.

This is the latest in a series of election and referendum briefings produced by the European Parties Elections and Referendums Network (EPERN). Based in the Sussex European Institute, EPERN is an international network of scholars that was originally established as the Opposing Europe Research Network (OERN) in June 2000 to chart the divisions over Europe that exist within party systems. In August 2003 it was re-launched as EPERN to reflect a widening of its objectives to consider the broader impact of the European issue on the domestic politics of EU member and candidate states. The Network retains an independent stance on the issues under consideration. For more information and copies of all our publications visit our website at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/1-4-2.html>.

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