

ELECTION BRIEFING NO 26 EUROPE AND THE SLOVAK PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION OF JUNE 2006

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Key Points:

- For the first time ever, the left, in the shape of Robert Fico's Smer-Social Democracy, won a Slovak election, gaining a third of seats.
- The election campaign focused strongly on economic issues, with Fico and Prime Minister Dzurinda the main protagonists.
- Dzurinda's Slovak Christian and Democratic Union polled far better than in the opinion polls, and the three centre-right parties of the former government were together stronger than Smer.
- The Movement for a Democratic Slovakia, still led by three-times premier Vladimir Mečiar, slumped to 8.67% of the vote, but played a key role in coalition formation.
- Fico incurred the wrath of the Party of European Socialists and the Socialist International by forming a coalition with the far-right Slovak National Party (and Mečiar).
- Turnout sank to 54.67%, an all-time low for a Slovak parliamentary election.

Introduction

The Slovak election of 17 June 2006 was the sixth free parliamentary election in Slovakia since 1989, and the fourth in the independent Slovak Republic. In many ways, it was less tense than all previous elections since there was no major decision to make about the future direction of the country: no decision on democracy, on the future of Czechoslovakia, or on membership of the EU and NATO. It consequently gained the lowest turnout of any parliamentary election in Slovakia, at 54.67%.

The major excitement, however, was in the process of forming a government. There had been a decline in the previously intense polarisation of Slovak society which meant that almost any party might end up going into coalition with any other. It was predicted in advance that Robert Fico's Smer-Social Democracy (Smer-SD), a member of the Party of European Socialists (PES) in the European Parliament, would

be the largest single party, and that Fico would be formally asked to form a government by the Slovak President Ivan Gasparovič (whom Fico had himself helped to power). But Fico's aims and strategy long remained unclear.

In the end, Fico formed a government with two parties identified with the nationalist strand in Slovak politics, the Slovak National Party (SNS) and the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), both of whom had disgraced themselves when previously in government in the 1990s. Predicting how this government will perform is as difficult as guessing the election result had been. There are question marks both over Fico's ability to control his coalition partners, and over the nature of Smer-SD itself as a party.

Background: the Slovak party system

The Slovak party system underwent some stabilisation from 2002 onwards, and the 2006 election was the first ever where no new party entered parliament. Seven parties had entered parliament in the September 2002 elections, and it is useful to introduce them as government and opposition parties since this divide eventually re-emerged after the 2006 elections.

The 2002-2006 government was formed from four centre-right parties. The Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) had been founded in the wake of the 1989 Velvet Revolution, and has been in every Slovak parliament from 1990 onwards. Although it stood as part of the five-party Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK) in the crucial 1998 election that rehabilitated Slovakia in the eyes of the international community, it soon after re-asserted its independence and formed its own parliamentary club. In the European Parliament, the Christian Democratic Movement belongs to the European People's Party (EPP).

The Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKÚ) had been formed in 2000, in an attempt to retain the strength in unity of the Slovak Democratic Coalition. It comprised the liberal Democratic Union, founded by politicians who had broken away from Vladimír Mečiar's Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) in the first two years after Slovak independence, as well as many leading figures in the Christian Democratic Movement, most notably Mikuláš Dzurinda, the prime minister from 1998 to 2006. The Slovak Democratic and Christian Union also joined the EPP, outwardly retaining the centre-right identity of its erstwhile Christian Democratic Movement politicians, although in policy terms it was nearer to the Democratic Union's liberal identity. It pushed for economic reform while retaining more liberal values than those of the Christian Democrats. The formation of the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union had made the Christian Democratic Movement a more 'fundamentalist' Catholic party, since those Christian Democrats who aspired to a broader 'catch all' party of the right had joined the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union.

The third party that had been in both Dzurinda governments was the Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK), which represented the country's ten per cent Hungarian minority and was strong in the south of Slovakia. Like the Christian Democratic Movement, it contained many politicians, for example its chair Béla Bugár, who had been active in politics throughout the 1990s. The party had been created in 1998 from

three Hungarian parties who had stood together in coalition in the 1994 elections. They were forced formally to unite by a controversial election law amendment passed shortly before the 1998 election that was disadvantageous to coalitions. Unlike the Slovak Democratic Coalition, which had turned into a party for the same reason, unity suited Slovakia's Hungarians, and the Party of the Hungarian Coalition arrangement became permanent. Since the strongest party that formed the party was Bugár's Hungarian Christian Democratic Movement, it also joined the EPP at European level.

The fourth member of the second Dzurinda government was the liberal Alliance of the New Citizen (ANO). This had been formed in spring 2001, and was a curious entity since its main sponsor and chair was the independent TV owner, Pavol Rusko, and the crucial role of its leader sat rather uneasily with its liberal profile.

The parliamentary opposition in 2002-2006 initially comprised three parties. The strongest was Mečiar's Movement for a Democratic Slovakia, which had done so much to bring about Slovakia's exclusion from the European integration process when it led the 1994-1998 government. It had emerged as the largest single party in every parliamentary election since its foundation in 1991, and although it had been weakened by splitting (yet again) just before the 2002 elections, it still remained the strongest single parliamentary party – a status it soon lost by splitting once more after the election. In the European Parliament, its MEPs were non-aligned. The Movement for a Democratic Slovakia had decided in March 2000 that it was a centre-right People's Party and wanted to join the EPP, but since EPP already had three Slovak members, these were able to block its membership.

The most strongly oppositional party in the 2002-2006 period was Robert Fico's Smer. Fico had broken away from the post-communist Party of the Democratic Left (SDL) soon after it entered government with the right in 1998, and he created a very successful new party that catered for anything likely to gain sponsorship and votes. It joined PES after amalgamating with SDL, which had failed to reenter parliament in 2002, and the smaller Social Democratic Party of Slovakia, both of which were already members of the Socialist International. Its name, Smer, means 'Direction', and after 2002 Fico pointed the arrow in its logo towards a red rose and turned it into Smer-Social Democracy.

The final rather unexpected entry into the 2002 parliament had been the unreformed Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS), which picked up votes, particularly in the less nationalist eastern part of Slovakia, from voters left in despair at the effects of economic reform and, most potently, unemployment. It had gained a steady two to three per cent of the vote throughout the 1990s, but had never before crossed the five per cent threshold necessary to gain parliamentary seats under the Slovak PR system.

The four-party second Dzurinda government formed in 2002, while hailed on its creation as the most programmatically coherent government in the short history of Slovakia, actually proved to be one of the most fractious. It soon lost its majority because of splits in both the Alliance of the New Citizen and the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union, but struggled on ruling through *ad hoc* alliances with the ever-increasing number of independent deputies (who were frequently thought to have been bribed), and some support from the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia, which was desperate to prove it was a respectable party that could re-enter government. The

Alliance of the New Citizen finally left the government after its chair, Rusko, was forced to resign as Economics Minister because of dubious financial dealing in autumn 2005. Although the government had long been shaky, its eventual collapse in January 2006 – caused by a row between the Christian Democratic Movement and the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union about implementing the Vatican Treaty – was rather unexpected. It was thought that the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union prime minister Dzurinda had finally decided to trigger an early election for strategic reasons. The election was brought forward from the normal September date to June with all-party agreement.

This rather messy government had, however, brought about some notable achievements. In 2004, it took Slovakia into both the EU and NATO, and, largely through the efforts of the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union Finance Minister, Ivan Mikloš, reshaped Slovakia's rather tarnished international image into that of an economically liberal Flat Tax paradise where every foreign company wanted to build their car factory.

In the run-up to the 2006 elections, it was fairly clear that six parties would definitely enter parliament. Under Slovakia's system of proportional representation, this entailed gaining at least 5% of the vote. These promising candidates comprised three government parties – the EPP members Slovak Democratic and Christian Union, Christian Democratic Movement and the Party of the Hungarian Coalition – and two opposition parties – Smer-Social Democracy and the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia. These were the five parties that had succeeded in gaining MEPs in the first European Parliament elections in June 2004. The sixth party that performed consistently well in opinion polls was the Slovak National Party (SNS), which had been elected to all four Slovak parliaments from 1990 until the 1998, but split disastrously before the 2002 elections, when both its halves gained below five per cent and were thus excluded from parliament. When the leaders of the two breakaway factions reunited, its popularity soon rose again to its former level.

Three further parties were 'possibles' for gaining parliamentary seats in 2006. The most promising was Free Forum (SF), which was largely formed from breakaway Slovak Democratic and Christian Union deputies, with a sprinkling of former deputies from other parties, some Greens and some intellectuals. Its leader, the former Slovak Democratic and Christian Union deputy parliament chair, Zuzana Martináková, styled the Free Forum as a 'party of the middle class', but it was damaged during the election campaign both by supporting a candidate in a mayoral election in Bratislava whose election proved unexpectedly controversial, and by internal arguments.

The next most likely candidate was the Communist Party of Slovakia. It had done very little during its four years in parliament, and not been immune from deputy defection, and its opinion poll preferences hovered around the 5% mark. Finally, the rump of the Alliance of the New Citizen under Pavol Rusko put on a high-profile billboard campaign that attempted to cater for Slovakia's liberal voters by emphasising issues such as the representation of women and the separation of church and state that were conspicuously missing from the offerings of the predominantly rightist major parties, and were not emphasised by Smer-Social Democracy either.

The only other party that was conspicuous in its billboard campaign was the Movement for Democracy (HZD), which had been formed from breakaway Movement for a Democratic Slovakia deputies just before the 2002 election. Its one single electoral success had been in getting its leader, Ivan Gasparovič, elected as president in spring 2004, although this was mainly because Smer had chosen to support for Gasparovič rather than running a candidate of its own. The Movement for Democracy exploited its link to the president, its honorary chairman, in the campaign, and although the non-executive president's having links to a political party, rather than acting as a non-party figure, was disapproved of by other parties, the irrelevance of the party in electoral terms limited the importance of this issue.

The campaign

The 2006 election campaign differed from previous campaigns in a number of ways. In terms of the electoral law, there had been two major changes. Firstly, the previously very restrictive provisions on television and radio coverage of the election campaign had been removed. In the past, they had reduced election campaign coverage to boring blocks of party political broadcasts on state television where every competing party – and half of them were total non-entities – had the right to the same space. Formal TV 'election campaign' debates between political leaders also had to include the irrelevant non-entities, and in other debates, the real political leaders of Slovakia could talk about anything except their election manifestos. In 2006, all TV channels were alive with election debates in which the leading contenders could be grouped together and pull apart each other's election programmes. The voters were thus able to gain a real idea of what the election campaign was about – if they were interested.

The second major election law change related to the way 'preferential votes' were counted. The Slovak system of PR used open rather than closed lists, meaning that voters had the opportunity to re-order the list of candidates that their chosen party had selected. At the polling stations, they were handed a sheaf of papers, each of which contained a numbered list of the candidates (maximum 150) for one of the political parties. They selected the list of their chosen party, but before placing it in a sealed envelope and putting it the ballot box, they could put a cross by up to four candidates they particularly liked. In the past, this had very little affect on which candidates entered parliament, since the 'preferential votes' were used to reorder candidates only in the case of candidates who gained at least 10% of all the preferential votes. In 2006, however, it was sufficient for a candidate to gain a preferential vote from at least 3 % of their party's voters in order for their preferential votes to count. This encouraged individual candidates to run their own private campaigns, paying to put up billboards advertising themselves at their own expense. Parties were not, for the first time, restricted in how much they spent on their campaigns (previous provisions had been flouted so widely and uncontrollably that spending limits had been simply abandoned), and parties appear to have done little to control personal campaigning since it also advertised the party at no cost to party funds.

In addition, the 'moratorium', which banned campaigning 48 hours before the election, and the publication of opinion polls in the two weeks before voting, was also abandoned. Campaigning could therefore be conducted on election day, though there was little of this (bar a few localised attempts at blatant bribery). Voting was also, for

the first time in a parliamentary election, conducted on a Saturday, instead of on a Friday afternoon and Saturday morning (the latter being a longstanding Czechoslovak tradition). Slovaks living abroad were allowed to vote by post for the first time.

The other ways in which the 2006 election campaign differed from previous ones related to more general shifts in Slovak politics. Unlike in 1998 and 2002, there was no NGO campaign designed to inform voters and to encourage people to vote. This was largely because there was no generous foreign funding to finance this activity. 'Get the vote out' campaigns had in the past had a strong political undertone. The Movement for a Democratic Slovakia was known to have a strong core vote which would be of particular benefit to that party if turnout was low. Young voters were also notoriously unlikely to vote, and since they were known to be less likely than most Slovaks to vote for Mečiar and his party, bringing them to the ballot box would help parties better able bring about Slovak accession to the EU and NATO. But in 2006, Slovak democracy was no longer considered to be in jeopardy. The Movement for a Democratic Slovakia had declined to the point that it was highly unlikely to emerge as the strongest single party, and its decline was largely due to the fact that it had abandoned the nationalist rhetoric and many of the practices that had in the past brought it into international disrepute.

With the decline in the political polarisation that had existed in the period where elections were considered crucial in determining the very nature of democratic politics in Slovakia, the election campaign for the first time revolved largely around economics. Smer-Social Democracy and the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union deliberately profiled themselves as the main protagonists in this battle. Fico's Smer, on the opposition side, decried the 'extreme right-wing government' that had brought poverty to Slovakia and led to 300,000 people moving abroad to seek work. Its campaign was, however, more low-key than in 2002, when it was generally considered to have over-exposed itself too early in the campaign, and to have appeared over-aggressive in promoting Fico for prime minister. On the government side, the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union defended its economic policies, most particularly the famous 'flat tax' that Dzurinda had described as Slovakia's 'trade mark, and in the later stages of its campaign it produced billboards asking 'Finish the reforms or start from the beginning again?' This played on the idea that the worst was over, and that by voting for the left, the electorate was opting for dismantling the economic reforms and yet more change of some sort that would disrupt their lives.

Mečiar's Movement for a Democratic Slovakia attempted to place itself in the safe middle ground in this battle. Despite having styled itself as a people's party of the right, its manifesto was rather left-wing in its emphasis on combating poverty, but did not support higher taxes. All the evils of life were to be solved '*zo zdrojov EÚ*' – by using EU funds. Although Mečiar made some nationalist remarks on the campaign trail, the party generally attempted to appear harmless to the point of neutering itself politically. Its mascot was a very cute toy lion, and many of its posters had rhyming couplets about poverty reminiscent of a nursery book.

The nationalist Slovak National Party also made extravagant economic promises, including providing housing for all young families within a year of the birth of their first child (although on questioning, it appeared rather vague about the precise

mechanics for doing this). It fell back heavily, however, on its normal nationalist rhetoric, with the party's chair, Ján Slota, promising to resign his chairmanship of the party if the Party of the Hungarian Coalition reentered government.

The remaining two government parties – the Christian Democratic Movement which had departed from the government in January, and the Party of the Hungarian Coalition which had remained until the bitter end – did not emphasise economics heavily in their campaign. The Christian Democrats emphasised family values, and chose a stork called Kristián as its emblem. The Party of the Hungarian Coalition courted the ethnic Slovak vote with posters showing people saying that, for various reasons of moral integrity, they were going to vote for Bugár, whose unflappable good nature had made him one of the country's most likeable politicians.

The crucial question of the campaign, however, and the one most frequently asked by journalists, related not to the parties' policies, but who they would go into coalition with. Most of the politicians did not really know, since they were having as much trouble as the political analysts in working out what the election result would be and hence what their realistic possibilities were. And they did not want to make themselves hostages to fortune. The only real certainty was that the Slovak National Party and the Party of the Hungarian Coalition would not go into government together. Both the Hungarian Coalition and Christian Democrats had grave reservations about the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia, particularly with Mečiar in a leading role, whereas it had long been known that the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union was prepared to take the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia as a partner. The Slovak Democratic and Christian Union tried to undermine Smer-Social Democracy by pointing out that it might form a government with the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia and the Slovak National Party. The only popular stance among the parties as a whole was a refusal to go into coalition with the Communist Party of Slovakia, but since it was doubtful that party would enter parliament, this was a fairly safe statement of moral principle. Fico stated that any party democratically elected to parliament was a legitimate coalition partner.

The result

The result was hard to predict for three reasons. Turnout was clearly going to be lower than the 70 % attained in 2002 – 60 % would have been regarded as an achievement – and it was thought that low turnout would damage Smer-Social Democracy in particular. It was also unclear from the opinion polls how many parties would enter parliament, and the size of the 'wasted vote' for parties gaining below five per cent affected how many seats each successful party would receive for each per cent of the vote it received. Finally, opinion polls were not particularly accurate, and had tended in the past to overestimate Smer's vote and underestimate the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union's.

The result, in the end, was less complicated than it might have been because only the six parties that had been clearly above the five per cent mark in the opinion polls managed to enter parliament. The failure of the other smaller parties meant that there were rather a lot of 'winners' among the new parliamentary parties, and only two losers.

The clearest winner was Smer-Social Democracy. With over 29% of the vote, it had managed, somewhat unexpectedly, to maintain its strong lead in the opinion polls, and more than doubled its percentage vote since 2002. Even given the low turnout, the actual number of people who had voted for it increased by 173%. It gained exactly one third of the seats, and Fico seemed to have a clear right to become the next prime minister. Its economic arguments had clearly convinced a substantial portion of the electorate.

Result of Slovak Parliamentary Election 17 June 2006

Party	% vote	seats	% seats	% vote 2002
Smer-Social Democracy (Smer-SD)	29.14	50	33.33	13.46
Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKÚ)	18.35	31	20.33	15.09
Slovak National Party (SNS)	11.73	20	13.33	3.32 (SNS) 3.65 (PSNS)
Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK)	11.68	20	13.33	11.16
Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS)	8.79	15	10.00	19.50
Christian Democratic Movement (KDH)	8.31	14	9.66	8.25
Others (15), inc.	12.00	0	0	25.54 (18)
<i>Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS)</i>	3.88	0	0	6.32
<i>Free Forum (SF)</i>	3.47	0	0	-
<i>Alliance of the New Citizen (ANO)</i>	1.42	0	0	8.01
<i>Movement for Democracy (HZD)</i>	0.63	0	0	3.28
Total	100	150	100	100

Turnout: 54.67%

Source: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic www.statistics.sk/nrsr_2006/

The only other party which increased its vote in numerical as well as percentage terms was the Slovak National Party. It had failed to enter parliament in 2002 because it was split, with its notoriously heavy-drinking chair, long-standing Mayor of Žilina Ján Slota, then leading the breakaway 'Real Slovak National Party' (PSNS). Reunited with his party, SNS's 11.7 % of the vote was the highest that it had obtained since 1990 (when it had won 13.9 %), and even in terms of its actual number of voters, this was more than a third higher than the combined votes for Slovak National Party and the Real Slovak National Party in 2002. While some foreign commentators viewed this as indicating an alarming rise in nationalism in Slovakia, in a sense the opposite is true. Slota's party had gained from the fact that the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia had toned down its nationalist rhetoric to the point that the strongest nationalists among its previous core electorate had moved their allegiance to the Slovak National Party.

Another winner was Dzurinda's Slovak Democratic and Christian Union, which, as in 2002, had obtained about 50% more of the vote than predicted in opinion polls. With over 18%, it had actually increased its vote share by more than three percentage points, despite the fact that opinion polls showed that the prime minister had very low trust ratings among the electorate. The party's percentage vote was, however, of little use since it was insufficient without the ability to build a new governing coalition.

The final partial winner was the Party of the Hungarian Coalition, whose percentage vote edged up slightly towards 12%. This was probably because the Dunajská Streda district, which had the highest turnout in the country – 62.62% - also had the highest SMK vote – 86.31%. There was little indication that its vote had increased beyond its ethnic core.

The first of the losers were the Christian Democrats, who became the smallest parliamentary party. However, the popular perception that they had done badly, which was shared internally in the party, was hard to justify rationally. Its 8.31% of the vote was broadly in line with opinion poll predictions, and actually better than the 8.25% it had obtained in 2002, the first election after the party lost many leading members to Slovak Democratic and Christian Union. Indeed, the only time the Christian Democrats had done substantially better was in the first 1990 election (19.2%), and with its rather narrow Catholic agenda, its low-key campaign, and the economic discontent with the government of which it had been part, could scarcely have done any better. Only the benefits of having a loyal core of voters in an election with a low turnout might conceivably have raised its percentage of the vote – but didn't.

The real losers of the election were the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia. At below 9%, they had lost over 10 percentage points since 2002, which was the biggest decrease in their vote since the party was founded. The party also did far worse than in the opinion polls, which had shown it at around 12%. In its attempt to gain international respectability, it had neutered itself in political terms so that it no longer had a loyal core of voters who turned out even if this was not predicted by the polls.

The other interesting aspect of the election was the result of the preferential votes within each party list, which allowed the electorate to rewrite the order of the candidates on the list to a greater extent than previously. More than three-quarters of voters availed themselves of this possibility, rising to 86.30% of Hungarian Coalition voters. Given the ethnic division of the Slovak party system, Hungarians had less realistic choice than ethnically Slovak voters, so that selecting their favourite politicians from the Hungarian list was their major electoral decision. Two aspects of the preferential voting are worthy of note.

Firstly, it appeared to benefit women, and went a little way to counterbalancing the gender bias with which the party lists were composed. Preferential votes raised the number of women deputies from 22 to 24 (of 150), which was one more than in any previous parliament. Most notably, the Christian Democrats would have had no women deputies at all if their original list order had been followed: the highest placed woman was at No. 15 on the list, and the party gained 14 parliamentary mandates. However, the women who had been placed by the party at No. 19 and No. 33 were raised through preferential votes to No. 8 and No. 10. All three female ministers/state secretaries on the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union list were also raised by

preferential votes to the top eight. The Movement for a Democratic Slovakia gained an extra female deputy through preferential votes, leaving it, as so often, the party with the highest percentage of woman in its club (27%). However, a woman candidate for the Hungarian Coalition lost her chance of a seat because a more popular male candidate was raised higher than her by the voters.

The second interesting aspect of the preferential votes was the personal popularity of the party leaders among party supporters. Most party leaders gained preferential votes from about two-thirds of their party's voters. The most popular was Mečiar, with 68.75%. This is scarcely surprising, since the party had become so bland that personal devotion to its charismatic leader was one of the few reasons left to vote for it. The Christian Democrats' Pavol Hrušovský only obtained preferential votes from fractionally under 50% of his party's voters, but was still the single most popular politician in his party. However, Prime Minister Dzurinda, with 39.2% preferential votes, was relegated to No. 3 on the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union list. The most popular figure proved to be the No. 3 candidate Iveta Radičová, a sociology lecturer who was not even a party member, but had been brought in the previous autumn to take over the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and the Family. She represented the 'softer' face of the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union's policies, and probably appealed to liberal voters, who had precious little choice in the 2006 elections.

Forming a government

The great irony of the 2006 election was that Mečiar's Movement for a Democratic Slovakia, which was the big loser in terms of the vote, became the key player in deciding who would become prime minister: Fico leading a left-wing government, or Dzurinda leading a right-wing one. This contrasted strongly with the two previous parliamentary elections, when it had been the largest single party, but unable to enter government because most other politicians considered it 'uncoalitionable' as a result of negative international reactions to Mečiar's rule from 1994-1998.

As Fico pointed out immediately after the election, coalition formation was made difficult for him by the fact that Smer-Social Democracy was the only party of the left among the six elected to parliament. He gave himself a couple of days' breathing space by insisting that he could not start negotiations on forming a government until asked to do so by President Gasparovič (which was not strictly true: in 1998 and 2002, Dzurinda had managed to put his coalitions together long before being formally asked to do so, and constitutionally, the procedure was not clear-cut).

There were four basic options for forming a new government. Fico started by meeting the Slovak National Party and the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia, the other two opposition parties. The three together would have a parliamentary majority of 85 seats, but this was regarded by many as the 'nightmare option', since it was the antics of the 1994-1998 Mečiar-led government including the Slovak National Party that had led to Slovakia's exclusion from the European integration process in 1997. There was, however, a certain programmatic coherence in such an arrangement, since their electoral programmes were all left-wing insofar as they were heavily critical of the previous government's economic reforms, and whereas the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia and most particularly the Slovak National Party were renowned

for anti-liberal nationalist stances, social liberalism was not a strong feature of Smer-Social Democracy either. Fico had in the past frequently aligned with the Slovak National Party in regional elections, and in promoting Gasparovič's candidacy as president. The Slovak crown began to sink as soon as Fico announced that he was beginning his negotiations with these two parties, and had to be rescued by the intervention of the National Bank of Slovakia.

Fico had, however, stated several times during the election campaign that the next government was likely to comprise government and opposition parties. Here, there were two options, both of which would have been more reassuring to the international community since they would guarantee some degree of continuity in Slovak politics and economics. The option Fico was thought most likely to choose was a coalition with the Hungarian Coalition and the Christian Democrats. Although centre-right, both had rural electorates who had experienced some adverse effects of the previous government's economic reforms. Whereas the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union had proudly led these reforms, the Hungarian Coalition was more interested in regional development for the ailing south of the country where its voters lived, and in the administration of EU funds, and the Christian Democrats' major preoccupation was with Catholic issues such as preventing the legalisation of registered partnerships. However, a faction in the Christian Democrats was averse to joining left-wing Smer-Social Democracy in government, and preferred to go into opposition. This complicated negotiations, particularly since the Hungarian Coalition was loathe to go into coalition with Smer without another centre-right party as the third party.

Fico's final option was to form a two-party coalition with the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union. This option appeared logical to foreign social democrats – the outgoing Czech Social Democratic Prime Minister Paroubek, who had supported Fico at his campaign rallies, mentioned it on the day after the elections. Since the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union was essentially a liberal rather than a right-wing party, its social value orientations were more compatible with normal social democrat principles than those of the other four more conservative parties. The problem, however, was that both Fico and Dzurinda had presented themselves as polar opposites in an election campaign dominated by economics, and the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union was far more bullish and uncompromising than its former centre-right coalition partners in criticising Fico's economic policies. The Smer-Slovak Democratic and Christian Union option was, therefore, the only one Fico more or less rejected after the first round of negotiations with the individual parties. He argued that his voters would have viewed this as a betrayal of his election campaign promises, and there was opinion poll evidence that they would prefer the Smer-Slovak National Party-Movement for a Democratic Slovakia option.

The fourth option for a new government excluded Fico. The three parties of the former government, the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union, the Hungarian Coalition and the Christian Democrats, together had 65 seats compared to Fico's 50, and could have formed a new government with Mečiar, whose party was happy to join anyone as long as it could save its future by getting back into government after eight years in the wilderness. This would produce a majority of 80 seats in the 150-seat parliament. However, the Christian Democrats refused to cooperate with the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia, its major adversary since 1991, on the grounds that its behaviour in 1994-1998 was unforgivable in the absence of an apology. This

may have been an excuse to avoid re-entering the coalition with the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union that it had left less than six months previously. However, a four-party centre-right coalition would also have been complicated and fractious, as well as appearing illegitimate to left-wing voters who regarded Smer-Social Democracy as the ‘winner’ of the election. Slovakia was almost alone among post-communist countries in never having had any kind of left-wing government since 1990, and many felt that the left’s hour had finally come.

After a week of negotiations, two parties made small moves to try and assure their place in government. Mečiar had himself been elected by his party as the leader of their parliamentary club, thereby making it clear that he did not expect a post in government, or as a chair or vice-chair of parliament, in any future arrangement. This could have been important, since both the Christian Democrats and the Hungarian Coalition had greater objections to Mečiar personally than to his party. The Hungarian Coalition also got fed up with the Christian Democrats’ dithering about both a four-party centre-right government and a Smer-Hungarian Coalition-Christian Democrat government, and indicated that it would enter a coalition with Smer even without another centre-right party. This opened up the prospect of a Smer-Hungarian Coalition-Movement for a Democratic Slovakia government, which for a day or so seemed the most likely prospect.

With a Smer-Social Democracy presidium meeting to discuss which parties to invite to join a coalition due on the Wednesday evening ten days after the election result had been formally declared, the Christian Democrats finally announced a couple of hours before it began that it was prepared to discuss a coalition with Smer. The Hungarian Coalition leader Bugár immediately stated that after 10 days of indecision, the Christian Democrats had made up their minds too late – in other words, his party was now relying on the Smer-Hungarian Coalition-Movement for a Democratic Slovakia option.

The Smer meeting was very short, indicating that their decision had already long been made. It announced that they would invite the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia and the Slovak National Party to form a government, with 11 ministries for Smer, 3 for the National Party and 2 for the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia, and Smer providing the chair of parliament. The next day it was announced that the Slovak National Party would gain the ministries of education, regional development and environment, and the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia justice and agriculture.

Structurally, therefore, the new Slovak government will be much more similar to the Mečiar government of 1994-1998 than the Dzurinda governments of 1998-2002 and 2002-2006. There will be one dominant party holding the both the office of prime minister and chair of parliament, and with more than twice as many government ministers as its two coalition partners together. In the end, Fico chose the path of least resistance: he will be in government with two smaller parties who lack strong policy goals in the area of economics, and who were too desperate to return to power to quibble about the terms. He has struck a hard bargain with his coalition partners. While in 1994, the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia had 61 seats compared to 13 for the far-left Association of Workers of Slovakia and 9 for Slovak National Party, in 2006 Smer-Social Democracy had only 50 seats, while the National Party gained 20 and Mečiar’s party 15. Just as, since Smer was first founded in late 1999, Fico has

retained total dominance over his party, so too he has asserted his dominance over his new government. The major remaining question is what he will do with this power.

Europe and the Slovak election

In retrospect, Slovak politics has not progressed quite as far as it sometimes seemed before the government was formed. The main EU question in the 2006 elections was, as for the whole previous decade, not what Slovak parties thought of Europe, but what Europe thought of Slovak parties.

The only party that had developed a complex – and rather Eurosceptic – EU affairs agenda was the Christian Democrats, the party that actually had the longest standing transnational links. The Euroscepticism in its election manifesto was largely defensive, wishing to prevent EU encroachment into the areas of family law and taxation, but it also rejected renewed attempts to ratify the Constitutional Treaty and Turkish membership. The Slovak National Party was the party that was fundamentally most hostile to the EU. Its manifesto emphasised the view that the EU should be a community of independent sovereign states, which was in line with its affiliation to the ‘Union for a Europe of Nations’ at EU level. It was reserved towards the adoption of the Euro, supported a referendum on the Constitutional Treaty (which had been ratified by parliament), and supported eastern enlargement of the EU, though its foreign policy had an openly pro-Slav bias. It wished to strengthen the ‘military-political identity’ of the EU, though largely because of its long-standing reservations towards NATO. The remaining parties that entered parliament generally referred to the EU only as a source of funding, and not in terms of EU policies.

As a consequence, the future direction of the EU was not an issue that permeated the election debate. The wider world was only relevant in arguments about how its reactions to either the party programmes or individual party politicians would affect Slovakia. Slovaks were accustomed to the situation that had pertained when Slovakia’s applications to join the EU and NATO were being judged by the international community, and when international actors had been able to give clear and unanimous signals about what was or was not acceptable if these goals were to be attained. The negative international reactions to Mečiar and his Movement for a Democratic Slovakia had been successfully instrumentalised for the purposes of domestic political competition by his rivals, and they made some attempts to use the same weapon in the 2006 elections, both against Mečiar’s party and against Fico’s desire to abandon the ‘flat tax’. However, the weapon was now blunted by the fact that different international actors had varying views, or none at all, about the acceptability of Mečiar after eight years out of power, and Fico’s economic programme was not outrageous by the general standards of left-wing European governments.

If anything, the attempt to use the ‘international card’ against Mečiar and Fico dimmed the awareness of how concerned others in the EU would be about the presence of Slota’s Slovak National Party in the government of a country with substantial ethnic minorities. Some suggested that the EU that had accepted the new Polish government would accept anything. This overlooked the fact that Poland was ethnically almost homogeneous, and that its two extremist coalition parties were new

to government power, whereas the partners Fico eventually chose had a track record of abusing power and exacerbating ethnic tension.

Future prospects

The Slovak party system is still characterised by an odd spectrum in which the left stands in the middle between the nationalist right (the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia, Slovak National Party) and the reformist right (the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union, Christian Democrats, Hungarian Coalition). Fico's achievement was to build up the left-wing 'middle' to the point where it could form a government with help from parties on either side. However, it did so largely by attracting voters from Mečiar's party, which attempted to transform itself into a mainstream 'people's party' of the right with little regard for the left-wing and nationalist inclinations of many of its former voters. This, in turn, pushed Mečiar nearer to joining up the ends of the party spectrum so that he could also form a coalition with the reformist right. It also affected the profile of Smer-Social Democracy so that its left-wing civic value orientation is weakened, and Mečiar's party was a more obvious coalition partner than the liberal but economically reformist Slovak Democratic and Christian Union. The new government of Smer-Slovak National Party - Movement for a Democratic Slovakia is united by the accent of its members on the 'social' and the 'national'.

In practical terms, the new Slovak government is the first ever that contains no member with previous ministerial experience. Given the performance of the Slovak National Party and Movement for a Democratic Slovakia when previously in government, this may be no bad thing. All three parties have resorted to placing 'experts' rather than their own parliamentary deputies in some ministries, which was facilitated by the general Slovak trend to assume that ministers should have professional experience in the area of their resort. A key question, however, is how many state officials in second-level posts are likely to be replaced, which could lead to a drain of valuable expertise, and consequently less effective administration. In economic terms, there are some question marks over the adoption of the euro in 2009, which could be problematic, since the next parliamentary elections are due in 2010, so that a delay of just one year is unlikely. However, despite a slight initial drop in the Slovak crown, the precise economic measures the new government adopts will be more important than the cruder election slogans. Fico has, like the previous prime minister, retained the major economic and foreign affairs ministries for his own party, and he has a good chance of appearing successful in his key aim of reducing poverty, since he will reap the benefits of the economic reforms implemented by the previous government.

The most optimistic scenario in political terms is that Fico will be successful in neutralising the more extreme traits of his new coalition partners, thus integrating them into the democratic mainstream and proving that no Slovak parliamentary party is a danger to the country's development. He has also placed himself in a position where he will be better able to implement clear policies than the two previous governments, who expended much effort in intra-coalitional negotiation and highly-publicised arguments. The fact that – unlike Mečiar in 1994-1998 – he has other potential coalition partners will check the ability of the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia and Slovak National Party to rebel against the weak position to which he has assigned them in the government. However, as prime minister Fico will be in danger

of overstretch, since the firm control he has hitherto exercised over the direction over his party will be hard to maintain when he is running a government and a state as well. Even if one accepts that he himself is motivated by a genuine desire to implement Social Democracy in Slovakia, his party contains an uneasy mix of business interests and functionaries from the conservative rump of the post-communist Party of the Democratic Left which merged with Smer after its disastrous election defeat in 2002.

There were two great unknowns in the run-up to the 2006 Slovak elections. The first was how the votes would be distributed, and which government coalitions would be possible. The voters delivered the answer to this on 17 June, and the politicians in the ten days that followed. The second unknown was what Smer-Social Democracy would actually represent as a ruling party. This question still remains open.

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>.