

## **ELECTION BRIEFING No 58 EUROPE AND THE SLOVAK PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION OF JUNE 2010**

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### **Key Points:**

- The centre-right won a surprise victory over the left-nationalist government of Robert Fico.
- Iveta Radičová became Slovakia's first woman prime minister.
- The nationalist vote declined notably among both Slovaks and ethnic Hungarians.
- Mečiar's Movement for a Democratic Slovakia, which had dominated Slovak politics in the 1990s, was eliminated from parliament.
- Voters used their 'preferential votes' to re-order the parties' candidate lists and bring some unexpected deputies into parliament.

### **Background**

The previous Slovak parliamentary election in June 2006 had begun a realignment of Slovak party politics and brought a left-wing prime minister, Robert Fico of Direction-Social Democracy (usually known as 'Smer'), to office for the first time.<sup>1</sup> For most of Slovakia's short history, the left had sat uneasily in the middle between the reformist right and the nationalist right, and in the immediate aftermath of that election it was unclear who Fico would choose as coalition partners. In the event, the nationalists, who had just spent eight years in opposition, proved the most compliant in negotiations. Fico therefore shocked the international community (and many Slovaks) by forming a coalition with the two parties that had nearly sunk Slovakia's chances of joining the EU and NATO when in power in the 1990s – the People's Party-Movement for a Democratic Slovakia led by the notorious 1990s prime minister Vladimír Mečiar, and the xenophobic Slovak National Party.

The 2006 election had appeared to herald a shift in the focus of Slovak politics away from emotive battles about the fate of the nation and the future of democracy. Both Fico's Smer

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<sup>1</sup> See: Karen Henderson, 'Europe and the Slovak Parliamentary Election of June 2006', *European Parties Elections and Referendums Network Election Briefing No 26* at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epern.pdf>.

and the largest of the reformist right parties, the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union-Democratic Party of the outgoing prime minister Mikuláš Dzurinda, presented the election as a contest between left and right-wing economic policies in which they were the two main protagonists. Both parties increased their vote, indicating that their emphasis on economic issues accorded with the concerns of the electorate. However, once Fico entered government with the two nationalist parties, the government appeared to represent less a political realignment than a reincarnation of earlier 1990s governments, but with Fico rather than Mečiar the leader of the dominant party. The controversies of the 1990s re-emerged: the government was accused of ruling by 'the tyranny of the majority' and excluding the opposition from any decision-making; nationalist conflict with the Hungarian minority in Slovakia (about 10% of Slovak citizens) and the Hungarian Government re-emerged; and corruption increased, with EU funds replacing privatisation as the major source of illicit gain. Unfortunately, Fico's two smaller coalition partners controlled several ministries with crucial roles in the allocation of EU funds, and although Fico was slow in ousting ministers embroiled in major scandals, by the end of the parliamentary term the Environment Minister had been changed so often that the ministry was abolished. More worryingly still, Mečiar's nominee as Justice Minister, the controversial former Supreme Court chair Štefan Harabin, brought about heavy politicisation of the judiciary and undermined its already modest integrity before being moved back mid-term to the Chair of the Supreme Court, from which previous experience indicated it would be very hard to oust him.

From the citizens' viewpoint, however, the Fico government appeared far from an unmitigated disaster. Many had been shocked by the pace of economic reform during the previous Dzurinda government, and Fico's policy of maintaining the status quo while declaring a concern for the economically disadvantaged was politically successful. His government was locked into its predecessor's aim of joining the Eurozone at the beginning of 2009 because in Slovakia, achieving European integration had become accepted as the touchstone of government competence. Fico achieved this by appointing as Finance Minister a young businessman who reassured foreign investors by leaving untouched the 'flat tax' which had been the previous government's flagship policy. At the same time, citizens' standard of living was protected by the high economic growth rates that were largely a result of the previous government's policies, as well as the opportunities to work abroad that derived from EU membership (likewise an achievement of the previous government). Although jobs both abroad and at home gradually declined with the onset of the global recession, Slovaks were aware that their neighbours who had not entered the Eurozone - most notably Hungary - were suffering far worse.

In terms of party political developments, there were three significant shifts during the 2006-2010 period that had an impact on the 2010 election result. The first was that Fico's Smer consolidated its domination of the vote that had, in the 1990s, gone to Mečiar's party: the older, more rural and less wealthy part of the population. Although Smer had gained less than 30% of the vote in 2006, its popularity in public opinion polls throughout its term in office was around 40%, which was a notable achievement for a nominally Social Democratic party ruling during an economic recession. It looked, therefore, highly likely that Fico would remain prime minister after the 2010 elections. Of its partners, Mečiar's party continued its gradual decline from the 37% it had obtained in 1992. It was a party that no longer had a message since it had toned down its nationalist rhetoric to prove it was acceptable within the EU, only to be eclipsed by Fico in populist appeals to the 'losers' of post-communist transition, while harder line nationalists could move to the Slovak National Party. Yet the

Slovak Nationalists were unable to build on the nearly 12% of the vote they had gained in 2006 both because Smer catered adequately to many patriotic sentiments, and because the Nationalist ministers had little to show for their four years in office but a few remarkably dodgy tenders.

The second shift was in the ethnic Hungarian political representation. This had, since the 1990s, been united in the Party of the Hungarian Coalition, which belonged to the reformist right in Slovak politics and had participated in the Dzurinda governments from 1998-2006. Immediately after the 2009 European Parliament election, its former leader Béla Bugár, who was also the only ethnic Hungarian politician whom many Slovaks found likeable, broke away and founded a new party called 'Most-Híd', the Slovak and Hungarian words for 'Bridge'. Although its members were predominantly ethnic Hungarians, it was open to Slovaks and its initial posters presented a multi-cultural message, declaring that a person's ethnicity did not matter. This left it open to build on the very small Slovak support that the existing Hungarian party had enjoyed; and in a global climate where close links with the economically flailing Budapest government had little to offer, it also offered an alternative vision to ethnic Hungarian voters.

The third shift was within the Slovak reformist right. A new party called Freedom and Solidarity had gained 4.71% of the vote in the 2009 European Parliament elections, which was just below the 5% threshold necessary for gaining seats in a Slovak parliamentary election. Led by Richard Sulík, who had been an initiator of the 'flat tax' reform when working at the Ministry of Finance, it was a liberal party both economically and socially, and played on the anti-corruption card. As such, it had the potential to gain support both from Slovak Democratic and Christian Union-Democratic Party voters and from the younger voters who had supported Fico's Smer in 2006. Opinion polls in the run-up to the 2010 election increasingly showed that its entry into parliament was certain.

## **The Campaign**

### *The party contest*

In the run-up to the formal three-week election campaign, two questions engaged both the media and political analysts. The first related to which parties were likely to obtain the minimum 5% of the national vote necessary for gaining any seats in parliament and being relevant players in the formation of the new government. Six parties had entered the previous parliament and of these three looked certain to gain representation. On the government side, Smer seemed certain not only again to obtain the highest vote of any single party, but also to exceed its vote in the last election. On the opposition side, the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union-Democratic Party and the Christian Democrats also appeared assured entry into parliament. The new Freedom and Solidarity became the fourth party likely to gain 5% since its support had been consistently rising since January, and by May was above the 10% mark.

This left four parties – three parliamentary parties and one new party – whose entry to parliament was uncertain. On the government side, Mečiar's People's Party-Movement for a Democratic Slovakia sporadically dropped below 5% in opinion polls, and although it was known to have an elderly rural core electorate who were highly likely to turn out on the day,

it could scarcely attract any new voters since its sole asset was Mečiar's fading charisma. The Slovak National Party had polled better than Mečiar's party in 2006, but had always had a rather volatile electorate, and it had only just scraped into the European Parliament a year earlier. Since its opinion poll support also occasionally dropped below 5%, its chances of success in 2010 were far from secure.

On the opposition side, the major unknown was the destination of the ethnic Hungarian vote after the Party of the Hungarian Coalition split. An oddity was that although the established Hungarian party was on the centre-right, Bugár also identified his new party Most-Híd as belonging to the centre-right - a clear sign that issues other than traditional left/right divides dominate politics in Slovakia. Both the Hungarian parties hovered around the 5% mark in opinion polls, and although it was possible that both would enter parliament, it was certain that at least one of them would: the 10% Hungarian minority had a good record on electoral turnout, so failure on the day for one party would inevitably lead to success for the other. While the established Party of the Hungarian Coalition appeared slightly stronger in the run-up to the election, the unknown was the ability of Most-Híd to attract additional Slovak voters, among whom it actively campaigned.

The sum result of all calculations from public opinion results was that any number between five and eight parties could enter parliament. For either the government or opposition camp, the loss of 4% - or even 4.99% - of the vote given to a party that failed to cross the 5% threshold could be fatal. This leads on to the second question, which was the coalition intentions of parties, and whether the divide between 'government parties' and 'opposition parties' was immutable.

Since Smer enjoyed around 40% support in public opinion polls, if this held up on election day (in the past, it often had not), it would probably only need one coalition partner for Fico to remain as prime minister. In most Slovak elections, between about 6% and 20% of the vote is 'wasted' on parties that do not receive 5% of the vote, so a government coalition only requires between about 40% and 47% of the popular vote in order to have a parliamentary majority.

It was long assumed that Fico would enjoy eight years in government, as his predecessor Dzurinda had before him, and analysts pondered which coalition partner Fico would choose during his second term in office. Both his smaller nationalist coalition partners were clearly keen to preserve the existing partnership, but Fico's dedication to them was less certain. Although he appeared to have little problem with their nationalist agendas, the alliance with the Slovak National Party had damaged Smer's relationship with the Party of European Socialists at EU level, which was a blow to Fico, who had struggled so hard to have his party recognised internationally as being Social Democratic. The corruption scandals surrounding both coalition partners had also not been easy to manage. It was therefore considered likely that he would consider a coalition with either the conservative Christian Democrats, or the Party of the Hungarian Coalition, or possibly the new Most-Híd.

However, another crucial consideration was whether the opposition parties were prepared to join a Smer-dominated coalition. Two of them were clear that they would not: the Slovak Democratic and Christian Coalition-Democratic Party and the new Freedom and Solidarity both laid emphasis on having economic policies totally opposed to Fico's. However, the electoral leader of the former, Iveta Radičová, shaped the election contest by challenging all

the opposition parties to make clear declarations that they would also refuse to help Fico back to the premiership. This forced the hand of the Christian Democrats, who stated increasingly clearly that they would not join with Fico, although it was known that there were divergent views within the party. Most-Híd was disinclined to join with Fico and, as the election campaign proceeded, nationalist tensions made a coalition between Smer and the Party of the Hungarian Coalition barely feasible.

Radičová's tactics initially appeared risky for Slovakia's future: if Fico was bound to lead the next government, then it was in the country's interest that he should not be forced back into coalition with the existing partners, who were both illiberal and nationalist, and heavily tainted with corruption. However, in the last two months of the election campaign the opinion polls began to suggest that a coalition of the centre-right parties without Smer might be arithmetically possible, and this coincided with Radičová's emphasis of the government-opposition divide. Consequently, an election year that had begun with the assumption that there would be some sort of coalition government led by Fico finally saw an electoral battle that was a genuine contest between government and opposition. Voters dissatisfied with the existing government were thus presented with a stick and a carrot: the strong likelihood that a future Fico government could be no better than the present one, and the genuine possibility of a viable alternative. A surprise right-wing election victory in Slovakia's favourite neighbour, the Czech Republic, just two weeks before the Slovak polling day also increased the feeling that anything was possible.<sup>2</sup>

### *The campaign*

The Slovak election campaign was marked, as so often, by debates that did not deal in detail with the differences between parties' programmes. Although these were discussed in the print media, news broadcasts could not discuss the election campaign. The major input of the all-powerful medium of television was formal debates between party leaders, where the last debates were between the leaders of the major parties and included two 'duels' between Fico and Radičová. Even these, however, were heavily influenced by the two other subjects that dominated the news during the election campaign.

As in the run-up to the European Parliament election a year earlier, the most controversial events in the campaign did not actually take place in Slovakia, and the key actor was Viktor Orbán, the leader of the right in Hungary.<sup>3</sup> He returned to office as prime minister after the Hungarian parliamentary elections in April 2010, which had resulted in a very marked strengthening of the nationalist parties in Hungary.<sup>4</sup> The unfortunate timing of the Hungarian election was exacerbated by the ninetieth anniversary of the Treaty of Trianon, which fell on 4 June, just eight days before the Slovak election. Since this treaty had formally removed two-thirds of pre-World War One Hungary's territory, including what is now known as Slovakia, this was regarded as a national disaster by many Hungarians, though not of course

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<sup>2</sup> See: Vít Hloušek and Petr Kaniok, 'The Absence of Europe in the Czech Parliamentary Election, 28-29 May 2010', *European Parties Elections and Referendums Network Election Briefing No 57* at [http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epernczechrep2010\\_no57.pdf](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epernczechrep2010_no57.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> See: Karen Henderson, 'The European Parliamentary Election in Slovakia, 6 June 2009', *European Parties Elections and Referendums Network EP Briefing No 44*, at [http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/no\\_44\\_epernep2009slovakia.pdf](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/no_44_epernep2009slovakia.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> See: Agnes Batory, 'Europe and the Hungarian Parliamentary Elections of April 2010', *European Parties and Referendums Network Briefing No. 51* at [http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/no\\_51\\_epernhungary2010.pdf](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/no_51_epernhungary2010.pdf).

by Slovaks. Before the Orbán government had even been sworn into office, the Hungarian parliament commemorated the anniversary by passing a law allowing ethnic Hungarians in former Hungarian territories to gain Hungarian citizenship. This was a red rag to the bull of the Slovak government, which responded by calling an extraordinary session of the Slovak parliament to pass a law that would remove Slovak citizenship from anyone who applied for citizenship of another country. The law received the support of not only the three government parties, but also the Christian Democrats. Ironically, banning dual citizenship was likely to have the most detrimental consequences not for ethnic Hungarian Slovak citizens, who were generally not particularly enthused by the prospect of having Hungarian passports since their EU and Schengen membership already gave them substantial rights to live and work in Hungary, but for Slovaks living outside the EU who needed the citizenship of their country of residence while wishing to retain their allegiance to their country of birth. However, for the ruling politicians, rationality took second place to the exigencies of promoting nationalist advantage in the election campaign.

While nationalist arguments were a perennial in Slovak election campaigns, the second subject to pre-occupy Slovakia during the election campaign was unexpected: in the last ten days before voting, Slovakia was hit by massive flooding. This was particularly devastating in eastern Slovakia (where Fico had some of his strongest support), and landslides added to the torrents in destroying houses. Fico only gave a short address at Smer's planned final election rally in Bratislava eight days before the election, before flying off to the stricken east of Slovakia. Another extraordinary session of parliament was called two days before the election, this time to legislate on assistance for the flood-stricken regions with the populist demand that political parties should participate by contributing part of the money that they received from the state. The opposition again considered this to be abuse of parliament for the purpose of government electioneering.

Programmatic campaigning during the election was hence largely overshadowed by governmental attempts to use their state power to determine the agenda of the election campaign. The convening of extraordinary sessions of parliament in the run-up to elections was an innovation of the Smer-led government, but that party also used some of the methods that Mečiar had employed in the fiercely-contested campaign that preceded his ousting from power in 1998: barely functional motorways and a new terminal at Bratislava airport were grandiosely opened in the run-up to the election and, unlike election rallies, these events could be covered at length in TV news broadcasts without infringing the election law. The weekend before the election, state-run Slovak Television also dedicated a lengthy special broadcast to the unveiling at Bratislava Castle of a statue of King Svätopluk, who had ruled the Great Moravian Empire in the Ninth Century and was presented as a key figure in Slovak history. Since the statue had been largely financed by contributions from Smer politicians, and President Gašparovič who unveiled it was also supported by Smer, this was an event that was hard to divorce from party politics despite its presentation as a nationally-important patriotic milestone.

However, Fico's opponents also delivered their own 'election bomb' (a Slovak term for the unveiling of a political scandal shortly before the election). In this case, it was a tape recording that allegedly revealed Fico discussing illicit means for financing Smer before the first elections it contested in 2002. This was followed in turn (perhaps coincidentally) by election day television footage of Fico's wife, who generally kept a very low profile, discovering in the polling booth that she had been given a set of voting papers that curiously

lacked the one with Smer's candidates. This was oddly reminiscent of the 1994 election, when Slovak Television had shown Mečiar arriving at his local polling station only to discover that he had been omitted from the electoral roll.

## The Election Result

Election day, Saturday 12 June 2010, dawned with the last-minute opinion polls, and indeed also the exit polls revealed when voting ceased at 10pm, still unsure which parties would enter parliament and who would form the government. It looked likely that there could be eight parties in parliament, but that the opposition would win as the Smer vote might sink as low as 30%.

**Table 1: Slovak 2010 Parliamentary Election results**

<b>Party</b>	<b>% Vote 2010</b>	<b>Seats 2010</b>	<b>% Vote 2006</b>	<b>Seats 2006</b>	<b>Change % (Seats)</b>
Direction-Social Democracy (Smer-SD)	34.79	62	29.14	50	+ 5.65 (+12)
Slovak Democratic and Christian Union-Democratic Party (SDKÚ-DS)	15.42	28	18.35	31	- 2.93 (-3)
Freedom and Solidarity (SaS)	12.14	22	-	-	+ 12.14 (+22)
Christian Democratic Movement (KDH)	8.52	15	8.31	14	+ 0.22 (+1)
Bridge (Most-Híd)	8.12	14	-	-	+ 8.12 (+14)
Slovak National Party (SNS)	5.07	9	11.73	20	- 6.66 (-11)
Others (15), including:	15.90	0	12.00	0	+ 3.90 (0)
<i>Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK)</i>	4.33	0	11.68	20	- 7.35 (-20)
<i>People's Party-Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (LS-HZDS)</i>	4.32	0	8.79	15	- 4.47 (-15)
<i>Party of the Democratic Left (SDL)</i>	2.41	0	0.12	0	+ 2.29 (0)
<b>Total</b>		<b>150</b>		<b>150</b>	<b>0.00 (0)</b>

Turnout: 58.83%

Source: Adapted from Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic data, [www.volbysr.sk](http://www.volbysr.sk).

In the event, as Table 1 shows, the opposition gained a clear victory. Crucial to this was a significant moment in Slovak politics: Vladimír Mečiar and his Movement for a Democratic Slovakia, which had dominated Slovak politics in the 1990s and had overseen the division of

Czechoslovakia in 1992, were finally eliminated from parliament with only 4.32% of the vote. Smer's vote held up reasonably at 34.79%, but this was insufficient to return Fico to power since the Slovak National Party only just made it into parliament with 5.07%. The last open question as the votes were counted was the fate of the Party of the Hungarian Coalition, which eventually fell with only 4.33% of the vote. The more multi-cultural Most-Híd exceeded all expectations with 8.12%. The four former opposition parties gained 79 of 150 parliamentary seats, and there was never any doubt that they would form a government together: in the course of the election night celebrations, their leaders visited each others' parties (in the alcohol and balloons sense of the word), and bantered with each other in earshot of the TV cameras.

The explanation for the opposition victory is complex. Most obviously, the government and opposition both had three parties in the old parliament, whereas in the new parliament the former government was only supported by two of six parties. The elimination of Mečiar and the ascent of Freedom and Solidarity had tipped the balance, since the split in the Hungarian vote leading to the 'waste' of the Party of the Hungarian Coalition's vote had been more than compensated for by the decline in the Slovak National Party's vote. There had been a shift in voting patterns, but this does not necessarily represent a shift in voters' programmatic preferences, as it can also be accounted for by changes within the parties on offer. Most notably, after four years in government Smer had become more appealing to its coalition partners' older voters, but had in turn sacrificed the vote of some more progressive younger people.

The vote for Radičová's Slovak Democratic and Christian Union-Democratic Party declined little in spite of the impressive 12.14% for the new Freedom and Solidarity party that had looked likely to attract its voters. This was a substantial achievement, as its chair, former prime minister Dzurinda, had declined to stand on its electoral list when confronted with corruption allegations, and at times it had seemed the party was losing its grip on its position as the leading opposition party. In Radičová's favour, however, was her popularity with voters as a sociologist and social policy expert who represented the 'human face' of economic reform. She had been the opposition's candidate in the 2009 presidential election, and obtained over 44% of the vote in the second round run-off against the sitting president. Freedom and Solidarity's success was largely due to its strong appeal to younger voters: according to the exit poll conducted by the MVK agency, it been supported by just over a quarter of all first-time voters. The party had campaigned heavily via the Internet, and was also the only significant party to support registered partnerships, as well as the decriminalization of marijuana use, which attracted younger voters whom in the West might be considered 'left wing'. In Slovakia such voters had no political home, since almost all parties styled themselves as belonging to the right, and Fico's conception of the social democratic left did not encompass social attitudes. In addition, in Slovakia, as in most of the post-communist world, the progressive political package includes innovative economic reform, so Freedom and Solidarity benefitted from fertile ground awaiting the ploughman.

The Slovak election result was interesting in one other regard, which was the power of the electorate in selecting which candidates their chosen party sent to parliament. The whole of Slovakia is a single electoral district for which competing parties produce a list of up to 150 candidates. Providing a party gains 5% of the national vote, the candidates to enter parliament are taken from the top of the party's list, but voters have the right to re-order the candidates on their chosen party list by selecting up to four preferred candidates. In 2010, over 70% of

voters exercised this right. This feature of the election system encourages candidates to run their own personal campaigns, using their own finances if they so wish, in order to increase their own chance of entering parliament. Since the Slovak election law no longer restricts each party's total expenditure on the election campaign, parties have generally been happy for individual candidates to spend their own money on promoting themselves, since they inevitably publicise their party at the same time. However, the results of the 2010 election, and the 2009 European Parliament elections the year before, illustrated the dangers this poses for party leaderships, since they lose control of which candidates on their list actually enter parliament.

Preferential votes were particularly significant in 2010 because the '5% clause' encouraged new parties to accept candidates from other smaller parties and groups on to their candidate list to increase the chance of the party as a whole gaining at least 5% of the vote. Most-Híd took candidates from the small Civic Conservative Party on to their list, and all four of them were elected, although only one of them was high enough on the original list to enter parliament. They attracted votes partly because they were all well-known Slovak intellectuals with considerable political experience, and ran an interesting campaign travelling around the country in farmers' overalls with three live pigs painted with the names Robo, Jano and Vlado (after the leaders of three government parties, who were deemed to have had their snouts in the trough for the last four years). Their success was also a result of the fact that only a small minority of the Most-Híd candidates were ethnically Slovak, so that the party's Slovak supporters concentrated their preferential votes on a small number of candidates while the ethnic Hungarian vote was spread more widely and less effectively. The end result was that six of Most-Híd's fourteen parliamentary deputies were Slovak, although a very large majority of the party's candidates and voters were ethnically Hungarian.

Freedom and Solidarity was confronted with an even more problematic debacle. It accepted on to its list four candidates from the 'Ordinary People' group, which was considering contesting the election as a political party, and which had a long list of populist reform-right demands that were not incompatible but more dogmatic than those of Freedom and Solidarity. The group asked for its candidates to be placed together in the four last places on the candidate list, and thanks to its leader's control of some regional and local newspapers, the group attracted sufficient preferential votes to be elected to parliament. This was to cause problems after the election, since, unlike in the Most-Híd case, neither the party leaders nor the unexpectedly elected deputies had political experience in making compromises.

## **The Impact of European Issues**

It is not uncommon for European issues to have little impact on elections in the new EU member states, and this was the case in the 2010 Slovak parliamentary election. However, the election, and the period of EU decision making in which it took place, had a big and problematic effect on Slovakia's standing in the EU because of the new government's stance on the Greek rescue package. The underlying problem was that the reform right parties which had so skilfully secured Slovakia's EU membership when in government from 1998-2006 also contained politicians sophisticated enough to produce a rational critique of specific EU policies, rather than merely craving to be accepted and respected by 'Europe', as was frequently the case with the left/nationalist parties that ruled from 2006-2010.

The Christian Democrats had traditionally been the most Eurosceptic of the parties forming the new government in terms of their value orientation, while Radičová's Slovak Democratic and Christian Union-Democratic Party and to an even greater extent Freedom and Solidarity were parties wary of the EU restricting their economic liberalism. Of the two liberal parties, the former was mainly concerned with retaining power over taxation in order to preserve its beloved 'flat tax' policy, while the latter was also generally hostile to Brussels bureaucrats. In line with their liberal economic views, in the run-up to the election both had attacked the previous government's endorsement of the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF) and accused it of having accepted terms unfavourable to Slovakia. They were also hostile to Greece's predicament, since they considered its government to have been financially irresponsible, and believed that it was unhelpful for other Eurozone countries to bail it out. This was, perhaps, a classic case of parties without government power finding it easier to indulge in Eurosceptic discourse since they would not have to deal with the consequences of their political posturing, but in the case of the Slovak opposition, their rather unexpected election victory meant that this was not a costless stance.

In the wake of the election, when the previous government remained in power for a month pending the new session of parliament, Fico wrong-footed the incoming government by insisting that he could proceed no further with the EFSF unless it gave its agreement. Radičová refused. Although the victorious parties were critical of all outgoing ministers who continued to make decisions (particularly on public procurement) in the post-election period, Radičová insisted that it was up to Fico to deal with the EFSF, since he had not consulted the opposition about the terms negotiated. Fico refused. This was, therefore, the first major issue the new government had to solve in July, and when Radičová made her first foreign visit as prime minister to Brussels, she was confronted by a tough line that refused any re-negotiation of the issue. As a compromise, the government decided that its deputies would approve the EFSF but not the loan to Greece. However, the EU was not interested in compromise, and Slovakia now faces the prospect of suffering political disadvantage for having failed to demonstrate solidarity within the Eurozone, with speculation, for example, that EU willingness to help with the massive flood damage in Slovakia over the summer may be affected, or that in future budget negotiations, EU states who are net contributors may be less inclined financially to support small new member states.

Ironically, the Slovak public was most receptive to the argument that Greeks on average earned more than twice as much as Slovaks, and the poor should not have to pay for bailing out the rich. Yet this argument was not supported by the (now) opposition parties, who frequently supported the politics of economic envy, while the government parties were more prone to rely on complex arguments of economic morality and rationality. Having achieved EU membership by introducing very tough economic reforms that alienated it from many voters, for which it paid in the 2006 elections, the reform right had little sympathy for 'old' member states that shied away from facing up to economic reality.

Another underlying problem was that some Slovak politicians from the government parties still regarded government-opposition disputes as the 'battle for democracy' it conducted during the 1990s, in which the EU showed a very detailed interest while Slovakia was an applicant state. Now it was a member state assumed to have a consolidated democracy, other EU governments had very limited interest in the minutiae of Slovak domestic politics and regarded alternation of power as normal, rather than distinguishing between 'bad' (nationalist) governments and 'good' (reformist) ones. While the corruption surrounding EU

funds under the Fico government did not go unnoticed in Brussels, the dogmatic economic liberalism of Slovak centre-right governments, including flat tax, was also not greeted with enthusiasm. Crucially, it was not accepted that a change of government should endanger wider EU interests, and since other EU governments sometimes risk electoral disadvantage by making compromises in EU decision-making, Slovak intransigence was met with little sympathy. It was notable that Radičová's foreign minister, her party's chair and former prime minister Dzurinda, had in 2008 led the opposition attempt to hold up ratification of the Lisbon Treaty because of a domestic dispute with the Fico government. The 'Greek loan' was, therefore, not the first occasion where the current governing parties put their own domestic battles above vital concerns for the future of the EU as a whole.

## **Future Prospects**

The new government was the first ever in Slovakia to contain no former members of the Communist Party, which was a result of generational change as well as its political orientation. It is outspoken about the need to reduce the corruption which increased under its predecessor, and by the end of the summer the Slovak press was already full of cases where incoming ministers had uncovered large-scale waste of resources. Their predecessors had accepted some grotesquely over-priced tenders, with the obvious suspicion that party clientelism was involved. The Interior Ministry now has a Christian Democrat minister who was previously Justice Minister and initiated the establishment of special courts to deal serious cases of organised crime, and his former deputy, who is now a Slovak Democratic and Christian Union-Democratic Party member, has become Justice Minister. Both are committed to dealing with abuses in the police and the judiciary. In addition, the Education Ministry, which was for most of the post-communist period run by (in very different ways) conservative ministers from the Slovak National Party or the Christian Democrats, has been given to an economist from the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union-Democratic Party who should finally start major reforms.

Yet while the government has so far been fairly united in its anti-corruption stance, economic policy – which is so central to its two members with the most parliamentary seats – has proved more problematic. While the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union-Democratic Party and Freedom and Solidarity agree on the need to cut the budget deficit, they are still negotiating how to do it, with the Finance Minister belonging to the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union-Democratic Party and the Economics and Labour, Social Affairs and Family ministries controlled by Freedom and Solidarity. The latter had campaigned heavily on the need to change the social insurance system, but its radical proposals could not gain consensus in the government. There was also much debate before VAT was finally raised. In the future, there may be further conflicts on issues of social values, with the conservative Christian Democrats having notable differences with Freedom and Solidarity.

In short, the new government is likely to be beset by internal conflicts. While the more nationalist governments led by Mečiar and Fico in 1994-1998 and 2006-2010 had one dominant party whose parliamentary deputies and ministers easily outnumbered those of its two coalition partners, centre-right governments have always been led by prime ministers whose party only controlled a minority of coalition votes, meaning that compromise was on the daily agenda. Radičová faces three further problems. Firstly, for the first time ever, two of the prime minister's coalition partners are new parties, whose political profile has to

consolidate while in office. Although initial attention was paid to incidents highlighting the inexperience of Freedom and Solidarity, potentially Most-Híd's relationship to the established interests of Slovakia's Hungarian community could prove more problematic. Secondly, despite her electoral appeal, Radičová's position within her own party is not unproblematic, since both the party chair, former prime minister and now foreign minister Dzurinda, and the very experienced finance minister Ivan Mikloš, are high-profile politicians who had held ministerial office long before Radičová joined the party.

Thirdly, Radičová also faces by far the strongest single opposition party in Slovak parliamentary history. Fico entered opposition fairly calmly (particularly compared to Mečiar in 1998, who threw a tantrum and gave up his seat in parliament when he lost power). He took the most important function open to the opposition, one of the four deputy speakers of parliament. With 62 of 150 parliamentary seats compared to the Slovak National Party's 9, Smer is the first Slovak opposition party which can present a credible and experienced shadow cabinet to compete against government ministers in parliamentary or television debates. It is, therefore, in a good position to benefit from presenting a united and coherent front if the government is divided by internal disagreements. Yet what it actually stands for in terms of economic interests and value orientation is less clear than one would expect from a party that designates itself as being directed to 'Social Democracy'. The long-term dividing lines of Slovak party politics are still fluid and liable to future change.

**Published: 26 September 2010**

*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>.*