

RIIA/OERN ELECTION BRIEFING NO 7

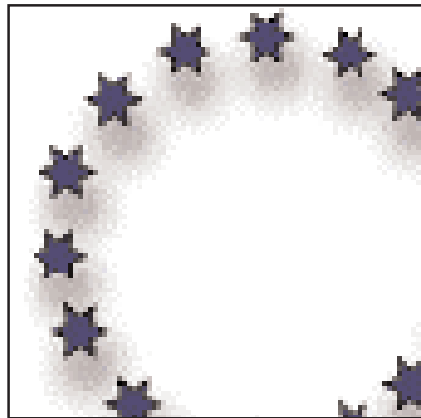
DECEMBER 2002

EUROPE AND THE SLOVAK PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION OF SEPTEMBER 2002

Karen Henderson

Department of Politics, University of Leicester

Email: kh10@le.ac.uk



Key points:

- The election brought a surprisingly clear result, with four centre-right parties gaining a majority of 78 of the 150 seats in parliament and rapidly forming a government.
 - The new government breaks the pattern of the ten years since Slovak independence in 1993, in which Meciar-led nationalist coalitions have alternated with broad left-right governments. It is therefore in an unusually good position to implement a coherent reform programme.
 - Meciar's Movement for a Democratic Slovakia slumped to an all-time low of 19.5 per cent of the vote.
 - The left is in chaos, with the unreformed Communist Party of Slovakia, which entered parliament for the first time since 1989, the only explicitly left-wing party to gain over 5 per cent of the vote and secure parliamentary representation.
 - EU (and NATO) membership formed a crucial backdrop to the elections. The key question was not, however, whether Slovakia wanted the EU but whether the EU would want Slovakia.
-

Background

Slovak politics in the 1990s was dominated by two events. The first was the controversial negotiation of independence after Vladimir Meciar's second government came to power as a result of the election of June 1992. The second was the débâcle of July 1997, when the undemocratic practices of Meciar's third government, formed after the autumn 1994 elections, led to Slovakia's exclusion from negotiations on NATO and EU membership. This was a personal failure for Meciar, since not only had he himself submitted the Slovak Republic's application for EU membership in 1995, but Slovakia's 'Visegrad Four' neighbours (the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland) had all started negotiations on EU membership in March 1998, and joined NATO in March 1999. The parliamentary election in September 1998 brought a radical change in Slovakia's direction. Meciar's Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) and the Slovak National Party (SNS) went into opposition, while the government was formed by the other four party lists which obtained more than the 5 per cent of the vote necessary to enter parliament: the Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK), the Party of the Democratic Left (SDL), the Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK) and the Party of Civic Understanding (SOP). These parties had the required 60 per cent majority in parliament to change the constitution, and did so in order both to arrange the direct election of the president and to make the constitutional changes necessary for EU membership.

This broad left-right government remained in power for the full four-year parliamentary term, and notched up very notable successes in the area of foreign policy. Slovakia was invited to join the OECD in December 2000. It started accession negotiations with the EU in February 2000, in little more than a year catching up with and even overtaking some of the 'first group' of post-communist candidate states that had been negotiating since 1998. By the end of the coalition's term in office, Slovakia looked likely to be invited to join NATO at the Prague Summit in November 2002.

However, for a number of reasons, the coalition was less successful in the domestic policy arena. First, public expectations were extremely high when the government changed in autumn 1998, and the rapid increase in Slovakia's (already high) unemployment rate came as an unpleasant shock. Secondly, rapid economic reform was hampered by the diverse nature of the coalition, with SDL objecting to more radical economic measures, including those supported by its own finance minister. Thirdly, reform of local government was complicated by the demands of the Hungarian SMK, which had rather hostile relations

with SDL. Fourthly, the new government was not free of the whiff of corruption that had enveloped its predecessor, and this made the electorate even more intolerant of economic hardship. Finally, the four 'parties' themselves mostly proved unstable.

Party shifts in the government camp

SDK had been formed from the parliamentary Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) and Democratic Union (DU), and also from the smaller Democratic Party (DS), Social Democratic Party of Slovakia (SDSS) and Party of the Greens in Slovakia (SZS). SDK had only registered as a party (instead of standing as a coalition) because of changes to the electoral law introduced by Meciar's government in May 1998. After the election, when it was in a position to reverse these changes, it had to decide what organizational form it really wanted to take. The new prime minister, the Christian Democrats' Mikulac Dzurinda, wanted to build on the success of the united SDK, but was opposed within his own party. Eventually, Dzurinda formed the Slovak Christian and Democratic Union (SKDU), which incorporated almost the whole of the DU, but only part of KDH. The rump KDH continued to exist, but was notably more Catholic fundamentalist than previously. Both SDKU and KDH entered parliament and government in 2002.

On the other hand, SDL, which alongside HZDS and KDH had been one of the only Slovak parties to survive in a recognizable form, and with a nationwide organization, for the whole of the 1990s, suffered a dramatic drop in support. This was probably inevitable owing to its ambiguous position as a left-wing party in a largely centre-right government. However, its decline was exacerbated by its links with some notable corruption scandals and by internal divisions on its positioning *vis-à-vis* government policy. Less than a year before the 2002 election, two of its government ministers (Milan Ftacnik and Brigita Schmognerova) and its former leader (Peter Weiss) broke away to form the Social Democratic Alternative (SDA). Perhaps most fatally, however, the youngest and most popular of its leading politicians, Robert Fico, was given no major office after the elections. He responded by leaving and forming the more populist Smer (Direction) party. Unlike SDL and SDA, Smer easily managed to enter the 2002 parliament, becoming the second largest opposition party.

The Hungarian minority party SMK had, like SDK, only registered itself as a single party in 1998 because of the new election law. Unlike SDK, the three centre-right ethnic Hungarian parties it comprised merged successfully. Despite some discontent over the fact that

the government had ignored the priorities of Slovakia's 10 per cent Hungarian minority, the vast majority of SMK's voters felt they had nowhere else to go. The party retained its 1998 vote in the 2002 elections and rejoined the government.

SOP had been a new party formed to fight the 1998 election on a centre-left platform, aided by publicity from the independent Markiza TV station. It was wholly successful in achieving the aim of its Chair, Rudolf Schuster, to become Slovak president, largely because it traded its right to a third government ministry for Schuster's nomination as the government's candidate in the first direct elections for president held in May 1999. Thereafter, the party had little *raison d'être*, and it eventually achieved oblivion by standing with SDL in the 2002 elections. Meanwhile, the director of Markiza, Pavol Rusko, had formed his own party, the liberal Alliance of the New Citizen (whose acronym, ANO, is the Slovak word for 'yes'). ANO entered parliament in 2002 and joined the new government.

Party shifts in the opposition camp

The more nationalist opposition parties were also not spared internal conflict between 1998 and 2002.

HZDS adapted badly to opposition. Meciar gave up his parliamentary seat just after the 1998 elections, re-emerging into the political limelight only to be defeated in the run-off with Schuster in May 1999. The party attempted to give itself a new profile in 2000 by abandoning its claim to be a 'centre' party, and declaring itself a 'people's party' on the right of the political spectrum. It also attempted to repair the damage done by its failure to be accepted in the NATO and EU enlargement processes in 1997 by loudly proclaiming its support for membership of both organizations. However, it remained unable to capitalize on the government's unpopularity because of the deep divides within the Slovak political community. In the main, disaffected voters from the government parties transferred their allegiance to newly formed parties, rather than back to parties that had ruled in the mid-1990s. HZDS entered the 2002 election as the strongest single party, but with no possible coalition partners.

Meciar's most fatal mistake was made shortly before the 2002 election. Less than a fortnight before nominations closed, it emerged that he had left many leading HZDS members off the party's candidate list, including Ivan Gasparovic, the second most popular politician in the party. With breakneck speed, Gasparovic left HZDS, founded a new party called the Movement for Democracy (HZD), had the party registered with the Interior Ministry, and collected

enough citizens' signatures to submit an HZD list for the 2002 elections shortly before midnight on the day nominations closed. The new party did not prove strong enough to enter parliament, and HZDS remained the single largest party in parliament after the 2002 elections, though much weakened. Meanwhile, the die-hard unreformed Communist Party of Slovakia, KSS, picked up the support of the most desperate and disillusioned voters, entering parliament for the first time since Slovak independence.

Finally, SNS split spectacularly and acrimoniously, with Jan Slota, its leader since 1994, forming the breakaway Real Slovak National Party (PSNS). SNS's new and equally controversial chair, Anna Malikova, led the party to a marginally worse election defeat than that of PSNS in the 2002 elections. The more nationalist segment of the opposition was, therefore, eliminated from parliament.

The 2002 election result

The real winner of the election was Prime Minister Mikulas Dzurinda, who remained in the country's highest office – an even greater feat in the volatile political climate of East Central Europe than in the rest of the democratic world. His party also showed the biggest gain when compared to public opinion poll predictions. The election produced the greatest stability and continuity of government in the history of independent Slovakia. The new government, sworn in on 16 October 2002, contains five ministers from the former government. These include four of SDKU's leading politicians: Mikulas Dzurinda (prime minister); Eduard Kukan (foreign minister); Ivan Miklos (economics/finance); and Ivan Simko (moved from interior to defence).

The technical 'winner' in the common Slovak usage of the word, which relates to the party gaining the most votes, rather than to the parties gaining governing power, was Meciar and HZDS. However, in reality both Meciar and his party were the greatest losers. Their proportion of the vote collapsed by nearly a third compared to opinion polls in the early summer and, even adding in the votes of Gasparovic's breakaway HZD, support was still lower than in both predictions and the 1998 elections. Meciar has now suffered national electoral defeat three times in a row: in the 1998 parliamentary elections, in the 1999 presidential elections, and in the 2002 parliamentary elections. His ultimate problem, however, is that he is 'uncoalitionable'. Whether he obtains 20 or 30 per cent of the national vote is essentially irrelevant because most other parties recognize that he is an impossible partner for a country seeking acceptability on the international stage.

TABLE 1: THE 2002 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION RESULT – VOTES AND SEATS

Successful parties	per cent vote	seats
Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS)	19.50	36
*Slovak Democratic & Christian Union (SDKÚ)	15.09	28
Smer ('Direction')	13.46	25
*Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK)	11.16	20
*Christian Democratic Movement (KDH)	8.25	15
*Alliance of the New Citizen (ANO)	8.01	15
Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS)	6.32	11
Total successful parties	81.81	150
*Total new government parties	42.52	78
Unsuccessful parties		
Real Slovak National Party (PSNS)	3.65	0
Slovak National Party (SNS)	3.32	0
Movement for Democracy (HZD)	3.28	0
Social Democratic Alliance (SDA)	1.79	0
Party of the Democratic Left (SD_)	1.36	0
Party of the Greens in Slovakia (SZS)	0.98	0
Others (total 12)	3.78	0
Total unsuccessful parties	18.19	0
Turnout: 70.07 per cent		

The other great loser, and probably the single person most disappointed by the result, was Robert Fico of the new Smer party. He had been the predicted winner, as he had widely been tipped as the most likely post-election prime minister both by his own billboards and by the international community (although, interestingly, domestic Slovak opinion had become far more open to discussion of alternatives in the run-up to the elections). While some public opinion polls shortly before the election had shown Smer as the strongest single party, it actually came third in the elections, and ended up in the rather ignominious position of being the second-largest opposition party. Like Meciar, Fico suffered from the problem of having made himself an awkward coalition partner – though not, from the international perspective, an unacceptable one.

The campaign

For a foreign observer, the campaign was slightly surreal because of a clause in Meciar's 1998 election law proscribing most TV coverage of the campaign. It was only allowed in state television's party political broadcasts and stylized 'round tables', where leading politicians were outnumbered by unknowns from the many small parties among the 26 who registered for the election. This led to the bizarre situation that when real TV debates took place involving heavyweights

such as Dzurinda and Fico, they were under strict instructions not to discuss their election manifestos! The prevalent use of party billboards with vacuous slogans also did little to promote serious discussion of policy issues. Political meetings were, as always, a favourite device of all major parties, with politicians having to pay attention to the small towns and villages where nearly half the population still lives.

The HZDS campaign had a radically lower profile than in 1998, when it had capitalized on many of the advantages of incumbency, for example by bringing in foreign stars to greet Meciar in his capacity as head of government (not, it was claimed, as the leading HZDS candidate). Associated expenditure thereby avoided election spending limits. In 2002, the party appeared to have retreated to the nationalist heartlands. Meciar's appearance at rallies was severely limited, and he refused to move far from his lavish new villa near Trencin. When he appeared in TV debates and round tables (which he had largely refrained from doing in 1998), he sometimes seemed extremely strained, and reacted irritably to questions about how he had paid for his villa. Even billboards were less prevalent, other than in the party's nationalist heartlands.

SDKÚ's campaign heavily emphasized experience and continuity. To the surprise of many observers, this worked, and SDKÚ succeeded in projecting itself with the authority of the party in power. 'Just one more little step' (to the EU and NATO), as one of its slogans went, was in the end a convincing enough argument

for many voters to forget all the disappointments of four years of Dzurinda's government and vote for the one party (apart from the Hungarians) who appeared to offer the cast-iron guarantee both of getting elected and of getting Slovakia into 'Europe'. While 15 per cent may not seem a huge achievement for a prime minister's party, it was very impressive in the circumstances.

The Smer campaign appeared by far the most well-organized and well-financed, and most even in its coverage of the country as a whole. It ran an expensive billboard campaign many months before the official campaign started, and Fico, having no government responsibilities, started a journey 'Around Slovakia in 80 Days' well before the election, becoming the most travelled of all party leaders. The campaign was highly professional, and all its political representatives were highly consistent in what they said. However, towards the end it was marred by ever louder questions about where its finance came from, and whom it might have to pay off with political favours if elected to government. The campaign may also have peaked rather early, with Fico appearing over-confident in his suggestions he would be next prime minister, as well as appearing too willing to introduce radical changes for which the shell-shocked post-transition electorate no longer had the stomach.

SMK was nearest to the situation of the British Labour or Conservative parties in safe constituencies. It had an almost unshakeable core electorate with a track record of high turnout, and its campaign concentrated almost entirely on the districts of southern Slovakia where the Hungarian minority is concentrated. But not quite entirely. In Bratislava particularly, many Slovaks stated that they would vote SMK because it was the only party that could be relied on to do what it said, as it had always pushed for reform. This was in some cases just an elaborate way of expressing the feeling that all Slovak parties had proved useless. But the party's leader, Bela Bugár, was a politician so widely liked by more traditional Slovaks that some lamented he was not a Slovak. The party was not unaware of the possibilities of increasing its strength by incorporating Slovaks (after all, little other possibility existed) and happily put up billboards in Bratislava with Bugár's face and the slogan 'Trust binds' in Hungarian and Slovak.

KDH was a far more conservative, rural and Catholic party after the split with SDKU. As a long-established party, with a smaller, but solid, electorate, it could afford to run a very low-key campaign. Its billboards were noticeably more prevalent in the north-western heartlands of the more nationalist parties, with which it shared its older, less educated voter base. Although it was clearly trying to 'steal' the nationalist vote, initial post-election analyses of voting shifts did not indicate a notable degree of success in this.

ANO's campaign was viewed somewhat sceptically by its opponents, who claimed that if you owned the most popular private television company, the rest of the campaign was less important. Although media monitoring did cast doubt on Markiza TV's impartiality, the party also ran a fairly even campaign of billboards and meetings throughout the country – aided by TV personalities. Its strongholds were in the east, not unlike those of its partial predecessor SOP.

KSS ran by far the most modest campaign of all the parties that entered parliament. Its billboards were small and rarely visible, and its strongest weapon was the deep economic despair of the elderly and the rural unemployed.

The campaign was generally far less tense than in 1998. While in the last elections there appeared to be a clear choice for or against Meciar, this time life was less simple. Although there was considerable dissatisfaction with the 1998–2002 government, its disillusioned former voters could not switch to Meciar's HZDS or the Nationalists, as this would clearly lead to a termination of Slovakia's efforts to join the EU and NATO, which were already far advanced. Although the two new parties that were in a position to be critical of both the two last governments, Smer and ANO, appeared to have the support of at least a quarter of voters, the will to try out something new and different had diminished after more than a decade of adventures with post-communist transformation.

One of the greatest dangers was therefore perceived to be voter apathy and a very low turnout, with fears of a repeat of the 58 per cent recorded in the June 2002 Czech election. This could have distorted the result by working in favour of HZDS and other forces unacceptable to the international community, since their somewhat older and more rural electorates (together with the Hungarian minority) generally had a better track record of actually turning up at the ballot box.

From January 2002 onwards, therefore, both Slovak non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and foreign donors began to prepare for a major 'get the vote out' campaign, similar to that run in 1998. Foreign sponsors eventually provided twice as much money to NGOs as in 1998. This was partly because the NGO sector had become more diverse over the previous years, and hence more capable of absorbing funds. While most money in 1998 had gone into a single campaign to raise electoral participation, in 2002 it provided money to over 80 projects. Some were specifically aimed at younger voters – those least likely to vote – while others aimed to deepen Slovakia's democratic consolidation by targeting groups such as women and Roma, who traditionally also had low participation in political life. Others aimed at monitoring the fairness of the electoral process (which was far less in question than in 1998, but nonetheless still in need of

consolidation) or at providing information about political events in the country, such as evaluation of government performance or party political manifestos. This kind of activity called for a high level of political objectivity, but was to some extent necessary because of the restrictions on media coverage of the campaign.

NGO activity was less controversial than in 1998, when it was bitterly attacked by the government then in power. Nonetheless, some interesting questions were raised about it. Since opinion polls showed that younger voters had a stronger than average inclination to vote for new parties, some people felt that it might advantage Smer to the detriment of the government parties.

Much of the NGO campaign in particular emphasized the extent to which voters would be deciding on whether Slovakia would complete its journey to the EU and NATO. Yet, up to a point, this had also been the key issue in the 1998 election campaign. It was that election that radically reversed Slovakia's course in the direction back to 'Europe'.

The EU issue in the campaign

Europe underlay the entire election in a way unthinkable in most Central and East European countries. Unlike Bulgaria and Romania, which were clearly not going to enter the EU in 2004 because of multiple underlying structural problems, Slovakia had in 1997 been temporarily separated from the other Visegrad states and excluded from negotiating membership purely for political reasons. It was, therefore, fairly evident that political mistakes in the 2002 election could set it back again, potentially undoing all the achievements of the previous four years.

The EU and NATO, and their many and varied representatives, left Slovakia in little doubt that this was the case. The fact that NATO was deciding on Slovakia's membership at the Prague summit in November 2002, and that one month later the European Council would make its decision on the 2004 EU enlargement wave, meant that a new government would have no time to establish its credentials after it took office. It had to be acceptable when appointed. Though reluctant to interfere in any state's electoral process, foreigners considered it quite valid to point out to Slovaks that while they were free to choose any government they wished, the EU also had a right to choose its partners. The unacceptability of Meciar and HZDS, as well as SNS, was quite simply a fact of which the electorate had the right to be unambiguously aware. Since a second exclusion was an idea the majority of the population could not stomach, the issue was relevant.

Party stances towards the EU can be divided into four main groups, which are descriptions in the specifically Slovak context, and not a classification system intended for broader use:

- Europhiles (SDKU, SMK, ANO, SDL, SDA) – Parties that are fully supportive of EU membership.
- Conditional Europhiles (KDH, Smer) – Parties supporting EU membership on a general level, but critical of individual points relating to economic interest or sovereignty.
- Phoney Europhiles (HZDS, SNS?) – Parties that declared pro-EU views in order to make themselves seem internationally respectable, but have done little to moderate their domestic political behaviour in a way that would make them acceptable partners to current EU members.
- Europhobes (PSNS, KSS, SNS?) – Parties at the extremes of the system on the left and right that were openly hostile to EU membership, but began to accept that it would happen, and began to concentrate on the need to fight for 'national interests'.

As usual, Slovaks 'domesticized' the EU issue. While Fico's Smer did begin to flirt with mild Euroscepticism, even talking about reopening negotiation chapters that had been provisionally closed, the hottest debate did not focus on any aspect of EU policy, nor on the implications of Slovakia's EU membership or the Convention's 'Future of Europe' debate.

The key question was whether the presence of Meciar and/or HZDS in government would exclude Slovakia from EU membership. Public opinion surveys conducted by the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic before the elections indicated that HZDS was considered a threat to Slovakia's NATO and EU membership by a large majority (over 70 per cent) of supporters of SDKU, SMK, SDA, KDH and ANO, and by a smaller majority of SDL, Smer and PSNS supporters. On the other hand, a large majority (over 70 per cent) of HZDS and SNS supporters thought that HZDS being in government would not threaten Slovakia's integration chances. Stating a belief that Meciar could bring Slovakia into the EU therefore appeared to be a feature of 'phoney Europhile' party supporters. It was a personal vote of confidence in Meciar, rather than a reasoned reflection of likely political outcomes. This matched the views of the two parties' leaderships, who appeared to view their ability to attain EU membership as a political virility symbol rather than a constraint on their political practices.

It is probable that the EU issue affected the election outcome by weakening the two largest parties now in opposition, HZDS and Smer, and strengthening SDKU:

- HZDS was 'uncoalitionable' since all other parties (except SNS, which was rejected by HZDS) wanted to

join the EU and NATO. This contributed to the gradual erosion of its support.

- Fico, whose Smer party did not publicly exclude forming a coalition with HZDS, refused to work with Meciar as an individual. This made Meciar nervous that his own party might replace him as leader, and possibly precipitated his final fatal mistake of excluding Gasparovic from the party's list of candidates – which led to the formation of HZD and the rapid fall in HZDS support shortly before the elections.
- Fico's refusal explicitly to exclude a coalition with Meciar worried Smer's predominantly young electorate, who favoured EU membership.
- Fico's threat to take a tougher stance with the EU in negotiations also made SDKU look like a 'safer pair of hands' than Smer.
- SDA's young social democratic supporters decided that a vote for a party that might not get into parliament was too risky at such a decisive point in their country's history, and many switched to SDKU.

Future perspectives

The Slovak party system has yet to reach any kind of equilibrium. Three major questions remain:

- The future of HZDS. Meciar's leadership is open to challenge after repeated election defeats. Yet for the

party's core voters he is its greatest asset. If nationalist concerns lessen as Slovakia becomes more used to independent statehood, it is uncertain whether the party will ever re-emerge as a major government player.

- The future of the left in Slovakia. Even supporters of the centre-right government are becoming increasingly aware that the lack of a mainstream centre-left opposition is a problem. It is unclear whether Fico's Smer will become a social democratic party, and prove sufficiently competent at compromise to integrate the left. It is also uncertain whether SDL' and SDA will survive after their 2002 defeat or whether the younger, more European generation will assume the task of reviving the left.
- The future of the centre-right after EU accession. Once the major task of accession to the EU has been accomplished, the government parties may divert their energies to arguing about differences between them.

However, in spite of these open questions, broadly speaking Slovakia's future looks bright. It is a consolidated democracy, and voters' choices are decisive in determining the make-up of its government. Although the party system looks unstable, the electorate itself is not volatile and unpredictable. For more than a decade, citizens have demonstrated a slow but steady shift towards parties which are acceptable to the international community, and even the declining parties with more dubious credentials are gradually changing.

The author would like to thank the British Academy for their support of the project 'Domestic and international influences on democratic consolidation: the 2002 Slovak parliamentary elections', which enabled her to conduct research in Slovakia during the course of the election campaign.

Convened from the Sussex European Institute, the Opposing European Research Network is a group of academic researchers studying party politics within the European Union and candidate countries and seeking to understand in particular why Euroscepticism exists in some states and not in others. Like the Royal Institute of International Affairs, the Network itself retains an independent stance on the issues under consideration. The views presented are those of the authors.

**For further details email p.a.taggart@sussex.ac.uk or
A.A.Szczerbiak@sussex.ac.uk
website:www.sussex.ac.uk/Units/SEI/oern/index.html**



The Royal Institute of International Affairs is an independent body which promotes the rigorous study of international questions and does not express opinions of its own.

The opinions expressed in this publication are the responsibility of the author.

© Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2002. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted by any other means without the prior permission of the copyright holder.



**THE ROYAL INSTITUTE OF
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS**

Chatham House 10 St James's Square London SW1Y 4LE
Tel 020 7957 5700 E-mail contact@riia.org
Fax 020 7957 5710 Website www.riia.org

Charity Registration Number: 208223