

2004 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION BRIEFING NO 10 THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION IN SLOVAKIA JUNE 13 2004

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Key points:

- Turnout at below 17% was a record low for any European Parliament or national Slovak election.
- The Slovak government parties gained 8 out of 14 seats, despite mid-term unpopularity, and obtained a higher share of the vote than in the 2002 elections.
- For the first time since its foundation in 1991, Meciar's Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) did not get the highest party vote in a national election.
- The Slovak party system shows signs of stabilisation: all European Parliament seats went to 5 of the 7 parties elected to parliament in the last national elections.
- No communists, nationalists or extreme Eurosceptics were elected.
- Pre-election debate of EU-related issues remained at a very basic level.

Background

Slovakia's path to EU membership had been rockier than that of its neighbours, and it was at a different stage of the political cycle when the first European Parliament elections took place. While in the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary, leftist governments fared badly or disastrously in the election, a centre-right Slovak government took more than half the country's European Parliament seats in spite of the fact that it was suffering from mid-term unpopularity. The Slovak political scene was also rather different from the other accession states because of the enduring aftermath of the shock of the country's initial exclusion from the European integration process in 1997.

Two aspects of Slovakia's political background were particularly important to the European Parliament elections. The first was electoral fatigue among Slovak voters, who

had been repeatedly mobilised for critical elections at regular intervals in the previous six years. The most crucial election was the Slovak parliamentary election of September 1998. The third government of Vladimír Mečiar, in power since 1994, had failed in its declared aims of joining the EU and NATO because its democratic credentials were questioned. It had also created an acutely polarised political society. Both the international community, and many Slovaks themselves, believed that the future of Slovak democracy hinged on the outcome of the election. There was a large NGO-led campaign to increase information and participation, leading to a massive 84% turnout, and a change of government. Under the premiership of Mikuláš Dzurinda, four parties covering a broad right-left pro-integration spectrum replaced the previous more nationally-oriented government coalition.

This crucial election was followed by a change in the constitution to introduce direct elections of the president, and the defeat of Mečiar's candidacy for president in the second round of presidential elections in May 1999. Although the first Dzurinda government made great strides in negotiating Slovakia's membership of the EU and NATO in the following years, the crucial decisions on enlargement by both organisations were to be made shortly *after* the September 2002 parliamentary elections. The largest left-wing party in the government had been discredited by its participation in the right-dominated Dzurinda government, and was doomed to be superseded in the elections by the new left-populist *Smer* ('Direction') party of Robert Fico, a breakaway left-wing MP. The possibility that he might form a government with Mečiar's HZDS, and thereby at the last moment scuttle Slovakia's chances of European integration, prompted another NGO-led campaign to increase electoral turnout, supported by the international community. Although in September 2002 turnout only reached 70%, Dzurinda's Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKÚ) unexpectedly polled better than Fico's *Smer*, allowing Dzurinda to form a second government comprising four centre-right parties.¹

Dzurinda's second government formed in October 2002 was the most programmatically coherent government ever to take power in Slovakia. However, the overcrowding on the right side of the party spectrum meant that the governing parties spent rather too much time arguing with each other instead of asserting their political agenda in the face of the left/nationalist parliamentary opposition. Internal disputes led to defections from two of the four government parties, and by 2004 the government had lost its majority in parliament. It had to gain the support of opposition parties or independents in order to pass legislation. Additionally, while the government's liberal economic policies gained much approval in the west, Fico's *Smer* attempted to make political capital from the despair of Slovaks suffering from the effects of reforms. Fico supported a trade union drive to hold a referendum calling early elections, which he hoped to win. When the requisite number of signatures had been collected, the left-oriented President Schuster called the referendum for the same day as the first round of the 2004 presidential elections (in which he happened to be standing for re-election).

¹ See: K.Henderson, "Europe and the Slovak Parliamentary Elections of October 2002", *Opposing Europe Research Network/Royal Institute for International Affairs Election Briefing No 7*, Sussex European Institute, University of Sussex, 2002 at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/paper7slovak.pdf>.

The April 2004 presidential elections were a monumental failure for the centre-right coalition government, whose four members failed to agree a common candidate.² Although most public opinion polls put the SDKÚ candidate, foreign minister Eduard Kukan, in the lead, turnout below 50% and a low point in SDKÚ support relegated him to third place. The second round run-off was between Meciar and former HZDS member Ivan Gašparovic, who had been at Meciar's side during the disastrous 1994-1998 parliament. Many Slovaks voted for Gašparovic as the 'lesser evil' in the second round, although they would have preferred to abstain if they had been less appalled by the prospect of a Meciar presidency. The fact that the referendum calling for early elections was invalid because of low turnout was little consolation to the government.

Less than two months later, the Slovak electorate was asked to go to the ballot box again and vote for its MEPs. Compared to the other electoral battles of the previous years, it was less than clear what they were voting for and why.

The second aspect of the Slovakia's political background that influenced the European Parliament election was the curious status of the EU in Slovak politics. The position of Meciar's HZDS towards European integration was complex: the party supported it at a declaratory level, but their voters were more lukewarm about the project than supporters of the pro-reform parties, and Meciar's 1994-1998 coalition government had tended to place domestic political power concerns above the need to fulfil the democratic criteria of the EU and NATO. After the electoral defeat of 1998, it was clear that Meciar's attempt to 'sit on the fence' between inclusion and exclusion in the European integration process – that is, to enjoy the prestige of gaining international acceptance without making domestic political compromises – had failed. HZDS began to declare its support for EU and NATO membership even louder, though its intra-party democracy left much to desire. However, in the run-up to the 2002 election the international community made it painfully obvious that participation of the party in the next Slovak government would exclude Slovakia from both the EU and NATO, and HZDS realised that a more fundamental change of approach was necessary.

What had happened over the years was that HZDS's opponents had succeeded in establishing a dominant political discourse in which it was accepted that European integration and Slovak national interest were synonymous. To oppose EU membership was to damage the interests of Slovakia, and to support EU membership but fail to deliver it was a sign of political incompetence. HZDS had failed. This made it 'un-coalitionable' and hence unable to participate in government until it gained the acceptance of the international community. Consequently, the largest Slovak party, which had the most latent hostility to the EU and the most Eurosceptic voters, was impotent in any debate on the EU as it could not afford to express anti-EU sentiments. In the run-up to the EU accession referendum in May 2003, this neutering of political discussion led to a bland campaign in which all parliamentary parties favoured a 'yes' vote. Slovakia produced the

² See: K.Henderson, "The Slovak Presidential Election April 2004", *European Parties Elections and Referendums Network Network/Royal Institute for International Affairs Election Briefing No 15*, Sussex European Institute, University of Sussex, 2004 at http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/slovak_pres_election_briefing3.pdf.

highest 'yes' vote for EU membership ever, but with a disappointingly low turnout which only just passed the 50% necessary for the referendum to be valid.³ Without anyone to vote against, the electorate needed all the powers of persuasion of the government, opposition and president together in order to be dragged to the ballot box. This was not a performance that could be repeated a year later in the European Parliament elections.

After the European Parliament results were announced, the EP chair Pat Cox interpreted the low turnouts in most of the accession states optimistically by pointing out that most of the EU's citizens felt that they had already expressed their support for the EU in the 2003 referendums on accession. The specific background to the EP election in Slovakia, which had the lowest turnout ever at 16.96%, appears to confirm the validity of this explanation. The Slovak electorate had been particularly overburdened by a sequence of elections determining the country's pro-European orientation, and the crowning achievement of EU accession on 1 May 2004 in many senses closed a difficult chapter in Slovakia's history that had begun with the arguments with the Czechs after the 'Velvet Revolution' of November 1989. However, there were also a number of other factors that affected the result of the European Parliament election, which emerge from a more detailed examination of the campaign and the final result.

The election manifestos

Complex debate on issues affecting the future of the European Union and Slovakia's place within it had been sparse prior to accession, when arguments centred largely around which party was most capable of achieving membership. However, anyone who had hoped that the election manifestos prepared for the European Parliament elections would at last provide more detailed information of individual parties' stances on particular EU-related issues was to be disappointed.

All the Slovak parties seemed remarkably ill-prepared for the EP elections, and most were barely able to produce any election programme at all. This was in marked contrast to the leading Czech political parties, who had often-elaborate websites up and running long before most Slovak parties had presented even the simplest of election manifestos.

There was generally an inverse relationship between the detail contained in the Slovak manifestos and the promptness with which they appeared on the parties' websites. The only two parliamentary parties which had programmes available in time for the official beginning of the campaign three weeks before polling merely presented a list of bullet points. The opposition Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS) and the government Alliance of the New Citizen (ANO) showed a remarkable coincidence of European-level policies, given that one of them aspired to sit with the far-left EUL/NGL and the other with the liberal ELDR group in the European Parliament. Both started with thinly-veiled criticism of continuing restrictions on the free movement of labour, and also included respecting

³ See: K.Henderson, "The Slovak EU Accession Referendum 16-17 May 2003", *European Parties Elections and Referendums Network Referendum Briefing No 7*, Sussex European Institute, University of Sussex, 2004 at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epernbrefslovak.pdf>.

national identity, promoting education, increasing employment and protecting the environment. Admittedly, the Communists also wanted to dissolve NATO, while ANO supported an open economy and free market. In general, however, neither party supplied any detail about its European policies.

The government Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK), which represented Slovakia's 10% Hungarian minority and was a member of the rightist EPP-ED group in the European parliament, issued a 'Declaration of the Republic Council of SMK before the elections to the European Parliament' on 22 May, which was entitled 'Together in Europe'. It emphasised that SMK 'welcomes the reunification of Europe', and that the EU 'creates possibilities for divided, unilaterally integrated and closed regions to develop once more as a natural whole, maybe even as Euroregions with exceptional support'. The short text was perfect for arousing Slovak nationalist fears that the Hungarian minority regarded the EU as the way to recreate the pre-World War I Greater Hungary, of which Slovakia had been a part. HZDS's first declaration on the EP elections was actually a reply to the SMK declaration, picking particularly on the sentence where SMK stated that 'The Hungarian Community in Slovakia can for the first time gain representation in the European Parliament, both as a consequence of its political weight in Slovakia, and together with other representatives of the Hungarian nation'. HZDS claimed this meant that the SMK MEPs would not be representing Slovakia's interests in the European Parliament. A further declaration by Meciar later in the week largely presented its election candidates, pointing out that they were fielding a former Slovak finance minister and the only agriculture specialist on any Slovak candidate list. The two-page statement also claimed in a rather alarmist tone that voting was important because more than 50% of the Slovak parliament's competencies would be transferred to the EU in the next few years. In the second part of the declaration, however, Meciar returned to the Hungarian theme, again attacking the SMK declaration and claiming that 'Anyone who does not vote is voting for SMK'.

The first lengthy manifesto to appear, some days into the official campaign, was that of prime minister Dzurinda's SDKÚ, which is also an EPP-ED member in the European Parliament. However, it was surprisingly devoid of content, comprising mostly bland and uncontentious wishes such as for 'a prosperous and secure future', and preserving and deepening the system of subsidiarity. Europe's community of values with the United States was emphasised in several places; collective rights (i.e. of the Hungarian minority) were rejected; and fulfilling the criteria for joining EMU and Schengen by 2006 was supported. Most significantly, it appeared to support national vetoes on economic and social affairs, but not necessarily in justice and home affairs. The latter had been the subject of an argument between Dzurinda and his coalition partners in the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH), which controlled the justice and interior ministries and was determined to maintain national vetoes in these areas.

The two most substantial and programmatic election manifestos were the last two to appear. They belonged to two parties with a growing reputation for Soft Euroscepticism: the opposition party *Smer* on the left and the governing KDH on the right. The left-populist *Smer*, which sat with the socialist PES in the European Parliament but had yet to

be accepted for membership of the Socialist International, slipped a link to its election material on to its party website half way through the official campaign. Interestingly, the manifesto was lacking in Eurosceptic undertones, as if it had been prepared with as much of an eye to gaining PES membership as to stirring up the Slovak electorate. Entitled 'A stronger Slovakia in a social Europe', its first half was dedicated to explaining the advantages of the social market economy that had been so successful in bringing stability and prosperity to broad strata of society in western Europe. It was a mainstream social democratic text, emphasising the advantages of PES membership and what *Smer* would do to encourage social justice, economic growth and job creation. The second part of the manifesto was devoted to the need to protect national interests. It highlighted specific issues where it thought the government had failed, such as use of structural funds, agreeing to close one of Slovakia's nuclear power stations and failing to protect Slovak farmers and the free movement of labour. The most critical part of the manifesto was an attack on the Iraq War towards the end. However, the penultimate paragraph contained an uncharacteristic attack on Euroscepticism: 'Europe is not the gigantic, bureaucratic monster that its opponents present it as, or a superstate forcing its bad decisions on the states and citizens of Europe.' The link to *Smer*'s special EP election website, and the contents of the website itself, including the manifesto, disappeared from *Smer*'s website a few days after the election, as if Fico and his colleagues did not wish to be reminded of their EUophilia after the election. The election material of all other parties remained accessible, usually with a post-election update added.

The Christian Democrats (also EPP-ED members, like SMK and SDKÚ) publicized the European Parliament elections on their website all through the campaign, but for several weeks the 'election programme' link produced a message that 'This page is being prepared, and will be accessible in the coming days'. When the manifesto finally emerged little more than a week before the election, it was perhaps not as well-crafted and reader-friendly as *Smer*'s, but was more detailed in some of the policy areas it looked at, such as justice and home affairs and education and research. While fairly Europe-focused, in some sections it appeared more suited to being the manifesto in a domestic election. It was not, however, particularly Eurosceptic in tone given the attitudes that emerged when some KDH politicians were interviewed.

Some small parties also produced election manifestos. The Free Forum (SF), founded by a group of parliamentarians who had broken away from SDKÚ, produced an early manifesto, which was brief but also quite detailed on internal and external security matters – a reflection of the fact that the party's founder and leading EP candidate, Ivan Šimko, was a former interior and later defence minister in the Dzurinda governments. The only really Eurosceptic manifesto – a brief document which appeared well before the campaign began – emerged from the Civic Conservative Party (OKS), a group mainly formed of Bratislava intellectuals who had broken away from one of the smaller centre-right parties in the 1998-2002 parliament. OKS fielded a single candidate in the EP election. It was totally against the EU as currently conceived, seeking to abolish, among other things, the EU's regional policy, the Common Agricultural Policy, the EU's environmental policy, and rejecting both the introduction of the euro in Slovakia and the EU constitution. The only other notably critical manifesto came from the Slovak National

Party, which, like HZDS, exaggerated the extent to which the Dzurinda government had ceded powers to Brussels, while also emphasizing its own European credentials and its links with the Eurosceptic UEN grouping in the European Parliament. The most salient feature of its campaign, however, was its anti-Hungarian rhetoric. The only other party with a slim chance of success – the coalition of Movement for Democracy (HZD)/People's Union (LÚ), which were both breakaway parties from HZDS, and also had UEN links – appeared to have no visible programmatic presence. Its only asset was that the HZD's founder and leader was the new President Gašparovic, but with his inauguration approaching, he was not in a position to campaign for them.

In analysing the Slovak EP election campaign, the key question is not whether the major focus was on domestic or EU issues, but whether the campaign was about issues at all. Elements common to all or most of the manifestos included defining Slovak national interest as increasing Slovak power, for example by not allowing the EU to be divided into small and large states (meaning, in practice, that small states retained large voices compared to the number of citizens they represented). The concepts 'equal worth' and 'equal rights' (*rovnocenný, rovnoprávný*) were used by both government and opposition parties (though not the more Christian democratic KDH and SMK), and were often objections to the transition periods on the free movement of labour. This was the nearest European issue to the core interest to the electorate, whose major concern was unemployment.⁴ Opposition parties generally criticized the accession terms negotiated by the government parties. Clear party stances on particular policy issues were, however, hard to find.

The candidates and the campaign

While the election manifestos were produced late, the parties were generally better at selecting and publicizing their EP candidates. A major criticism of the parties' campaigning was their focus on selling their candidates and not their policies.

The most conspicuous feature of the candidate line-up was the relatively high number of women in winnable places on the candidate lists. Five of Slovakia's 14 MEPs are in fact women. This is rather surprising for a country without a single female government minister, and a cynic might deem it ultimate proof of the fact that the European Parliament elections were considered second-rank. Although it was later suggested that the parties had not run significant personalities as candidates, this was not always the case. *Smer* fielded its second most prominent politician, Monika Benová, at the top of its list. HZDS also produced a strong candidate list (particularly given the frequent depletion of its ranks by defection), and had former government ministers in leading places. The most unusual – and ultimately also the most successful – choice of candidate was the decision by SDKÚ to field the ice hockey legend Peter Štastný at the top of its list.

⁴ According to the Eurobarometer *Flash EB 161: European Elections 2004 Barometer* (EOS-Gallup, www.eosgallupeurope.com), based on interviews conducted between 5-13 May, 75% of Slovaks thought the European elections should concentrate on the theme of unemployment (compared to EU average 75%), and 76% thought the personality of candidates would be essential to their decision in the elections (compared to EU average 57%).

The campaign itself was low-key. Everyone blamed everyone else for this. The media blamed the parties, and the parties blamed the media. The government was blamed for not running any official information campaign about the European Parliament elections, while the prime minister pointed out that if it had, it would have been criticised (in which he was undoubtedly correct). It was taken for granted that voting in the European election was a good thing, and that if the public only had enough information, they would surely be convinced and behave in the required manner. The region's elites had believed the same when they tried to educate their populations about Marxism-Leninism and scientific communism.

The parties campaigned in a number of traditional ways, but with no great intensity. The party with the earliest and most extensive billboard campaign was the government coalition member ANO, which was clearly concerned that it would not gain the 5% of the vote necessary to get any seats. It portrayed its leading candidates with the slogan 'in their heart in Slovakia'. SDKÚ relied largely on the image of Štastný with the slogan 'I will be happy (in Slovak: *šťastný*) if we promote a strong Slovakia'. *Smer*'s posters used a slogan that was strikingly reminiscent in content and graphic presentation to that of an NGO voter mobilization campaign in the 2002 elections (leading to arguments about copyright and copying). Little campaign literature was distributed through letterboxes, and street activity (walkabouts and meetings) was limited.

While public and private television channels had slots reserved for Party Election Broadcasts, few parties availed themselves of this expensive option for boring the electorate. While some television debates took place, they tended to lack content. This was in part because Slovak television permits politicians to discuss everything but their election programmes during an election campaign; consequently, even if there were any European themes in the election campaign, the viewers would not know about them. Likewise, television news programmes showed politicians doing everything except speaking on the campaign trail; the politician's 'sound-bite' putting across the most powerful message of their election manifesto was unknown. Attempting to be neutral in the campaign period has led to a situation where television has been neutered. TV coverage tends to reinforce the impression that election campaigns are about personalities and not issues.

Where 'Europe' was discussed in television debates, almost all politicians placed their emphasis on power rather than policies. The crux of most parties' arguments was that they would be best at defending Slovak interests in the EU. What these interests actually were was rarely spelt out. It was somehow assumed that Slovak national interest was a clear and uncontested concept.

The one acerbic element that did enter the election campaign related to turnout and the most emotive issue in domestic politics, the Hungarian minority. There were early indications that the turnout in Slovakia would be extremely low: both domestic and multinational public opinion polls put it at between 20 and 30 per cent. However, turnout was usually higher among ethnic Hungarians than Slovaks. Since the whole of Slovakia

was a single constituency, it was arithmetically possible that an 80% turnout among ethnic Hungarians, with an overall Slovak turnout of only 20%, would mean that a third of Slovakia's MEPs belonged to the Party of the Hungarian Coalition. *Smer's* Fico had obviously also done some calculations of this kind, and when Meciar raised the subject in a television debate a week before the election,⁵ complaining that ethnic Hungarians elected in Slovakia would represent the Hungarian nation and not Slovakia, Fico joined in and claimed that if Slovaks did not go and vote, 5 or 6 of Slovakia's 14 MEPs could be from SMK. However, Slovaks were evidently not unduly alarmed by this prospect: in the end, only 17% went to vote.

The election and its result

The technical conduct of the EP election in Slovakia contained both familiar and innovative features. Most unaccustomed was the fact that, in accordance with the EU's recommendation, Slovakia held the election on a Sunday. The Czecho-Slovak norm (which the Czechs retained) was for voting to be conducted from 2pm on Friday until 2pm on Saturday. In other respects, voting was similar to normal. The European Parliament seats were distributed proportionally to all parties who gained at least 5% of valid votes. Since Slovakia only had 14 seats to distribute, it would have been technically possible for a party to gain more than 5% of the vote and still not get a seat, although in the event this did not happen. All five parties who entered the European Parliament had between 13 and 18% of the vote, while their nearest rivals were just under the 5% threshold.

Amid international and domestic consternation at Slovakia's record low turnout, the surprise of the result itself was often overlooked. It had been confidently predicted that the opposition, and most particularly the populist left party *Smer*, would be the winners. Opinion polls indicated fairly consistently that the government parties would gain about a third of the vote, having lost 10% since the 2002 elections. The opposition parties had gained 10%, and looked set to win about half the vote. About a sixth of the vote remained with smaller parties who had failed to gain parliamentary seats in 2002, or which had been formed since the previous national elections by defecting parliamentarians.

Other factors also suggested the government was unlikely to win the European Parliament elections. They took place nearly two years into the parliamentary term; the four government parties had lost their parliamentary majority because of defections, leaving the balance of power with independents; and there was discontent among many sections of the population who had been affected negatively by the government's economic reforms. The presidential elections had gone badly for the government as well.

All calculations of the result of the European Parliament elections based on polls of voting intentions showed that the government would obtain a minority of 5 or 6 of the 14 seats, while the parliamentary opposition parties would gain at least half, with *Smer* alone obtaining up to 5 seats. However, when polling day came, *Smer* and HZDS both obtained

⁵ See: STV1, 6 June 2004, *O päť minút dvanást*, 11.55-13.00.

3 seats, while SMK got the 2 it had hoped for, and KDH and SDKÚ managed to do get 3. Contrary to all expectations, the government had won. As shown in Table 1, the government parties not only gained a majority (8 of 14) of the European Parliament seats, but also improved in percentage terms on their September 2002 parliamentary vote, obtaining just over half the total vote. The opposition parties, on the other hand, polled fractionally less than in 2002.

Table 1: June 2004 Slovak European Parliament election

	% vote	EP seats	% vote 2002
Government parties			
Slovak Democratic and Christian Coalition (SDKÚ)	17.09	3	15.09
Christian Democratic Movement (KDH)	16.19	3	8.25
Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK)	13.24	2	11.06
Alliance of the New Citizen (ANO)	4.65	0	8.01
Total government parties	51.20	8	42.52
Opposition parties			
Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS)	17.04	3	19.50
<i>Smer</i> (Direction)	16.89	3	13.46
Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS)	4.54	0	6.32
Total opposition parties	38.49	6	39.29
Extraparliamentary/breakaway parties			
Free Forum (SF)	3.25	0	-
Coalition Slovak National Party/Real Slovak National Party (SNS/PSNS)	2.01	0	(3.65/3.32)
Coalition Movement for Democracy/People's Union (HZD/LÚ)	1.69	0	(3.28/-)
Civic Conservative Party (OKS)	1.00	0	0.32
Others (6)	2.35	0	7.60
Total parties not elected to parliament in 2002	10.32	0	18.19

Apart from the unexpected government victory, what was striking about the vote was the apparent consolidation of the party system. All 14 seats went to parties that had entered parliament in the 2002 elections. No new or peripheral parties won any seats, and the two parliamentary parties with the lowest vote in 2002 slipped below the 5% cut-off point for gaining seats. Extremist and maverick parties enjoyed no success at all: no nationalists, communists and anti-EU parties gained any significant support. Furthermore, HZDS – the party that had damaged Slovakia's European integration chances so badly in the second half of the 1990s – for the first time since its foundation failed to emerge as the single largest party in a national election.

Explaining the election result

The results of the EP election confirm a long-term trend in Slovak politics: fairly stable preferences on the part of the electorate. While the party constellation in Slovakia has previously appeared to change at each election, this has been due primarily to turbulence at elite level, with attendant splitting and merging of parties. The sort of parties that the electorate chooses has changed less. The European Parliament elections were the first time voters were asked to choose from almost the same set of parties as in the previous national elections, and the election produced a very similar result.

Both the unexpected government victory, and the extremely low turnout require some explanation. The discrepancy between public opinion polls and the EP election result is not so surprising as it first appears. While the government had done badly in the April 2004 presidential elections and was not particularly popular, the support for its constituent parties had not plummeted as in Poland or the Czech Republic. The social effects of some government policies were severe, particularly in the East of the country, but its economic reforms had received much international acclaim, and also won substantial and well-publicised foreign investment, particularly from the car industry. In addition, the prime minister's SDKÚ had a track record from 2002 of polling far more strongly than predicted in public opinion surveys, and the opposition *Smer* did worse in real elections than in polls.

Turnout also worked in the government's favour, being higher than average in Bratislava and some other large towns, where SDKÚ captured around a quarter of the vote. While the Hungarian minority generally displayed the same apathy towards the EP elections as other Slovak citizens, the SMK vote at 13.24% was a few percentage points higher than normal. The slightly higher turnout among Hungarians therefore aided the government parties' total vote without justifying nationalist fears that a disproportionate number of Slovak MEPs would be ethnically Hungarian. The most notable winner among the government parties was KDH, which did almost twice as well as predicted and achieved its highest percentage vote in a national election since 1990. Having a reasonably loyal core vote played to its advantage given the low turnout, and the fact that the election was held on a Sunday may also have helped mobilize its rural voters: in most Slovak villages, the door of the church is not far away from the polling station.

SDKÚ's victory was also helped by Štastný's candidacy. 62% of SDKÚ voters gave Štastný a preferential vote. Although voters do generally tend to circle the name of the top candidate on the list, it is nonetheless interesting that SDKÚ's predominantly well-educated, middle-class urban electorate did not disapprove of the populist choice of lead candidate. Candidate selection may also have assisted the failure of the only government party that did not get into the European Parliament. ANO's Eva Cerná, placed at number two behind the lesser known Jozef Heriban on the party's predominantly female candidate list, outstripped him in preferential votes and might possibly have gained the party the extra 0.35% of the vote necessary for success had she led the campaign. Finally, it is possible that the government parties gained a marginal benefit from their supporters'

shock at the result of the presidential election, when two opposition candidates made it into the second round.

Just as the government parties gained from differential turnouts, most of the opposition parties lost. Turnout was low in the depressed east of Slovakia, where the Communist Party of Slovakia had most support. Like HZDS, its supporters were lukewarm to the EU. Normally, elderly rural voters are conscientious electoral participants. *Smer's* problems with mobilizing its opinion poll support, as discussed, look like being long-term.

Small parties also fared badly. Given the generally low-key campaign, there was little opportunity for parties formed from the splintering of parliamentary parties to raise their profile sufficiently to gain seats. The Slovak National Party, which was not a newcomer to the political scene, had been engaged in bitter internal feuding for several years, and spent the entire pre- and post-election period occupied with legal wrangling about which factions had the right to register a candidate list.

A number of reasons can be suggested for the low turnout in Slovakia. First of all, this was a phenomenon that affected all post-communist EU members. Most were small states, for whom the complexities of the large EU were far removed from the immediacy of national politics in a small political community. However, the low turnout in the only large new member state (Poland) suggests that alienation caused by the small size of the new member states was not the key factor. Low turnouts were not a perennial problem in Slovakia, unlike in Poland and Hungary. The lowest national parliamentary election turnout ever (from five held since 1989) was in 2002, when 70.06% of voters participated.

Secondly, Slovak voters were particularly election-weary, having experienced two very tense national elections since 1998 and very recent two-round presidential elections. Slovakia would be well advised in the future to hold EP elections and presidential elections on the same day, since both occur in a five-year cycle. The experience of Lithuania, which obtained the highest post-communist EP election turnout because a presidential election was held on the same day, suggests this would be effective in raising turnout. Additionally, the political elites appeared to be as election weary as the voters: the lackluster performance of the parties in producing election programmes and campaigning bears witness to this.

Thirdly, Slovakia's turbulent road to EU membership meant that the feeling that the major goal had been achieved in the accession referendum was particularly strong. The fact that the referendum had been so recent would have made it harder to mobilize the electorate with an EU information campaign, had any been attempted.

Fourthly, and perhaps of greatest import, the fact that Slovakia sent no extremist parties of any kind to the European Parliament was not a coincidence, and was closely linked to the low turnout. The turnout may therefore not be as problematic as it immediately appears. Because it was accepted in Slovak political discourse that EU membership was in the national interest, no relevant party attempted to mobilize the Eurosceptic vote. Any

Communist or HZDS voters who were naturally hostile to the EU were not encouraged to vent their feelings in the European Parliament elections. The signals from their party leaders, who refused openly to oppose EU membership, created confusing cross-pressures to Eurosceptic citizens' own feelings, increasing apathy towards the election. In turn, the fact that there was no overt anti-EU campaign conducted before the EP elections also meant that voters who were generally in favour of the EU perceived no overwhelming urgency to vote. It is notable that the most successful party in the election – the Christian Democrats – actually had a critical political programme related to the EU, while remaining 'Eurorespectable' because they had done so much to achieve Slovakia's membership of an organization that contained many other Catholic countries.

The final three reasons why the Slovak EP elections suffered from a particularly low turnout are also country-specific. The fifth reason, articulated mainly by opponents of the government, was that citizens as a whole were disillusioned by the corrupt nature of the political process, and the fact that politicians of all parties represented their own interests and not those of the people. While the majority of Slovaks had rejected the political style of the third Meciar government from 1994-1998, the two Dzurinda governments that followed had not been bereft of corruption scandals. The dissension between the many factions of both governments often created the impression that politicians were more concerned with their arguments with each other than with the concerns of the electorate.

The sixth reason for a low turnout is the 'missing left'. The main axis of party competition in Slovakia is between the nationalist right (HZDS) and the economic reformist right (SDKÚ, KDH, SMK). While *Smer* aspired to membership of the PES, the party had too often flirted with Slovak nationalism to be acceptable to liberal anti-communists concerned with issues of poverty and social exclusion in Slovakia. A mainstream West European social democrat would have been hard pressed to find any party to vote for in the EP election in Slovakia.

The final reason for the low turnout was a technical one. The elections were for the first time ever held on a Sunday. The Czecho-Slovak pattern of Friday afternoon-Saturday morning elections had allowed citizens to vote as part of either their workday or leisure day routine. While Slovak presidential elections had been one-day ballots held on Saturdays, this was still more convenient for many people than a Sunday, when urban-dwellers traditionally went back to the village to have lunch with their relatives, and villagers stayed at home unless they went out to church. Although the EU encourages EP elections being held on a Sunday, in an era of Europe-wide low turnouts, it is a questionable recommendation.

Conclusion

In spite of the ignominy of having the lowest turnout ever in a European Parliament election, the Slovak result provided the country with a well-balanced and apparently unproblematic group of MEPs. 8 of the 14 MEPs will belong (at least initially) to the EPP, meaning that Slovakia has above-average representation in the largest of the EP political groups in spite of the fact that it is one of the EU's smaller member states. It will

also be represented in the PES, the second largest group, and have 3 independent MEPs (from HZDS). While HZDS has in the past been associated with an array of unflattering adjectives (authoritarian, nationalist etc.), the party has for several years been desperate to establish itself as a respectable coalition partner, preferably within the EPP, and its MEPs are all senior politicians with government-level experience. Its independent MEPs are potentially relatively desirable partners. In addition, 5 of the 14 Slovak MEPs are women.

At a domestic political level, the EP election result is a sign of stability in terms of voter preferences, the party system and the legitimacy of the current government. While its significance is undermined by the 17% turnout, the reasons behind the record low turnout are not entirely negative. On balance, for both Slovakia and the European Parliament the result will probably prove positive.

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>