

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION BRIEFING NO 44 THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION IN SLOVAKIA, 6 JUNE 2009

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Key points:

- The leading government party, Smer-Social Democracy, confirmed its continuing domestic popularity by winning nearly a third of the vote - almost twice as much as its nearest competitor.
- The Slovak party system appears to be stabilising since the same six parties gained seats as in the 2006 parliamentary election.
- There were few signs of Euroscepticism or extremism, and the self-styled 'eurorealist' Slovak National Party (a member of the ruling government coalition) gained substantially less support than in opinion polls.
- Slovak voters enthusiastically used their 'preferential votes' to re-order the candidates on their preferred party's list, so that the list leaders of two of the six successful parties failed to win a seat in the European Parliament (EP).
- Participation increased by 16%, contrary to the EU-wide trend - but since Slovakia had had the lowest turnout in EP history in 2004, this still left them with the lowest turnout of all 27 states in 2009.

The EP election took place three years into Slovakia's four-year parliamentary electoral cycle, and was therefore an interesting test of public opinion, notwithstanding the fact that the country's chronically low turnout in EP elections weakens its predictive value. The June 2006 parliamentary election had produced alternation in government after eight years of centre-right rule.¹ 1998 had been a watershed in Slovak politics: in the previous four years, the nationalist government led by Vladimír Mečiar's Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), with Ján Slotá's Slovak National Party (SNS) as a junior partner, had led to Slovakia's exclusion from detailed EU accession negotiations and NATO membership because

¹ 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>.

of doubts about the country's democratic credentials. However, after 1998, two four-party governments under the premiership of Mikuláš Dzurinda (now chair of the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union-Democratic Party – SDKÚ-DS) reversed the country's fortunes, so that it joined the EU in the first wave of eastern enlargement in May 2004, and increasingly became known as a flat-tax paradise beloved by foreign investors, most particularly automobile manufacturers.

The Dzurinda governments also transformed the discourse on Slovak national interest. Whereas under Mečiar governments prior to 1998, nationalism primarily consisted of provincial xenophobia relating largely to Czechs and Hungarians, the two following governments established the principle that Slovakia's vital national interest was successful European integration. In the new millennium, even the nationalist opposition parties felt compelled to adopt this agenda. The ability to achieve European integration became the ultimate test of government competence, and the major EU debate in Slovakia was not what Slovaks thought about the EU, but what the EU thought about Slovakia. This largely excluded Euroscepticism as a feasible electoral strategy.

However, by the time of the 2006 parliamentary election, a substantial part of the Slovak electorate was more interested in economic rather than nationalist concerns. Shell-shocked by the forced pace of economic reform since 1998, for the first time ever the main winner in an election was a left-wing party, Robert Fico's Smer-Social Democracy (Smer-SD). In Slovak politics, the left has always sat uneasily between the nationalist right (the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia and the Slovak National Party) and the reformist right, which comprised the liberal Slovak Christian and Democratic Union, the more conservative Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) and the Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK). The communist successor Party of the Democratic Left (SDL) had twice joined coalition governments with the centre right, but was eliminated from parliament in 2002 after a breakaway deputy – Fico – had successfully formed a populist party initially called 'Direction' (Smer), which he gradually consolidated as Smer-Social Democracy.

In 2006, Smer-SD emerged as clearly the largest parliamentary party with 29% of the vote – a total only surpassed in any previous parliamentary election by Mečiar's Movement for a Democratic Slovakia. Although Smer-SD was expected to form a coalition with the Christian Democrats and the Party of the Hungarian Coalition, it horrified the international community by choosing the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia and the Slovak National Party instead. Since both these more nationalist parties were desperate to regain government power after eight years in opposition, they presented themselves as more amenable partners. Consequently, although Slovakia had its first left-wing prime minister ever, and arguments over economic policy between Smer-SD and the liberal right Slovak Democratic and Christian Union were fierce, some issues resonant of the 1990s re-emerged. The opposition criticised the government for corruption and clientelism, exacerbating relations with the Hungarian majority, and concentrating all economic and political power in its own hands in what was emotively called 'the tyranny of the majority'.

However, the opposition's arguments had little resonance with the voters. Smer-SD's opinion poll popularity remained high – far higher than at the time of the 2006 elections. It was common for over 40% of respondents to say that they would vote for

Smer-SD, and on occasion it even appeared possible that the party might obtain an absolute majority in parliament if an election were called, given that some votes were always ‘wasted’ on parties that did not obtain the 5% of the vote necessary in both national and European elections in order to gain any seats. Smer-SD’s popularity was due to a large extent to the ‘feel good’ factor of an improving economy. While the Slovak Christian and Democratic Union could reasonably argue that the country’s economic success was due to the economic reforms it had introduced while in government and the foreign investment this had attracted, Smer-SD had also been careful to prove its ‘EU competence’. Under Fico’s government, Slovakia completed the process of European integration by joining the Schengen Area at the end of 2007, and more remarkably by becoming the first ex-Warsaw Pact member to join the Eurozone on 1 January 2009.

Both achievements mattered on an everyday level to ordinary citizens. Being a long, thin country, and one whose capital city was within easy commuting distance from Austrian and Hungarian villages (where Slovaks found real estate prices lower than in Bratislava suburbs), the border-free Schengen Area life could be enjoyed by almost everyone. The year before the EP elections was also the honeymoon period for Slovakia’s adoption of the euro. Slovaks watched their currency remain strong as their neighbours’ Czech crowns, Hungarian forints and Polish zlotys declined in value, and hopped across the gloriously open borders for cheap shopping forays. In the first half of 2009, the deeper economic problems of pricing themselves out of the market were not yet acutely apparent. While the recession was beginning to bite, the public was by this point well aware that it had hit stronger western economies much earlier, and to many Fico’s argument that it was the fault of unbridled western capitalism was perfectly credible.

Against this background, Slovaks entered ‘election year’ 2009. As in 2004,² the direct election of the president preceded the EP election by two months, and the four-yearly regional elections were also due in November. The presidential election was a victory for Fico and Smer-SD, since it was won by the incumbent Ivan Gašparovič, a defector from the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia whom they had helped to power in 2004. His main rival, the Slovak Christian and Democratic Union vice chair Iveta Radičová, was supported by the three opposition parties elected to parliament in 2006, but obtained only 44.46% of the vote in the second round run-off on 4 April 2009 on a 51.67% turnout. Consequently, the opposition’s main hope of success in the EP elections lay in their supporters proving more willing to participate than those of the government in a ‘second order’ election where turnout would be far lower.

Slovak political parties in the EP

The trans-national affiliation of political parties is a more salient political issue in Slovakia than elsewhere in the EU, and discussion of this issue is therefore a useful prelude to examining the campaign for the EP election. A product of the country’s tortured trajectory to EU accession, and the way that achieving further European integration was successfully established in political discourse as a test of government

² See: Karen Henderson, ‘The European Parliament Election in Slovakia, June 13 2004,’ *European Parliament Election Briefing* No 10 at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epnep2004slovakia.pdf>.

competence, is that a party's membership in a trans-national organisation can be instrumentalised in domestic political debate: Slovak parties feel a need to show the electorate that they are internationally acceptable. Even those parties that have found affiliating with international party organisations problematic accept it as a priority.

The three main opposition parties in Slovakia – those that were in government from 1998-2006 when EU and NATO membership was attained – belong to the European People's Party (EPP), which affirms their right or centre-right orientation in domestic politics. In 2004, the Slovak Christian and Democratic Union, the Christian Democrats and the Party of the Hungarian Coalition obtained 8 of Slovakia's 14 EP seats. There was no anti-government backlash visible in this election, although it took place half-way through Slovakia's parliamentary cycle.

The leading government party in 2009 – Smer-SD – had allied with the Party of European Socialists (PES) from the time its observers first arrived in the EP. However, relations were often problematic. At its inception in 1999, Smer appeared populist, but Fico cemented its left-wing credentials by merging with the communist successor Party of the Democratic Left and the Social Democratic Party of Slovakia (SDSS), which were already allied with the PES. However, Smer-SD's membership was suspended in 2006 after it formed a government coalition with the Slovak National Party, whose nationalism was unacceptable to the PES (although the party's MEPs continued to belong to the PES within the EP). The PES's stance was largely incomprehensible within Slovakia, where Social Democracy was considered a left-wing economic affair without accompanying liberal and anti-racist social values. However, Fico was adamant in his wish to remain part of European Social Democracy, and the party was eventually readmitted, largely because there was clearly no other viable left-wing party in Slovakia, and Smer-SD had gained 3 MEPs in 2004. PES membership was valuable to Smer-SD in domestic politics as it enabled the party to emphasise that many of its economic policies that were heavily criticised by the opposition were mainstream in the EU as a whole, whereas the Dzurinda government's flagship 'flat tax' policy was regarded as a problematic post-communist oddity.

The Movement for a Democratic Slovakia had the greatest problems with transnational affiliation in the EP, and its 3 MEPs remained non-aligned from 2004 to 2009. It had originally designated itself, rather meaninglessly, as a 'centre party', but it re-styled itself as the People's Party-Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (ĽS-HZDS) in 2000 in an attempt to position itself on the right of the political spectrum and gain EPP membership. It wished to overcome its 1990s reputation as a pariah party, and to prove that it was an enthusiastic supporter of European integration. This aim forced it to refrain from any form of Euroscepticism, even if such a stance might have appealed to its (ever-diminishing) core electorate. Yet EPP membership was unrealistic, given both the veto power of the three Slovak parties already within the group, and the hostility of some west Europeans with longer memories. By 2009, the party had set its sights on the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats in Europe (ALDE), since this third-largest group in the EP had no Slovak member. Such an affiliation was rather incongruous, since the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia was not liberal in either its economic or social values, but it aspired to ALDE membership via the smaller European Democratic Party which formed part of ALDE.

The final Slovak parliamentary party was the Slovak National Party, which had failed to gain any MEPs in 2004. However, it had established links with the Union for Europe of the Nations (UEN) during the period when the party split into two (with both parts consequently failing to enter the Slovak parliament from 2002-2006) and Anna Belousovová was chair. However, Šlota – re-established as chair, with Belousovová as his deputy, when the party reunited – also endorsed the party's UEN affiliation. The party appears to have recognised that in the Slovak domestic political debate, where 'eurorespectability' was all-important, this was strategically preferably to aligning with racist pariahs such as Le Pen's National Front in France.

A curiosity of Slovak parties' transnational affiliations was their relatively limited scope. Slovak MEPs (with the exception of the three non-aligned Movement for a Democratic Slovakia members) all belonged to the two largest groups: EPP and PES. This was almost unique among EU member states.

The parties' EP election programmes

Against this background, the details of EP election manifestos were little discussed, even by the parties themselves. Of the parliamentary parties, only the Christian Democrats had developed detailed criticisms of individual EU policies, mostly in justice and home affairs issues where it was feared that an increase in EU competencies might jeopardise the country's independence to preserve Catholic values on questions such as registered partnerships, abortion and stem-cell research. Their manifesto was entitled 'We believe as you do in the strength of our family and in traditional values', and its opening section was devoted to this subject. However, the party's drift towards Euroscepticism had been checked when the party split the year before. The breakaway Conservative Democrats of Slovakia (KDS) eventually allied themselves with the Civic Conservative Party (OKS), a small party of rather Eurosceptic intellectuals, and became the Slovak partner of the pan-European Libertas. This left the slightly slimmed down Christian Democratic Movement more compatible with other Christian Democrats in the EPP. The pro-European orientation was re-inforced when it was decided that Ján Figel', the very experienced Christian Democrat politician who had been Chief Negotiator for Slovakia's EU accession talks, would take over as party leader when his five-year stint as the Slovak European Commissioner ended in autumn 2009.

The more liberal Slovak Democratic and Christian Union, which also belonged to the EPP, entitled its manifesto 'For a prospering Slovakia in a strong Europe', and concentrated on a defence of economic liberalism. They wished to prevent any extension of EU competencies that would threaten the economic freedom of individual member states: the preservation of the flat tax they had introduced in Slovakia had long been a major concern for them. They also favoured the ending of restrictions on the free movement of labour, which was generally regarded as an irritant by voters. A major thrust of their manifesto, however, was to criticise the economic policies of the current government. They emphasised the extent to which Slovakia's high growth rates in the early years of the Fico government had been due to their own reforms in the previous parliamentary period, and noted that the recent stalling of economic growth during the economic recession was a result of their successors' neglect about continuing reforms.

The Party of the Hungarian Coalition – Slovakia’s third EPP member - was the most unreservedly pro-EU opposition party, and entitled its manifesto ‘Our future in Europe’. As always, its programme focused heavily on minority rights issues, and it was clearly addressed at the Hungarian community in Slovakia, which comprised about 10% of the population.

Among the governing parties, Smer-SD, in a manifesto entitled ‘Social Europe – an answer to the crisis’, was able to legitimate its own policies by pointing to the long-term prioritisation of employment policies at EU level by its Social Democrat partners in the PES. It emphasised principles of solidarity, and the extent to which its promotion of the concept was in line with policies in other member states. The defence of Slovak national interests was also a theme, with criticism of the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union and the Party of the Hungarian Coalition for having suggested the EP set up a monitoring group to look at political developments in Slovakia.

The Movement for a Democratic Slovakia produced a strongly pro-integration manifesto entitled ‘Slovakia – the stable heart of Europe’. This was in line with its continuing efforts to find itself a trans-national ‘home’ in the EP: its three members in the previous EP had been some of the most orthodoxly pro-European non-aligned MEPs ever. This precluded the party courting votes by anti-EU appeals, although some of its voters might have been amenable to such a message.

The Slovak National Party was the only one of the Slovak parliamentary parties that had failed to gain representation in the EP in 2004, and produced a manifesto that was distinctly nationalist in its determination to protect Slovak interests. It also promoted the idea of a bi-cameral EP, with one chamber representing all member states equally, which would clearly be to the advantage of small states such as Slovakia.

Three of the smaller parties are worth mentioning. Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) was a new party which promoted itself on the grounds of its economic expertise, with a strong undertone of the ‘we know best’ superiority with which the Slovak liberal right had so often alienated voters. It was rather Eurosceptic, since it also knew better than the politicians and ‘European bureaucratic machinery’ in Brussels: it opposed the Lisbon Treaty, was hostile to economic harmonisation, and criticised excessive spending. The Green Party, on the other hand, supported a ‘democratic federal Europe’. Its European anchoring was demonstrated by the fact that it was the only Slovak party to present the common programme of its transnational group as its own election manifesto. The Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS), which had actually been elected to the previous national parliament, was also anti-Lisbon, and presented a rather confused and somewhat Eurosceptic manifesto which was more hostile to NATO than the EU, and was also nationalist and environmentalist at the same time.

The campaign

In line with the generally rather idiosyncratic relationship that Slovakia enjoyed with the EU, the campaign was marked by a feature largely absent elsewhere in the EU: an obsession with turnout. In June 2004, Slovakia had produced the lowest turnout ever in the history of EP elections, at 16.96%. This did not represent hostility to the EU as such – Slovakia had produced the highest ‘yes’ vote ever in an EU accession

referendum the year before³ – but rather the fact that it was not a highly contested issue. However, politicians were acutely aware of the embarrassment that producing a second exceptionally low turnout in 2009 would cause. Once again, the issue was not what Slovaks thought of the EU, but what the EU would think about Slovakia. It was generally agreed that it was not in the Slovak national interest to create an unnecessarily negative image of the country through a pathetically low turnout in the elections that the EU considered so important.

The parties did their best to raise both turnout and their own chances of success by the use of the conventional Slovak electioneering tools: billboards, party rallies in public squares and walkabouts in city centres by politicians, with the attendant handing out of leaflets.⁴ The prominence of billboards in particular appeared slightly greater than in 2004. As in 2004, the parties tended to contest the EP election by claiming that they could promote Slovak ‘national interest’ better in Europe rather than specifying which EU policies needed to be promoted or opposed in order to do this. In many senses, EU membership remained a ‘valence issue’ in Slovak politics: everyone agreed it was a good thing that it was not in the national interest to oppose, and the main contest was about who fitted in with it best and could therefore bring home the greatest benefits.

Slovak election laws also did not assist in raising the profile of the election and EU-related policies. No coverage of the parties’ campaigns, or excerpts from campaign speeches, or discussion of differences in EU-related policies between the parties was permitted in TV and radio news and current affairs coverage. This, in turn, encouraged rather negative discussion of non-party political issues such as low turnout and whether MEPs were overpaid. The normally dull party ‘election spots’ could be broadcast in allotted slots if the parties paid for them, but this did little to encourage interest in the elections. Discussion of European and campaign issues was therefore largely consigned to the print media, although the state-run Slovak Television (STV) was eventually prevailed upon to broadcast political debates on the EP elections between the competing parties for three successive nights in the week running up to voting. Some issues of concern, apart from the alleged lack of activity and the privileges of MEPs, were the importance of the EU for asserting Slovakia’s foreign policy interests (foreign policy being a subject more easily grasped than the complexities of EU legislation that the EP actually deals with) and the general economic arguments that are inevitable, particularly during a recession. The one point that everyone agreed on was that the electorate should vote. The EP Information Office also supported this with its own campaign, emphasising the importance of the issues the EP dealt with.

The EP election campaign only caused one major political row, and it was not related to anything said by a Slovak politician. The Hungarian opposition leader, Viktor Orbán, held a joint meeting with Party of the Hungarian Coalition representatives in the Hungarian border town of Esztergom on 23 May, and stated that the forthcoming EP elections would decide how many deputies there would be in Brussels

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

⁴ It has been suggested that the parties led a more active campaign than in 2004, although domestic themes were prevalent over EU ones. See: Volebný infoserwis, <http://www.infovolby.sk/index.php?base=data/monitoring/1244216397.txt>, accessed 18.06.2009.

representing Hungarians living in the Carpathian Basin – thereby clearly implying that ethnic Hungarians elected in the Slovak Republic would be representing Hungarians in general and not Slovakia. For the parties in the Slovak government, this and other remarks by Hungarian politicians were aimed at ‘ethnic separation, a denial of the sovereignty of neighbouring countries and challenging the territorial integrity of the Slovak Republic’.⁵ A special session of the Slovak parliament was called just three days before voting in the EP election, which Party of the Hungarian Coalition representatives described as part of the governing parties’ election campaign. The Slovak Christian and Democratic Union and the Christian Democratic Movement declined to participate, while a few Hungarian deputies did take part in the six-hour debate. Since it was not technically part of the EP election campaign, the electronic media were free to give it copious TV news coverage, thereby providing free publicity to the governing parties.

The nationalist tone of the end of the election campaign was also present in President Gašparovič’s televised address to the electorate made on the same day. Although his main message was the importance of citizens’ voting, he also emphasised that they had ‘the possibility to vote for deputies who will act as a single whole in the European Union and defend the interests of Slovakia’.⁶ This message was strangely at odds with the desire of all Slovak parties to prove that they were members of trans-national groups in the EP, and underlines the fact that the EP campaign was considered primarily to be an argument about ability to represent national interests, and not about the programmatic differences between parties’ policies at EU level.

The results

The overall election result, as shown in **Table 1**, shows a striking similarity in party performance to the result of the previous parliamentary election. This was remarkable given that Slovakia was three-quarters of the way through the parliamentary electoral cycle and in the middle of an economic recession. Prime minister Fico was quick to point out that Smer-SD was the only ruling Social Democratic party in the EU to have ‘won’ (that is, to have gained a higher percentage of the vote than any other single party), and whereas the (then) opposition parties had obtained only 6 of 14 seats in 2004, in 2009 as governing parties they obtained a narrow majority of 7 of 13 seats. The PES, however, had not won in Slovakia, as Smer-SD gained 5 seats, and the EPP gained a total of 6 seats from the 3 opposition parties.

The balance between the vote share of the government and opposition parties was also very similar to 2006: the government parties’ share of the vote – 46.56% - was only slightly less than the 49.67% they had obtained in 2006, while the opposition parties’ share of the vote – 39.18% - was only slightly more than the 38.36% of the vote they had obtained in 2006. In addition, more ‘wasted votes’ than in 2006 went to small parties whose voters would be likely to favour the opposition rather than the government parties. Most particularly, the economically liberal Freedom and

⁵See: National Council of the Slovak Republic, ‘38. schôdza Národnej rady Slovenskej republiky so začiatkom 3. 6. 2009 o 13:00’, <http://www.nrsr.sk/Default.aspx?sid=schodze/schodza&ID=215#current>, accessed 07.08.2009.

⁶ See: ‘Vyhlásenie prezidenta SR Ivana Gašparoviča k voľbám do Európskeho parlamentu, 3.6.2009’, <http://www.prezident.sk/?vyhlaseenie-prezidenta-sr-ivana-gasparovica-k-volbam-do-europskeho-parlamentu-3-6-2009>, accessed 06.08.2009.

Solidarity, which only just failed to gain EP representation with 4.71% of the vote, was likely to have taken voters from the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union, and almost certainly deprive it of a third mandate.

Table 1: 2004 and 2009 EP election results, 2006 parliamentary election result

	2004		2006	2009		2006-9 Change
	%	MEPs	%	%	MEPs	
Smer-Social Democracy	16.89	3	29.14	32.01	5	+2.87
Slovak Christian & Democratic Union - Democratic Party (SDKÚ-DÚ)	17.09	3	18.35	16.98	2	-1.37
Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK)	13.24	2	11.68	11.33	2	-0.35
Christian Democratic Movement (KDH)	16.19	3	8.31	10.87	2	+2.56
People's Party- Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (ĽS-HZDS)	17.04	3	8.79	8.97	1	+0.18
Slovak National Party (SNS)	2.01	0	11.73	5.55	1	-6.18
Freedom & Solidarity (SaS)	-	-	-	4.71	0	-
Green Party (SZ)	-	-	-	2.11	0	-
Conservative Democratic Party (KDS), Civic Conservative Party (OKS)*	1.00	0	0.27	2.10	0	+1.83
Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS)	4.54	0	3.88	1.65	0	-2.23
Free Forum (SF)	3.25	0	3.47	1.57	0	-1.90
Party of the Democratic Left (SDE)**	-	-	0.12	0.62	0	+0.50

Source: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (<http://www.volbysr.sk/volbyep2009>)

Notes:

*KDS had broken away from KDH in 2008; 2004 and 2006 figures are hence for OKS only.

**The SDE party prominent during the 1990s had in the main merged with Smer in 2004.

However, it would almost certainly be wholly false to extrapolate even the most marginal swing towards the opposition from the EP election result. Low turnout makes it indisputably a second order election compared to parliamentary and presidential elections in Slovakia, and public opinion polls, whatever their limitations, have in Slovakia proved a better indication of parliamentary election results. This is particularly the case because, to the chagrin of Slovakia's political elites, in 2009 Slovakia yet again produced the lowest EP election turnout in the whole of the EU: at 19.64%, Slovakia was narrowly beaten even by Lithuania's 20.98%. This scarcely came as a surprise, since the week before the election one public opinion poll agency had estimated turnout at 16 to 21%. Prime Minister Fico subsequently tried to pre-empt criticism of low turnout by explaining that Slovakia was 'such a pro-European oriented state' and that the lack of conflict in relations with the EU 'subdued' voters.⁷ Yet efforts to raise the turnout had actually been rather successful: the Slovak turnout had increased by 15.8% in an election where turnout in the EU as whole had decreased by 2.45%.

A few comments can nevertheless be made about the strength of parties in the EP elections. On the government side: firstly, Smer-SD's 32.1% was the highest vote the

⁷ See: 'Fico: Na účasť vplýva antikampaň', *Sme*, 05.06.2009, <http://volby.sme.sk/c/4876371/fico-na-ucast-vplyva-antikampan.html>, accessed 06.08.2009.

party had ever achieved in a national election, and despite its tendency to poll below opinion poll estimates, its 40% plus poll ratings are likely to be a reliable indicator of its performance in next year's general election. It is remarkably successful for a left-wing party governing in the midst of an economic recession. Secondly, the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia's 8.97% performance in 2009 was better than its 2006 parliamentary election result and may indicate that it retains a solid core vote and is less likely to be annihilated by achieving less than 5% in the next parliamentary election than opinion polls sometimes suggest. Thirdly, the very low 5.5% vote for the Slovak National Party may be accounted for by the disinclination of its (always volatile) nationalist support base to engage with the EU: opinion polls subsequent to the election do not suggest that its popularity has declined.

On the opposition side, the strongest party – the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union – as always polled more than its opinion poll preferences prior to elections. Slovak voters have shown a tendency over the years to understand the importance of the 5% threshold when voting in parliamentary elections, and the Freedom and Solidarity voters may well veer towards the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union before the parliamentary elections. Secondly, the healthy Christian Democratic Movement vote of 10.87% - far higher than it obtains in opinion polls – must be seen in the light of its exceptionally good EP election performance in 2004: it has disciplined Catholic voters with an external European allegiance, and may do less well in 2010, although it does not appear to have been badly damaged by the breakaway Conservative Democrats of Slovakia. The strong Party of the Hungarian Coalition vote of 11.33% was assisted by the high turnout in ethnic Hungarian areas (the highest district turnout, 29.81%, was in the largely Hungarian Štúrovo). Given subsequent developments (see below), its 2010 parliamentary election performance is the most uncertain element in the entire Slovak party system.

The second, and more fascinating, aspect of the EP election in Slovakia relates to the 'open list' system and the use of 'preferential votes', which enables voters to choose not just their preferred party, but also their preferred candidates on the party lists. As in national parliamentary elections, the entire country formed a single constituency, and parties provided a national list of up to 13 candidates (the number of Slovak MEPs having been reduced by one after the 2007 enlargement). In the polling station, each voter was handed 16 sheets of paper, each containing the candidate list of one party. The voter then selected one list to put into the ballot box in an envelope, with the option of first marking the names of two favoured candidates on that list. Candidates who had obtained the preference of at least 10% of the voters who had used this option were then officially reordered according to voter preferences. It was this aspect of the voting procedure that provided more surprises than the overall election result.

In 2004, voters had tended with a couple of exceptions to accept candidates in the order presented by their parties. In 2009, however, the 'list leader' of three successful parties out of six was deposed by the voters. In almost all cases, the candidates 'raised' by the voters were sitting MEPs whose party had given them a lower list ranking than in 2004. This refutes the argument often heard during the election campaign that Slovak MEPs have a low profile, and citizens do not know what they are doing in Brussels. The one-fifth of Slovaks who bothered to vote in the election

was clearly familiar with the names of their parties' MEPs who had served them for the previous five years.

The most striking re-arrangement of a party list hit the Christian Democratic Movement, the most 'EU-aware' party. Its list leader, former government minister Martin Fronc, was relegated to fourth place on the list, and subsequently resigned his position as deputy chair of the party. The voters replaced him by Anna Záborská, the list leader in 2004, who had gone on to become the first EPP member to chair the EP Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality, and also the first Slovak MEP to be entrusted with such a Committee chair, yet had been placed third on the Christian Democrats' list in 2009. Miroslav Mikolášik, another serving MEP, was moved from third to second place on the list and was hence also re-elected. The party's third serving MEP, Ján Hudacký, was removed by voters from second to third place, which given that the party gained one less seat than in 2004, deprived him of his EP seat.

The second case of voters' choosing who was elected to the EP affected the Slovak National Party. The list leader, Dušan Švantner, who had been somewhat controversial during the campaign, was relegated to third place. The successful candidate, Jaroslav Paška, a former government minister, was raised from second place to first, although it has been suggested that this might have been because his surname was confused with that of Pavol Paško, the popular Smer-SD chair of the national parliament. That name recognition mattered is confirmed by the fact that voters' number two candidate (who was not elected, since the party only obtained one seat), was Rafael Rafaj, the party's prominent parliament faction leader, who was raised from the clearly unelectable seventh position on the list.

However, the most striking case of name recognition related to Monika Flašíková-Beňová, who had been Smer-SD's list leader in 2004, and was re-instated to this position by the voters although relegated to third place on its 2009 list. This pushed list leader and Chair of the parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee Boris Zala down to second place. She was an interesting figure: once Fico's number two when he founded the party, she had been marginalised by the party for her opposition to its forming a government coalition with the Slovak National Party in 2006 (and she in fact openly stated after the 2009 EP election that she regretted that the Slovak Nationalists had obtained an EP seat). Although she had not distinguished herself as a particularly active MEP, she was well-known to the public, and her high-profile husband – former Movement for a Democratic Slovakia, and later Smer, marketing manager Fedor Flašík – was participating in 'Let's Dance' (the Slovak version of celebrity 'Strictly Come Dancing') at the time of the election.

The Party of the Hungarian Coalition had no problems with voters re-arranging their list: they retained their 2004 female list leader, Edit Bauer, who had been active in the area of both Women's Rights and Gender Equality and Employment and Social Affairs, and since the party's other MEP was not standing again, the new number two candidate was also elected with little trouble. The Movement for a Democratic Slovakia also retained its 2004 list leader, former minister Sergej Kozlík, who was re-elected with no problem in 2009 as the party's sole MEP. The party's two other serving MEPs were placed at two and three on the list, but it is notable that Irena Belohorská, who had proved to be one of the most active and successful non-aligned

MEPs in the history of the EP, again received the second highest number of preferential votes although placed third on the party list. Finally, a clear majority of the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union's voters opted for list leader Eduard Kukan, a one-time communist-era career diplomat who during his eight years as foreign minister from 1998-2006 had successfully overseen Slovakia's EU and NATO accession. The party's list leader in 2004, ice-hockey star Peter Štastný, who had in that election obtained a towering majority of preferential votes, was placed number two on the list, and re-entered the EP, albeit gaining just over half the number of Kukan's preferential votes. Zita Pleštinšská, who had been one of the most active of all Slovak MEPs, trailed a long way behind both of them, but nonetheless gained the third highest number of preferential votes despite having been relegated to sixth place on the party's list.

Conclusion/Election aftermath

Slovakia voted on Saturday 6 June, and although it was agreed that the Central Electoral Commission would not announce the results until all polling booths had closed EU-wide at 22.00 on Sunday 7 June, the media were able to give accurate results from the Sunday morning onwards. The main story of the day, however, was the announcement of the long-predicted split of the Party of the Hungarian Coalition. Its one-time chair, Béla Bugár, who was the only ethnic Hungarian politician many Slovaks found likeable, went on to found a new party called Most-Híd, the Slovak and Hungarian for bridge. Its initial publicity posters promoted a multi-cultural agenda emphasising that an individual's ethnicity was not their most important quality - a very European message often overlooked by both Hungarian and Slovak politicians in Slovakia. This development was likely to have a more profound influence on the shape of the party system than the less likely possibility that Freedom and Solidarity might establish itself as a parliamentary party.

In general, it cannot be concluded that the EP election results will have any marked influence on Slovak domestic politics. They indicate that the Slovak party system is stabilising: no newly-founded Slovak party has entered the Slovak or European parliament since 2002. In terms of Slovak attitudes to the EU, the EP election confirmed that Slovakia is marked by a passive consensus that accepts the country's EU membership without question or conflict. Although outside observers often view Slovakia as a state troubled by nationalism, Euroscepticism is not a force that can easily be mobilised in Slovak politics. Prime Minister Fico probably got it right when he suggested that the low turnout in EP elections merely indicates Slovaks regard their EU membership as something natural. In the absence of any sharp political controversy about EU issues, it is hard to mobilise voters.

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