

## **ELECTION BRIEFING No 70 EUROPE AND THE SLOVAK PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION OF MARCH 2012**

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### **Key Points:**

- Smer-Social Democracy won a majority of parliamentary seats with the highest percentage vote ever gained by a single party in independent Slovakia.
- Robert Fico was returned as prime minister, presiding over Slovakia's first democratically-elected one-party government.
- The centre-right remained fractured, with five parties in parliament.
- No nationalist parties entered parliament, and nationalist disputes were notably absent from the election campaign.
- Anti-corruption demonstrations were a major feature of the pre-election period, and the younger generation is becoming more assertive in party and extra-parliamentary politics.
- EU issues were less prominent in the campaign than might have been expected given their crucial role in the fall of the previous government, but Eurosceptic discourses became more prominent.

### **Background**

Iveta Radičová's centre-right government had been the surprise victor in the June 2010 Slovak parliamentary elections,<sup>1</sup> only to be brought down on 11 October 2011 when she linked the parliament's ratification of the expanded European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF) with a vote of confidence in the government. This was a bad idea, since one of her coalition partners opposed it, and the largest opposition party - Robert Fico's Smer-Social Democracy (Smer-SD) - refused to vote in favour unless all the governing parties agreed to. When the government fell, it was promptly agreed in parliament that there would be early elections on 10 March 2012, and on 13 October all parties except the governing Freedom and Solidarity and the opposition Slovak National Party approved the expanded European Financial Stability Facility.

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<sup>1</sup> See: Karen Henderson, 'Europe and the Slovak Parliamentary Election of June 2010', *European Parties Elections and Referendums Network Election Briefing No 58* at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epern-election-briefing-no-58.pdf>.

The wilful suicide of the Radičová government was particularly strange as for almost two decades since Slovak independence on 1 January 1993, the reformist right had portrayed its battle against nationalism and communist legacies as a crucial struggle for securing Slovakia's democratic future anchored in the European Union, but there was little doubt when the government fell and early elections were called that these would return their opponent Robert Fico as prime minister. However, both the course of the campaign and the ultimate election result brought many new surprises.

The key to understanding the background to the 2012 elections is the gradual strengthening of Smer-Social Democracy as the largest party in Slovak politics. During the 1990s, Slovak politics was strongly polarised between the nationalist right - led by three-times prime minister Vladimír Mečiar's Movement for a Democratic Slovakia, but also containing the more extremist Slovak National Party - and the reformist right, which included the political representatives of the country's 10% Hungarian minority. In this contest, the left, in the shape of the communist successor Party of the Democratic Left, occupied the middle ground politically but always joined coalition governments of the reformist right. In late 1999, the youngest and most popular leading politician in the Party of the Democratic Left, Robert Fico, broke away and formed his own party called 'Smer', which means 'Direction'. Although the party was initially viewed as populist, Mr Fico gradually made clear that its 'direction' was social democracy, which was added to the party's name in 2005, when it incorporated the old and failing Democratic Left and the very small Party of Social Democracy. Equally important was the fact that it also gradually captured Mr Mečiar's nationalist voters, who tended to come from the poorer, older, less educated and more rural part of the Slovak population. In the 2006 election, when Slovakia was already safely in the EU, Mr Fico won a plurality of seats (50 of 150), but chose Mr Mečiar's now much smaller party and the Slovak Nationalists as coalition partners because of the hostility and bad tactics of the centre-right parties, which he would have preferred as coalition partners.<sup>2</sup> Despite major problems with corruption during his government from 2006-2010, his popularity grew and he was deprived of a second term in office from 2010 to 2014 largely by the complexity and uncertainty of electoral arithmetic in a proportional representation system with many small parties and a '5% threshold' that gave parties with less than 5 per cent of the vote no seats at all.

The major problem of the reformist right, which had secured Slovakia's EU and NATO membership when in power from 1998 to 2006, was that it was divided into a number of smaller parties who often paid too much attention to fighting with each other for the 'core' reformist right electorate, and too little attention to attracting middle-of-the-road floating voters. The centre-right in Slovakia had four main components. The Christian Democratic Movement had existed since 1990, but gradually became more Catholic in orientation, and in the new millennium got stuck with between 8-9% of the vote. The Slovak Democratic Christian Union-Democratic Party (SDKÚ-DS) was founded in 2000 with some leading Christian Democrat politicians, most notably the prime minister from 1998-2006, Mikuláš Dzurinda, and some politicians who had originally defected from Mr Mečiar's party. They were generally liberals in terms of economic policy and value orientation, but identified with the right at EU level. The third component was the representatives of the Hungarian minority

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<sup>2</sup> See: Karen Henderson, 'Europe and 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-election-briefing-no-26.pdf>.

in Slovakia, but the Party of the Hungarian Coalition split in 2009, and the new Most-Híd party (its title being the Slovak and Hungarian words for ‘bridge’) proved dominant in the 2010 elections. This was highly significant, because Bridge aimed at attracting ethnically Slovak as well as Hungarian voters, and its Slovak voters ensured that some of the much smaller number of Slovak candidates on its lists got elected to parliament. Finally, the centre-right always relied in government on a smaller liberal party, but these tended to be transient. The liberal party elected for the first time in 2010, which also immediately entered government, was Freedom and Solidarity, which represented liberal views on economic issues such as ‘flat tax’, as well as supporting causes such as the legalisation of marijuana and registered partnerships. Crucial, however, for the fall of Ms Radičová’s government was the fact that Freedom and Solidarity was strongly Eurosceptic when it came to the Eurozone’s bailout fund, the European Financial Stability Facility.

In the run-up to the crucial parliamentary vote that brought down the government in October 2011, most attention was focused on Richard Sulík, the leader of Freedom and Solidarity, who was the prime mover in his party’s opposition to the European Financial Stability Facility. Almost all government negotiation focused on trying to change Mr Sulík’s mind, and little attempt was made to highlight the fact that it was Robert Fico who controlled most of the parliamentary deputies who refused to vote for the expanded bailout fund, and that they were refusing to vote for a measure that they supported merely because they scented the chance of bringing down the government - arguably placing party political gain above Slovakia’s national interest, which Mr Fico’s Smer-Social Democracy otherwise claimed staunchly to defend.

However, Mr Fico’s main argument - that the centre-right government was so divided and fractious that it was incapable of governing - was not without foundation. Ms Radičová had previously been near to resignation because of disputes within the government and, significantly, a major problem she had faced was lack of support from her own party, the Slovak Democratic Christian Union-Democratic Party. She had become lead party election candidate and subsequently prime minister in 2010 largely because she was the most popular party member with the public, but ex-prime minister Mikuláš Dzurinda remained party chair and became Foreign Minister, while Ms Radičová’s fellow deputy party chair, Ivan Mikloš, returned to his old role as Finance Minister. Neither were particularly supportive of her during key crises, and less than two weeks after her government fell, she announced that she would not take part in the March 2012 elections. This was the first step towards the near demise of her party, hitherto the strongest on the centre-right, on voting day.

## **The Campaign**

### *The pre-campaign period*

Although parliamentary election campaigns in Slovakia formally begin three weeks before polling day, the party battle inevitably started as soon as the election date was known four months earlier. From the outset, the election appeared to be Mr Fico’s to lose, as the Social Democrats’ opinion poll ratings hovered around 40%. This meant that an outright victory, with at least 76 of the parliament’s 150 deputies, would be within his reach if he polled more than 40% and if up to 20% of the vote was ‘wasted’ on parties gaining less than 5% of the vote, and hence no seats in parliament. However, he did not openly aspire to single-party

rule, and had been quite consistent since his party first took part in a parliamentary election in 2002 in maintaining that he considered a government comprising just two parties to be optimal. He was known to be averse to forming another coalition with the Slovak National Party, and Mr Mečiar's party, his other former coalition partner from 2006-2010, had failed to re-enter parliament in 2010 and declined further since. Therefore the most likely outcome of the election appeared to be a coalition between Mr Fico's Smer-Social Democracy and the conservative Christian Democrats. The latter were less radical regarding economic reform than the Slovak Democratic Christian Union-Democratic Party and Freedom and Solidarity, since many of their voters were older and rural and hence more economically vulnerable, so on economic issues they were to some extent compatible with Smer-Social Democracy. Although the Christian Democrats were very Catholic and conservative on social issues such as the family, registered partnerships and abortion, Smer-Social Democracy's vision of social democracy consisted largely of a commitment to state protection of the economically less privileged, and lacked the social liberalism of their West European partners, so clashes in this area were not likely to present a major problem. Both parties also embraced a moderate Slovak nationalism.

The other possible coalition partner for Smer-Social Democracy was the mainly Hungarian Bridge party, who also had a more rural and economically challenged electoral base, and was anxious to be in government in order to gain representation for the Hungarian minority in important state positions. Its minority rights agenda also contained liberal elements that should have been compatible with a social democratic party, although Smer-Social Democracy's nationalist inclinations while in government, and the background of many of its supporters as erstwhile voters for Mr Mečiar's rather nationalist Movement for a Democratic Slovakia, meant that a coalition with Bridge would be much less attractive to its electorate.

The great unknown of the election resulted from the number of parties that were within a few per cent of the crucial '5% clause', and who might or might not enter parliament, meaning that the number of deputies larger parties obtained for each per cent of the vote they won would increase if the smaller parties only gained around 4% of the vote, which would not be converted into seats. The Slovak National Party was clearly in the 'danger zone', and on the government side the situation was even more complex. The Slovak Democratic Christian Union-Democratic Party and the Christian Democrats appeared certain to enter parliament although, as the campaign continued, the former declined remarkably and entered the 'danger zone' around 5%. While Bridge was also likely to enter parliament, the Party of the Hungarian Coalition, from which it had split before the previous election, was not an entirely spent force, and was heavily supported by the Hungarian media, which most ethnic Hungarians in southern Slovakia followed. However, given how controversial - and economically unsuccessful - the nationalist prime minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán, had become, it was unclear how strong a role this would play. Yet both parties were to some extent in the 'danger zone' - Bridge with good grounds for optimism, and the more nationalist Party of the Hungarian Coalition with an outside chance.

The final government party, Mr Sulík's Freedom and Solidarity, also approached the 'danger zone' for two reasons. Firstly, its role in bringing down the government and thereby opening up the possibility of a Fico government might alienate its young and liberal electorate, and possibly drive them back to the Slovak Democratic Christian Union-Democratic Party, from which many of them had come. Secondly, some of its 2010 vote had been attracted by the four 'Ordinary People' candidates to whom it had given the last four places on its candidate

list, and who had all been elected to parliament because of the ‘preferential votes’ system which allowed voters to put crosses by the names of their four favoured candidates on the party list they choose. ‘Ordinary People’ was the creation of Igor Matovič, a young entrepreneur who had founded a network of free regional newspapers which placed political adverts and complaints about corruption among a sea of commercial ads. The ‘Ordinary People’ deputies had been a further thorn in the side of Ms Radičová’s government as on some key issues their voting behaviour was unpredictable.

In November 2011, Mr Matovič registered Ordinary People as a political party, using the name ‘Ordinary People and Independent Personalities’ since a former Slovak nationalist had renamed his party ‘Ordinary People’ at the end of October, presumably as a ‘spoiling’ exercise. By December, Mr Matovič had put together a candidate list containing a number of civically active candidates new to politics, as well as a number of independently-minded established politicians with a track record of falling out with their party colleagues. These included two parliamentary deputies from the Civic Conservative Party who had been elected on the Bridge list in 2010 but then failed to support their party on the crucial European Financial Stability Facility vote, as well as the leading figures of the Conservative Democrats of Slovakia, which had split from the Christian Democratic Movement in 2008. These experienced politicians may or not have helped Mr Matovič’s Ordinary People to gain votes: they had some personal following, but were also regarded by many of the new party’s discontented younger voters as too conservative and politically tainted. In the event, their tenure on the party list was brief. Before the election campaign formally began, they publically condemned an informal suggestion by Mr Matovič that he and the chairs of the Civic Conservatives and Conservative Democrats should take a lie detector test to prove that they had never offered or taken bribes (whether - as they claimed - because it was an offensive suggestion, or perhaps because of fear of failing the test, remaining unclear). Mr Matovič himself took the test in February, and generally ran his election campaign by the cost effective method of arranging televisual stunts protesting against corruption that were covered in news broadcasting. In the first opinion polls in which Ordinary People figured after its founding, it appeared likely to enter parliament, but the subsequent split left it firmly in the ‘danger zone’.

Into this complex and uncertain party constellation came Gorilla. The Gorilla file was posted anonymously on the internet in the run-up to Christmas, and gradually attracted media attention with the result that by the end of January, Bratislava witnessed the largest demonstration since the fall of communism as ‘anti-Gorilla’ protesters marched through the streets, with the militant rump ending up in a confrontation with the police outside the parliament building. Gorillas of every shape and size dominated the political and physical landscape, appearing on banners, posters and magazine covers. The Gorilla file itself had dubious credentials. It was apparently the Slovak Information Service (SIS) – effectively the secret police – which had chosen the name Gorilla to designate an operation in which they bugged a Bratislava flat owned by a well-known entrepreneur to monitor meetings that took place there between the chair of one of Slovakia’s largest companies and leading politicians and their representatives. The file was an SIS summary of the content of meetings rather than a transcript of conversations, and although Mr Fico was the only politician alleged by the file to have come personally to the flat, it was most damning for the two leading politicians on the Slovak Democratic Christian Union-Democratic Party candidate list, Mr Dzurinda and Mr Mikloš, who were portrayed as having been involved in major corruption surrounding privatisation deals towards the end of their second term of office from 2002-2006.

The file was toxic largely because of an underlying suspicion in society, among both supporters and opponents, that the right was not as clean as its promotion of transparency in public life and its condemnation of corruption under the Mečiar and Fico governments should have suggested. The former prime minister Mr Dzurinda had not himself stood on the Slovak Democratic Christian Union-Democratic Party's candidate list in 2010 because of a scandal involving party finance (although he was then appointed Foreign Minister in the Radičová government), and with the still popular Ms Radičová refusing to stand for the party in the 2012 election, and Mr Dzurinda's personal popularity long declining, the party's credibility and core values were now at stake. Mr Fico reacted by casually refusing to confirm whether he had ever been in the bugged flat, saying that he refused to be drawn into the scandals of the second Dzurinda government. The Christian Democrat interior minister, the young but politically experienced Daniel Lipšic, enthusiastically set up an inquiry, both to distance his own less-tainted party from the scandal, and to bolster his position in his own party. Freedom and Solidarity, only founded in 2009, could claim total innocence in the Gorilla accusations, but was later itself attacked by the publication of text messages and video recordings showing that its leader Mr Sulík had discussed sensitive parliamentary business with a notorious entrepreneur who had a very dubious history. Bridge successfully distanced itself from the scandal (notwithstanding the fact that the flat's owner was a prominent ethnic Hungarian), with its leader Béla Bugár stating that he knew some of the facts contained in the file to be true and some to be false, thereby effectively undermining its value as a document. Ordinary People enthusiastically joined in the fray, since the essence of the Gorilla file contents supported its own message of opposing political corruption.

The anti-Gorilla demonstrations continued, ever waning in size, until the election, with their hitherto unknown leaders appearing challenged when it came to articulating constructive demands, and some of their suggestions, such as delaying the elections and introducing a majoritarian-type election system allowing candidates to be directly elected, appeared unlikely to strengthen democracy. The most interesting facet of the movement was that the demonstrators were predominantly young - in the age group that could not remember the fall of communism - and were clearly unimpressed with the achievements of the political class that had ruled since then. As the election drew closer, a major concern was that the both the anti-Gorilla campaign, and the general disillusionment of pro-reform voters with the way the outgoing government parties had, in part through its unnecessary collapse, failed to live up to the hopes of its supporters in the wake of their unexpected election victory, would do much to depress electoral turnout. Given that the opposition parties and their supporters were relatively un-touched by the major scandals of the previous five months, and less affected by the mood of despondency and frustration, this could have a significant effect on the election result.

### *The campaign*

Despite the political turbulence on the streets, the election campaign itself was relatively calm. In line with what emerged in public opinion polls as the electorate's most pressing concerns – unemployment and the standard of living – a lot of the televised election debates concentrated on economics and contentious related issues such as the financing of motorway building.

Smer-Social Democracy appeared fully aware that the election was theirs to lose, and ran a fairly low-key and professional campaign. The single slogan on their pre-election billboards had been 'People deserve security', accompanied by the head of one of a number of the party's most prominent politicians, which emphasised not only the message, but also the idea that they were a team of experienced figures and far more solid than a party based on Mr Fico alone. The billboards in the campaign period were changed slightly to say 'Let's vote for security', with the simple message remaining the same, but adding 'A single vote can decide', in case their supporters were inclined to take their victory for granted and stay at home on polling day. The party also continued, as in the previous election, to hold large indoor rallies with both their leading politicians and entertainers, and it was notable that at the final rally in Bratislava, where the party was normally beaten by the Slovak Democratic Christian Union-Democratic Party, so many people attended that thousands had to be accommodated in an overflow room where they watched proceedings live on a large screen. Unlike in the previous parliamentary and European Parliament elections, no attempt was made to 'play the Hungarian card', and nationalist messages were toned down. Arguably, criticising Hungary was barely necessary in a period when the EU's institutions were doing this increasingly volubly, but it was also likely that the possibility of a post-election coalition with Bridge made it inadvisable for Smer-Social Democracy to augment nationalist sentiment among its voters.

The election campaign of the Slovak Democratic Christian Union-Democratic Party, who had been the second party after Smer-SD in the 2006 and 2010 elections, was less focused, and the need to replace the unpopular Mr Dzurinda as a leader loomed in the background throughout, although removing him shortly before the election was not judged wise. Posters with Lucia Žitňanská, the justice minister and number three on their candidate list, and also Mr Dzurinda's most likely successor, were rather more prominent than those with Mr Dzurinda and Mr Mikloš, who were both controversial because of 'Gorilla'. The party presented various billboards, in which leading figures gave messages linked to their own ministerial briefs, but there was also a backward-looking flavour to the campaign: ex-prime minister Mr Dzurinda played on his success in achieving Slovakia's EU accession in 2004, though eight years on, and with Romania and Bulgaria, and shortly also Croatia, becoming members as well, this barely seemed a remarkable feat, and the nationalist Mr Mečiar's stunning failure in this regard had become an irrelevance since his party was no longer a serious political player. Another prominent poster in the period leading up to the election asked 'Red or Blue?', and showed pliers cutting through a red wire - symbolic of cutting through the Iron Curtain - but this was unlikely have a strong emotional appeal to younger voters. Its attraction as a party of successful economic reform was also weakened because it had little positive to show on this front from the period of the Radičová government, and the failure of that government to survive even two years was barely a testimony to political competence.

The Christian Democrats, who had never been the most polished electoral campaigners, made a mistake at the outset of the campaign by choosing the slogan 'white Slovakia', which was supposed to mean something other than the common Slovak usage whereby 'whites' were the opposite of Roma. In the later stages of the campaign, their slogan became 'It begins with work' (relating to various policy areas), but this did not convey a strong message. The party was doing well in the opinion polls as the Slovak Democratic Christian Union-Democratic Party's support collapsed, and it tried to portray itself as the 'leader of the right', but its message was unfocused.

Freedom and Solidarity, which in the 2010 elections had gained heavily from social networking campaigning, ran a mixed campaign, where its hostility to the EU was more prominent in TV adverts than in billboards. Most-Híd laid its emphasis on the concept of 'Responsibility'. However, none of the former governing parties succeeded in conveying such a clear message as Smer-Social Democracy. Of the viable parties on the centre-right, the single exception was Ordinary People, on whose four deputies elected on the Freedom and Solidarity List in 2010 the Radičová government had relied in parliament, but who had not been represented in the government. Their campaign was clearly focused on the issue of corruption, which accorded to the mood of the times.

The final party that should be mentioned is the opposition Slovak National Party, which ran a chaotic campaign with overtly anti-EU and racist anti-Roma billboards, as well as incoherent promises to lower the (already low) flat tax rate while substantially raising pensions. Given the low profile of nationalist issues in the campaign and the concerns of the electorate, its chances of entering parliament did not appear strong, despite the lack of nationalist competitors for its vote.

The 'coalition question' - party promises to the electorate, and speculations from political analysts, about who would enter coalition with whom in certain post-election situations - remained a major element of the election campaign. Mr Fico and the Social Democrats, as always, remained open. The Slovak Democratic Christian Union-Democratic Party and Freedom and Solidarity were clear that they would not enter coalition with Mr Fico's Smer-Social Democracy, but - unlike in 2010 - did not succeed in eliciting similar undertakings from the Christian Democrats. There was, however, a move on the centre-right to emphasise that their ability to form a government would depend on only four centre-right parties entering parliament, with Ordinary People, as unreliable partners, being excluded from the calculation in the hope of dissuading centre-right voters from choosing them. The other discourse promoted by the centre-right was that a conclusive Fico win allowing one party to rule alone would somehow be the equivalent of the one-party rule that had existed under communism, or be comparable in its negative effects to the one-party rule of Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party in Hungary. The latter was a curious argument, since Mr Orbán was the a partner of most of the centre-right Slovak partners in the European Parliament, and it appeared to be a rather confused and desperate attempt to exploit a Slovak aversion to Hungarians which the Slovak parties concerned did not formally endorse. In the event, the very clear election result made all such considerations irrelevant.

## **The Election Result**

Election night on 10 March 2012 demonstrated the inaccuracy of exit polls, which were broadcast just after the last polling station shut and showed Mr Fico and his Smer-Social Democracy short of a parliamentary majority. However, as the real votes were counted, it became very clear that for the first time ever, Smer-Social Democracy had exceeded the expectations of opinion polls. As Table 1 shows, with over 44% of the vote, and nearly 20% of the vote being 'wasted' on parties that did not win the 5% necessary to gain deputies in parliament, Mr Fico was clearly in a position to form a single-party government with 83 of the total 150 parliamentary deputies. Although Mr Fico initially continued with his long-held stance that he did not want to lead a one-party government without a coalition partner, none



of the very much smaller parties that had gained parliamentary seats had anything to gain from joining a leftist government in which they had no veto power. Eventually, the second Fico government appointed in early April 2012 contained 4 non-Smer-Social Democracy members among 14 ministers.

**Table 1: Slovak 2012 Parliamentary Election results**

<b>Party</b>	<b>% Vote 2012</b>	<b>Seats 2012</b>	<b>% Vote 2010</b>	<b>Seats 2010</b>	<b>Change % (Seats)</b>
Direction-Social Democracy (Smer-SD)	44.41	83	34.79	62	+9.62 (+21)
Christian Democratic Movement (KDH)	8.82	16	8.52	15	+0.30 (+1)
Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLaNO)	8.55	16	0	0	+8.55 (+16)
Bridge (Most-Híd)	6.89	13	8.12	14	-1.23 (-1)
Slovak Democratic and Christian Union-Democratic Party (SDKÚ-DS)	6.09	11	15.42	28	-9.33 (-17)
Freedom and Solidarity (SaS)	5.07	11	12.14	22	-7.07 (-11)
Others (20), including:	19.32	0	15.90	0	+3.42 (0)
<i>Slovak National Party (SNS)</i>	4.55	0	5.07	9	-0.52 (-9)
<i>Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK)</i>	4.28	0	4.33	0	-0.05 (0)
<i>People's Party-Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (LS-HZDS)</i>	0.93	0	4.32	0	-3.39 (0)
<b>Total</b>		<b>150</b>		<b>150</b>	<b>0.00 (0)</b>

Turnout: 59.11%

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

The election result was significant in terms of Slovak political development as it confirmed indications from the previous two parliamentary elections that the Slovak party system was increasingly becoming structured around a left-right economic divide, rather than being dominated by issues of national identity or the nature of the political regime. The fact that there was the highest percentage of ‘wasted votes’ since 1992 could be attributed to the largest number of parties ever (26) having taken part in the ballot at a Slovak parliamentary election, and a disillusioned electorate voting for parties with no realistic chance of electoral success. However, it was notable that nearly half the ‘wasted vote’ went to the main nationalist representatives of ethnically Slovak or Hungarian citizens - the Slovak National

Party and the Party of the Hungarian Coalition - both of whom were no longer able to garner more than 5 per cent of the vote. The Hungarian-led Bridge party, however, appeared to be developing into a genuinely multi-ethnic party: the FOCUS agency's exit poll for Slovak Radio and Television suggested that slightly more ethnic Hungarians had voted for the more nationalist Party of the Hungarian Coalition, but that Bridge obtained nearly half its vote from ethnic Slovaks.

The other stark message of the election was that the Slovak right was hopelessly divided compared to Mr Fico's united left: all five opposition parties that entered parliament had supported the Radičová government and considered themselves to belong to the right, and none of them gained even a fifth of the vote for Smer-Social Democracy.

Two other aspects of the election result are worthy of note. Firstly, the Slovak 'open list' system of proportional representation allowed voters to reorder the candidates on the party ballot paper they cast into the voting urn by putting a cross by the name of up to four candidates they preferred. Any candidate who obtained more than 3% of these 'preferential votes' was then moved up the candidate list accordingly. For all five centre-right parties, this made a difference to which candidates on the list entered parliament; and for two of them, their party leaders did not obtain the most preferential votes. The young Daniel Lipšič, the Christian Democrats' former justice and interior minister, gained more preferential votes than both the party leader and former Slovak European Commissioner Ján Figel' and the former party leader and chair of parliament Pavol Hrušovský; and the Slovak Democratic Christian Union-Democratic Party's Lucia Žitňanská, their former justice minister, gained more preferential votes than party leader and former prime minister Mikuláš Dzurinda and former deputy prime minister and finance minister Ivan Mikloš. As will be noted below, neither party accepted the electorate's verdict in post-election decision making.

Secondly, the 2012 Slovak parliamentary election did nothing to close the gender gap in Slovak politics. Only 24 of the 150 deputies elected were women - the same number as in 2006, although 3 more than in 2010 - and although 15 of these were from the Smer-Social Democracy list, none became government ministers. The single woman to join Mr Fico's government was one of the four independents chosen.

## **The Impact of European Issues**

The EU featured less prominently in the election campaign than might have been expected, given both the prominence of the Eurozone crisis in international news and its role in the downfall of the previous Slovak government. It is notable, however, that Slovakia's 'passive consensus' on the EU had ended, and there were significant differences in the parties' stances on EU-related issues, which some parties chose to highlight in campaigning.

The most Eurosceptic of the government parties fighting the 2012 election was, not surprisingly, Freedom and Solidarity, which had opposed the European Financial Stability Facility even before it was expanded. While Ms Radičová's Slovak Democratic Christian Union-Democratic Party had also had doubts about the rescue fund before rather unexpectedly entering government in summer 2010, the party had later come to accept the economic and political imperatives in the Eurozone and the need to stabilise the euro, albeit it with an emphasis on the need for budgetary discipline and financial control. Freedom and Solidarity, however, while still outwardly supporting Slovakia's membership in the

Eurozone, at times demonstrated attitudes that verged on hard Euroscepticism: it was not merely opposed to certain policies and developments that might have problematic effects for Slovakia, but showed a deep hostility toward 'Brussels', which one of its campaign TV adverts clearly made fun of.

This was odd for a party that was, at an international level, a member of the European Liberal and Democratic Reform (ELDR) party. It is notable, however, that since Freedom and Solidarity had no MEPs - both the elections in which it had entered the Slovak parliament having taken place after the last European Parliament elections in 2009 - it was not a member of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), which was the European Liberal and Democratic Reform's party group in the European Parliament.<sup>3</sup>

The most Eurosceptic of the opposition parties to fight the 2012 election was the Slovak National Party. Although the Slovak Nationalists had long been regarded, on the basis of many of its leading politicians' pronouncements, as a Eurosceptic party, the 2012 parliamentary election was the first where its election campaign was overtly hostile to the EU. One of its election billboards graphically attacked the EU in a slightly obscene manner, and its views towards the EU - demanding, for example, an EU minimum average wage while also insisting on national sovereignty - showed the same bizarre inconsistency as its domestic policies. The consequence of its campaigning was, of course, its elimination from parliament with less than 5% of the vote.

Of the centre-right parties who were members of the European People's Party group in the European Parliament (the largest), both showed some soft Eurosceptic tendencies. In the case of the Slovak Democratic Christian Union-Democratic Party, this was its overt hostility to any idea of tax harmonisation, which would threaten its flagship 'flat tax' policy. The Christian Democrats, on the other hand, were becoming slightly less Eurosceptic than previously, when they had been strong opponents of extending EU competencies in the justice and home affairs field. This was in part because some of their more Eurosceptic politicians had broken away from the party in 2008, and also because Slovakia's first European Commissioner, Ján Figel', had returned to Slovakia and become chair of the Christian Democratic Movement in 2009. Bridge, on the other hand, retained the tendency of all Slovak parties representing ethnic Hungarians to be strongly Europhile.

Smer-Social Democracy's victory was not, therefore, in any way a problem for the EU. It was the most amenable of the parties to any kind of increase in the powers and the budget of the EU, and - perhaps because Fico was not particularly interested in foreign policy - was one of the only Slovak political parties without an ambition to impose its own visions on the EU as a whole.

The real shift in party attitudes towards the EU manifest in the 2012 election campaign was that the earlier pre-occupation with what the EU thought of Slovakia had all but disappeared.

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<sup>3</sup> A further curiosity in this regard is that former prime minister Vladimír Mečiar's People's Party-Movement for a Democratic Slovakia, which had few noticeably liberal traits, did have one MEP who was an Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe member - though no representatives in the Slovak parliament since 2010. This was because, in the era when transnational party affiliations were considered a sign that a party was able to promote Slovak national interests by being considered respectable on an international level, Mr Mečiar's party had eventually joined the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe via the European Liberal and Democratic Reform party's smaller partner, the European Democratic Party.

Parties were happy to express quite hostile criticism of the EU without fear that this could somehow be construed as damaging Slovakia's national interest.

## **Future Prospects**

In the aftermath of the election, from a few hours after the result became clear, incoming prime minister Robert Fico, buoyed by the confidence and magnanimity of finally achieving the victory he had sought for over a decade, displayed a desire for reconciliation and consensus-building atypical of his previous political style, and even attempted to make his peace with a press to which he had in the past so often been so hostile. When it very soon became clear that no party would consider a coalition, he sought the services of some non-party members as ministers. Most notably, he chose a respected and politically neutral lawyer as justice minister, which gave hope that the dangerous politicisation of a sensitive portfolio that had previously led to a 'ping-pong' effect when governments changed might finally end. However, although the government was far less controversial than his first in 2006, when he was in coalition with nationalists, it appeared unlikely to bring about many innovative reforms in Slovakia. Unlike the Radičová government, the first in Slovakia containing no former communists, Mr Fico's government contained six, including the prime minister himself. Another was the non-party foreign minister, Miroslav Lajčák, who had also been nominated to this position by Smer-Social Democracy when previously in government. Although a professional diplomat who had held high international offices, his particular specialism in the Balkans suggested that Slovak foreign policy would remain centred on familiar areas where its expertise was respected, and that competence rather than radical reform would be the order of the day. The new government's downgrading of the human rights agenda also indicated that it had little interest in policy areas connected with traditional left-wing value orientations as understood in the West.

On the right, there were few initial signs of consolidation in the wake of the election defeat. As widely predicted, Mr Dzurinda stood down from the leadership of the Slovak Democratic Christian Union-Democratic Party, but was succeeded not by the popular Mrs Žitňanská, who had a ministerial track record, but by Pavol Frešo, who was the elected executive chair of the Bratislava region as well as a parliamentary deputy. It was unclear how he would develop and advance the party's political profile, and the party's long-term future remained unclear.

The Christian Democrats appeared incapable of addressing their inability to gain more than 8% of the vote, and the popular Mr Lipšic decided to leave the party and eventually formed a new one of his own. With the reputation of its leader Mr Figel' also coming under increased public scrutiny, even the future of this most long-established party was open to question.

The rather maverick Ordinary People remained as unpredictable as predicted, with the 'independent personalities' on its party list displaying their independence with some eccentric personal statements, and support being provided for either the government or the opposition on an *ad hoc* basis. In opposition, such behaviour mattered less than in government. Bridge and Freedom and Solidarity also provided no clear policy leads in the post-election period. Slovakia's right was, in short, completely rudderless.

As a consequence, Mr Fico's second government did not need to shine in order to retain its dominance on the Slovak political scene. Weathering the economic storm in Europe was its

main priority, and how the Slovak party system would develop, on either left or right, remained an open question.

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*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/research/europeanpartieselectionsreferendumsnetwork>.*