

The party of outgoing Prime Minister Robert Fico running favourite in the general elections on 5th March in Slovakia

Corinne Deloy

Analysis

Abstract:

On 5th March next 4.4 million Slovaks are being called to ballot to renew the 150 Members of the National Council of the Republic, the only chamber in Parliament. Around 250,000 Slovakian citizens live abroad and they are also eligible to vote. During the previous election on 10th March 2012 only 7,051 of them turned out to fulfil their civic duty. 23 parties, i.e. three less than in 2012 are running in the elections on 5th March.

The most recent opinion poll by Ako credits Direction-Social Democracy (SMER-D), led by Prime Minister Robert Fico, with a distinct advantage over his rivals: 40.7% of the vote. The government party is followed by several opposition movements, which are all due to win under 10% of the vote; they have failed to unite in order to block the way of the outgoing Prime Minister. SIET (Network) is due to win 8.1% of the vote; Most-Hid, 7.9% and the National Party (SNS), 7.4%. These three parties are followed by Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) which is due to win 6.2% of the vote; the Party of Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OL'aNO) is due to win 5.7% of the vote and the Christian Democratic Party (KDH), 5.6%.

THE REFUGEES BOOST ROBERT FICO

Outgoing Prime Minister Fico quickly opposed Brussels' engagement to relocate 160,000 refugees from Syria, Iraq and Eritrea within the 28 Member States. He is refusing Slovakia's reception of a share of the refugees and supports a stricter control of the borders, a position approved, according to the polls, by 89% of his fellow countrymen. The head of government maintained "that if we take

in the refugees we shall then find ourselves with a mad man winning 30% of the vote as in Banska Bystrica," referring to Marian Kotleba, leader of a far right party, the People's Party Our Slovakia (L'SNS) who was elected leader of the region of Banska Bystrica in November 2013. "My priorities are not the migrants' rights but Slovakian citizens and their security," declared Robert Fico during a debate in the programme V politike (In Politics) on the TV channel TA3.

The head of government even lodged a complaint against the decision of the European Council to relocate refugees with the European Union's Court of Justice. We should recall that Bratislava will take over the presidency of the Council of the European Union on 1st July.

But Robert Fico's main fear is the terrorist threat, which in his opinion, is embodied by the refugees. He also decided to monitor every single Muslim in the country. The latter represent 1% of the Slovakian population and are mainly of Bosnian descent. Slovakia also has a population of Iraqis and Libyans. Hoping to exploit fear of the refugees as much as possible Direction-Social Democracy changed its campaign slogan to "Protecting Slovaks".

The Muslim Foundation of Slovakia said it was shocked by the Prime Minister's declarations and of the monitoring he wants to establish over each Muslim in the country. "He is insinuating that some of the country's citizens are a threat, not because they have been the focus of some legal decision or a complaint with the police but purely because of their religious orientation," reads the organisation's internet site.

"Talking of collective guilt, classifying people according to their religion is not a good way to improve the country's security," stressed the President of the Republic Andrej Kiska (independent). "Encouraging fear and hate is exactly what the terrorists want us to do," he added.

There is no doubt that the refugees have been a major theme in Direction-Social Democracy's campaign and this is why Robert Fico is doing everything he can for the question and more widely, that of immigration, remain the focus of debate. "On this issue the Prime Minister appears as the one who is most competent," maintains Martin Slosiarik, Sociologist and Director of the pollster *Focus*.

ROBERT FICO'S RESULTS

The outgoing Prime Minister is focusing his campaign on the results of his four years as head of the country. He maintains that he has consolidated the country's financial figures, supported growth and reduced unemployment (this has dropped from 13.8% in 2012 to 10.6%). He is also proud that Slovakia is also one of the States with the lowest debt ratio in the euro zone; representing 53.6% of its GDP in 2015 against 85% on average in the European Union. Robert Fico has taken several measures that are always well received just before an election: reduction of VAT from 20% to 10% on certain foodstuffs (bread, milk, butter, some meats and fish); free train travel for children, students and pensioners; a reduction in bank service tariffs and the payment of a further financial aid to families with children.

Robert Fico has indicated that the minimum salary which was already raised in 2014 and 2015 would increase again and that VAT might be brought down

on other foodstuffs if he retained his post as head of government. "We want the State to share its wealth with its citizens," he stressed. He also declared "We are a social democratic government. In our opinion the development of the social State and the market economy should go hand in hand." However Direction-Social Democracy is campaigning less over its programme than over the guarantee of the stability and security it says it embodies. The party has highlighted tensions – which are real – between the opposition parties and the fact that it is the only one that can guarantee that conflict will not interrupt government work.

AN EXTREMELY FRAGMENTED OPPOSITION

In Slovakia the right-wing opposition is extremely fragmented. No less than six parties represent it. Several of them have tried, in vain, to join forces on several occasions. After the previous general elections on 10th March 2012 the Christian Democratic Movement, Most Hid, the Democratic Union and the Christian Democratic Party rallied under the People's Platform. Many conflicts and the defeat of their presidential candidate Pavol Hrusovsky (KDH), who came third in the first round of voting on 15th March 2014 with 21.25% of vote, led to the dissolution of the Platform in the spring of 2014.

The Democratic Union and Christian Democratic Party then split giving rise to two parties: Democratic Union and the Christian Democratic Party, led by Pavol Fresco, and Prosperity of Slovakia led by Ludovit Kanik.

In view of the upcoming general elections on 5th March the Christian Democratic Party, Most Hid and SIET (Network), a centrist party founded by Radoslav Prochazka, tried to join forces but did not succeed in finding agreement. "We see an alternative to a government led by Direction-Social Democracy alone in an alliance of Most Hid, the Christian Democratic Movement and SIET, parties whose programmes are close to one another and which share the same values. These parties could form a stable government," declared Bela Burgar, the leader of Most-Hid.

The Party of Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OL'aNO) led by Igor Matovic and NOVA, a liberal party led by Daniel Lipsic, drew closer together in June 2015. They are standing as one party in the elections and not as a coalition, since they are not sure of winning the 7% necessary for a coalition.

"Too many people want to hold the leading role," stated Pavel Haulik of the pollster MVK. Moreover the opposition is struggling to assert its campaign themes and offer a truly alternative programme to the policy undertaken by Robert Fico. The latter finds it easy in this case to state that if the right came to power it would cancel the reforms that he has set in place and reduce the minimum wage, that it would increase energy prices and do away with free travel for children, students and pensioners, etc.

THE SLOVAK POLITICAL SYSTEM

The National Council of the Republic (Narodna rada Slovenskej republiky) comprises 150 members elected for 4 years by proportional election from blocked lists in one single national constituency. Each voter casts four preferential votes for candidates on one list. Seats are distributed according to the Hagenbach-Bischoff system. All parties have to win over 5% of the votes cast to be represented in parliament; a coalition 7% (10% if it comprises 4 parties or more).

In order to stand in the elections every party or movement has to pay a deposit of 15,000€, which

is returned if its rallies at least 10,000 members. If the party has less members than this it can however deliver a support petition bearing the number of signatures necessary that enables it attain this figure. The parties which won more than 3% of the vote in the previous general election have the right to a State subsidy.

Candidates have to be at least 21 years old and live permanently in Slovakia. Finally a new law limits spending on the election campaign to 2 million €.

6 political parties are represented in the present National Council of the Republic

- Direction-Social Democracy (SMER-SD), a social democratic party created on 29th October 1999 and led by outgoing Prime Minister Robert Fico, 83 seats;
- the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH), a party founded in February 1990 and led by Jan Figel, 16 seats;
- the Party of Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OL'aNO), a right-wing party created in October 2011 and led by Igor Matovic, 16 seats
- Most-Hid (Bridge), a liberal party founded on 30th June 2009 by members of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK-MKP) and led by Bela Bugar, 13 seats;
- Democratic Union and Christian Democratic Party (SDKU-DS), created in 2000 and led by Pavol Freso, 11 seats;
- Freedom and Solidarity (Sloboda a Solidarita, SaS), a liberal party founded in February 2009 by its present leader, economic and father of the flat rate tax in Slovakia, Richard Sulik, 11 seats.

Reminder of the results of the general elections on 10th March 2012 in Slovakia

Turnout: 59,11%

Political Parties	No of votes won	% of votes won	No of seats
Direction-Social Democracy (SMER-SD)	1 134 280	44,41	83
Christian Democratic Movement (KDH)	225 361	8,82	16
Party of Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OL'aNO)	218 537	8,55	16
Most-Hid	176 088	6,89	13
Democratic Union and Christian Party-Democratic Party (SDKU-DS)	155 744	6,09	11
Freedom and Solidarity (SaS)	150 266	5,88	11
National Party (SNS)	116 420	4,55	0
Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK-MKP)	109 483	4,28	0
Others	267 547	10,53	0

Source: National Statistics Institute

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