

# Can Robert Fico's Direction-Social Democracy remain in office in Slovakia?

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Analysis

Slovaks are being called to the polls on 29 February to renew the 150 members of the National Council of the Republic (*Narodna rada Slovenskej republiky*), the only house of parliament. This election is an «*important test for the country,*» said political analyst Tomas Koziak. «*Will the electorate vote for parties that try to limit democracy, compromise democratic ideas, or will they turn to parties that oppose such practices?*» The poll is taking place in an atmosphere of protest against the authorities in power - and in particular the political class - accused of corruption on the one hand, and the threat of a vote in favour of the far-right nationalists united in the People's Party-Our Slovakia (LSNS) led by Marian Kotleba on the other. This has also led to the creation and breakthrough of new parties that have put the fight against corruption at the heart of their struggle. They are standing as opponents to the current government, including Robert Fico's Direction-Social Democracy (SMER-SD) and outgoing Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini's Progressive Slovakia/Civil Democracy Assembly (SP-Spolu) and For the People (Za Ludi), a party created by former head of State Andrej Kiska (2014-2019).

The poll is being held a few days after the second anniversary of the murder of journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kusnirova, both aged 27, on 21 February 2018. Kuciak was investigating allegations of European subsidy fraud on behalf of the website *aktuality.sk*, - which belongs to the country's leading daily *Novy cas* - crimes that had been organised by the Italian mafia in Slovakia with the support of government officials. Several tens of thousands of Slovaks took to the streets in what was the biggest demonstration since the Velvet Revolution of 1989. The assassination led to

the resignation in March 2018 of Prime Minister Robert Fico, two ministers and the police chief.

The vote comes at the same time as the trial of businessman Marian Kocner, who was arrested and imprisoned in October 2018 for the double murder of Kuciak and Kusnirova. Kocner, is also being prosecuted for dubious financial transactions and tax evasion, together with three other people, the two killers, one of whom is a former soldier, who has confessed to the murder, as well as Alena Szuzsova, one of the businessman's loyal associates, who are accused of acting as intermediaries. The defendants face sentences ranging from 25 years to life imprisonment. The prosecutor has requested a 20-year prison sentence for Marian Kocner. The verdict is expected to be announced the day before the election.

Fifteen parties and movements are presenting candidates for the legislative elections. According to the latest poll by the Focus Institute, Direction-Social Democracy leads with 17% of the vote, followed by the Party of Ordinary People and Independent Personalities-New Majority (OL'aNO-NOVA) with 13.3%, the right-wing extremists of the People's Party-Our Slovakia (LSNS) with 12.2%, and Progressive Slovakia/Civil Democracy Assembly with 9.3%. 4 other parties are forecast to win seats in the next parliament: For the people, 8.2%; We are a family (Sme Rodina), 7.8%; the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) led by Alojz Hlina, which is due to return to parliament with 5.4% and finally, Freedom and Solidarity (Sloboda a Solidarita, SaS), 5.3%.

In view of these results, Direction-Social Democracy, which has stated that it will not ally itself with the

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People's Party-Our Slovakia, might have difficulties in forming a government. *«If 10 parties exceed the 5% threshold necessary to enter parliament, which the polls are now forecasting, it will be very difficult to manage the political impact of these parliamentary elections,»* warned journalist Juraj Hrabko.

### Can Direction-Social Democracy remain to lead government?

Direction-Social Democracy has dominated Slovak political life for 14 years (with a two-year interlude between 2010 and 2012). Although it is losing ground in the polls, it remains the country's leading party and the favourite to win the elections. The government led by Peter Pellegrini, comprising Direction-Social Democracy, Most-Hid and the National Party (SNS), survived the crisis caused by the assassinations of Jan Kuciak and Martina Kusnirova. *«Robert Fico is no longer Prime Minister but he is still the leader of Direction-Social Democracy, the ruling party, and he is still powerful. Moreover, the outgoing head of government, Peter Pellegrini (SMER-SD), is loyal to him. Robert Fico wants to be rehabilitated, but the trial puts him in a delicate position,»* said political scientist Juraj Marusiak.

In the electoral campaign, Peter Pellegrini has highlighted the economic results achieved by his government, particularly the low unemployment rate (4.92%). According to statistics, the number of unemployed people has fallen by 40% in the last three years. Direction-Social Democracy is campaigning on its social programme and has just passed a vote on the payment of a 13th month's allowance to pensioners, a measure costing €442 million for an average pension of €460. The party has pushed through parliament the doubling of the allowance paid to families with children from €24.5 to €50/month for one child. The total cost of this measure is €300 million. Finally, the government has abolished motorway tolls for vehicles over 3.5 tons. The party wants to introduce measures to ensure that doctors trained in Slovakia stay in the country by obliging those who want to emigrate to reimburse their school fees, which total around €55,000.

### In the opposition camp

The People's Party-Our Slovakia (LSNS) stands as the main opponent of Direction-Social Democracy. Led by Marian Kotleba, LSNS claims to be a defender of Slovak identity and sovereignty. Economically positioned on the left of the political spectrum, it fights against *«Roma criminality»*, the presence of Muslims in Slovakia, the influence of the United States and the European Union in the country, the *«power of the Zionists»* and anything that could threaten the values of the *“traditional family”*. The party wants to establish a flat tax (a single rate set at 15% for VAT, income tax and corporate tax), to counter the *«power of finance»* and put the economy back into Slovak hands, to take the country out of NATO, to exclude *«people who do not want to work»* from the social benefit system and to hold a referendum on the exit from the euro. *«We are going to put Slovakia back on its feet,»* its slogan reads.

The party stands as the successor to the People's Party, the fascist group that ruled Slovakia between the two world wars. It likes to honour the memory of Jozef Tiso, a Catholic priest who rallied to Nazi Germany and was President of the Slovak Republic between 1939 and 1945. A request to dissolve the LSNS in 2017 failed. In April 2019, the Supreme Court refused to ban the party on the grounds that it did not have sufficient evidence that it was promoting *«extremist ideas with fascist tendencies»*. *«The People's Party - Our Slovakia is cashing in on the idea that all politicians are corrupt and ignorant. Moreover, no other party visits Slovak villages; it is the only one that does so and talks to people,»* said Jakub Drabik, professor of history at the Academy of Sciences. *«If Social Democracy-Direction fails to mobilize its voters, and some of them are looking for an alternative option, the extremists of the People's Party-Our Slovakia may well be the winners of the election,»* said Martin Slosiarik, an analyst for the pollster Focus. For its part, the National Party (SNS), which advocates immigration control and the fight against the *«Islamisation»* of Slovakia, as well as the closure of US bases and the protection of the traditional family, calls the People's Party-Our Slovakia a *«fascist party»*. *«Those who vote for Marian Kotleba*

are working to weaken Christian and social patriotic forces,» said Zuzana Skopcová, spokesperson for SNS leader Andrej Danko.

All political parties have ruled out governing with the People's Party-Our Slovakia after the elections, except for the populists of We are a family (Sme Rodina).

The liberal opposition parties failed to form a coalition. Freedom and Solidarity (Sloboda a Solidarita, SaS); Progressive Slovakia (SP) led by Michal Truban, allied to Civic Democracy Together (Spolu) led by Miroslav Beblavy; For the People (Za Ludi), a party created in 2019 by former President of the Republic (2014-2019) Andrej Kiska, and the Party of Ordinary People and Independent Personalities-New Majority (OL'ANO-NOVA) tried, in vain, to unite in a Bloc for Change. Its leader, Igor Matovic, wanted to form an alliance only with Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), but this idea was rejected by its leader, Richard Sulik.

The Progressive Slovakia/Civil Democracy programme focuses on education and health issues, as does that of For the People, which also focuses on tackling inequality and poverty across the country and increasing investment in infrastructure.

«I've beaten Robert Fico three times. I prevented him from becoming President of the Republic in 2014, which was the first failure of his career. Then, in 2018, he had to resign from the post of Prime Minister and then failed to become President of the Constitutional Court in 2019», Andrej Kiska likes to repeat, reproaching the former head of government for his response to the assassinations of Jan Kuciak and Martina Kusnirova.

It should be remembered that Progressive Slovakia/Civil Democracy won the May 2019 European elections with 20.11% of the vote, ahead of the Social Democracy - Direction 15.72% and the People's Party-Our Slovakia 12.07%.

Two months earlier, Slovaks elected Zuzana Caputová (PS) as President of the Republic. She defeated Maros Sefcovic with 58.4% of the vote, supported by Social Democracy-Direction which won 41.6% of the votes.

Finally, the two Hungarian parties - the Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK-MKP), which became the Hungarian Community (MKS), and Most-Hid - are in danger of disappearing from parliament because they have failed to form an alliance.

### The Slovakian Political System

The National Council of the Republic (Narodna rada Slovenskej republiky) comprises 150 members elected for 4 years by proportional representation from lists blocked within a single national constituency. Each person can cast 4 preferential votes for candidates on the same list. Seats are distributed according to the Hagenbach-Bischoff system. A party must obtain at least 5% of the votes cast to be represented in parliament; a coalition, 7% (10% if it comprises 4 or more parties).

To be able to stand for election, a political party or movement must pay a deposit of approximately € 17 000 (which is paid back if it receives at least 2% of the votes cast) and make a declaration that it has at least 10 000 members. If its membership is below this number, a party may nevertheless submit a petition of support containing a number of signatures enabling it to meet requirements. Parties that won over 3% of the votes in the previous legislative elections are entitled to a State subsidy. Candidates for parliamentary elections must be at least 21 years of age and be permanently resident in Slovakia. Finally, the electoral law limits campaign expenditure to € 3 million.

8 political parties are represented in the current National Council of the Republic:

- Direction-Social Democracy (SMER-SD), a social democratic party of outgoing Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini, founded on 29 October 1999 and led by Robert Fico, has 49 seats;
- Freedom and Solidarity (Sloboda a Solidarita, SaS), a liberal party founded in 2009 by the economist and instigator of the flat rate tax, Richard Sulik, has 21 seats;
- the Party of Ordinary People and Independent

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Personalities (OL'aNO), a right-wing movement created in October 2011 and led by Igor Matovic, allied to the New Majority (Nova), created in 2012 and led by Gabor Grendel, has 19 seats;

- The National Party (SNS), a nationalist, populist movement led by Andrej Danko, has 15 elected members;

- the People's Party-Our Slovakia (LSNS), a far-right nationalist movement led by Marian Kotleba, has 14 seats;

- We are a Family (Sme Rodina), a right-wing populist party led by Boris Kollar, has 11 elected members;

- Most-Hid (which means «bridge»), a liberal party founded in 2009 by members of the Hungarian

Coalition Party (SMK-MKP) and led by Bela Bugar, has 11 deputies;

- the Conservative Party (SKS), formerly «#SIET» (meaning «network»), led by Ivan Zuzula, has 10 elected members.

The Slovaks also elect their head of State by direct universal suffrage. Zuzana Caputova (Progressive Slovakia, PS) was elected President of Slovakia on 30 March 2019 with 58.4% of the vote against the Vice-President of the European Commission, Maros Sefcovic, supported by Direction-Social Democracy, who obtained 41.6% of the votes. The turnout rose to 41.79%.

**Reminder of the results of the previous general elections on 5th March 2016**

Turnout: 59,82%

Political Parties	Number of votes won	% of votes won	Number of seats
<b>Direction-Social Democracy (SMER-SD)</b>	737 481	28,28	49
<b>Freedom and Solidarity (SaS)</b>	315 558	12,10	21
<b>Party of Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OL'aNO)</b>	287 611	11,03	19
<b>National Slovak Party</b>	225 386	8,64	15
<b>Peoples Party-Our Slovakia (SNS)</b>	209 779	8,04	14
<b>We are a family (Sme Rodina)</b>	172 860	6,63	11
<b>Most-Hid</b>	169 593	6,50	11
<b>Slovak Conservative Party (SKS)</b>	146 205	5,61	10
<b>Christian Democratic Movement (KDH)</b>	128 908	4,94	0
<b>Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK-MKP)</b>	105 495	4,05	0
<b>Others</b>	106 974	4,07	0

Source : <http://volby.statistics.sk/nrsr/nrsr2016/en/data01.html>

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