

# Ruling parties routed in Slovakian elections

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The social democratic Smer-SD has emerged as the clear winner in the Slovakian parliamentary elections held last Saturday. They received 44 percent of the vote, giving them 83 seats in the 150-member parliament. This is the first time in the history of the country that a party has sufficient control of parliament to govern without a coalition partner.

Incoming Prime Minister Robert Fico immediately said he would use his majority to push through the austerity measures dictated by the European Union. “The EU can rely on Smer because we realize that Slovakia wants to live in Europe and intends to defend the euro zone,” he said.

The early election was called because the outgoing prime minister, Iveta Radicova, did not have a parliamentary majority to back the euro rescue fund. Her government obtained a vote supporting the fund with the votes of the social democrats, but they demanded in return Radicova’s resignation and early elections.

The right-wing government party Slovak Christian Democratic Union (SDKU) of Mikulas Dzurinda suffered heavy losses. Its vote fell by two-thirds. With just 6 percent of the vote, it is only just managing to enter the new parliament.

The right-wing Freedom and Solidarity Party (SaS) received 5.9 percent of the vote. It voted “no” on the euro rescue agreement and aid for Greece, fracturing the coalition with Radicova and triggering a government crisis.

With 8.8 percent of the vote, Radicova’s Christian Democrats (KDH) are now the second-strongest party. The Most-Hid party, which is based on parts of the country’s Hungarian minority, remains in parliament, having won 6.9 percent of the vote.

Immediately after the election, both Radicova and Dzurinda announced their resignation from politics.

The protest party Ordinary People (OL), led by Igor

Matovic, has also won seats in parliament. It received 8.6 percent, clearing the 5 percent hurdle for parliamentary representation. The grouping was mainly supported by disappointed voters of the right-wing parties.

Turnout in the election was nearly 60 percent.

A dominant issue in the election was a corruption scandal that has been given the codename “gorilla.” Wiretap transcripts of the Federal Security Service that were placed on the Internet have revealed the relationship between politicians and big business in privatization programmes and public procurement.

In the weeks before the election there were repeated protests against the corrupt elite of the country. But even though many media commentators saw this as the only reason for the defeat of the ruling parties, the precarious social situation and the Radicova government's austerity measures have played an equally important role.

As a result of the economic crisis, unemployment has risen to 14 percent, one of the highest rates in the EU. The automotive industry, built up strongly in the 1990s, has recently cut jobs and wages. The average wage is about €800, the minimum wage is €327.

It is impossible to live in Slovakia on such wages. In the capital, Bratislava, housing and food already cost as much as in Vienna, 60 kilometres away. In the underdeveloped districts of southern Slovakia one in three people is out of work.

Grigory Meseznikov, president of the Institute for Public Affairs, believes that social issues proved decisive in the outcome of the elections. “Many people have fears that they do not have enough protection,” he said.

Against this background, the Radicova government tried to push through massive job cuts in public services as well as a drastic reform of pensions, but failed due to coalition infighting.

Fico, who had been prime minister from 2006 to 2010, took advantage of the discontent with the right-wing parties and the lack of an alternative, and intends to continue essentially the same policy.

Hannes Swoboda, president of the Social Democratic group in the European Parliament, said that Fico's victory heralds the "start of a new, more social Europe." Exactly the opposite is the case.

Former Interior Minister Robert Kališák, after Fico the strongman in Smer, immediately made it clear that "unpopular decisions" were now the order of the day. To reduce the deficit below the 3 percent level, as demanded by the EU, savings of some €1.5 billion were necessary, he said.

Fico has shown many times that he is as ruthless and right-wing a politician as his predecessor. In 1987, he joined the Communist Party. After the fall of the Stalinist regime in 1989, he joined the CP's successor organization, the SDL. Shortly thereafter, he founded the Smer-SD, zealously advocating free market policies.

In 2006, he formed a coalition with the ultra-right Slovak National Party (SNS) and the right-wing populist "Movement for a Democratic Slovakia" of ex-Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar. Despite his "left" rhetoric, he essentially continued the economic policies of his right-wing predecessors. The 19 percent flat tax remained intact as did the cuts in health care.



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