

# Slovakia takes up membership in the European Union with extreme right-wing president

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In the second round of voting in the Slovakian presidential elections held on April 17, Ivan Gasparovic emerged the winner against former Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar. Both candidates stand on the far right of the political spectrum and are hated by broad sections of the population.

For more than a decade, Gasparovic was the closest confidante of Meciar. Together, they founded the extreme right-wing and racist Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) in 1991. During Meciar's period in power from 1992 to 1998, Gasparovic occupied the post of president of the Slovakian parliament.

In recent years, the relationship between the two men has been increasingly dominated by personal rivalry. For this reason, Meciar refused to allow Gasparovic a place on the party's slate of candidates in elections held in September 2002. Gasparovic responded by breaking away from the HZDS and founding his own party, the Movement for Democracy (HZD), which is generally described in Slovakia as the "HZDS without Meciar."

In the decisive round of voting, Gasparovic received 1,079,592 votes (60 percent of the vote) and Meciar 722,368 (40 percent). Voter turnout totalled just 44 percent.

In the first round of the election on April 3, Meciar was the clear winner with 650,242 votes (33 percent), while Gasparovic received 442,564 votes (22 percent). A few hundred votes behind was Eduard Kukan, the candidate of the biggest governing party and Slovakian foreign minister. Turnout was less than 48 percent of the 4.2 million Slovaks eligible to vote.

The reason figures such as Meciar and Gasparovic were able to win lies in the policies of the ruling conservative coalition that has lost all popular support due to the brutal social attacks over its past six years in power.

The election result will only serve to intensify the crisis of an already very unstable Slovakian government. With only 68 deputies, the Slovakian ruling coalition lacks a majority of the 150 seats in the country's National Council. Meciar's party, the HZDS, has 26 seats and has already announced it will make life even more difficult for the coalition. Gasparovic's HZD is

not even represented in parliament but has the support of the third biggest party, Smer, which is agitating for the overthrow of the government.

Should the government collapse, the president assumes a decisive role because, according to the constitution, he has the responsibility for naming a new prime minister. The latter can then draw up a new cabinet whose members, however, must also be confirmed by the president.

In addition, the president has certain powers relating to domestic policy. He can pass draft laws back to parliament—a move undertaken on a number of occasions by the country's current president, Rudolf Schuster, who was fearful of social unrest.

The governing alliance is based on a narrow social layer and is divided amongst itself. Before the presidential elections, it was unable to arrive at a commonly agreed candidate. Initially, the party of the prime minister Mikulas Dzurinda, the Slovakian Christian and Democratic Union (SDKU), had proposed Eduard Kukan, its foreign minister. Then, the Christian-Democratic Movement (KDH) put up its own candidate, who was subsequently supported by the Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK). Three weeks before the elections were due to take place, the fourth party in the governing coalition, the Alliance of New Citizens (ANO), withdrew its own candidate in favour of Kukan. In all, 11 candidates stood in the elections.

Opinion polls, which increasingly took on the role of opinion makers, had up to the last minute predicted a clear victory in the first round for the candidate of the biggest governing party, the SDKU. Numerous commentaries have subsequently concluded that his defeat was his comeuppance for "reform policies" pursued by the Dzurinda government. Even by east European standards, the government programme of social cuts and concessions to employers was regarded as extremely aggressive. In approval of such brutal measures, business circles in Slovakia liked to praise the country as the "Tiger of the Tatras."

In the final round of voting, the four parties constituting the bourgeois governing alliance called either directly or indirectly

for a boycott. According to its speaker, in a vote between Meciar and Gasparovic, neither could be regarded as a lesser evil. The KDH and SMK had called upon their supporters to stay away from the election. Both the SDKU and ANO made no recommendation of whom to vote for, and their leading figures said they would not bother to vote.

At the back of this stance are purely tactical considerations. Had more voters abstained, it was likely that Meciar, with a relatively stable and reliable voter lobby, would have won. This result would have been more propitious for the government because a president Meciar, allied with a conservative governing alliance, would have been better able to stand up to the opposition party Smer, supported by his rival Gasparovic.

For his part, Gasparovic, in his post of president, is indebted to the biggest opposition party. Together with the elections on April 17, Smer and the trade unions also managed to include a referendum over premature national elections. Because of the low level of voter participation (36 percent), however, the proposal for the referendum fell.

Using the influence that Smer gained through its use of social demagogy, the party has raised an ultra-reactionary figure into the country's highest state post. Smer was unrelenting in its campaign for the lesser evil of Gasparovic against Meciar.

In fact, under circumstances where it was generally known that the two candidates were like peas in pod, the election campaign assumed absurd forms. According to press reports, a number of voters entered polling booths in the capital city of Bratislava sporting rubber gloves, while others held their noses.

The online newspaper *Slovak Spectator* wrote of Gasparovic: "But his past is so closely tied with Meciar's that it was certain many voters would fail to find a difference between the two, and their dislike for Meciar would be just as harmful for Gasparovic's presidential ambitions as for Meciar's."

According to the *Slovak Spectator*, this dilemma led to the phenomenon of the "anonymous election campaign": "Most major Slovak cities, where anti-Meciar sentiment tends to be strongest yet people are well aware of Gasparovic's political history, were filled with billboards reminding Slovaks that 'not voting means voting for Meciar'.... Unable to engage in real campaigning, Gasparovic only had to hope that voters themselves would conclude that there was a significant difference between himself and Meciar."

Gasparovic's victory over Meciar is due to the support he received from Smer, a populist party that emerged from the successor organisation of the country's former ruling Stalinist party, and that enjoys a considerable lead in current opinion polls.

Smer is recording 30 percent for the European elections due to take place on June 13. Currently, the party would win 5 of the 14 seats eligible to Slovakia in the European Parliament. In contrast, the party of the head of government stands to win just 2 seats. In elections in September 2002, Smer took third place with 13.6 percent of the vote.

Smer is a split-off from the Party of the Democratic Left (SDL), the successor organisation to the former Stalinist state party. SDL Chairman Robert Fico broke with the party in December 1999. The name Smer means "direction, aim," and the organisation demagogically describes itself as a "social alternative for Slovakia."

The split came about after the SDL entered government in the aftermath of the 1998 elections. Following government policies involving the savaging of the country's social welfare provisions, the SDL rapidly lost popular support and Fico decided to desert the sinking ship. He had no principled differences whatsoever with the pro-market policies of the SDL. Fico described the "reforms" as "painful but necessary." They had to merely be organised in a "socially fair manner."

Fico combines political demagogy over the well-being of the population with nationalist demagogy and racist witch-hunting of the Roma and Hungarian minorities in Slovakia.

He declares his role models to be Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder. Smer also likes to refer to itself as "Smer—third way." Fico is a vehement advocate of Slovakian membership of the EU and supported the country's entry into the NATO alliance at the end of this past March.

An argument used by Fico against the election of Meciar referred to the precedent established by Jörg Haider's entry into the Austrian government in 2001. In response to that, the EU temporarily froze relations with Austria. According to Fico, there was fear of a strain in relations with the EU should Meciar win the election. This line was taken up by numerous commentators in the Slovakian media who acknowledged that Gasparovic pursued much the same policies, but was less well known abroad and therefore less of a risk for Slovakia's image.

This line of argument is designed to tie the Slovakian workers to the farcical election process and to prevent them from defining their independent interests. The EU, for its part, has had no problem in coming to terms with individuals regarded as unacceptable just a few years previously.

Although in the mid-1990s the EU refused to hold entry negotiations with Meciar as head of government, citing his racist, corrupt and utterly undemocratic policies, Slovakia is now entering into the EU with a president who is Meciar's exact political double.



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