

Slovakia: Social Democrats form a pact with the extreme right

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Recent parliamentary elections and the formation of a new government in Slovakia have once more highlighted the reactionary character of the “democracies” that developed in Eastern Europe following the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in the early 1990s.

Political life is dominated by a tiny elite that acquired enormous wealth through the privatisation of formerly state-owned assets. This new ruling layer originated in the old nomenklatura, from among the former oppositionists, or from the criminal milieu, and is represented by various party formations that rarely last longer than one legislative period.

Election campaigns are characterised by violence and bitterness, but in the end the parties are willing to form a coalition with anyone in order to cling to power.

This is the pattern of politics in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, the Baltic states and, particularly, Slovakia, where the social democratic Smer, whose roots go back to the Communist Party, has formed a government coalition with two extreme right-wing parties, one of which includes the Slovakian fascist Josef Tiso among its forbears.

Direction—Social Democracy (Smer-SD), under Robert Fico, emerged as the victor in the June 17 parliamentary elections. With 29.1 percent of the vote, it saw its 2002 result more than double.

The outgoing centre-right coalition headed by Mikulas Dzurinda suffered a heavy defeat. Dzurinda’s Slovakian Christian Democratic Union (SDKU) won 8.4 percent of the vote. Election turnout was 54.7 percent—the lowest in a parliamentary election since Slovakia separated from the Czech Republic.

The ultra-right Slovakian National Party (SNS) increased its vote from 3 to 12 percent, becoming the third strongest party. The conservative Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), the party which in the 1990s provided the prime minister, Vladimir Meciar, won just 8.8 percent.

The social democratic Smer has since agreed to form a government with the right-wing parties SNS and HZDS, and President Ivan Gasparovic swore in the new government on July 4. Smer will have eleven of the sixteen ministerial posts in the new cabinet. The HZDS takes on Justice and Agriculture, and the SNS will control the ministries of education,

construction and the environment.

The formation of the new government means official politics in Slovakia has taken a huge lurch to the right.

The HZDS has long been renowned for its right-wing, nationalist politics, emerging at the end of the 1990s from the anti-communist Citizens Movement of Czechoslovakia. From 1993 to 1998, following the separation of Slovakia from the Czech Republic, Vladimir Meciar officiated as an autocratic head of government. During this period, he ruled with the support of both the former Stalinists and the fascist National Party.

His nationalist economic policy discredited Meciar in the eyes of the Western powers. Despite the privatisations and deregulation he advanced, some so-called “strategic enterprises” remained under state control. Above all, this included the lucrative gas and energy enterprises.

His goal was to develop a domestic capitalist layer. During his term of office he introduced so-called “reforms” that were then continued by his successors even more intensely. He was notorious for his racist utterances against the Roma and other minorities.

In this regard, the SNS goes even further. The Slovenska Narodna Strana was formed in 1990 and has its roots in the Slovak People’s Party, which collaborated with Nazi Germany between 1939 and 1945 and whose leader, Josef Tiso, is still admired today in the party.

As prime minister of a Slovak puppet regime, the Catholic priest was responsible for the deportation of thousands of Jews. Tiso never displayed any regret and defended his views in court when he was placed on trial after the end of the war.

Following an internal party struggle at the beginning of the 1990s, the SNS expelled many of its more moderate members from its ranks and elected Jan Slota as its chairman. Since 1990, Slota has been mayor in the northern Slovakian town of Zilina.

He is notorious for his excessive alcohol consumption and his racist utterances against the country’s Hungarian minority and the Roma. He abused and threatened Hungarians as “lumpen elements” and “murderers of the Slovaks,” also saying, “We will get in our tanks and crush Budapest.”

The SNS wants to substantially curtail the social and political

rights of minorities. In 2003, Slota proposed paying 20,000 Kronen to every Roma who underwent voluntarily sterilization. At that time, even Smer protested against such proposals.

In the recent elections, the SNS campaigned vehemently for the introduction of the death penalty. Slota said that the increase in prostitution should be dealt with by “a good thrashing.” While the SNS seeks to make homosexuality a punishable offence, it has promised to provide Slovakian families with a house paid for by the state on the birth of their first child.

The situation of the Roma is already intolerable. In many Roma settlements there is 100 percent unemployment. Meagre welfare payments are hardly enough to ensure survival. Under the Dzurinda government, the social programmes demanded by the European Union, in education for example, were barely introduced for the Roma.

Many voted for Fico and Smer because they hoped for an alternative to the radical “free market” policies of the Dzurinda government, which had become the darling of neo-liberals throughout Europe because of its introduction of a flat tax of 19 percent. That Smer is now prepared to enter an alliance with the SNS exposes its real, reactionary character.

Robert Fico, the founder and head of Smer, began his political career in the Democratic Left, which emerged from the Stalinist party of state. Many former Communist Party bigwigs could be found in the Democratic Left, seeking to continue their careers and become wealthy under a new party label.

Fico created his own party in 1999 after he failed to gain a government post. At that time, he regarded his role models as Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder, who were both moving to the right of their conservative predecessors. He combined staunch law-and-order policies with unconditional support for the European Union and NATO.

Following the 2002 elections, when the Dzurinda government stepped up its attacks on the general population, at the same time becoming increasingly unstable, Fico changed his policies, at least outwardly. The party added the title “Socialna demokracia” (social democracy) and engaged in social demagoguery.

In 2005, the party was accepted into the Federation of European Social Democrats and the Socialist International. Since no other Slovakian party was discussing social questions, Fico styled himself the “advocate of the poor” and criticised the government’s anti-social reforms.

In the election campaign he promised to reintroduce the welfare state, abolish the flat tax and introduce a so-called “millionaire’s tax.” He promised to lower the burden on ordinary people by cutting taxes on food and medical products.

Fico’s election victory was a result of the broad rejection of the Dzurinda government’s “reform course”—drastic even by Eastern European standards. Staggering social cuts had been implemented under Dzurinda’s leadership. Unemployment benefits and welfare assistance were more than halved. Secure

jobs and protection against dismissal were all but abolished. The reform of the pension system was accompanied by substantial cuts in benefits. The health system was restructured on the basis of the “free market.” Today, as a result, a large section of the population at best receives a bare minimum of health provisions in emergency cases.

The economy and the state were completely restructured in the interests of European capital. The introduction of a uniform income tax rate of 19 percent ripped an enormous hole in the budget, which was only partially filled through cuts in public expenditure and an increase in the value added tax on consumer items.

Ordinary people gained no benefit from the country’s high levels of economic growth. The official unemployment rate of 15.5 percent is the second highest in the European Union. While the region around the capital Bratislava has flourished, the areas to the east and south have been left to fend for themselves.

Popular disgust with the entire gamut of official politics had already found expression in earlier elections. In the 2004 European elections, only some 17 percent of voters participated. In last year’s regional elections, turnout was only 18 percent, falling to just 11 percent in the second ballot.

After the expulsion of the New Citizens Alliance (ANO) from the four-party coalition at the beginning of the year, Dzurinda no longer enjoyed a parliamentary majority. For more than two weeks it proved impossible to hold a sitting of parliament due to the absence of the opposition parties. Only the switch of HZDS deputies to the government benches enabled parliament to function, which gave rise to the supposition that they had been bribed.

European politicians and media have reacted sceptically to the new government, not because of the participation of an openly fascist party, but out of concern that the pro-business policies of the outgoing regime may not be continued. Brussels expressed the worry that this might endanger the introduction of the euro, planned for 2009, and that Slovakia was expected to honour all its obligations.

Fico immediately tried to dispel such doubts, insisting that the new government would uphold all its obligations and would continue the pro-European Union course of the previous administration. Even the flat tax, which was ferociously criticized by Smer, will probably remain. Not only did the SNS state expressly that it was for its retention, President Gasparovic, who was elected to office thanks to Fico, also said that the reforms that had already been implemented would not be reversed.



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