

Slovakia: new right-wing government announces austerity program

Markus Salzmann**3 July 2010**

The new government of Slovakia has announced a savage austerity program. As is the case in the neighboring states of Hungary and the Czech Republic, the government in Slovakia is intent on ruthlessly shifting the entire burden of the economic crisis onto the population.

The social-democratic Smer-SD, led by the former head of government Robert Fico, won the biggest share of the vote (34 percent) in the parliamentary elections held on June 12 but lacked sufficient support from other parties to form a government.

Fico had governed in a coalition with the right-wing populist Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), led by former Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar, and the ultra right Slovak National Party (SNS). In the June parliamentary election, however, the SNS received just 5.1 percent. The HZDS failed to re-enter parliament, receiving less than the five-percent necessary for representation.

President Ivan Gasparovic gave the job of forming a new government to the 53-year old sociology professor Iveta Radicova, a member of the Christian liberal SDKU. Radicova has now formed a coalition between her own party, the recently created neo-liberal Freedom and Solidarity Party (SaS), the Christian Democrats (KDH) and the party Most-Hid (Bridge), which stood in the election for the first time and represents a layer of wealthy Hungarians in the country.

These parties have very little support in the population. The SDKU received just 15 percent of the vote.

The lack of support for the right-wing parties is not surprising. In the election campaign they argued in favor of jointly slashing social spending. The most vehement advocate of this course is the neo-liberal SaS, which represents a narrow layer of entrepreneurs and super rich in the country. The organization has been able to win some credibility amongst young Slovaks because of

widespread anger with the established political parties.

In an interview with the Austrian Standard, Richard Sulik, the founder of SaS, described Fico as a "Bolshevik" and then expressed his regret that the Smer government had not continued the radical free market policies introduced by the conservative government led by Fico's predecessor, Mikulas Dzurinda.

Dzurinda oversaw a massive assault on social benefits. Unemployment pay and social welfare assistance were cut by more than half, and protection against dismissal largely wiped out. Large cuts were also made in pensions. The health system was reformed on the basis of free market criteria. As a result, a large proportion of the population now receives only a bare minimum of health care.

The economy and state were completely restructured in line with the demands of European big business and the banks. The introduction of a uniform tax rate of 19 percent tore an enormous hole in the national budget, which was partly compensated for by cuts in public expenditure and an increase in value added tax.

Sulik's statement, claiming that Fico failed to continue such policies is false. In fact, Fico intensified these measures. He whipped up nationalism and encouraged discrimination against minorities living in the country in order to defuse widespread social discontent with his government.

Indicative in this respect was the law introduced by Smer which made Slovak the only official language in the country, a deliberate provocation against minorities. In addition, the Patriotism Law, which came into force on April 1, stipulates that all meetings of parliament and government, including meetings of local councils, have to begin with the singing of the national anthem. The same applies to all sporting events.

Classes in schools are required to display the national coat of arms, flag, text of the national anthem and the preamble to the Slovakian constitution. The principle of

“education to love one's homeland” introduced by the former Stalinist state party has been elevated to the status of the basic principle of teaching.

The preparation for the introduction of the euro last year was also accompanied by large scale austerity measures implemented by Fico.

Nevertheless European and Slovak politicians and businessmen grew increasingly apprehensive about the Fico government, in particular because of his two coalition partners. The extreme right SNS was seen as a problem, not so much due to its openly fascist positions, but because, according to press reports, its chairman Jan Slota was involved in numerous criminal activities and was increasingly regarded as a risk.

Representatives of the European Union were also angry with the government for increasing its level of indebtedness after years of budget cutting.

Radicova has already put forward her blueprint for a government program. It consists of drastic economic measures, further reforms in the social and health systems and a smashing up of the relatively well-preserved education system.

Radicova had already filled the post of Social Minister under Dzurinda. In the space of a few months she had become intensely disliked due to the austerity measures of the conservative government and her own arrogance. Following Dzurinda's fall from grace at the beginning of this year due to a money laundering scandal, Radicova took over leadership of the SDKU.

The planned cuts will have major consequences for the population. Slovakia is already the poorest country in the Eurozone. Last year the country's gross national product fell by about 4.7 percent, and the official rate of unemployment rose to 12.5 percent. While there was slow growth in the economy this year, the situation for workers has worsened, with unemployment now standing at 15 percent.



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