

Slovak government collapses

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Last week, Slovakia was the last of the 17 euro-zone countries to vote on the expansion of the European rescue fund (EFSF). The motion was carried only after a second vote made possible by the decision of the right-wing government to hold new elections. This was the condition laid down by the social democratic opposition for its agreement to extend the EFSF.

In its first vote on Tuesday, the parliament had voted against the expansion of the fund and thereby sealed the end of the coalition led by Prime Minister Iveta Radicova, who had turned the issue into a vote of confidence in her government. Radicova's coalition partner, the right-wing Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) refused to take part in the vote in protest against the billions of aid planned for European countries such as Greece.

The expansion of the EFSF fund, which was initiated by the combined heads of state and government in the European Union, required the agreement of all euro zone parliaments. From the total funding of the EFSF of 440 billion euros, Slovakia is expected to guarantee €7.7 billion.

After the failure of the first vote, leading euro-zone countries increased the pressure on Bratislava. Chancellor Angela Merkel and other EU leaders called on party leaders to agree to the EFSF extension. "We call on all parties to set aside their short-term political positions and ensure the rapid adoption of the decision at the earliest opportunity," declared EU Commission chief Jose Manuel Barroso and EU Council President Herman Van Rompuy.

It then became clear that none of the political parties in Slovakia had any principled objections to the bank bailout package. After the collapse of the coalition of

four parties, the foreign minister, Mikulas Dzurinda, who is also chairman of the Christian Democratic party SDKU-DS, conducted immediate negotiations with the opposition. Dzurinda agreed with the chairman of the social democratic Smer, Robert Fico, to approve the measures in a second vote. Smer supports the expansion of the EFSF, but abstained from the first vote in order to force the resignation of the Radicova government.

The parliament in Bratislava was duly praised for its decision by no less than EU Commission President Barroso. "I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate Slovakia. It is an important decision for all of Europe," Barroso said in Sofia.

The toppling of the government in the poorest euro country has triggered a major political crisis, with both the conservative camp and the Social Democrats lacking an overall majority in parliament.

In the June 2010 parliamentary elections, Fico's Smer emerged as the strongest force in parliament with more than 34 percent of the vote, but lacked a majority to form a government. Fico had previously made a pact with the populist Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) led by former Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar and the ultra-right National Party (SNS).

Just a few days after the election, Fico handed over the task of forming a government to Radicova, who formed a coalition of her Christian-liberal SDKU with the recently formed neo-liberal party, Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), the Christian Democrats (KDH) and the newly founded Most-Hid (Bridge) party, which represents the wealthiest layers of ethnic Hungarian society.

Radicova, who has been in power barely 16 months, has had frequent conflicts with her coalition partners—mainly in relation to the state’s European policy. In particular the neo-liberal SaS, which represents a narrow layer of entrepreneurs and super-rich in the country, criticized Radicova because the austerity measures introduced by her government did not go far enough.

This is despite the fact that Radicova was continuing the reforms implemented by previous governments. She recently ordered the conversion of government hospitals into joint stock companies—a measure which involves massive layoffs, wage cuts and a significant pruning of inpatient care in the country. In late September, 2,400 of the 6,500 doctors in Slovak hospitals drew up a letter condemning the privatisation plans.

SaS chief Richard Sulik has repeatedly denounced the “incompetence of the Greeks when it comes to reform” and declared they should not be “saved” at the expense of Slovakia. Similar comment were made by the Christian-Liberal Party boss Dzurinda, who praised the brutal austerity measures in Slovakia as a remedy for Greece’s problems.

Dzurinda had carried out his own massive offensive against social and welfare rights when he led the Slovavk government from 1998 to 2006. Unemployment benefits and social assistance were more than halved and safety regulations and employment protection for workers virtually abolished. The reform of the pension system was bound up with significant reductions in pensions.

The economy and the state were completely restructured in order to favour European big business. The introduction of a uniform “flat tax” of 19 percent tore a huge hole in the state budget, which was then offset by savings in public spending and an increase in VAT.

The social democratic government led by Fico continued this course. The preparations for the introduction of the euro in the country in 2009—which coincided with massive austerity measures—were

carried out when Fico was in power. Fico paved the way for this turn towards the free market with large doses of radical nationalism. The Smer-led government introduced a law which makes Slovak the country’s sole official language—an open provocation to the considerable minority communities resident in Slovakia.

Fico also introduced the so-called Patriotism Act, which stipulates that all meetings of parliaments and governments, ranging from the national House of Representatives to the smallest municipal council, had to begin with the singing of the national anthem. The same law demanded the hanging in public schools of national emblems, such as the country’s flag and the texts of its national anthem and constitution. Smer, which has its roots in the country’s former Stalinist state party, has elevated “education to love the fatherland” to its main educational principle.

New elections have been planned for March 2012. It is unclear who will win. President Ivan Gasparovic has already announced he favours a “government of officials.” This is one option favoured by the ruling elite in order to step up its austerity program for the masses and prepare for forthcoming class struggles.



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