

Slovakian parliamentary elections marked by rightward shift

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Slovakian prime minister Robert Fico of the social democratic Smer-SD focused the entire campaign for parliamentary elections on the issue of refugees. Although only 333 asylum applications were made last year and just 8 accepted—in a country with a population of 5.4 million—Fico sought to divert attention away from the social crisis by waging a sustained propaganda campaign against refugees and Muslims.

The result was a pronounced shift to the right. While Fico's party lost its absolute majority, falling from 45 to 28 percent of the vote, a number of far-right parties, including one openly fascist organisation, passed the 5 percent hurdle and will have representation in parliament. Eight parties are now represented in parliament, making the formation of a stable government virtually impossible. There will also be consequences for the European Union (EU), since Slovakia assumes the EU presidency for six months beginning in June.

Fico is likely to continue as prime minister, as Smer-SD remained the largest party with 28 percent of the vote. But the party requires at least two coalition partners to form a majority government.

The second-strongest party is the right-wing liberal SAS. SAS leader Richard Sulik is a vehement critic of the EU and advocates radical measures against refugees. New right-wing parties represented in parliament include Siet, led by former presidential candidate Radoslav Prochazka, Sme rodina (We are one Family) of millionaire Boris Koller, and the extremist Our Slovakia of provincial government leader Marian Kotleba.

Kotleba's party, which won less than 2 percent of the vote four years ago, received 8 percent this time around. It is openly racist, functions on the verge of illegality and is notorious for its attacks on Roma and

refugees. The 36-year-old neo-Nazi Kotleba most often appears in public wearing a black uniform, and his supporters refer to him as "führer." He has appeared in court on numerous occasions for spreading racist propaganda, but has always been exonerated. Two previous parties led by him were banned for violating the constitution.

Kotleba conducted his election campaign with propaganda tirades against Roma and the EU. He denounced Roma as "parasites," "anti-social" and murderers, who live off state aid, and he demanded the withdrawal of all social benefits. He called for withdrawal from the EU and NATO, which he described as a "terrorist organisation," as well as the reintroduction of the Krone as the currency.

The party Ordinary People (Olano) of Igor Matovic was also able to increase its support. It was formed in a split from the SAS five years ago and also agitates against refugees. With 11 percent support, it emerged as the third-strongest party.

Fico at first planned a coalition with the right-wing Slovakian National Party (SNS), with which he formed a coalition government in 2006. But the SNS, which was not represented in parliament in 2012, achieved just 9 percent of the vote, not enough to establish a coalition.

Two Christian Democratic parties also suffered disastrous results: The SDKU, which led the government three times prior to 2012 and provided two prime ministers—Nikulas Dzurinda and Iveta Radicova—obtained less than 1 percent of the vote and will no longer be in parliament. In addition, the Christian Democratic KDH, led by former EU commissioner Jan Figel, failed to make it into parliament for the first time since the collapse of the Stalinist bureaucracies in Eastern Europe.

Prime Minister Fico's election campaign, focused entirely on agitating against refugees, played directly into the hands of right-wing forces. Although Slovakia is situated on the edge of the Balkan route and has been affected far less than some neighbouring countries by refugees travelling through the country, Fico, together with Hungarian prime minister Victor Orban and Polish prime minister Beata Szydło, are among the leading anti-refugee agitators in the Vysegrad Group.

Slovakia challenged the implementation of obligatory quotas for the distribution of refugees within the EU. In the election campaign, Fico vowed that he would "not permit even a single Muslim to be brought here via EU quotas." He also utilised the Paris terrorist attacks and the alleged assaults in Cologne, Germany, over the New Year as the basis for a repugnant anti-refugee campaign. He visited the Greece-Macedonia border, where thousands are suffering under unspeakable conditions. This was not "disgusting," he declared, but rather "a danger."

Fico is targeting refugees to divert attention from the social problems in the country. Due to the sharp rise in social inequality, a series of protests by teachers and nurses took place in recent weeks, demanding better equipment for schools and health care institutions as well as wage increases. At the end of January, thousands of teachers began an unlimited strike.

Around 600 nurses have handed in their resignation to protest the unsustainable conditions in Slovakian hospitals, and because hospital workers are forbidden by law from striking. The average wage for a nurse is between €500 and €800. The protest had a huge impact. In the cities Zilina and Prešov, in particular, patients had to be turned away and operations postponed.

Fico's anti-refugee campaign avoided dealing with the genuine concerns of ordinary Slovaks. Despite the mass anger at the terrible conditions in the education and health care systems, the government ignored the loud protests by teachers and nurses.

Around 11,000 teachers at 700 schools across the country took part in the strike. They were supported by students and parents. The education sector has fallen victim to the brutal austerity measures of recent years. On average, teachers wages are less than €1,000 per month. Hundreds of posts are vacant, and workloads are enormous. Even a poll conducted by a government-linked institute found that 52 percent of the population

supported the teachers' demands.

Above all, the widening wealth gap between the booming Bratislava region and the impoverished east of the country was the main reason for Fico's declining popularity, according to political scientist Marian Lesko. "It demonstrates that after two terms in office, voters have had enough of the social democrats and an all-powerful Prime Minister,"

Faced with the approaching presidency of the EU, talk is growing about the formation of an independent government of experts in Bratislava or a coalition including Smer-SD and a large percentage of the right-wing parties. There is broad-based unity among all eight parties represented in parliament on the refugee issue. All are opposed to a quota system that would compel the country to accept refugees.



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