

Slovakia: Fico forms unstable right-wing government

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A right-wing government coalition led by the outgoing Prime Minister Robert Fico has been formed in Slovakia following the parliamentary elections of March 5. The social democratic Smer-SD of Fico agreed a coalition pact with the far-right Slovak National Party (SNS), the Most-Hid party (of the Hungarian minority in the country) and the right wing party Siet, which entered parliament for the first time.

The four-party coalition has 81 of 150 available seats. The withdrawal of any party would lead to the loss of majority, and the coalition is regarded as extremely unstable, with the smaller coalition partners torn by sharp internal differences. Observers believe it is likely that Fico's multiparty coalition will break up before the end of its term.

Fico had focused the election campaign in Slovakia on the issue of refugees, although last year just 330 asylum applications were made in the country and only eight accepted—in a country of 5.4 million inhabitants. Nevertheless Fico placed the refugee question centre stage, patently seeking to divert attention from the country's social crisis.

The result was a massive shift to the right. The vote for Fico's own Smer-SD decreased from 44 to 28 percent, while several extreme right-wing parties, including an openly fascist organisation, were able to cross the five-percent hurdle and enter parliament.

A total of eight parties are now represented in parliament, including the far-right Our Slovakia (LSNS) led by Marian Kotleba—a man who appears regularly in a black shirt and sings the praises of the pro Hitler Slovakian regime which ruled between 1939-1945. Nearly a quarter of first-time voters voted for LSNS. Kotleba ran as a candidate in the regional elections in November 2013 for the first time, and was elected in a runoff for the post of regional chairman of

the Banská Bystrica region. Without any MPs his influence was limited. Now his fascist movement has 14 seats in parliament.

Regardless of its inherent instability and the open conflicts between coalition partners, the new government is clearly on the right. The SNS is well known for its agitation against refugees and Roma. In his first term in power from 2006 to 2010, Fico formed a coalition with the SNS, which stood in the election campaign against the country's Hungarian minority of nearly half a million people. This has not prevented Most-Hid, the self-appointed defender of the Hungarian minority, from joining the new coalition with Fico and SNS.

Founded in 2009, Most-Hid represents a wealthy layer of Hungarian speakers in Slovakia, seeking to advance their social interests by increasing their political influence. The party advocates neo-liberal policies and shares the positions of Fico and SNS on the refugee issue. Infighting has broken out in Most-Hid, which had previously ruled out a coalition with Fico. The deputy chief of Most-Hid has resigned from the party in protest.

The Siet party is also far right. It was founded in 2014 by the Catholic lawyer Radoslav Procházka, after he quit the right-wing conservative KDH. Siet combines ultraconservative with nationalist, neo-liberal economic policies. At the center of its election campaign was the repulsion of refugees and radical tax cuts for big business.

The new government has been greeted with skepticism in most European capitals because of its likely instability. In July Slovakia takes over the rotating EU Presidency, under conditions of deepening crisis for the European Union.

The conflicts over refugee policy in the EU are likely

to intensify. Fico is a resolute opponent of the refugee policy of the German chancellor Angela Merkel. Following the distribution of the first refugees by the EU Commission and the allocation of 800 refugees to Slovakia, Fico filed a complaint in early December 2015 to the European Court.

While the new coalition will undoubtedly step up its criticisms of the EU, Slovakia remains highly dependent on Brussels. EU transfers to Slovakia amount to around €1.7 billion annually, about 2 percent of GDP.

In the ten days of coalition negotiations, Fico pledged to continue with the austerity policies of the last few years. His focus is on a balanced budget by 2020 and a tough stance against “debtor nations” like Greece.

Smer-SD will take over nine ministries, including the key departments of finance, home affairs and economy. The finance minister is once again Peter Kazimir, a staunch opponent of loans to Greece and advocate of tough budget-cutting measures in his own country. The new government is planning further tax relief for companies and radical health care reforms.

The SNS is to take over the ministries of defence, education and agriculture, the Hungarian party the ministries of Justice and Environment while Siet takes over the Ministry of Transport.

It was already clear during the election campaign that the official agitation against refugees was used to deflect attention from the social and economic problems. The government parties are agreed on imposing their rightist agenda on the population.

The economic prospects for Slovakia are very poor. While the official unemployment rate is around 10 percent, in some regions of Slovakia nearly a third of the population is unemployed. The minimum wage is just over 400 euros per month.

In February teachers and hospital staff protested against intolerable conditions. Around 600 nurses announced their resignations. The hospital staff are prohibited from striking and the average salary of a nurse is between 500 and 800 euros.

Some 11,000 teachers are taking part in strike action affecting 700 schools nationwide. The teachers were supported by students and parents. Teachers’ salaries are on average less than 1,000 euros a month. Hundreds of posts are unoccupied, and the workload has increased enormously. A poll by a government-related

institution has shown that more than 52 percent of the population support the teachers’ demands.



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