Ex-Prime Minister Robert Fico wins parliamentary election in Slovakia

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Contrary to most predictions, former Prime Minister Robert Fico and his Smer (Direction) party won Slovakia's parliamentary election last weekend. With almost 23 percent of the vote, or 42 of the 150 seats in parliament, Smer became by far the strongest party, but will have to establish a coalition. Fico was entrusted with forming a government by President Zuzana ?aputová on Monday.

The election in the country of only 5.4 million inhabitants was followed internationally with some aprehension. Fico's position on the war in Ukraine was a focus of attention. Fico called for an end to arms deliveries to Ukraine and the lifting of sanctions against Russia. In the election campaign, he announced that he would not supply Ukraine with "any more shells" and advocated early peace negotiations.

Fico's election victory is due to widespread opposition to the war in Ukraine. Back in March, a Globsec poll found that 51 percent of Slovaks blamed the West and Ukraine first and foremost for the war. Further polls showed that 69 percent thought arms deliveries led to an even wider war. Correspondingly, within the last year, support for the country's NATO membership dropped from 72 to 58 percent and support for European Union (EU) membership from 77 to 64 percent.

The consequences of the war have significantly aggravated the social situation in Slovakia, where almost 500,000 pensioners now live below the poverty line. In 2022 alone, this number increased by 200,000. The minimum pension is around €330 [$US348], with a cost of living that is only slightly below the European average. At the same time, inflation for food and other goods, for example, rose even more than in Poland or the Czech Republic.

The 59-year-old Fico headed the Slovak government from 2006 to 2010 and from 2012 to 2018. In 2018, he had to resign after mass protests against the brutal murder of journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancée. Kuciak had been researching a criminal gang that siphoned off EU funds on a grand scale and was said to have close ties to the ruling party. The suspicion of having commissioned the murder reached into the highest government circles.

The liberal forces strengthened by the outrage over the Kuciak murder, including ?aputová, who was elected president in 2019, quickly discredited themselves by their support for the Ukraine war, the European Union and market-oriented social policies.

The Progressive Slovakia (PS) party of European Parliament Vice President Michal Simecka, to which ?aputová also belonged before her election as president, came second with 18 percent. She was strongly supported by European media and governments. The PS stands for a decidedly neoliberal economic policy and for a hard line towards Russia, as advocated by the leading EU members.

The Olano party of ex-premier Igor Matovi?, which won the parliamentary election in 2020 under the banner of the "fight against corruption," received only 9 percent in an alliance with two right-wing micro parties.

The entrepreneur Matovi? formed a four-party coalition in 2020 that followed a right-wing course, rejected effective protective measures for the population at the height of the pandemic and at the same time pursued social cuts. It unreservedly supported the war against Russia and was one of the first in the EU to supply arms to Kiev.

The coalition lost support in the population and engaged in endless attrition until it finally broke apart in the spring of this year. Matovi? was not helped by a

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plagiarism scandal. Subsequently, President ?aputová appointed a cabinet of experts under the interim prime minister ?udovít Ódor.

The former governing parties received the payback for their policies on Saturday, winning only 600,000 votes, less than half as much as in 2020. With the exception of the capital Bratislava, the opposition Smer won in all regions.

Peter Pellegrini's Hlas (Voice) party, a split from Fico's Smer, came in third with 14.7 percent. Observers believe that cooperation between the two parties is likely after the election. Pellegrini said he could act as a "stabilising element" in a future coalition.

Another possible government partner is the Slovak National Party (SNS) with 5.6 percent. The right-wing extremists under Andrej Danko have openly declared themselves in favour of forming a "bloc." On immigration and issues regarding foreigners, the ultra-right SNS and Smer advocate the same policies.

The arch-conservative Christian Democrats (KDH) also made it into parliament. So did the neoliberal party Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), which won 6.3 percent.

Fico's election victory caused considerable consternation in Brussels and Berlin. It is feared that after Viktor Orbán's Hungary, another EU member will oppose supporting Ukraine and sanctions against Russia. Aleksandar Vu?i?, the president of Serbia, which is not yet a member of the EU, also has close ties with Moscow.

Fico, like Orbán, will not push his opposition to Brussels too far, however. Economically, Slovakia, home to numerous international car companies, is desperately dependent on the EU.

Fico's anti-war rhetoric disguises an extreme right-wing policy that has so far been largely noted with favour in the EU. He is a typical Stalinist turncoat, combining his pro-capitalist policies with populist rhetoric.

Fico had started his political career in the Czechoslovak Communist Party, embraced the market economy after the fall of Stalinism and supported the sell-off of public property that plunged many workers into poverty. When the successor to the CP, the SDL, was increasingly discredited as a result of its anti-working-class policies, he founded the Smer-SD in 1999, which has since moved steadily further to the right.

From 2006 to 2010 Fico made pacts with two far-right parties, supported the EU's disastrous austerity dictates in Greece and passed on the consequences of the economic crisis to his own people. In his second term in government, he also mixed populist rhetoric with a right-wing, EU-friendly foreign policy. Especially on the refugee issue, Fico is fully in line with the EU and wants to close the so-called Balkan refugee route, if necessary, with the help of the military.

Fico has shown no fear of contact with right-wing extremist forces in the past, and there are many indications that a future government will lean even more heavily on them.

?uboš Blaha, deputy leader of the Smer, courted favour with the extreme right during the recent election campaign. At an election rally, he declared that they wanted to free the country from "the Euro-American occupation" and a "fascism in rainbow colours."

Fico's disengagement from the Ukraine war, while popular, has few practical consequences, as Slovakia has already handed over its main weapons systems and no further deliveries were planned anyway. In addition, Pellegrini, a potential coalition partner, is explicitly in favour of military aid to Ukraine. The head of Hlas maintains close relations with the German Social Democrats (SPD), who advocate an escalation of the war against Russia.

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