

General Elections in Slovakia, a round up one week before the vote

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the poll

On 12th June next the Slovaks are being called to renew the 150 members of the National Council of the Republic, the only Chamber in Parliament.

The electoral campaign has focused on traditional issues for a long time – such as employment and social questions. But the vote on 26th May last by the Hungarian Parliament of an amendment to the nationality law granting a Hungarian passport (called the Trianon Passport after the treaty whose 90th anniversary was celebrated on 4th June) to Magyars living abroad (on condition that they speak Hungarian) has put the national issue at the heart of the Slovakian electoral campaign.

Head of Government Robert Fico (Direction-Social Democracy, SMER-SD) reacted violently to this amendment recalling his ambassador Peter Weiss from Budapest, denouncing the arrogance and nationalist exaggeration of the Hungarian government. He said that this law represented a “*danger for the security of Slovakia*” and convened the State Security Council – a meeting that is restricted to the cabinet and is included in the Constitution to be employed in the event of a terrorist military threat or a natural catastrophe. The Slovak Parliament immediately reacted to this measure implemented by its Hungarian neighbours by approving by a wide 90 majority vote (of the 115 members present) an amendment to the citizenship law that stipulates that every Slovak who voluntarily takes up the nationality of another country automatically loses his previous nationality (negotiations may take place with regard to Czechs). A fine of 3000 € will be imposed on anyone who does not declare their dual nationality. Foreign Minister Miroslav Lajcak said the revision of the law approved by the National Council of the Republic was already the norm in several European countries such as Austria, the Czech Republic and Estonia. The Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK) protested against this amendment which it believes anti-democratic and anti-constitutional. The former Democratic Union-Democratic Party (SDKU-DS) leader, Mikulas Dzurinda said that the revision of the law on citizenship

went against Slovakian interests because it could lead to the emergence of a new minority – of Hungarian citizens living (permanently) in Slovakia. “*This new episode in Slovak-Hungarian tension comes at the worst time for the democratic opposition which was doing well – it fosters the populist and nationalist parties by feeding an anti-Hungarian discourse. The nationalist parties in power now have additional arguments. What better than to play the Hungarian card which makes people forget the affairs of corruption and economic difficulties!*” stresses the chairman of the Public Affairs Institute, Grigorij Mesesnikov. The National Slovak Party (SNS) and Direction-Social Democracy already played the “*Hungarian card*” in the presidential election on 21st March and 4th April 2009. Around 500,000 Hungarians live in Slovakia representing around 10% of the population. Direction-Social Democracy (SMER-SD) is basing its campaign on the results it has produced over the last four years at the head of the country. The party is proud to have enabled Slovakia to have become the first Central and Eastern European country to adopt the single currency. It also highlights the country’s entry into the Schengen Area. The Prime Minister’s work is however just an extension of what his predecessor Mikulas Dzurinda had started - the latter was in power between 1998 and 2006 – even though Robert Fico’s government abolished some of the measures undertaken by Mr Dzurinda such as

the medical fee. The outgoing Prime Minister did not do anything to the single tax rate which affect both revenue, companies and VAT which is set at 19% (which he reduced on certain products) nor did he ban the payment of money into private retirement funds. The main criticism aimed at Robert Fico involves the strengthening of the role of the State, notably in terms of the economy, the lack of work undertaken to reduce public spending, the worsening of the country's relations with neighbouring Hungary and the escalation of financial and corruption scandals. The law with regard to the press which makes it obligatory for papers to publish people's reactions to personal articles, is also considered far too great a threat to the freedom of expression. Finally the law establishing Slovakian as the official language of the State is also the focus of criticism on the part of a number of personalities who see the introduction of discrimination against the Hungarian population or more generally against minorities in this text. *"For political ends Robert Fico is following the polls and decided to defer his decision on Slovakian aid to Greece arguing that the loan from Bratislava to Athens has to be approved by the new Parliament,"* analyses Petr Horvath, political expert at the University of Trnava. *"Robert Fico's appeals to Greece to reduce its budget do not match his own promises to continue building a social State,"* highlights Grigorij Meseznikov. Likewise the promises of a social policy by the Prime Minister are difficult to honour without increasing the country's already high public debt.

Although the President of the Republic, Ivan Gasparovic does not officially support any party in the general election on 12th June next he remains close to SMER-SD. *"He has nearly the same programme as mine,"* he said of Robert Fico. The Head of State also warned against the number of parties that will make up the future government coalition. According to him a great number of parties would weaken the government. *"The more parties there are the more it is likely that early elections will be convened,"* he stressed. *"The longer the formation of the government coalition the greater the challenge to the country in terms of economic and international problems,"* said Ivan Gasparovic.

"These elections will be a referendum on the path the Slovakia has to follow," said Iveta Radicova, (SDKU-DS). According to the Christian Democratic leader, Robert Fico is offering a programme *"based on loans and the covering of bank losses in which the poor pay for the rich and the responsible for the irresponsible."* The opposition, and notably the SDKU-DS, are offering voters a responsible policy of reform in which decisions belong to the sovereign people. *"SMER-SD is focused on just one thing: the four years it has spent in the outgoing government which proves that the party is unable of offering anything new to the population,"* declared Iveta Radicova. The SDKU-DS has called for elections that are based on real competition between the programmes and not on promises or worse on insults and national passion.

The SDKU-DS was pleased with the successes of the rightwing which won the general elections in the Czech Republic on 29th May last. *"Responsibility was stronger than populism, the strength of proposal was stronger than criticism. The results of the Czech elections prove that the negative electoral campaign and attacks made against the adversary do not lead to success,"* declared Iveta Radicova. She also spoke out against the bishops who asked their faithful to vote for the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) on 12th June saying that this party *"was greatly inspired by Christianity and Christian values."*

"Enough, we want change" – this is the slogan of the Hungarian Coalition Party. Its leader Pal Csaky, whom outgoing Prime Minister Robert Fico qualifies as *"an extension to Viktor Orban,"* is fighting for the National Slovakian Party not to enter government. The Hungarian Coalition Party has said that it does not want to govern with SMER-SD. *"We are thinking about our results first then of cooperation with the Democratic and Christian Union and with the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH),"* indicated Pal Csaky. Most-Hid, the other party representing ethnic minorities led by Bela Bugar shares this opinion and maintains it wants to cooperate with the opposition including the Hungarian Coalition Party. With regard to this Pal Csaky answered that the Most-Hid leader should have thought of that before leaving the Hungarian Coalition Party to create his own party. The

Civic Conservative Party (OKS) led by Peter Zajac decided to join forces with Most-Hid in the elections on 12th June.

The Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) rejected any type of cooperation with SMER-SD on 24th May. The party led by Jan Figel, former European Commissioner made the fight against corruption one of the vital conditions for a return by Slovakia to a healthy economy and social development. According to KDH the outgoing government coalition, which has faced several financial scandals has worsened the country's socio-economic situation. However Jan Figel, who says he is doing his best to win victory for the right said that a coalition of his party with SMER-SD could not be completely ruled out even though he would only do so as a last resort.

Nationalist Martin Piry (SNS) caused a scandal by presenting a short ten minute film of Rom children making obscene gestures in a gypsy camp in Kosice. When reminded that the National Slovakian Party has been in government for the last four years and that it has done nothing to improve the situation of this population Martin Piry answered that the "*problem*" was the job of the Home and Labour Ministries and these two posts were not held by his party in the outgoing government. The National Slovak Party's spokesperson, Dusan Strauss pointed to the fact that the party's goal was to attract attention to problems that were caused "*by the abuse of certain people who undeservedly receive social allocations.*" "*In order not to feed those who do not want to work,*" read the party's posters. Slovakia has a population of 250,000 Roms who live mainly in the east and south of the country.

Finally the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (LS-HZDS) protested at the assessment of the political parties' programmes in these general elections made by two independent think-tanks – the INESS and INEKO. Both of these institutes agreed that the former Prime Minister's party (Vladimir Meciar 1993-1998) has the worst score. "*None of the parties puts forward a programme including real measures that will help to save at least 1.5 to 2 billion €, i.e. the*

sum necessary for the country to recover budgetary balance," declared Radovan Durana of the INESS. The chair of the Public Affairs Institute, Grigorij Meseznikov says that SMER-SD's social programme (which includes for example continued increases in retirement pensions) will inevitably lead to an increase in the public debt, the other parties are basing their promises on an improvement in the economy and a better use of European funds. The LS-HZDS programme is deemed by Transparency International, the non-governmental organisation devoted to the fight against corruption, as the least effective in terms of countering financial crime. The organisation believes that the SDKU-DS and the party created by the author of the Slovakian fiscal reform, Richard Sulik, Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), are the two parties which present the best programmes to fight corruption.

According to the latest poll by Polis, SMER-SD is due easily to win the general elections on 12th June next with 34.3% of the vote. It is due to come out ahead of the SDKU-DS which should win 16% of the vote, the KDH 11.9%, Freedom and Solidarity 9.9% (it would thereby enter Parliament), Most-Hid, 5.3% and the Hungarian Coalition Party, 5.1%. Turnout is due to rise to 60%.

SMER-SD's government partners i.e. the National Slovak Party and the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia have lost a lot of ground in the polls and may be excluded from parliament. Robert Fico will then experience some problems in forming a government after the election.

Another poll undertaken mid-May reveals that 41.5% of Slovaks say they are confident in outgoing Prime Minister Robert Fico, 17.4% in Iveta Radicova and 17% in Jan Figel. Finally a poll by MVK between 16th and 23rd April last shows that KDH voters are the most faithful, those of the National Slovakian Party, the most volatile. Hence 42% of those who voted for the National Slovakian Party and 49% of those who voted for a Movement for a Democratic Slovakia in the last general elections on 17th June 2006 are about to give their vote to SMER-SD whilst more than

¾ of former KDH voters (78%) say they will vote again for this party. 15.5% of them are due to vote for the outgoing Prime Minister's party.

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Translated by Helen Levy