

The Leftwing Opposition is due to win the Slovakian General Elections

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D-7
7 days before
the poll

4.3 million Slovaks are about to renew the 150 members of the National Council of the Republic (Narodna rada Slovenskej republiky), the only Chamber in Parliament, during the early general elections that will take place on 10th March next. The election follows the vote of no confidence against the government of Prime Minister, Iveta Radicova (Democratic and Christian Union-Democratic Party SDKU-DS), on 11th October last. 26 candidate lists are against each other in this election, which has been typified by a record number of candidates (52) who decided recently to quit the list of the party on which they had been registered. The Ordinary People and Independent People's Party (OL'aNO) led by Igor Matovic has been most affected by this: 30 of its candidates are now standing as independents.

728 Slovaks living abroad have registered to fulfil their civic duty by mail. There were 570 of them in the last general election on 12th June 2010. Most expat Slovaks live in the neighbouring Czech Republic; there are also a great number in the USA and Canada. Milan Vetrak, head of the office of Slovaks Abroad (USZZ) is expecting greater turnout on the part of expats than two years ago in response to the fall of Iveta Radicova's government, who was especially criticised by this population.

The referendum that the National Party (SNS) wanted to organise on the same day as the general elections regarding the Slovakian language (it wants Slovakian to be the country's only official language) will not take place. Many political analysts think that this popular consultation would have been anti-constitutional, since the use of minority languages in official communications is considered by the Slovakian Fundamental Law as a fundamental freedom and right. Hence it is obligatory to display bilingual posters in towns in which at least 20% of the population belong to a minority. The official campaign started on 18th February. Just one week before the election the leftwing opposition, represented by Direction-Social Democracy (SMER-SD), a party led by former Prime Minister (2006-2010), Robert Fico, is still the main favourite in the polls.

The Gorilla Affair, the name of the operation run by the Slovakian secret service that emerged in December with the publication of secret documents and the online recordings of internet conversations dating back to 2005-2006 are now the focus of the electoral campaign. The recordings revealed links between the political and business worlds. The conversations between Jaroslav Hascak, chairman of the financial group Penta, with several politicians including Jirko Malcharek (New Citizen's Alliance, ANO), the then Economy Minister (2005-2006), prove that bribes exchanged hands and that money was laundered during

the privatisation of certain companies. They also reveal information – which has been backed up by other eye-witness accounts – about the funding of the country's main political parties. The Democratic and Christian Union and Democratic Party (SDKU-DS) led by outgoing Prime Minister Iveta Radicova, who was in office in 2005-2006 was the first to fall victim in this affair, notably because of the party's present leader, outgoing Foreign Minister and former Prime Minister (1998-2006), Mikulas Dzurinda and Finance Minister, Ivan Miklos. The other parties have not been spared, even though opposition leader Robert Fico (SMER-SD)

purposely avoids talking of the issue (the recordings reveal that he had meetings with Penta CEO, Jaroslav Hascek).

On the request of Penta CEO, who maintained that the book threatened his rights, a Bratislava court banned the publication of a book on the Gorilla affair written by Tom Nicholson a Slovak/Canadian journalist, who was the first to reveal the scandal. In this affair no one seems to be in control anymore, neither the politicians nor the business world or the media, and everyone has been affected by the scandal that simply increases the defiance and disappointment that is already high, of the country's population with regard to the elites. Several demonstrations, in Bratislava and in the provinces, for example in Poprad and Prievidza, have been organised over the last few weeks to denounce the embezzlement that was revealed by the Gorilla affair. Another demonstration is due to take place on the eve of the election on 9th March.

Freedom and Solidarity (Sloboda a Solidarita, SaS), a member of the outgoing government is suspected by many of being at the origin of the publication of the Gorilla affair. The party's leader, Richard Sulik, speaks of *"an alliance of old corrupt structures"*. His party, created in 2008, and which did not exist at the time of the affair, is indeed the only one (with the Ordinary People and Independent People's Party) not to have been soiled by the scandal and may reap the benefits during the election. SaS is amongst the most virulent critics of the political leaders and the parties involved in the affair. Richard Sulik's party has however been drawn into the fray: former Defence Minister, Lubomir Galko (SaS) was forced to resign on 23rd November 2011 after it was revealed that he had ordered the secret services to spy on a journalist. Moreover Richard Sulik found himself under the spotlight on 23rd February last when a telephone conversation recording with businessman Marian Kocner was put online. It emerges that the SaS leader wanted (before the fall of the government on 11th October last) to replace Prime Minister Iveta Radicova by Finance Minister Ivan Miklos. The politician also reveals to Marian Kocner that several MPs in parties belonging to the government coalition were offered 300,000€ each if

they voted in support of Dobrosla Trnka, a candidate standing for re-election as general prosecutor last December. Whilst one of these MPs was an SaS member, Richard Sulik did not deem it necessary to inform the police. He apologised after the publication of the recording online and promised that this kind of thing would not happen again. Richard Sulik also promised to give up his seat as MP if he did not win the most preference votes on 10th March next.

The recent politico-financial scandals are affecting the members and supporters of the rightwing parties more. On this end of the political scale, a new generation, which supports the EU less and which is more radical, is emerging and its members may rapidly rise to positions of responsibility. SDKU-DS leader, Mikulas Dzurinda declared that he was not planning to quit as head of his party, which usually holds a congress within the six months following the general elections; on this occasion his leadership may however be challenged, notably if the party fails to enter parliament on 10th March next.

Lucia Zitnanska, the outgoing Justice Minister declared that if the SDKU-DS was ousted from the National Council of the Republic, Mikulas Dzurinda should resign from his post. She has already announced that she might stand to succeed him and several of the party's regional leaders – Ondrej Matej from Presov, Martin Fedor from Trencin, have publicly declared their support to her.

Slovakia's main political parties have signed a text with three NGO's – Transparency International Slovakia, the Institute for Economic and Social Reform (INEKO) and the Institute for the Governance of Slovakia (SGI) – which commits them to improving the transparency of their funding methods. The text places emphasis on 7 measures, 6 of which are recommendations put forward by the Council of Europe. The People's Party – Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (LU-HDZ) led by Vladimir Meciar and the National Slovakian Party (SNS) refused to sign the pact.

According to the latest poll by MVK, Direction-Social Democracy (SMER-SD) is due to win the election easily with 40.6% of the vote, i.e. 84 seats. It is due to be followed by the Christian Democratic Movement

(KDH) that would then become the leading rightwing party with 12.7% of the vote (26 seats). The Ordinary People and Independent People's Party is due to win 7% (15 seats), Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), 6.1% (13 seats) and Most-Hid 5.9% (12 seats). A significant feature of this poll: the Democratic and Christian Union-Democratic Party (SDKU-DS) is not due to win the minimum 5% of the votes cast that are vital to enter parliament. The Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK) led by Pal Csaky and the National Party are also due to fall into the same category.

Moreover according to another poll by MVK, opposition leader, Robert Fico is, in the opinion of the Slovaks, the most credible politician in the country (37.1%). Outgoing Prime Minister Iveta Radicova comes second with 18.2% and the President of the Republic, Ivan Gasparovic, third (14.3%). However, when asked about the least credible politicians, the Slovaks quote Mikulas Dzurinda first (52.6%). The SKDU-DS leader runs ahead of the far right leader Jan Slota (SNS) who achieves 34.4%.

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