

# Will Robert Fico be able to return to office in Slovakia?

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Analysis

On September 30, Slovaks are being called to the polls to renew the 150-member National Council of the Republic (*Narodna rada Slovenskej republiky*), the single chamber of Parliament. These general elections have been brought forward by one year. 72,993 Slovaks living abroad have registered to take part in the ballot, a record in the country's history.

Following the last general elections on 29 February 2020, Igor Matovic (Party of Ordinary People and Independent Personalities, OL'aNO) formed a government bringing together 4 parties: OL'aNo, SME Rodina (We are One Family), SaS (Freedom and Solidarity) and ZL (For the People). Putting an end to the regime of Robert Fico (Direction-Social Democracy, SMER-SD) was the main watchword and unifying element of the coalition government.

The vote was held just a few days after the second anniversary of the murder of journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kusnirova, both aged 27, on 21 February 2018. Jan Kuciak was investigating for *aktuality.sk*, the website of the country's leading daily *Novy Cas*, regarding suspicions of European subsidy fraud organized by the Italian mafia in Slovakia with the help of people close to the government. The double murder led tens of thousands of Slovaks to take to the streets, and in March 2018 prompted the resignation of then Prime Minister Robert Fico, as well as 2 ministers and the police chief. Igor Matovic emerged as the man who could bring the government down. His anti-Fico rhetoric helped him win the general elections to a backdrop of fragmented opposition.

The following three years saw an accumulation of scandals and incoherent decisions. In all, Slovakia has had 3 governments in 3 years. Igor Matovic ran the country like a business, disregarding his governmental partners, which led to numerous conflicts. For example, the Prime Minister's handling

of the Covid-19 pandemic was chaotic, with no hesitation in ordering Russian Sputnik 5 vaccines despite opposition from members of his coalition. His inconsistencies ended up dividing the ruling majority. On March 28, 2021, the Prime Minister agreed to step down, but demanded to be replaced by his Finance Minister, Eduard Heger (OL'aNO), and to be given the Finance portfolio himself. This was done on 30 March 2021.

Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) was the first party to leave the coalition on September 13, 2022. In July 2022, OL'aNO decided to increase aid to families, a measure passed by Parliament despite the opposition of SaS, but with the votes of far-right MPs. This was seen as a betrayal by Richard Sulik's party as a result of which the government was brought down by a vote of no confidence on 15 December 2022.

On 23 January 2023, the government and the SaS party agreed on a constitutional amendment that allowed the National Council to call a snap election. The draft was adopted by a majority of MPs, who agreed to dissolve parliament by a three-fifths majority. The vote took place on 31 January, and the early general election is scheduled for 30 September.

Eduard Heger resigned on 7 May following the scandal sparked by the accusation that Agriculture Minister Samuel Vican had received subsidies for his own business.

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The latter resigned; the following day, Foreign Minister Radoslav Kacer submitted his resignation.

On 7 May, Ludovit Odor, Vice-President of the Slovak National Bank, was appointed Prime Minister by President of the Republic, Zuzana Caputova. Although the new head of government failed to win the confidence of parliament (only 24 of the 136 MPs presents voted in his favour), the head of state dissolved parliament and reappointed him on June 15, entrusting him with running the country until the elections.

A total of 2,728 candidates from 24 political parties and a coalition of parties are standing for election on 30 September.

According to an opinion poll carried out at the end of August by the Median institute, SMER-SD (Direction-Social Democracy) will lead the poll with 17.8% of the vote by a narrow margin, ahead of Progressive Slovakia (PS) with 17.5%. However, the former has been losing ground in recent weeks, while the latter has been slowly, but surely gaining support.

Republika (REP), the far-right party led by Milan Uhrík, is expected to come 3rd with 10.2%. Hlas, (Voice in Slovak), created in 2020 by former Prime Minister (2018-2020) Peter Pellegrini after his secession from SMER-SD, is likely to take 4th place with 9.4%, in alliance with the Good Choice (DV), another party born of a split from Robert Fico's party and led by Tomas Drucker.

Sme Rodina is estimated at 8.2% and OL'aNo 7.1%. Jan Figel's Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) is expected to take 7.3%, SaS 6.7% and the National Party (SNS), a right-wing, nationalist and populist party led by Andrej Danko, 5.3%, just above the threshold required for representation on the National Council of the Republic.

The number of parties entering Parliament will be decisive in building the future majority. Robert Fico might finish in the lead, but not manage to secure any allies.

### WILL ROBERT FICO MAKE A COMEBACK?

Although Robert Fico and SMER-SD lead the polls, their advantage has narrowed in recent weeks. Like Igor Matovic 3 years ago, the former Prime Minister sees himself as the leading opponent of the current

government. He draws on the various government crises and the discontent of Slovaks with the high inflation rate (9.6% in August 2023, the highest in the euro area). He views this as a consequence of the economic sanctions imposed on Russia, which was Slovakia's main supplier of gas and oil before Moscow's invasion of Ukraine and is using it to highlight the incapacity of those in power and the need for change. Robert Fico also relies on the pro-Russian sentiment of part of the population, blaming the United States for Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. According to the latest opinion polls, 30% of Slovaks are Russophiles. A poll carried out by the Globsec think-tank shows that while 40% of Slovaks believe that Moscow is responsible for the current war, 34% consider that the conflict is the result of the West's provocation of Russia and 17% that Kyiv has oppressed the Russian-speaking part of its population.

After Prime Minister Eduard Heger decided to send MIG 29 aircraft to Kyiv without consulting Parliament, Robert Fico asserted that the country's sovereignty was threatened by NATO pressure (he did not hesitate to compare the German NATO soldiers stationed in Slovakia to those of the Wehrmacht) and the European Union's support for Ukraine. He opposes his country's support for Kyiv and promises to halt all arms deliveries to Ukraine.

Robert Fico has become highly radicalized, a strategy designed to attract to his name the votes of far-right voters that he may need to regain power. He says he is ready to ally himself with parties representing this political trend, such as the National Party or Republika. In so doing, the former Prime Minister has moved closer to the positions defended by the head of the Hungarian government, Viktor Orban.

Republika is a party founded in 2021 by Milan Uhrík and former members of the People's Party-Our Slovakia (LSNS). Its ideology is far-right, even neo-fascist. Its leader is opposed to any aid to Ukraine and is highly critical of the sanctions imposed on Russia. To place this in context, he has refused to condemn the deportations of Jews during the Second World War on the grounds that he is

not a historian himself. For its part, the National Party (SNS), led by Andrej Danko, is a right-wing, nationalist, populist party. It previously governed in coalition with SMER-SD between 2006 and 2010 and between 2016 and 2020. Both parties have made efforts to "clean up" their image and are attempting to look more presentable in the run-up to the elections.

Robert Fico's return to office also depends on the performance of Peter Pellegrini's Hlas party. The latter is totally opposed to any alliance with far-right parties. At the SMER-SD congress in July 2020, former Prime Minister (2018-2020) Peter Pellegrini chose to secede. He created Hlas, which quickly became popular among voters if opinion polls are to be believed. Hlas defines itself as social-democratic, a position left vacant on the political chessboard following Robert Fico's turn to the right. Indeed, after Peter Pellegrini's secession, Fico declared that his party was moving towards a "rustic social democracy" which, in his words, "perfectly perceives the specificities of Slovak reality".

### THE RIGHT STILL HIGHLY FRAGMENTED

Igor Matovic (Ol'aNo) is warning against the return to power of Robert Fico and far-right forces in his campaign. He appealed to Eduard Heger, whom he had asked to return to his original party in order to ensure a victory for the democratic forces on 30 September. OL'aNO is running in coalition with For the People, led by Veronika Remisova, and the Christian Union, led by Anna Zaborska.

For his part, Eduard Heger will be running under the colours of the centrist, environmentalist, pro-European party he founded, Democrats (D), which is chaired by Miroslav Kollar. The former Prime Minister has declared that he would never collaborate with SMER-SD or Hlas.

Another representative of the right, former Prime Minister (1998-2006) Mikulas Dzurinda is campaigning at the head of his new party, European Blue-Slovakia (M). The name refers to the democratic coalition that brought together

first 3, then 5 parties opposed to former Prime Minister (1994-1998) Vladimir Meciar (Movement for a Democratic Slovakia, HZDS) in 1998, and later became the Rainbow Coalition, then the Christian Democratic Coalition (SDKU). The party is allied with Most-Hid (Bridge), a party led by Lazlo Solymos, which advocates the integration of Slovakia's ethnic Hungarian minority. Mikulas Dzurinda is campaigning on the danger of Robert Fico's return to power. In his view, the latter would isolate Slovakia on the international stage and drag it into the camp of ill-liberal democracies. For Mikulas Dzurinda, the September election is as important as that held on 25 and 26 September 1998, which witnessed Mikulas Dzurinda terminating the reign of Vladimir Meciar, who had contributed to the country's isolation at a time when Bratislava was integrating the European Union and NATO.

The Blue Coalition has published its *Ten Commandments*, which include a pledge to remain pro-European and to support innovation and reform. An extra-parliamentary opposition party, Progressive Slovakia is led by Michal Simecka, a figure little known to Slovaks. The party is social-liberal and pro-European. It aims to restore Slovaks' confidence in their institutions, advocates greater separation of powers and, of course, a firm fight against corruption. Progressive Slovakia is opposed to any collaboration with the far-right parties (Republika, the National Party and Marian Kotleba's People's Party-Our Slovakia (SNS)), as well as with Robert Fico's SMER-SD.

### THE SLOVAK POLITICAL SYSTEM

The National Council of the Republic, the single chamber of Parliament, comprises 150 members elected for 4 years by proportional representation on blocked lists within a single national constituency. Each voter casts 4 preferential votes for candidates on the same list. Seats are distributed according to the Hagenbach-Bischoff system. A party must obtain at least 5% of the votes cast to have the right to be represented in Parliament, and a coalition, 7% (10% if it brings together 4 parties or more).

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To stand for election, a party or political movement must pay a deposit of around €17,000 (which is returned if it wins at least 2% of the votes cast) and make a declaration certifying that it has at least 10,000 members. If its membership is below this number, a party may nevertheless submit a petition of support containing a number of signatures enabling it to reach the 10,000 mark. Parties with more than 3% of the vote in the previous general elections are eligible for subsidies. Candidates for general elections must be at least 21 years old and permanently resident in Slovakia. Finally, the electoral law limits campaign expenses to €3 million per party.

6 political parties are represented in the current National Council of the Republic:

- the Party of Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OL'aNO), a right-wing party founded in October 2011 and led by former Prime Minister (2021-2022) Igor Matovic, has 53 seats;
- Direction-Social Democracy (SMER-SD), a social-democratic party founded in 1999 and led by former Prime Minister (2006-2010 and 2012-2018) Robert Fico, has 38 deputies;
- We are a family (Sme Rodina), a right-wing populist party led by Boris Kollar, has 17 seats;
- the People's Party-Our Slovakia (LSNS), a far-right nationalist party led by Marian Kotleba, has 17 seats;
- Freedom and Solidarity (Sloboda a Solidarita, SaS), a liberal party founded in 2009 by the economist and father of the flat tax, Richard Sulik, who still leads it, has 13 seats;
- For the People (Za Ludi, ZA), a liberal, pro-European party founded in 2019 by former President of the Republic (2014-2019) Andrej Kiska. Led by Veronika Remisova; it has 12 deputies.

Slovaks also elect their head of state by direct universal suffrage. Zuzana Caputova (PS) was elected President of Slovakia in the 2nd round of voting on March 30, 2019, with 58.41% of the vote, against European Commission Vice-President Maros Sefcovic, supported by SMER-SD, who obtained 41.69% of the vote. Turnout was 41.79%.

Reminder of the results of the 29 February 2020 general elections in Slovakia

Turnout : 65,8%

| Political Parties   | N° of votes won | % of votes cast | N° of seats won |
|---|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Party of Ordinary People and Independent Personalities-NOVA (OL'aNO-NOVA) | 721 166         | 25,02           | 53              |
| Direction-Social Democracy (SMER-SD)                                      | 527 172         | 18,29           | 38              |
| We are a family (Sme Rodina)  | 237 531         | 8,24            | 17              |
| Our Slovakia" People's Party (LSNS)                                       | 229 660         | 7,97            | 17              |
| Progressive Slovakia - Together - Civic Democracy (PS-SPOLU)              | 200 780         | 6,96            | 0               |
| Freedom and Solidarity (SaS)  | 179 246         | 6,22            | 13              |
| For the People (ZL)   | 166 325         | 5,77            | 12              |
| Christian Democratic Movement (KDH)                                       | 134 099         | 4,65            | 0               |
| Hungarian Community Brotherhood (MKÖ-MKS)                                 | 112 662         | 3,90            | 0               |
| National Party (SNS)  | 91 171          | 3,16            | 0               |
| Good Choice (DV)  | 88 220          | 3,06            | 0               |
| Fatherland (Vlast)  | 84 507          | 2,93            | 0               |
| Most-Hid  | 59 174          | 2,05            | 0               |
| Autres  | 49 798          | 1,59            | 0               |

Source : <https://volby.statistics.sk/nrsr/nrsr2020/sk/data01.html>

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