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Slovakia: civil society opposes its leaders

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For some years now, Slovakia has been going through a period of profound political change. Marked by a complex history influenced by the Pan-Slavic movement and the legacy of the communist period, the Slovak political scene is characterised by growing instability, a division of society and a rise in populist discourse. Successive events have fuelled discontent and protests, which are now directed at the Prime Minister Robert Fico.

GROWING DISCONTENT

The [legislative elections](#) October 2023 saw two radically opposed visions of Slovak politics do battle: on the one hand, progressive parties (PS – Progressive Slovakia, SaS – Freedom and Solidarity and KDH – Christian Democrats) which advocate greater European integration and far-reaching reforms, and on the other hand, populist and Eurosceptic parties which promote a nationalist, identity-based discourse critical of the European Union and NATO (Smer-SD – Social Democrats, Hlas – Moderate Social Democrats, SNS – National Party).

By tapping into the discontent of part of the electorate, Smer-SD managed to rally widespread support, particularly in the country's most disadvantaged regions, and the presidential election (March-April 2024) and the European elections (June 2024) further accentuated these divisions. The campaign was marked by personal attacks and debates reflecting the deep division in Slovak society. The war in Ukraine has played a major role in the rhetoric of the government parties, which are exploiting the question of migration, using fake news related in particular to the war. The attack on Prime Minister Robert Fico on 15 May 2024 further exacerbated this situation with hate speech and personal attacks now becoming even more frequent. Security measures for politicians have been tightened

and debates on freedom of expression and national security have dominated the political agenda.

Since the last legislative elections in October 2023, the country has been led by a very fragile coalition government, bringing together political parties with sometimes divergent ideologies. This coalition faces many challenges, including:

- **European issues:** Slovakia must reconcile its national interests with the requirements of the European Union. The foreign policy defined by Robert Fico, opposed to military aid to Ukraine and which challenges the pro-European, pro-NATO position of the previous government, worries European partners and is discrediting Slovakia. Moreover, corruption remains an endemic problem in Slovakia, as it continues to erode the confidence of citizens in the institutions and hinders the country's development. However, the government's priority seems to be to 'whitewash' these activities and its imprisoned supporters with controversial projects such as the abolition of the anti-corruption prosecutor's office, judicial reforms that could weaken the independence of the judiciary and restrictions on the media and certain NGOs. This policy is also justified by an emphasis on anti-immigration and anti-minority rhetoric and the denunciation of the 'liberal elites.'

- **The economic crisis:** like many other countries, Slovakia has been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and now especially by the war in Ukraine, on its eastern border, which have weakened its economy. The OECD has revised its forecasts for the Slovak economy downwards for 2025, while anticipating faster growth than that forecast in the national budget: an increase in Slovak GDP is forecast at 2.4% and not 2.7% as previously estimated.

The budget approved for 2025 is based on an estimated economic growth of 2.2%, but according to the OECD, inflation is expected to accelerate from 3.2% to 4.4%. The most worrying aspect for citizens is certainly the increase in VAT to 23% and the new tax on banking transactions introduced in January 2024, which particularly impacts small businesses (a ceiling limits the amount of tax for the largest transactions). However, the government has announced that food taxes are set to decrease.

- **Social tensions:** social inequalities, long-term unemployment and the precariousness of many households are fuelling social tensions and contributing to the fragmentation of society. Although the unemployment rate is now 5.4%, it is still higher than that of the other Visegrad Group neighbours (Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland), and is even twice as high as that in the Czech Republic and Poland. Furthermore, the rate of people unemployed for more than a year is among the highest in the European Union. Social tensions are also being aggravated by budgetary restrictions, particularly in the health sector.

MEDIA AND CITIZENS' MOVEMENTS OPPOSE EACH OTHER

During the elections, the government enjoyed the support of part of the population, particularly in rural areas and among the elderly, who were won over by the populist discourse on social protection, the rejection of the elites and the criticism of immigration, all themes widely relayed by pro-government media: the *News and Media Holding* media group, which controls numerous

newspapers and magazines aimed at a wide range of the population; [the Mafra Slovakia group](#), which belonged to former Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, and *Mayer Media*, controlled by Ľuboš Blaha, with the monthly magazine *Extra Plus*, which distils disinformation and partisan articles. Among Slovakian television channels, the public channel RTVS, TV Markíza and especially TA3 are now vectors of government propaganda.

For some voters, Robert Fico's promises to control inflation and support local industries (in particular the automotive sector) correspond to a certain nostalgia for stability while war is at the border. Nevertheless, faced with the rise of populism, which is taking the form of anti-democratic measures, and the recognition of fragmentation within the population, part of Slovak civil society has mobilised to defend democratic values and human rights. Demonstrations and citizen actions have been organised regularly to express the population's discontent and to demand change since the last parliamentary elections, with an upsurge and increase in participation in Slovak cities, particularly in recent months. Thus, tens of thousands of people, especially in Bratislava and Košice, the country's two main cities, initially protested against the judicial reforms. Rallies have also been held to condemn attacks on the independent media (such as the audit of the public broadcaster RTVS), before spreading to [radical opposition](#) against Robert Fico and his government.

Beyond the demonstrations, many initiatives have been taken within Slovak civil society to promote democracy, human rights and European values. NGOs, such as the movement '*For a Decent Slovakia*' which was created following the 2018 demonstrations after the assassination of the journalist Ján Kuciak, citizens' movements and independent media have played a crucial role in this context by informing citizens and organising awareness campaigns and public debates.

The conflict between part of civil society and the Ministry of Culture on issues related to freedom of

expression and the protection of cultural heritage has highlighted the tensions between defenders of democratic values and a government accused of wanting to restrict individual freedoms in the media and public spaces. The new Minister of Culture Martina Šimkovičová (representative of the National Party) fuelled the opposition by deciding to dismiss the directors of cultural institutions, national museums (National Gallery), theatres and operas, as well as radio and television, for economic and, unofficially, ideological reasons. The ministry also decided to modify the national anthem with a new arrangement, 32 years after it was introduced, while retaining the original text and melody. This has been to emphasise the importance and significance of the anthem as a national symbol.

THE HARDENING OF PROTESTS

The appearance on [Russian television of Róbert Fico](#) sparked significant reactions, fuelled by the announcement on 25 December 2024 that the Prime Minister would be attending the Victory Day commemorations in Moscow in May 2025. Thus, the association 'Peace for Ukraine', created in immediate civic response to the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian army and which organises public protests under the title "[Slovakia is Europe](#)", considered that the Prime Minister's meeting with Vladimir Putin was not only unnecessary, but also unconscionable, as the President of Russia has been accused of war crimes by the international community.

In November and December 2024, the opposition parties questioned the government's incompetence and criticised the Prime Minister's attitude, which is damaging the country. They also called for demonstrations throughout Slovakia. The rhythm and intensity of the [demonstrations has grown](#) during the winter totalling more than 60,000 demonstrators in Bratislava and tens of thousands in other towns. Another form of protest has taken on an unprecedented scale in Slovakia, with a proliferation of petitions and open letters addressed to the Prime Minister or the government in protest

against the latter or with a sharpening of criticism directed at Fico himself.

Magda Vášaryová, former Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and ambassador to the Czech Republic, launched a petition at the beginning of November 2024. The latter, in the form of a protest, is addressed to the Prime Minister and as of 30 January 2025 has been signed by more than 6,500 people, including personalities, academics and journalists, who denounce the Prime Minister's actions and *"his wilful approach which has long discredited the Slovak Republic among allies and cooperating states and destroyed the work of experts in international relations and economic cooperation through ill-considered speeches. [...] An appearance on Russian propaganda television, whose programmes are also directed against our state, has crossed every possible boundary that we could cross by silence or a raised eyebrow. It is impossible to endlessly justify his public remarks, which are in flagrant contradiction with what he signed up for as Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic, or with what he says among our allies. No power obtained in free elections can be transformed into an attempt to govern for life at the price of not respecting the rules of a democratic state. Our protest is motivated by our interest in the meaningful future of our homeland and the future of the coming generations of the Slovak Republic"*.

Thus, the petition *"We support psychiatrists and psychologists, the EU, NATO, Ukraine"*, proposed by Jozef Hasto and Anton Heretik, had collected nearly 1,100 signatures by 30 January 2025. On 15 May 2024, Robert Fico was shot and wounded by a man whose motives remain unclear. On 5 June 2024, the Prime Minister posted a 14-minute pre-recorded speech on social media in which he described the assailant as an *'activist of the Slovak opposition'*, a *'messenger of evil and political hatred'*. According to him, this hatred was fuelled and got out of control because of a *'frustrated and failed opposition'*. He claimed that the opposition representatives had encouraged *'violent or hateful excesses'* against his democratically elected government. In response to

the attack, the government decided on measures to increase the security of politicians and other important figures, which were generally considered excessive and were validated by parliament.

The petition, an *'open letter'*, offers an analysis *'as citizens and professionals in the field of psychiatry and psychology'* of the Prime Minister's behaviour, *'characterised by an increasingly authoritarian style, the manipulation of facts, lies, defamation and attacks on political opponents, journalists and ordinary citizens who express their disagreement [...]* Your political behaviour and your proclaimed positions polarise society and influence its emotional atmosphere. They are generating frustration and discontent among a large part of the Slovak population'. Robert Fico supports people *'who spread conspiracies, slander and lies that are devastating our culture'*, and takes initiatives with Russia that challenge *'who is the final aggressor and who is the victim defending himself'*. The petition suggests that *'the aggressiveness and emotional volatility in [... his] public appearances became more pronounced after the assassination attempt'*, and that the stress suffered by the Prime Minister may *'be having an impact'* on his behaviour.

This is not the first time that Slovakia's mental health experts have made their analyses public: in the petition, they point out that in 1998 reservations had been addressed to Vladimir Meciar, then Prime Minister. This time, the petitioners ask the Prime Minister to *'develop [his] capacity for introspection and [to] correct [his] political behaviour, including considering leaving high politics'*.

Moreover, the [open letter](#) addressed to the government, launched by academics from all over the country on 23 January 2025, which had gathered nearly 2,500 signatories by 30 January 2025. Entrepreneurs and investors, in turn, published an [open letter](#) on 25 January 2025, which calls on the government not to *'endanger [... the] economy and the future of Slovakia by disconcerting foreign customers, partners and investors with statements about leaving the EU'*, and to *'support*

the improvement of the education and language skills of Slovak citizens in order to [better be able to...] face the challenges of the globalised market and increase our competitiveness'.

Finally, [411 NGO's and citizens' associations](#) have criticised the government and expressed their indignation at the management of public affairs and foreign policy: *'We want to strongly oppose government measures that go against the principles of open governance, transparency in the exercise of public power, free access to information, citizen participation in the development of legislation, as well as discriminatory measures in the field of justice'*. The verbal attacks on the civil sector *'are reminiscent of the old totalitarian regimes (fascist and communist), which took similar steps to establish a non-democratic political order'*, even though NGOs *'are now replacing the dysfunctional state in many areas of activity. This is particularly evident in the fields of healthcare, mental health, social assistance, education, culture, environmental protection and sports'*. Thus, the limitation of funding and the questioning of NGOs can only aggravate *'further social tensions, frustration and the polarisation of society'*.

THE HEIGHTENING OF TENSIONS

These demonstrations and petitions prompted reactions from the government and its supporters. In response to these protests, a petition, published on 27 January 2025, [demanded the end of subsidies for NGO's](#), especially "Peace for Ukraine", but the list of signatories was not made public. The aim is to draw the government's attention to *'the possible presence of foreign forces on Slovak territory'*, which calls into question *'national sovereignty', 'democracy' and 'political stability'* and therefore to stop funding organisations suspected of being linked to *'foreign forces'*, which obviously recalls measures initiated by Russia that have since been implemented in certain countries, such as Georgia. It is interesting to note that the petition emphasises that *'the citizens of the Slovak Republic are exposed to targeted disinformation, the aim of which may be*

to instil fear and destabilise society', in particular regarding 'the alleged departure of Slovakia from the EU and NATO'. The current demonstrations are denounced as being organised 'under the influence of foreign forces'.

The context of the cyberattacks that took place in January lends weight to this type of accusation. Indeed, one of the most important electronic services of the State, the land registry, was paralysed by such an attack at the beginning of January 2025: the data was encrypted by hackers and the services were forced to close for several weeks. This attack highlights the urgent need to make safe the information systems and networks of state authorities that process citizens', state institutions and local authorities' data. And so, another cyberattack was attempted on 24 January against the General Health Insurance Company (VŠZP) to disrupt the IT infrastructure, data and services. Thanks to preventive security measures, the attack was effectively contained and did not penetrate the internal systems or threaten the integrity and security of the data of the insured.

For the Prime Minister, this cyberattack against a state service is a means of 'eliminating disobedient governments that have a different opinion on certain things'. In his opinion, this cyberattack, like the one against the land registry, is no coincidence, but the work of opposition representatives, foreign-funded non-governmental organisations, a large proportion of Slovakia's anti-government media and foreign agents present in the Slovak Republic, who must be expelled. These agents are said to be [the same](#) as those who took part in the 'events in Georgia' and the 'Maidan' in Ukraine'[1]. On 23 January, after the meeting of the Republic's Security Council, Robert Fico pointed his finger at a structure that wanted to abuse gatherings, to aggravate tensions and expressed his concerns about a possible attempt to undertake a coup d'État in Slovakia. Robert Fico cited a report by the SIS (civil intelligence service) mentioning 'serious information about a long-term organised influence operation aimed at destabilising the Republic'[2] and claimed that

the political opposition coordinated with foreign entities to overthrow its government by organising a planned civil disobedience campaign involving the occupation of government buildings, road blockades and national strikes. These allegations were immediately rejected by the opposition leaders and the NGOs concerned, who consider them to be attempts to intimidate the Slovakian people.

WHAT CAN WE EXPECT FROM THE PROTESTS?

Fico's government may gradually isolate itself on the European stage, especially regarding its stance on Ukraine and the rule of law. The coming months will certainly be decisive in achieving a balance between national sovereignty and the country's international commitments. But tensions may worsen further if the government persists with its authoritarian reforms and/or if the economy continues to stagnate. Two factors are crucial for the future: the European Union may decide to step up its pressure on the government, with proceedings due to breaches of the rule of law, and citizen activism may continue, which is a sign of democratic vitality.

In parliament, protests against the fourth Fico government and his statements have obviously had repercussions: the ruling coalition has now potentially lost its parliamentary majority. Indeed, during the Hlas-SD party congress, two of the party's MPs were expelled and, together with two other MPs, declared that they would no longer vote in parliament until further notice, which means that the government coalition now only has 75 votes thereby losing its absolute majority (76).

Furthermore, on 4 February, the President of the Republic, Peter Pellegrini, convened a round table of the leaders of the parties in the government coalition (Smer-SD, Hlas and SNS) and the representatives of the opposition parties (PS, SaS, KDH) to discuss foreign policy orientations. The President intended to take advantage of 'this opportunity to tell all Slovak citizens that Slovakia's accession to the European Union and NATO is indisputable', but his closeness to the current Prime Minister was certainly

[1] In reference to the popular uprising that toppled pro-Russian Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovych in 2014.

[2] The secret service is currently headed by the son of Tibor Gašpar, who has been accused of serious misuses of the police for political purposes when he was President of the Slovak Police between 2012 and 2018. Mr Gašpar was forced to resign following the murder of journalist Jan Kuciak in 2018, which also led to the resignation of Robert Fico after major protests.

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not unrelated to the opposition parties' decision not to participate in this meeting.

behaviour of a single man, the Prime Minister, who is expected to resign, as in 2018. But this would not solve all the problems ...

The current political and social crisis is such that part of society is mobilising using old methods (demonstrations) and more recently adopted methods (online petitions), focusing both on a contested ideological line and on the personality and

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