

Research Briefing

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Slovakia: 2023 general election and formation of a new coalition government



Summary

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Summary

On 15 December 2022 the ruling coalition government in Slovakia lost a vote of confidence. Its replacement caretaker government – with the fourth prime minister in five years – then lost a no confidence vote, but was allowed to remain in office with limited powers until early elections could be held on 30 September 2023.

Slovakia's Ministry of the Interior announced 24 political parties and one coalition had submitted candidates lists, with a total of 2,728 candidates selected to contest the 150 seats in the National Council.

Smer-SD, led by former prime minister Robert Fico, and Progressive Slovakia were favourites to win the election, with Hlas likely to be the kingmaker in deciding who would form the next government.

The main election campaign issues centred around Ukraine and Russia (and whether or not Slovakia should continue to provide humanitarian and military aid to Ukraine), the economic situation in Slovakia and migration.

The Smer-SD party secured the most votes and gained 42 of the 150 seats in the new parliament. Progressive Slovakia came second with 32 seats in the National Council. Hlas, led by another former prime minister, Peter Pellegrini, was a close third and saw 27 of its candidates elected.

Turnout was 68.42%, the highest for 20 years.

A total of seven parties passed the 5% threshold to win seats in the new parliament, which led to protracted negotiations to form a coalition government.

As predicted, Peter Pellegrini was being courted by both Smer-SD and PS to gain his support to help them form a government.

A key point for talks between both potential groupings was who will take on the post of Interior Minister. With several senior members of Smer-SD currently facing criminal prosecution, the running of the interior ministry could play a pivotal role in Slovakian politics going forward.

On 11 October it was announced that Smer-SD, Hlas and the SNS had agreed to form a government. A coalition agreement will shortly be presented to the President and will include information on how the ministries have been allocated.

1

Background

In Slovakia the President is head of state and legislative power is vested in the unicameral National Council of the Slovak Republic (Národná Rada Slovenskej Republiky).

Slovakian citizens over the age of 18 are entitled to vote and, for the 2023 election, there were 4,388,872 Slovaks registered to vote.

The most recent parliamentary elections in Slovakia had been held on 29 February 2020. However, the government formed after the election collapsed following a legislative motion of no confidence.

Slovakia's constitution states elections are held every four years, so an amendment to the constitution was made to allow early elections.

The recent political upheaval in Slovakia has seen four prime ministers in five years.

Slovakia's National Council

The National Council's 150 members, known as Deputies, are elected to four-year terms in office. The Prime Minister is nominated by the President and confirmed by the National Council.

Slovakian citizens must be aged over 21 to stand for election and, in 2023, 2,728 candidates (from 24 political parties and one coalition) contested the election.

The National Council's members are elected using the Hagenbach Bischoff method of proportional representation.¹ Under this system, each party or coalition submits a list of candidates ahead of the election and voters select up to four candidates on one list. To win seats in the National Council, parties must earn more than 5% of the vote and coalitions of two or three parties must secure more than 7% of votes.² For coalitions of four parties or more, the threshold is 10%.³

¹ Inter-Parliamentary Union, [Slovakia: Národná rada \(National Council\) electoral system](#) [accessed 9 October 2023]

² Emma Nix and others, [Your primer on the Slovak elections](#), Atlantic Council, 22 September 2023

³ Jon Henley, [Slovakian elections Q&A: country votes after four PMs in five years](#), the Guardian, 25 September 2023

Key dates

On 15 December 2022, less than three years into a four-year mandate, the ruling coalition lost a vote of confidence with 78 of the 150 parliamentarians voting against the government.⁴

Despite the loss, President Zuzana Čaputová asked Prime Minister Eduard Heger to remain in office as a caretaker prime minister with reduced powers until the constitution could be amended to allow early elections.

On 25 January 2023 Slovakia's constitution was amended, with 92 parliamentarians voting in favour of an amendment allowing a snap election.⁵

This met the requirement for referendums needing approval by 90 votes in parliament and provided for elections to be held on 30 September.⁶ The formal announcement of the election date was made on 9 June.⁷

Heger resigned on 7 May 2023, following a series of senior resignations and opposition calls for him to move aside.⁸

Following Heger's resignation, President Čaputová asked the Deputy Governor of the Central Bank, Ludovit Odor, to lead a technocrat government until elections were held. Čaputová named the rest of the new administration on 15 May.⁹

Under Slovakian law, every government must face a confidence vote in parliament within 30 days and, on 15 June, the government of technocrats was defeated in a 34-43 vote of confidence.

The president therefore had to dismiss the prime minister and cabinet, but at the same time asked the government to stay in office with limited powers until the new government is formed, following the September election.¹⁰

⁴ Tom Nicholson, [Slovak government falls after parliament no-confidence vote](#), Politico, 15 December 2022

⁵ AP News, [Slovakia parliament changes constitution to enable snap vote](#), 25 January 2023

⁶ Reuters, [Slovakia's former coalition heads agree to early parliamentary elections](#), 22 January 2023

⁷ Tomas Zelenka, [Snap General Election to Take Place on September 30](#), News Now (Slovakia), 9 June 2023

⁸ Radovan Stoklasa and Jason Hovet, [Slovakian president picks technocrat government after prime minister quits](#), Reuters, 7 May 2023

⁹ AP News, [Slovakia gets technocratic caretaker government until September's early election](#), 15 May 2023

¹⁰ President of the Slovak Republic, [President appoints Ludovit Odor's government](#), 15 June 2023

2 2023 election

2.1 Political parties

24 political parties and one coalition contested the 2023 election. Of these, Smer-SD and Progressive Slovakia had clear leads in the polls, with Hlas tipped to finish third and likely to play a role in potential coalition talks.

Profiles of these three leading parties, in alphabetical order, are below.

Hlas (Voice)

Hlas is a centre-left party led by Peter Pellegrini. He established the party in 2020 as an offshoot of Smer-SD. Hlas continues Smer-SD's socially democratic economic legacy but takes a softer line on social issues.

Hlas has supported Slovakia's programme of aid to Ukraine and sanctions on Russia, and opposes right-wing populism and extremism. It also supports expanding the Slovak welfare state and accelerating European integration.¹¹

Progressive Slovakia (PS)

Progressive Slovakia is a centre-left, liberal party led by Michal Šimečka. The party was established in 2017 and gained traction a year later, winning the municipal elections in Bratislava.

PS supports further EU integration and campaigns against misinformation. It has also pledged to combat corruption in state bureaucracy, the private sector and the judiciary.¹²

Šimečka has been vocal in defending the rights of LGBT+ citizens, in what commentators have observed as a rarity in the deeply conservative country.¹³

Smer-SD (Direction-Social Democracy)

Smer-SD is a left-wing nationalist and populist party led by former prime minister Robert Fico, who established the party in 1999.

The party's key policy is for an end to military aid to Ukraine, removing sanctions against Russia and strengthening Slovakia's relationship with

¹¹ Emma Nix and others, [Your primer on the Slovak elections](#), Atlantic Council, 22 September 2023

¹² As above

¹³ Tom Nicholson, [Coalition jockeying revs up in Slovakia after Fico's victory](#), Politico, 1 October 2023

China. Smer-SD also favours a strong welfare state and government intervention in economic matters.¹⁴

2.2

Candidates for Prime Minister

On 3 July 2023, the day after the deadline for candidates to file to contest the election, Slovakia's Ministry of the Interior announced 2,728 candidates would contest the 150 seats in the National Council.¹⁵

Former prime minister Robert Fico and Michal Šimečka were favourites to emerge as prime minister after the election, with Peter Pellegrini's Hlas polling in third place and likely to be the kingmaker in deciding who would form the next government.¹⁶

Profiles of the three leading candidates, in alphabetical order, are below.

Robert Fico

Robert Fico was born on 15 September 1964 in Topolčany, western Slovakia. He graduated with a degree in law from Comenius University in Bratislava and is married with one son.

Before entering politics, Fico did two years of military service and then almost a decade at the Ministry of Justice, rising to Deputy Director (1992-95).¹⁷

Fico briefly joined the Communist Party in 1989, before it was overthrown that same year. He swiftly joined the Democratic Left Party (SDL), a reform-minded successor to the Communist Party, before setting up his own party, Smer ("Direction") in 1999.¹⁸ Smer later merged with other left-wing parties to become Direction-Social Democracy (Smer-SD).

Fico was elected to the Slovak National Council in 1992 and has remained in politics ever since, either as a Deputy or as prime minister.

His first term as prime minister was from July 2006 to July 2010. He returned to the post in April 2012 and was reappointed to a second consecutive term in March 2016 following Smer-SD's win in the parliamentary election earlier that month. He resigned in March 2018 after more than two weeks of political

¹⁴ Emma Nix and others, [Your primer on the Slovak elections](#), Atlantic Council, 22 September 2023

¹⁵ Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic, [Elections to the NR SR 2023: candidate lists were submitted by 24 political parties and 1 coalition within the deadline specified by law](#), 3 July 2023

¹⁶ Ladislav Charouz, [Slovakia's parliamentary election: the leaders and the kingmakers](#), New Eastern Europe, 19 September 2023

¹⁷ Government Office of the Slovak Republic, [Robert Fico: Prime Minister](#) [accessed 27 September 2023]

¹⁸ BBC Monitoring, [Biography: Slovakia – Robert Fico](#), 19 May 2023

turmoil and public protests sparked by the murder of an investigative journalist.¹⁹

Peter Pellegrini (Hlas)

Peter Pellegrini was born on 6 October 1975 in Banska Bystrica. He gained degrees in Finance, Banking and Investment from the Technical University of Matej Bel in Banska Bystrica and from the Technical University of Kosice.

He speaks English, German and Russian in addition to his native Slovak.²⁰

Between 2002 and 2006 Pellegrini worked as an economist and, later, as advisor to Ľubomír Vážny, the National Council member for Privatisation and Economy.

In the 2006 parliamentary election Pellegrini was elected to the National Council, representing the Smer. He was re-elected in the 2010 and 2012 elections and, from 2014 to 2015, was Minister of Education, Science, Research and Sport.²¹

On 25 November 2014 he was elected Speaker of the National Council, a position he held until 23 March 2016 when he was appointed Deputy Prime Minister, with responsibility for investments and informatisation.²²

Pellegrini was appointed prime minister in March 2018, following the resignation of Robert Fico. Pellegrini stepped down on 21 March 2020 after his party lost the parliamentary election.

Following that election defeat, Pellegrini promptly left Smer to form his own social democratic party, Hlas.²³

Michal Šimečka (PS)

Michal Šimečka was born on 10 May 1984 in Bratislava, Slovakia's capital.

In 2006 he graduated from Charles University in Prague, gaining a degree from the Faculty of Social Sciences, Political Science and International Relations. He then graduated with an MPhil from St Antony's College, Oxford University (2008) and a DPhil from Nuffield College, Oxford University (2012).²⁴

¹⁹ Christian Davies, [Slovakia's PM resigns amid scandal over murder of journalist](#), the Guardian, 15 March 2023

²⁰ Government Office of the Slovak Republic, [Peter Pellegrini: Prime Minister](#) [accessed 26 September 2023]

²¹ As above

²² BBC Monitoring, [Biography: Slovakia - Peter Pellegrini](#), 25 March 2020

²³ Jon Henley, [Slovakian elections Q&A: country votes after four PMs in five years](#), the Guardian, 25 September 2023

²⁴ European Parliament, [Michal šimečka: Curriculum vitae](#), 23 April 2020

Before entering politics, Šimečka was a reporter, a political risk analyst in London, a university lecturer and a senior researcher at the Institute of International Relations in Prague.

He was elected a Member of the European Parliament in 2019, representing the Progressive Slovakia (PS) party.²⁵ Since January 2022 he has been a vice-president of the European Parliament.

2.3 Election campaign

Slovakia's election came at a time when its citizens were experiencing a weakened economy following Covid-19 restrictions, high inflation from the Ukraine war and a surge in irregular migration.²⁶

Ukraine and Russia

Slovakia has been a strong supporter of Ukraine throughout its war with Russia and has provided both humanitarian and military aid. Slovakia has also taken in over 100,000 Ukrainian refugees.

It has restricted Russia's diplomatic presence in Slovakia and has also urged the EU to enforce its sanctions against Moscow. Slovakia even went as far as formally designating Russia a "state sponsor of terrorism".²⁷

However, polling leading up to the election showed a growing pro-Putin tilt amongst voters, with an increasing number of Slovaks against continued military aid to Ukraine.

According to a May survey commissioned by the Bratislava-based Globsec think tank, only 40% of those polled believed Russia was responsible for the war in Ukraine, with the remainder blaming the West or Ukraine itself.²⁸

The same survey showed exactly half of Slovaks polled viewed the US as posing a security threat to their country, only slightly below the 54% that saw Russia as a direct security threat.

In his election campaign, Robert Fico made the Russia-Ukraine war a key part of his manifesto, pledging to reverse Slovakia's military and political support for neighbouring Ukraine should he return to power.²⁹

²⁵ The Slovak Spectator, [EP election in Slovakia: Official results confirm the victory of pro-EU forces](#), 26 May 2019

²⁶ Jon Henley, [Slovakian elections Q&A: country votes after four PMs in five years](#), the Guardian, 25 September 2023

²⁷ Emma Nix and others, [Your primer on the Slovak elections](#), Atlantic Council, 22 September 2023

²⁸ Dominika Hajdu and others, [GLOBSEC trends 2023: United we \(still\) stand](#) (PDF), Globsec, 22 May 2023

²⁹ Karel Janicek, [As Slovakia's trust in democracy fades, its election frontrunner campaigns against aid to Ukraine](#), AP News, 18 September 2023

Economy

The Slovakian economy grew rapidly in the early 2000s but has since stagnated.

Slovakia's per-capita GDP now puts it near the bottom of the eurozone, alongside Latvia and Croatia. Its budget deficit is forecast to reach nearly 7% in 2023. Inflation is also predicted to rise in 2023, to 10.9%.³⁰

Fico promised his voters an economic turnaround if elected, with more social spending. However, this will require help from the EU, including the release of €6 billion in recovery-fund money Brussels has earmarked for the country.³¹

Migration

Another key issue for voters is the surge in migrants, many from Afghanistan and Syria. In the first eight months of 2023, Slovakia registered approximately 24,500 migrants who had entered irregularly, most of whom came through Serbia and then Hungary.³²

This increase in migration along the Balkan route has led to calls for increased border control in the run-up to the election.

Fico made tackling migration a key election pledge, telling reporters covering a press conference:³³

We want to remind the Slovak government that it has all options — legislative, technical and personnel — to revive border controls on the Slovak-Hungarian border.

He later flagged the issue as one of his potential government's first priorities.³⁴

2.4 Election results

The Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic published the preliminary election results and, with 99.98% of votes counted, former prime minister Robert Fico's Smer-SD party secured the most votes and 42 of the 150 seats in the new parliament.

³⁰ Emma Nix and others, [Your primer on the Slovak elections](#), Atlantic Council, 22 September 2023

³¹ Matthew Karnitschnig, [Why Slovakia's election doesn't really matter](#), Politico, 28 September 2023

³² Sonya Ciesnik, [Migration 'used to mobilise voters' ahead of elections in Slovakia and Poland](#), France 24, 29 September 2023

³³ As above

³⁴ Reuters, [Slovakia's Fico: border checks with Hungary a priority for new government](#), 1 October 2023

Fico addressed Smer's victory the day after the election, saying he would wait for a formal invitation from President Zuzana Čaputová before launching coalition talks. He told a press conference:³⁵

If we are given a chance to form a government, I would ask you for patience. Slovakia needs to calm the situation.

The pro-West Progressive Slovakia party came second and gained 32 seats in the National Council.

The two leading parties highlight the political polarisation in Slovakia. As Šimečka observed in an interview on the RTVS channel:

In light of the number of mandates, there are two realistic coalition possibilities. One led by Smer, and another by Progressive Slovakia and other partners, which would ultimately have more mandates.³⁶

Hlas finished third with 27 of its candidates elected and the party's leader, Peter Pellegrini holding a pivotal role in coalition talks.

Four other parties crossed the 5% threshold to secure seats in the new parliament.

Political Party	No. of valid votes	% of valid votes	Seats
Direction - Social Democracy (Smer-SD)	681,017	22.95	42
Progressive Slovakia (PS)	533,136	17.96	32
Voice - Social Democracy (Hlas)	436,415	14.70	27
OL'aNO and Friends (OL'aNO)	264,137	8.90	16
Christian Democratic Movement (KDH)	202,515	6.82	12
Freedom and Solidarity (SaS)	187,645	6.32	11
Slovak National Party (SNS)	166,995	5.63	10
Others	496,036	16.72	0
Total	2,967,896	100.00	150

Figures correct as of 9 October, with 99.98% of votes counted

Source: The Election to the National Council of the Slovak Republic 2023, [Valid Votes Cast for Political Parties](#) [accessed 9 October 2023]

In addition to the total of 2,967,896 valid votes cast, there were 35,052 invalid or blank votes.

This represented a turnout of 68.42% (from the 4,388,872 registered voters); the highest turnout for 20 years.³⁷

³⁵ Tom Nicholson, [Coalition jockeying revs up in Slovakia after Fico's victory](#), Politico, 1 October 2023

³⁶ As above

³⁷ Tim Gosling, [Slovakia election: Strongman Robert Fico's return to power](#), Deutsche Welle, 1 October 2023

2.5 International reaction

Responses to Fico's victory mainly came from Central Europe.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán was among the first to congratulate Fico, posting on social media:³⁸

Guess who's back! Congratulations to Robert Fico on his undisputable victory at the Slovak parliamentary elections. Always good to work together with a patriot. Looking forward to it!

Aleksandar Vučić, the leader of Serbia, commented:

Heartfelt congratulations to Robert Fico for his victory. I am convinced we will deepen the cooperation between our two countries in the near future.³⁹

2.6 Coalition negotiations

Before the election, Slovakia's President Čaputová said she would task the winner with forming a new government, assuming they could organise a majority in the 150-seat parliament.⁴⁰

With seven political parties reaching the threshold to have members in the National Council, coalition negotiations involved several players.

In a possible indication of Slovakia's post-election reality, the post of Interior Minister (who oversees the police, amongst other things), became a pivotal point in talks between Smer-SD and Hlas and also talks between PS and Hlas. Its significance is due to several senior members of Smer-SD currently facing criminal prosecution.⁴¹

A Smer-SD led government?

Robert Fico needed at least two other parties to join Smer-SD in forming a majority in parliament. A coalition with Hlas and the far-right SNS was the most likely scenario to reach the majority required.⁴²

³⁸ Viktor Orbán (@PM_ViktorOrban), [X \(Twitter\)](#), 1 October 2023 [accessed 10 October 2023]

³⁹ Aleksandar Vučić (@predsednikrs), [X \(Twitter\)](#), 1 October 2023 [accessed 10 October 2023]

⁴⁰ Tim Gosling, [Slovakia election: Strongman Robert Fico's return to power](#), Deutsche Welle, 1 October 2023

⁴¹ Michaela Terenzani, [Control of the Interior Ministry is at the centre of coalition talks. No wonder](#), The Slovak Spectator, 9 October 2023

⁴² Ivana Kottasová, [Pro-Russian politician wins Slovakia's parliamentary election](#), CNN, 2 October 2023

Smer-SD and Hlas are closely aligned and the failure of the far-right Republika party to win any seats helped Fico's prospects as, ahead of the election, Pellegrini ruled out joining any coalition involving Republika.⁴³

Pellegrini has said Hlas and Smer-SD are politically and ideologically close, adding: "Slovakia wished the victory of Robert Fico."⁴⁴

A Progressive Slovakia led government?

PS would also have needed the support of Hlas to form a government, as well as the centre-right KDH and the neoliberal SaS.

This coalition scenario gained some traction a week after the election, with PS offering the premiership to Hlas leader Peter Pellegrini to dissuade him from forming a government with Robert Fico's Smer-SD.⁴⁵

2.7

A new government is formed

On 11 October 2023 it was announced Fico's Smer-SD party had agreed to form a coalition government with Hlas and SNS. Together they will control 79 of the 150 seats in the National Council.⁴⁶

Fico said a coalition agreement will be presented to the President in a short time and that this would include specific names appointed to fill ministerial posts.

Early reports suggest Smer-SD will run six ministries, with Hlas getting seven and SNS three.⁴⁷

⁴³ Ladislav Charouz, [Slovakia's parliamentary election: the leaders and the kingmakers](#), New Eastern Europe, 19 September 2023

⁴⁴ Tom Nicholson, [Coalition jockeying revs up in Slovakia after Fico's victory](#), Politico, 1 October 2023

⁴⁵ Albin Sybera, [Progressive Slovakia offers to give up PM post in push for government without Smer](#), Intellinews, 9 October 2023

⁴⁶ Sam Hancock, [Slovakia elections: Populist winner signs deal to form coalition government](#), BBC News Online, 11 October 2023

⁴⁷ Tom Nicholson and Laura Hülsemann, [New government emerges in Slovakia, with Robert Fico as prime minister](#), Politico, 11 October 2023

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