

Slovakia: Record holder in the lowest turnout

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On May 24, the election to European Parliament (EP) was held in Slovakia. This election was the third since the country's entry to the European Union (EU). As in the previous contests, the turnout was extremely low, and in 2014, it reached its historical minimum as only 13% of the Slovak citizens participated on the polls.

The elections to EP in Slovakia are held under a proportional electoral system with a single nationwide constituency where all 13 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are elected. Originally, Slovakia had 14 MEPs, but after Romania and Bulgaria entered the EU, this number was slightly reduced. In the election, only political parties may compete and the country applies a 5% threshold what limits the chances for smaller parties. This system was adopted before the country's first European election in 2004 and has not been modified so far.

The campaign

The election to European parliament was affected by the presidential election, which was held in March 2014. Since 1999, Slovak citizens choose their head of state directly and the president's term lasts for five years.¹ This means that the presidential elections in Slovakia always precede the competition to European parliament as the former are held only about two months before the latter.

¹ The president was originally elected by the parliament, but the high polarisation of the party system in the second half of the '90s eliminated any chance to choose the head of the state in this way. As a result, until the adoption of direct election, Slovakia had no president for nearly one year (Henderson, 2002).

The main consequence here is quite straightforward. The contest for the head of state is of great importance in the domestic politics and the one in 2014 was no exemption. At least two factors played a role here. First, the campaign was very intensive and lasted for a long time. Some of the candidates started with their presentation during summer 2013, and such, the campaign lasted for nearly a whole year. Second, the presidential election in 2014 received great attention as the prime minister and the leader of dominant party Smer–Social Democracy (Smer-SD) Robert Fico entered the competition. The race thus provided a strong rivalry between the candidate of the ruling party with nominees of the opposition and a few independents. The presidential contest ended in the end of March, leaving citizens tired from the long lasting campaign.

Until the new head of state was decided, the topic of European election in fact did not exist in Slovak politics. Even in the following days, it did not become the prime question as the media were more occupied with the victory of nonpartisan Andrej Kiska and even more with the failure of the prime minister. This was an important point as it was less than two months before the election to EP and the campaign for it did not even start.

Based on the aforementioned, the campaign for the European election was not intense in Slovakia and it was not far from being invisible. The main political parties did not open any conflicting debate, and they presented rather moderate views on the EU and its function. The valence issues as the importance of the country's position in the EU, lower bureaucracy, support of education and research, and so on, ruled the campaign what was quite striking when compared with previous presidential election, which included repeated clashes between candidates.

From the relevant parties, only the right-wing liberal Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) presented itself as the only true advocate of Slovakia in Europe. With the main campaign quote *All for Brussels, we for you!* it tried to visibly distinguish itself from the remaining mainstream parties by claiming that it only protects the country's economic interests.² Although SaS is the parliamentary party with the most reserved opinion on the EU, it is still far from stances held by the British UKIP led by Nigel Farage. For example, it criticises the adoption of the Euro by Slovakia as premature, but as a solution, it does not call for its abandoning and return to previous currency, but only for a higher responsibility of the member states.

² In 2011 SaS was the only party which refused to support the bailout rescue programs and thus laid down the government of Iveta Radičová of which it was a member.

Results

The election was won by the ruling social democratic Smer-SD, which got 4 of 13 seats. Although the party won with a fairly high margin, its result of 24.1% was rather a disappointment. When compared with the European election in 2009, the party lost nearly 8 percentage points and one seat in the European parliament as it dropped from five to four mandates.

The remaining nine seats were divided between seven parties. The strongest oppositional party, the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH), slightly increased its vote share from 2009 (+2.3 percentage points) and equaled its seat gain, as it got two mandates. On the other hand, a more liberal Slovak Democratic and Christian Union–Democratic Party (SDKU-DS) lost more than half of its support from the previous European election, but due to the formula of the system, it was able to remain at two seats.

Table 1. Results of the 2014 EP elections – Slovakia

Party	EP Group	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (change from 2009)	Seats (change from 2009)
Smer–Social Democracy (Smer-SD)	S&D	24.1	4	-7.9	-1
Christian Democratic Movement (KDH)	EPP	13.2	2	+2.3	+0
Slovak Democratic and Christian Union–Democratic Party (SDKU-DS)	EPP	7.8	2	-9.2	+0
Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLaNO)	NI	7.5	1	+7.5	+1
NOVA, Conservative Democrats of Slovakia (KDS), Civic Conservative Party (OKS)	ECR	6.8	1	+6.8	+1
Freedom and Solidarity (SaS)	ALDE	6.7	1	+2.0	+1
Party of Hungarian Community (SMK)	EPP	6.5	1	-4.8	-1
Bridge (Most)	EPP	5.8	1	+5.8	+1
Others		21.5	0		
Total		100	13		-
Turnout (%)		13		-6.6	
Legal threshold for obtaining MEPs (%)		5			

EP group abbreviations: EPP, European People's Party; S&D, Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats; ALDE, Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe; G-EFA, The Greens–European Free Alliance; ECR, European Conservatives and Reformists; GUE-NGL, European United Left–Nordic Green Left; EFD, Europe of Freedom and Democracy; NI, Non-Inscrits.
Source: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic.

All the other parties were able to secure one mandate each. Of this group, only the party of the Hungarian Community (SMK), representing the Hungarian minority living in southern parts of Slovakia, had MEPs even before election 2014. The other four subjects contested in the European election for the first time as they were mostly created after 2009. Most of them may be labeled as centre-right, and their vote shares were quite similar as they ranged between 5.8% and 7.5% of votes.³

Despite the anticipated trends in recent Europe, the far-right parties failed in election 2014 in Slovakia. The once popular nationalist Slovak National Party (SNS) secured only 3.6% of votes and lost its only MEP from the previous term. Even lower result was gained by the continuously rising extreme right People's Party–Our Slovakia (LSNS), whose leader succeeded in regional election in 2013 when he got the office of a regional president. The party, however, got only 1.7% of votes and was not even close to obtain a seat. The Slovak far right will thus be not represented in EP for the following five years.

Interpretation

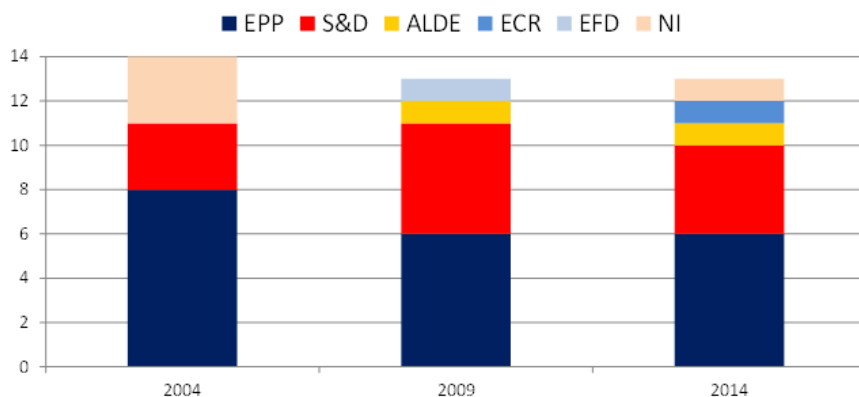
The European election 2014 in Slovakia provided several interesting insights. First of all, for the third time, the parties grouped in European People's Party (EPP) gained the most seats. Although they were not able to match their success in 2004, when they acquired nine mandates, their share remained the same as in 2009 with six seats. As before the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), represented by Smer-SD, ended as second with one lost seat when compared with election 2009.

As for the results of respective political parties, the victory of Smer-SD was clear but rather unsatisfying for the party. Since its emergence in 1999, the party of Robert Fico became the dominant subject of the party system with hegemony of the centre-left ideological axis (Leška, 2013). It won all general elections since 2006, continuously increasing its results. In the last parliamentary election in 2012, Smer-SD got more than 44% of votes, thus receiving a majority in Slovak parliament, which allowed it to form a government without any need for coalition partners (Spáč, 2014). However, in recent years, some signals indicating the party's decline have been shown, i.e. the regional elec-

³ One of these parties, the Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLaNO), is a specific subject. It profiles itself as a platform for independent candidates and has strong antiestablishment sentiments. As such, the party has only four members who are its founders (Spáč, 2012).

tion in 2013 and presidential contest in March 2014. The European election in 2014 confirmed this potential trend.

Figure 1. MEPs of EP groups in Slovak elections



Note: In 2004, Slovakia had 14 MEPs; in 2009 and 2014, only 13 MEPs.
Source: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic.

The election also showed that important discussions regarding potential increase of far-right and populist parties in Europe have avoided Slovakia so far. Both far-right parties have failed to secure any seat. The potential explanation lies in the fact that these parties typically mobilise their voters on domestic topics. This is especially true for the extreme LSNS, which is oriented strongly negatively against Roma minority in Slovakia while the EU and its aspects are of secondary importance to it.

However, the most striking result of the election 2014 was the extremely low turnout. Despite fairly high support of EU institutions in Slovakia, only 13% of citizens participated on the polls, thus creating a negative record in the history of European elections.⁴ This outcome may be partly attributed to the crucial presidential race held only two months earlier, as this competition took enormous attention and led to some fatigue of voters. The weak and short campaign before European election only supported this contrast. Although the poor turnout may be rated as a negative factor, it opened discussions about

⁴ Turnout in elections 2004 and 2009 was also the lowest in the EU when it reached 17% and 19.6%, respectively.

a possible change of the electoral system to mobilise more voters in later contests. In 2014, a grand codification of all electoral laws is being prepared in Slovakia, thus creating a chance to modify the current system and its parts.

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