

Slovakia: Continuation of electoral earthquakes

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The 2019 European Parliament (EP) election was held in Slovakia on May 25th, the fourth time since the country's accession to the EU. Two points are worth mentioning at the outset. Firstly, turnout increased considerably since the previous election in 2014. However, with roughly one in four voters participating in the election, it was still the lowest turnout in the whole EU. Secondly, the results confirmed the substantial recent changes in Slovakia's political life, with critical implications for the coming years.

In line with other EU countries, the elections are held under proportional representation rules. Similar to national elections, there is only one constituency that comprises the whole country. The threshold is set at 5%, which effectively bans smaller parties from obtaining EP seats. Similar to several other member states, Slovakia does not allow its citizens to vote from abroad in EP elections. The country elects fourteen members of the EP (MEPs), although it will only have thirteen until Brexit is finalised.

BACKGROUND AND CAMPAIGN

In the 2016 general election Slovakia experienced a huge shift of its party system. Although SMER-SD lost a considerable part of its support, it maintained its position as first party. As for past elections, populist and antisystem parties gained parliamentary representation, including the extreme right People's Party-Our Slovakia (LSNS). This electoral success led the new coalition government formed by SMER-SD and its junior partners to state that they serve as a 'barrier against extremism' (Rybář and Spáč, 2017).

Following the murder of investigative journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancée in February 2018, massive demonstrations were held across the whole country (cf. Mezešnikov and Gyarfašová, 2018). The protestors demanded an early election and an independent investigation of the crime. After a series of these public protests, several members of the government, including the long-term Prime Minister Fico, stepped down. However, the parties in government refused to call an early election, thus not fulfilling the protestors' principal aim. As a result, support for governing parties, and primarily for SMER-SD declined. This trend was observed both in the 2018 local and in the 2019 presidential elections. Thus, the 2019 EP election found the country in a rather agitated state of mind.

Table 1 - Results of the 2019 European Parliament elections – Slovakia

PARTY	EP GROUP	VOTES (N)	VOTES (%)
Progressive Slovakia/Together (PS/S)	ALDE/EPP	198,255	20.1
SMER - Social Democracy (SMER-SD)	S&D	154,996	15.7
People's Party - Our Slovakia (LSNS)	NI	118,995	12.1
Christian Democratic Movement (KDH)	EPP	95,588	9.7
Freedom and Solidarity (SaS)	ECR	94,839	9.6
Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLaNO)	ECR	51,834	5.3
Party of Hungarian Community (SMK)	EPP	48,929	5.0
Slovak National Party (SNS)	NI	40,330	4.1
Christian Union (KU)	NI	37,974	3.9
We Are Family - Boris Kollar (WF-BK)	EAPN	31,840	3.2
Bridge (Most)	EPP	25,562	2.6
Christian Democracy - Life and Prosperity (KDZP)	NI	20,374	2.1
Others		66,164	6.7
Total		985,680	100
Turnout (%)			22.7
Legal threshold for obtaining MEPs (%)			5

For the Brexit scenario, Slovakia included a mechanism in its electoral law. Based on it the party with the lowest remainder obtains its last seat only after Brexit takes place. In fact this mechanism was set in such a way that it allowed a non-logical solution, i.e. the party with less votes could get more seats in case a no-Brexit scenario occurs. This possibility truly occurred as KDH obtains its second seat only after scenario while SaS with a lower results obtains its two seats right from the beginning.

Source: Statistical Office of Slovak Republic.

	SEATS	SEATS IN CASE OF BREXIT	VOTES CHANGE FROM 2014 (%)	SEATS CHANGE FROM 2014	SEATS CHANGE FROM 2014 IN CASE OF BREXIT
	4 (2 for ALDE and 2 for EPP)	4	+20.1	+4	+4
	3	3	-8.4	-1	-1
	2	2	+10.3	+2	+2
	1	2	-3.5	-1	
	2	2	+3.0	+1	+1
	1	1	-2.4		
			-1.6	-1	-1
			+0.5		
			+3.9		
			+3.2		
			-3.2	-1	-1
			+2.1		
		14			

In Slovakia, the timing of the European election is critical. A direct presidential election takes place every five years in spring. The presidential election is the most critical competition in the country, and it receives substantial attention from political parties, society and media. In 2019, the second round of this election took place on March 30th. Until this date the issue of an EP election was marginal. While the campaign before the presidential election lasted for about one year, the campaign for the EP election took roughly one and a half months.

Despite its short duration, the campaign was reasonably visible. In comparison to the 2014 EP election, which had a non-existing campaign (Spáč 2014), the political parties were overall more active in mobilising their supporters. This was mainly true for two new parties Progressive Slovakia and Together - Civic Democracy, which emerged at the end of 2017 and later formed an electoral coalition (PS/S) with a strong pro-EU stance. It was also true for the liberal Freedom and Solidarity party (SaS), the main opposition force in the parliament. Similarly, the extreme right party LSNS was very active, even though in 2016 it initiated a petition to hold a referendum about Slovakia's withdrawal from the EU and NATO. On the other hand, the governing parties (and especially SMER-SD) held only a feeble campaign similar to that seen at the previous EP election in 2014.

The campaign in Slovakia did not focus on a dominant issue. Most parties debated about problems such as security, immigration, double standards for food quality, environmental protection and further development of EU integration. The stances of parties ranged from openly pro-EU to Eurosceptic. Along with LSNS, the latter category included the governing Slovak National Party (SNS) and a new entrepreneurial party We are Family (WF-BK), led by Boris Kollar, which entered parliament in 2016. Shortly before the 2019 EP election, the WF-BK joined ranks with the parties of Marine Le Pen and Matteo Salvini, and it was reluctant to condemn the scandal of Austrian Vice-Chancellor Strache. Together LSNS, SNS and WF-BK blamed the EU for discriminatory practices (double standards regarding food quality), negatively evaluated its immigration policy, labelled its activities a liberal threat to a more conservative Slovakia and as a 'dictate of Brussels', and called for weakening or even abandonment of sanctions against Russia (cf. Gabrižová, Geist and Koreň, 2019). The intensive campaigning of the extreme right party, LSNS, led more pro-EU parties to stress the risk of spreading extremism not only in Slovakia but in the whole EU as well. Hence, they used the LSNS as a mobilising topic to encourage their supporters to cast a ballot at the EP election so as to avert the risk of a rise of extremist politics.

RESULTS

The results of the election confirmed the dynamic evolution of Slovakian politics. The coalition PS/S secured more than 20% of votes and won with nearly a 5 percentage points margin. The coalition gained four seats in the EP. The election was also a success for the LSNS. After scoring less than 2% at the 2014 EP election, the extreme right party increased its gains considerably, ending in third position, with more than 12% of votes, and thus obtaining two seats.

By contrast, the election was catastrophic for the three governing parties. As in the 2014 EP elections, the support for the SMER-SD declined substantially. In 2009, the party dominated the EP election with more than 32% of votes and five seats out of thirteen. Ten years later its vote share had halved, and its number of seats dropped to three. For its two junior coalition partners, the nationalist SNS and the Hungarian party Bridge (Most), the results were even worse. Both these parties were unable to pass the threshold of 5% and remained without any representation in the EP. Because another Hungarian party, the Party of Hungarian Community (SMK), also ended just below the threshold, for the first time since 2004, Slovakia will have no MEP from this ethnic minority.

The parliamentary opposition experienced mixed results. While the SaS secured two seats (one more than in 2014), the anti-corruption Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLaNO) barely passed the threshold and obtained one seat. The cooperation of WF-BK with Marine Le Pen and Matteo Salvini did not provide the result that the party hoped for, as it scored only 3% of votes and no seat in the EP. Finally, the election was a triumphant comeback for the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) that dropped out of the national parliament in 2016. The party received nearly 10% of votes and obtained two seats (one of them after Brexit). Hence, in terms of gained seats, none of the EP groups got the upper hand in Slovakia.

CONCLUSION

The 2019 EP election provides essential insight into the politics of Slovakia. Although turnout increased to nearly 23% (it was 13% in 2014), it remained the lowest among all EU member states. In comparison to the previous EP election, the campaign in 2019 was more intense and had a stronger mobilising effect. On the other hand, Slovakia partly suffers from the timing of the election. The occurrence of the highly visible presidential election only two months before the competition for the EP had two connected consequences. Firstly, the duration of the campaign for the EP election was short, as it lasted around one and a half months. This gave only limited opportunities for parties to mobilise the electorate. Secondly, the long-lasting campaign for the presidential election made it harder for parties to persuade citizens to take part in another vote just a couple of weeks later.

With regard to the results, for the first time since 2006, the SMER-SD did not win a national election to a representative body. After a series of disappointing results in recent years, the party that once dominated the Slovak party system is following a steadily declining trend. The failure of its junior coalition partners in 2019 to acquire any seats in the EP only confirms that Slovakia is experiencing significant changes to its political scene.

On the other hand, the victory of the coalition PS/S shows that new liberal parties are increasingly popular. If this trends continues, they will have a real chance to win the upcoming general election in spring 2020 and to become the senior governing party. However, the success of the LSNS indicates that protest and extremist viewpoints also find support among a substantial portion of society. With the decline

of the SMER-SD as well as of the SNS, the extreme right LSNS might well be able to gain more supporters and become a constant player in the political map of Slovakia.

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