Strengthening Social Democracy in the Visegrad Countries

Limits and Challenges Faced by Smer-SD

Darina Malová
January 2017

- Smer-Sociálna Demokracia (Smer-SD) was founded in December 1999 as a result of the defection from the post-communist Party of the Democratic Left (SDĽ) by Robert Fico, the party's most popular politician at that time.

- Smer-SD is the largest mainstream party in Slovakia, with stable support. Its mixed, mostly traditional left--wing (bread-and-butter) appeals and selected social policies have proven popular with the electorate.

- Robert Fico has remained the key person in Smer-SD. He is the uncontested leader, exercising a large amount of control over the party organisation, including territorial party units, selection of candidates for public elections and many key party decisions.

- Smer-SD is, in terms of its rhetoric, a traditional socialist party, speaking to the poorer strata, advocating a welfare state, but in reality the party pursues fairly strict austerity policies with occasional 'social packages'.

- Unlike Western social democratic parties the leaders of Smer-SD are prone to using national and populist appeals.

- In terms of ideology (like many other parties in Slovakia) Smer-SD is a typical catch-all party with centrist and partly inconsistent party programmes, appeals to ever wider audiences, and the pursuit of votes at the expense of ideology.

- The weakest points in the public perception of the party are Smer-SD's murky relations with oligarchs and high levels of corruption.

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1. Historical context of Social Democracy in Slovakia: weak ideological and organisational roots due to the dominance of national identity issues

The first independent social democratic party in Slovakia was founded in 1905 and lasted less than a year before reuniting with the Hungarian Social Democratic Party. After the formation of the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1938), the Slovak social democrats merged with the Czech party and founded the Czechoslovak Social Democratic Labour Party (Československá sociálně demokratická strana dělnická, ČSDSD). The main social democratic leaders in Slovakia felt that Slovakia was economically and culturally backward, and so they paid attention to national identity issues. They supported the unitary state and the idea of one – Czechoslovak – nation, thus neglecting demands for more autonomy for Slovakia. As a result, the Social Democrats had weak electoral support and party politics was dominated by the conservative and national parties on the right and by the Communist Party on the left. After the Second World War, the social democratic movement was renewed as the Czechoslovak Social Democracy (Československá strana sociálně demokratická, ČSSD); however, after the communist takeover the party merged with the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (Komunistická strana Československa, KSČ).

The party-state regime, having failed to initiate initiating any substantial changes, abruptly collapsed in November 1989. While in the Czech Republic the social democratic movement was soon renewed by former emigrants, its development in Slovakia was more complicated. During the 1990s, party politics was shaped by issues of nationhood and by the character of the political regime under the former Prime Minister Mečiar. Only later, after the series of neo-liberal reforms introduced by the 2002-2006 government, did socio-economic questions gain greater importance.

The re-emergence of the social democratic movement in Slovakia after 1989 came from two political initiatives. Firstly, in February 1990 the Slovak Social Democratic Party (Sociálnodemokratická strana Slovenska, SDSS) was established by a group of non-Communist activists, and secondly, the younger generation of Communist Party members attempted to transform their party into a social democratic one. From its foundation, the SDSS had few members and little support. Even after Alexander Dubček, the popular face of the Prague Spring's reform communism, joined the party in 1992, support for the SDSS increased only minimally. Dubček's tragic death in November of the same year led to the stagnation of the SDSS. The party on the one hand suffered from the structure of party competition which focused on national issues, while on the other hand, it was impaired by its unclear relationship to the post-communist Party of the Democratic Left (Strana demokratickej ľavice, SDĽ), which became its main rival on the left.

The SDĽ was the successor to Slovakia's Communist Party (Komunistická strana Slovenska, KSS) and from 1990 was fairly successful in distancing itself from its communist past. The party's young leadership succeeded in constructing a modern social democratic image – accepting a (social) market economy, large-scale privatisation, foreign investment, European Union and NATO membership. It was gradually recognised by international socialist organisations: the SDĽ gained membership in the Socialist International (SI) and associated membership in the Party of European Socialists (PES). However, the internal tensions between the new leadership and the traditional membership, including the obsolete party apparatus, persisted for the entire life of the party (Kopeček 2002, Haughton 2004, Rybář and Deegan-Krause 2008). The weak results of the SDĽ under the Common Choice umbrella in the 1994 parliamentary elections returned the initiative to the more conservative local party bosses. Yet, the party rejected coalition with Vladimír Mečiar's Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko, HZDS), with its nationalist and authoritarian orientation. After the 1998 elections, the SDĽ formed a broad coalition government with pro-market and pro-European parties, despite the change in the party leadership. Internal tensions over party ideology led to

subsequent splintering, however (Rybář and Deegan-Krause 2008). In 1999 Robert Fico, a former member of the SDĽ and the party's most popular politician at that time, established the party Smer (Direction).

The 2002 parliamentary elections ushered in a massive reconfiguration on the centre-left. The newly-founded Smer remained the only centre-left alternative in the parliament, receiving 13.46 per cent of the vote; other non-communist left-wing parties did not enter parliament. European socialists (PES) strongly advocated and supported mergers of Slovakia's social democratic parties. By the end of 2004, Smer had successfully united six left-wing parties. This process was also linked to ideological changes, described as making Smer more of a social democratic party. (Marušiak 2006: 33). Between 2002 and 2004 the party added the tag "Third Way" (see chapter 3) to its name, and at its congress in December 2004 the party changed its name to Smer-Social Democracy (Smer-SD) and became the main political representative of 'moderate redistributive sentiment and economically-orientated opposition to pro-market reforms' in Slovakia (Rybář and Deegan-Krause 2008: 506). This restructuring of the centre-left has partly helped to distance the party from the communist legacy.

2. Party organisation and election results

Slovakia's parties have a very low level of institutionalisation and Smer-SD is no exception, remaining centred around Robert Fico, its charismatic founder and uncontested leader (Kopeček 2001, Rybář 2004, Rybář and Deegan-Krause 2008). Fico exercises a large amount of control over the territorial party units, the selection of candidates for public elections and many key party decisions. Smer-SD is organised in a hierarchical and centralised manner.

Party structure: hierarchy and territory

Smer-SD operates at three territorial levels – national, regional and district, which are congruent with the political and administrative regions. However, the party is organisationally weaker in southern Slovakia, which is populated mostly by ethnic Hungarians. The supreme decision making body is the national party congress (*snem*). Delegates are selected according to a quota system that is adopted by the executive council on a yearly basis 'according to the size of their membership'. The congress elects the party leader, executive council, and review and arbitration committees. The composition of the executive council is determined by the party statutes, which limit the number of executive council members to a maximum of 38 members. The majority of its members (the party leader, vice-chairs, chairs of the eight regional councils, the chair of the parliamentary deputies' club and the general manager) are members of the executive council ex officio. In practice, the party officials who are members of the executive council ex officio are able to exert effective control over the body.. The membership of the executive council overlaps to a considerable degree with the group of Smer-SD's founding members. Such arrangements limit the possibility of forming internal party factions and internal opposition. The executive council enjoys key powers over internal party life, including the right to 'elect' (which means to nominate) and dismiss regional chairs and district chairs. The executive council approves – upon the suggestion of the party leader – the list of candidates for the parliamentary elections and for elections to the European Parliament (Rybář 2011: 62). The (national) executive committee is the executive and the statutory body of the party and consists of the party leader, vice-chairs, chairman of the parliamentary deputies club, chairman of the ministerial club and the party general manager, while one member is nominated by the executive council.

Regional and district organisations operate also in a fairly hierarchical and centralised way. Regional organisations are led by the regional (executive) councils. Their composition is not elected but determined by the party statutes and they consist of the regional chair and district chairs. Regional chairmen are 'elected' and recalled by the executive council. District organisations enjoy only formal autonomy, as they do not elect the

district chairman, who is appointed and dismissed by the (national) executive council. Furthermore, the (national) executive council has the final say in the operation and establishment of district organisations, and it also decides on the merger and dissolution of district organisations. The party statutes allow local clubs and expert sections to be formed at local, district and regional levels. The key power of the regional and district executive councils might be said to lie in the right to approve candidates for regional and local elections; however, proposals are submitted by the regional and district chairs.

The party's organisation is clearly built around its leader and the tiny party elite that consists mostly of founding members. Robert Fico has always been re-elected as the party leader without a challenger and with no votes against him, which helps buttress his position as the unchallenged party leader. Our analysis indicates that power in the party rests mainly with its central executive structures, and especially with the party chairman. Such tight control over the party's organisation and leadership has prevented the formation of factions (Malová 2013). Despite recurring rumours of financial tensions between backstage actors, Smer-SD acts in an extremely coherent manner, without open controversy or doubts regarding its leadership. In contrast to other parties in Slovakia, Smer-SD enjoys exceptional unity in parliament. So far there have been no recorded departures of MPs.

Participation of Smer-SD in the government

Party politics in Slovakia is fluid and highly unstable. Thanks to Fico's clever strategies in party-building, Smer-SD is an exception to this general trend, as it has well-organised, hierarchical and territorial structures. Since 2006 it has been the strongest and the most stable party in Slovakia (see Table 1). With the exception of a short period after the 2010 elections, it has been the leading party in coalition governments and from 2012-2016 it even successfully formed and maintained a single party government. Even after the 2016 elections, when Smer-SD suffered a substantial loss of its electorate (see below), the party remained the strongest party in the government and Robert Fico was for the third time able to form a government. This time he had to conclude an agreement with three right-wing parties, including the Slovak National Party (Slovenská národní strana, SNS), the primarily Hungarian ethnic-based party Most-Híd[1] (Bridge) and the right-wing Sieť (Network)[2].

Table 1. Electoral results in national and European elections

Years	Legislative elections			European elections	
	Percent of votes	Number of seats in the Parliament	Percent of seats in the Parliament	Percent of votes	Number of seats in the Parliament
2002	13.46	25	16.67	–	–
2004	–	–	–	16.89	3
2006	29.14	50	33.33	–	–
2009	–	–	–	32.01	5
2010	34.79	62	41.33	–	–
2012	44.41	83	55.33	–	–
2014	–	–	–	24.09	4
2016	28.28	49	32.67	–	–

Source: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic.

In the 2002 elections Smer's behaviour was that of a typical populist and anti-establishment party, attracting a high degree of support prior to the elections by criticising the previous ruling coalitions for incompetence

1 This is a splinter party from the Hungarian minority party. Most-Híd advocates for cooperation between both ethnic groups (Hungarians and Slovaks) and promotes moderate minority demands.

2 Since September 2016 Sieť, due to its multiple divisions, ceased to participate in the coalition.

and corruption. At the time Fico showed an ambiguous attitude to EU enlargement and Mečiar's HZDS, which might have caused him some damage; the party's support proved to be somewhat volatile. Immediately after the elections, however, Smer's popularity returned to its previous level, confirming its potential. The 2006 elections were marked by a deep split in public opinion over policies. While one half of the society supported structural reforms introduced by the centre-right government, the other half believed that society 'was heading in the wrong direction' (Bútorová and Gyarfášová 2006:118). These elections put socio-economic issues at the centre of the political struggle. Smer-SD's focus on traditional left-wing issues and the varying strength of the right wing parties accounted for these diverse election outcomes.

In the 2010 elections Smer-SD performed very well, because it focused on promoting its ability to play the role of main caretaker of a strong social state and of the national interests. Although four years of coalition with dubious partners (the SNS and HZDS) brought criticism from the PES and liberal left wing voters, in the end its increased success in the elections (it improved by more than 5 per cent) was achieved largely at the expense of its former coalition partners, as the party used national appeals.

The sweeping victory of Smer-SD in the 2012 elections was the result of intra-coalition conflicts over the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF) scheme, which caused the fall of the previous centre-right government in October 2011. This paved the way to power for Robert Fico, who returned to the government with 44.41 per cent of the vote, thanks in part to a campaign focusing on criticism of the right-wing parties' lack of competence in government and promoting Smer-SD's own capacity to take care of the weaker and poorer part of society. Smer-SD was very effective in attracting new first-time voters, thanks to the effect of the 'Gorilla file', a leaked document that implied high-level political corruption during the last government of Mikuláš Dzurinda in 2005-2006 and led to mass protests in December 2011.

In the March 2016 elections Smer-SD lost a substantial share of its voters, barely passing 28 per cent, although public opinion polls for several months predicted stable support of around 35 per cent. This was partly because of Fico's intolerant and simple-minded response to the European migration crisis. He returned to the national card, this time taking aim at Muslim refugees. Smer-SD leaders strongly opposed the EU quota and the party's main campaign slogan shifted from 'We work for the people' to 'We will defend Slovakia'. Even at his final pre-election party rally in the capital, Bratislava, he reiterated his pledge not to allow a single Muslim migrant on Slovak soil. However, Fico's change in rhetoric backfired against him as many other parties used the same anti-Muslim appeals and Smer-SD lost its distinctiveness as a social democratic party.

Fico simply neglected his traditional 'bread-and-butter' appeals that in the past had safely attracted the majority of his traditional electorate. Moreover, strikes by teachers and nurses in late 2015 and scandals in the health care sector undermined the image of good governance Fico had sought to cultivate during 2012-2016. Furthermore, the government's latest package of welfare changes offered pensioners a measly increase of €1.9 per month, undermining support in one of the party's core demographics. The prime minister's use of intolerant and xenophobic rhetoric, combined with most of the opposition's reluctance to take a tolerant attitude to the European migration crisis, triggered a new cycle of party system restructuring in Slovakia. The extreme right wing Peoples' Party – Our Slovakia, led by Marian Kotleba, entered the parliament with 8 per cent of the vote and 14 MPs.

Since its establishment, Smer-SD's popularity has risen constantly in all types of elections mainly thanks to its popular and politically-skilled leader. Local elections are the second most important in Slovakia, as they usually attract around 50 per cent of voters. In the 2014 local election Smer-SD was the most successful party, with 24.68 per cent of its candidates being elected. Even independent candidates (i.e. those who are not

members of any party, but usually backed by several parties) who ran with the support of the ruling Smer-SD frequently succeeded in local and in regional elections. In the last decade only Smer-SD could provide the strong party patronage important for local and regional leaders. Given that they have the lowest turnout, the European elections are the least important in Slovakia. Slovakia had already become infamous as the country with the lowest voter turnout in the EU. Robert Fico often expressed his dissatisfaction with this negative image, but like other political leaders he seems to be more concerned with the amount of seats in the European Parliament that his party obtains. Smer-SD was able to almost double its support between 2004 and 2009 from 16.9 up to 32 per cent, which means the party holds 5 of 14 seats. However, in the 2014 elections the party's support fell to 24.09 percent, and it lost one seat.

Socio-demographic profile of Smer-SD: voters, members and leaders

During the 2000s Smer-SD clearly moved toward the socioeconomic left; however, the party remains very open to other current themes, according to the sociological and ideological demands of its rather volatile electorate. While at the beginning of its existence Smer was able to attract a younger and more educated electorate, now the party is less attractive to young people with higher education.

The Smer-SD statutes provide for three types of membership: founding, regular, and affiliated. Founding membership was mainly relevant before the 2006 party congress, when party resolutions had to be approved not only by a majority of delegates to the party congress, but also by a majority of the 34 founding members (Rybář 2011: 51). However, the statutes still grant founding members the automatic right to become congress delegates. Affiliated membership opens the party to young people under 18. In terms of recruitment, expulsion and the powers of party members, the strong position of the central party leadership is obvious (Malová 2013). During the last six years Smer-SD has had a stable number of members, around 16,000 – the largest membership among Slovak parties, even if this number is strikingly small (only 0.36 per cent of the electorate) compared to the high number of votes the party receives in elections.

Slovakia's most popular party is often perceived as a power machine for its leader, Robert Fico; however, there are also some other important figures, namely the five vice-chairs – Robert Kaliňák, the second most important figure and three times interior minister, Marek Maďarič, the main organiser of election campaigns and three times culture minister, Peter Kažimír, two times finance minister, and Peter Pellegrini, the party's rising star. and since the 2016 elections deputy prime minister for investment, and finally Pavol Paška, who from 2012 was a Speaker of Parliament, but had to resign in 2014 in the wake of a corruption scandal in the health care sector. The majority of Smer-SD's leaders are 'founding members' and are typically men with higher education, most frequently lawyers, born in the second half of the 1960s or early 1970s. Ideologically they are united by their preference for a strong, fairly paternalistic state stressing law and order. Some of these party leaders come from a specific business milieu with interests in the health and energy sectors and ties to important figures in the 1994-1998 Vladimír Mečiar administration (Nicholson, 2002).

The high degree of authority of the central bodies and the party chairman has proven to be essential for the strengthening of voter support, as they are able to adapt their program and priorities to the political trends of the day. Thanks to this flexibility and control, Smer-SD has successfully transformed itself from a party using typical populist rhetoric, i.e. anti-establishment and anti-corruption appeals, to an established party competing in mainstream left-right politics (see Hanley and Sikk 2014, Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2015). Through the aforementioned mergers with smaller left-wing parties, Smer-SD was able to develop a relatively extensive and stable territorial organisation with a relatively large membership compared to other Slovak parties (Dolný and Malová 2016). In sum, the centralisation of authority affords the party maximum flexibility, with minimum opposition. Given the fact that the organisation of Smer-SD is mainly elite-driven, without

mass membership and with minimal influence of rank-and-file members, it is, in terms of party structures, a typical catch-all party[3]. Moreover, Smer-SD functions in Slovakia as a larger and mainstream party, and this characteristic is also part of this interpretation.

3. Programme, values and policy of Smer-SD

This part of our analysis also stems from the interpretation of the catch-all party model and its programme features, such as centrist and inconsistent party manifestos designed to appeal to ever wider audiences, and the pursuit of votes at the expense of ideology (Williams 2009). Moreover, in many areas there are substantial differences between the declared values and programme of Smer-SD. In terms of rhetoric, Smer-SD behaves like a conservative socialist party, speaking to the poorer strata of society with strong national appeals. As has already been explained above, so far no factions have developed in Smer-SD and Robert Fico has always been the only candidate for chairman at the party congresses.

Socio-economic issues

At the very beginning Smer defined itself as a 'non-ideological' political subject that prefers 'pragmatic' solutions, and therefore the party's stances on socio-economic issues were not clearly articulated. Smer offered more 'clean hands', i.e. anti-corruption appeals. Smer's 1999 program (*Why we are here!*) advocated for a stronger role for the state and a renewal of 'order, justice and stability', focusing on removing the existing 'economic disorder'. The programme supported a mix of personal responsibility, social solidarity and assistance from the state (Krištofík, 2001). In the December 2000 programme Smer promoted the redistributive role of the state (without increasing social security), stricter fiscal discipline and effective measures against corruption, as a part of its 'law and order' mission. In the next year Smer passed a new manifesto that referred to the political concept of the Third Way of western political parties such as Britain's Labour Party and the German Social Democratic Party. At the same time Smer's concept of the Third Way served as an appeal to disappointed voters at both ends (i.e. pro-Mečiar and anti-Mečiar) of Slovakia's polarised polity. The party endorsement of the 'Third Way' was defined at the congress in terms of the 'politics of pragmatism and rationality' or as an effort to 'search for a new social cohesion' (Marušiak, 2006).

Only after its massive defeat in 2002 did Smer shift its position more to the left, However, the programme interpreted socio-economic issues in a relatively unclear and populist way. The party mainly campaigned with strong anti-establishment appeals, favouring a more redistributive role for the state, but without any further specification. During its time in opposition (2002-2006) Smer-SD gradually strengthened its left-wing ideological profile by focusing on a critique of the social consequences of the centre-right government's policies. The 2005 program (*Back to Human Dignity – First Steps towards a Social State*) declared the main ambition of Smer-SD to be the transformation of Slovakia into a welfare state. In the 2006 election campaign Smer-SD depicted itself as a social democratic party promoting 'solidarity, justice and equality of opportunity'. Opposing the flat tax, Smer-SD promised to lower taxes on basic goods (food, medicine) and to introduce progressive taxation for persons with 'exceptionally high incomes' and for natural monopolies; however, many party promises remained unfulfilled. Fico's government showed more continuity in economic policies than was expected, and the Euro was introduced in January 2009. On the other hand, the government stopped all privatisations and tried to limit private ownership of public utilities, pension and health care insurers. In the former case the interventions focused on keeping the energy prices low and, in the latter, on increasing resources in the state-owned insurances at the expense of the private ones. Moreover, Smer-SD's main ideological goal – building the 'welfare state' – was not fulfilled. Compared to the electoral promises, the government's social measures

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3 This conclusion reflects the definition offered by Michelle H. Williams (2009) and which follows Otto Kirchhemer's writings.

were limited to introducing Christmas bonuses to pensioners and one-off child benefits to the first child in the family.

The party again offered 'social security' in the 2012 early elections; however, after the formation of the new single party government Smer-SD focused on budget consolidation, interpreted as a painful but necessary step to economic growth. Fico has frequently stressed that this aim should not be reached by the further impoverishment of those citizens 'who live at the bottom of society'. He therefore introduced a special bank levy, increased higher income taxes for individuals and corporations and excise taxes for tobacco.

According to its programmes, socio-economic issues are Smer-SD's most important priority; however, its policy strategies as to how to develop the welfare state in Slovakia are fairly random and focus on a traditional understanding of social democratic ends and means, i.e. 'bread-and-butter' issues. The three consecutive social packages (i.e. sets of measures such as lower tax levies for low earners, cheaper natural gas for households, free train tickets for students and pensioners and many others) introduced after Fico's defeat in the 2014 presidential elections were more designed to reboot his support than to increase living standards for the poorer strata in Slovakia.

However, due to constitutional limits on government spending (if the public debt reaches the 60 per cent ceiling a vote of confidence must be initiated) any advancement of the welfare state in Slovakia is fairly unlikely in the broad coalition of three partners. Smer-SD, after four years in government, lost many of its voters due to its non-systematic social policy and an inappropriate anti-migration campaign (see above in the section on the election) and has to restructure its party programme and policies.

Post-modern issues: cultural liberalism, minorities and ecology

From its foundation Smer-SD advocated more for social rights, economic redistribution and support for transitional losers than it did for liberal values. Given the economic situation and value orientation of the majority of voters, its agenda is more authoritarian and traditionally materialist compared to most West European social democratic parties. The party's conservative face is very consistent and corresponds to traditionally-held values in Slovakia that are linked to the role played by the Catholic Church in the country. The vast majority of citizens are most responsive to appeals regarding things such as nation, family and (Catholic) religion. Smer-SD prefers to stick to these conservative appeals, and its programme documents tend to reduce human rights to social and economic 'securities', ignoring ethnic and sexual minorities' identities and interests. In 199, Fico was already showing a very careful attitude to minority rights and rejected any expansion of ethnic minorities' rights up to the 'European standard'. The post-2016 inclusion of the Hungarian party Most-Híd in the coalition may improve the treatment of minorities.

Smer-SD frequently refers to articles 55 and 44 of the Constitution, which proclaim that the country's economy is based on 'the principles of a socially- and ecologically-oriented market economy' and that everyone has 'the right to a favourable environment'. However, in its programmes very little attention is paid to ecology, while its past and current policies confirm that the environmental dimension is mostly an appendix. The party's neglect of environmental issues reflects the priorities of the vast majority of the electorate, for whom development issues remain more important.

Foreign Policy and European Integration

The European Union and NATO are the most important frameworks for Smer-SD's foreign policy; until recently, however, foreign and EU policy were not an important priority of Fico's party. For example, Smer-SD prefers career diplomats as foreign ministers, and within the party hierarchy only a few politicians (e.g. Boris

Zala and Monika Beňová, both MEPs) have an interest in shaping the party's foreign policy. After the 2012 and 2016 elections Fico gave the foreign ministers the position of deputy prime ministers. However, Smer-SD's foreign policy priorities are often perceived as incoherent, because while Fico repeats his interest in maintaining 'friendly relations' with Russia, his rhetoric is in contrast with Foreign Ministry actions.

Slovakia has strongly supported European integration, a support that stems from the structural condition of its economy, coupled with turbulent political developments up to the end of the 1990s. While immediately after its foundation Smer had a lukewarm or at least ambiguous attitude toward the European Union, this attitude gradually underwent a substantial change. During the 2012-2016 government Fico saw the EU as the crucial referential framework for the economic and social development of Slovakia and 'the source of the political, economic and social security of Slovak citizens'. This change resulted from the party's experience of government and access to EU structural funds (Bilčík and Haughton, 2012). While the 2012 election program was highly Euro-optimistic but not detailed, in the 2016 elections, however, the anti-migration appeals were linked with anti-EU rhetoric. Given the country's size and its dependence on EU markets, it is likely that the party will continue its rather incoherent approach to foreign and EU policy.

4. Smer-SD in the context of party politics in Slovakia

Slovak party politics has been rather unstable and fragmented, the result of volatile voter preferences and a number of structural divides (centre vs. periphery, economic, religious and ethnic). During the last decade the most relevant divide in party competition has been socio-economic, the result of the dominant position of Smer-SD as the only relevant left wing party with, so far, no relevant rival on the left. Moreover, Smer-SD has faced fragmented right-wing and centre-right parties; its position in the party system is therefore exceptional. Smer-SD is also exceptionally stable in terms of party discipline, cohesion and public support, which contributes to its incomparable position in Slovakia's party politics.

Parties in Slovakia are of four basic organisational types (see Malová and Dolný 2016). The first is a party with a developed territorial organisation, where lower levels have a relatively large degree of autonomy from the central party leadership. This arrangement is based on party orientation towards a stable and clearly defined voter base, with which it has strong ties. This type of party however, is an exception, with the Christian Democratic Movement[4] (Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie, KDH) being the only current example among Slovakia's parliamentary parties.

The second type of party has a relatively developed organisational structure, albeit with little relative autonomy at lower levels, and a dominant party leader or supreme body of central leadership. This is the result of top down party establishment, whereby the leader and his closest associates as founders seek to maintain their decisive position within the party. Smer-SD and Most-Híd are the best examples of such organisations.

The third type is exemplified by the new parties Freedom and Solidarity (Sloboda a Solidarita, SaS) and Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti, OĽaNO), which were created as the political projects of their leaders. Unlike other parties created around leaders, they have fully given up on building party structures and recruiting members. The SaS, for example, has only about 160 members and OĽaNO has virtually no members, only a leader who runs the party as a business company. It is questionable whether or not these parties will be successful in the long term; however, in the short term, they have demonstrated that a party organisation is not necessary for electoral success in Slovak general

4 Although the KDH did not pass the 5 percent election threshold in the 2016 elections, the party support has slowly increased to over 6 percent.

elections. These parties even do not strive to recruit members and establish territorial organisations. Election candidates on their party list can be simply 'hired and fired' according to the arbitrary decision of the leadership. This type of party organisation may complicate the further institutionalisation of individual parties and the party system in general. The last type of party is represented by the extreme right-wing Peoples Party – Our Slovakia (Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko, ĽS-NS), which also has a minimal number of members and a centralised and unchecked party executive without differentiated territorial and organisational structures. In general, this type is very similar to the third one, but its extreme ideology that firmly unites party members has to be categorised as a separate model. In terms of the situation in Slovakia's party politics, Smer-SD represents a mainstream type of political party that may be clearly identified by ideology and in organisational terms.

Smer-SD's policy toward other parties is by and large very 'pragmatic', that is its behaviour follows more from the party's immediate political and power concerns then from ideology. The party tends to cooperate with all parties, depending on the probability of obtaining support that will allow it to maximise its main targets and gains. The most illustrative example is the government that followed the 2006 elections, when Smer-SD formed a coalition with two parties that were prominent in politics during the 1990s: the HZDS and Ján Slota's SNS. The latter's nationalist and xenophobic rhetoric was in direct conflict with core social democratic values, and caused concern in the Party of European Socialists (PES). Despite international and domestic reservations, Smer-SD used this opportunity merely to maximise its power and give itself more ministerial posts than it would have been able to claim on the basis of the election results. Fico often tolerated the SNS party leader's regular outbursts of anti-Hungarian rhetoric; however when the HZDS and SNS refused to support the Lisbon Treaty in a parliamentary vote Smer-SD turned immediately to the opposition parties for help, received it and even succeeded in dividing them. During Fico's second term, when he was the leader of the single-party government, he also turned to opposition parties (KDH and Most-Híd) several times for help when he needed to pass legislation. Fico is an excellent negotiator, and he is always prepare to make trade-offs when his power goals are at stake. Smer-SD's strategies toward other parties do not focus on the search for reliable partners or on the building of stable alliances.

Since the March 2016 elections party politics have become extremely polarised, as two opposition parties, SaS and OĽaNO, are very dissatisfied with the broad coalition government and have launched a permanent anti-Fico campaign, accusing him and Interior Minister Robert Kaliňák of corruption. The campaign is very intense, although not as major as the Gorilla protests. However, Smer-SD is not responding to this accusation, even though there are clear signs that the party leaders have very close ties with several influential oligarchs who have clearly benefited from 'doing business' with Fico's three consecutive governments. Apparently these ties also limit Smer-SD autonomy when it comes to decision making. Consequently corruption and clientelism have became the most pressing political issue in Slovakia, and have contributed to the polarisation of party politics. So far, these accusations have not seriously damaged Smer-SD, since the loss of part of the electorate in the 2016 elections may be only temporary. In general, its support depends more on economic performance and improvement of social standards than on anti-corruption accusations from the opposition, as in Slovakia many people are convinced that all parties are corrupt, and therefore remain fairly indifferent to clientelism and corruption.

This highly stable and almost uniquely high level of support for Smer-SD over time is the result of several factors. Firstly, Smer-SD is the only relevant left-wing party without serious competition from the left or the right. So far, all other post-2004 left-wing projects have been fairly artificial, gaining only minimum support, while the right-wing parties remain fragmented and unable to challenge the dominant position of Smer-SD. Following the change of SNS leadership, however, this party and its chair Andrej Danko have emerged as the main competitor – Danko has regained the nationally-oriented voters that the SAS lost in 2016. Secondly, the

pragmatic approach to other parties and patronage provided to regional and local politicians contributes to Smer-SD's and Fico's popularity. Public opinions polls and the 2014 presidential elections showed that Fico's potential rose to 40 per cent. Thirdly, Fico's charismatic appeals, communication skills and his 'caretaker' image mean that his position in Smer-SD and Slovakia's politics remains quite unshakeable.

5. The party's networks and alliances

Smer-SD operates as a traditional left-wing socialist party and it respects official interest groups, namely trade unions. Party leaders, namely Robert Fico, care about the party's international recognition, mainly by social democratic parties.

Slovakia's civil society is relatively well differentiated and organised. Many interest groups have a direct influence on policy making, on the basis of special legislation that allows selected interest groups (professional chambers, trade unions, business and employers' organisations) to participate in law making. Since 2001 NGOs and citizens have been able to access government policy making via a special public procedure (collective legislative proposals), but the success of these initiatives is very limited. Business and employers' organisations are the most influential, and they enjoy privileged access to any government.

Immediately after the collapse of the communist regime trade unions preferred to distance themselves from all political parties. Since 2002 Smer-SD has sought to establish a closer connection with trade unions, and has succeeded. For example, when the right wing government led by Mikuláš Dzurinda embarked upon its program of liberalising the system of interest representation in 2003, intending to abolish the privileged access of unions to policy making, Smer protested and worked with the Confederation of Trade Unions (KOZ) to collect signatures to initiate a referendum calling for early elections in 2004. Even though the referendum failed due to insufficient turnout[5], Smer-SD repeatedly signed pre-election agreements with KOZ, calling on unions members to support the party in the elections. In exchange, the Smer-SD programme pledged to advance unions' concerns. Under Smer-SD-led governments the competences of the tripartite again increased, and the Labour Code was amended in accordance with most trade union demands. Because unions in Slovakia focus – and have more impact – on law making and not so much on wages, alternative new trade unions in public sector (medical doctors, nurses and teachers) have recently emerged and organised fairly influential protests blaming Fico's governments for neglecting their wage-related demands.

In connection with the introduction of the Euro and the emerging economic crisis, the Fico government increased cooperation with the main industrial interest groups and initiated several social agreements with business, financial and employers' organisations, despite Fico's populist rhetoric concerning 'multinational monopolies' and 'foreign companies'.

During its first term in government, Smer-SD had conflicts with many NGOs, think-tanks and watchdog organisations over corruption scandals, abuse of public resources and other accusations of mismanagement. Since the 2012 elections Smer-SD has shown more respect for these groups, which in Slovakia function as opinion leaders, but on the other hand Fico has had constant clashes with media and journalists. This frequently leads to accusations that he engages in non-democratic behaviour.

Since the foundation of Smer-SD, the Party of European socialists (PES) has played an important role in shaping left-wing politics. Firstly, in 2004 the PES made a merger of Slovakia's social democratic parties a condi-

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5 To be valid, a referendum requires 50 percent turnout of all eligible voters, and only 35 per cent of voters showed up at the polls.

tion for PES membership. Secondly, although the PES did not prevent a coalition with dubious partners (the SNS and HZDS), in December 2009 Smer-SD was accepted as a full member of PES, as the European Socialist Congress concluded that except for the inappropriate comments by the SNS leader regarding minorities, there were no disturbing trends identified in the government policies. Thirdly, recent anti-migrant and anti-Muslim rhetoric has also raised concerns in the PES, but no action against Smer-SD has been initiated. The closest allies to Smer-SD have traditionally been the Social Democratic parties in the Czech Republic and Germany, and since in Hungary and Poland there are currently no influential social democratic parties Smer-SD focuses on good relations with the governing parties regardless of party ideology.

Róbert Fico has often emphasised that what matters in politics is a pragmatic, i.e. non-ideological approach to decision-making (though one that 'respects social democratic values'). He considers this pragmatism, together with advancing traditional left-wing and conservative issues such as 'bread-and-butter issues', 'order' and 'stability', to be the most reliable topics for political competition in the effort to increase voter support for his party. Moreover, he suggests that the whole European social democratic movement needs more effective vote-seeking strategies, revolving around long-established social issues, and calls for a more pragmatic approach at the European level (Fico 2011).

6. Conclusion: What are the current challenges of the social democratic party in Slovakia? How can the party respond to them?

There are two main short-term challenges for Smer-SD related to the party's ability to govern effectively and to sustain (and eventually increase) its support. First and foremost, Smer-SD has to deliver on its promises to build a strong social state and improve the standard of living. During its previous term in office (2012-2016) the party sustained a delicate balance between two difficult tasks – consolidation of the public finances and social harmony; however, it was not enough to maintain support and the party lost some of its voters. Secondly, the party has to revise and improve its programme and to overcome its pragmatic approach to politics and policies, i.e. an approach related to immediate political and power requirements. For example the party's programme for the 2016 elections had only a few, very general, lines (Smer-SD 2016).

Since the March 2016 elections Smer-SD's chances of going beyond its previous, mostly symbolic attempts to build a social state are even more limited, because the party has several times won elections by promising to increase living standards, but on the other hand failed to convince a large number of its voters who opposed the party's austerity policies. This volatile party support may increase the chances of the opposition parties. For example, public sector employees such as teachers and nurses are demanding higher wages and this is being used by opposition parties to wage anti-Fico and anti-Smer campaigns. Moreover, the 2016 coalition government must fight tax evasion and corruption, especially in public procurement. This task is even more complicated because several top Smer-SD officials have been accused of clientelist and corrupt practices. Smer-SD has only a fairly limited hope of addressing the deep-rooted structural limits to good governance, such as the vulnerability of Slovakia's small open economy, the high level of dependence on foreign investments, pressing regional disparities and the high level of long-term unemployment. The party's traditional bread-and-butter approach needs some modernisation. This could take the form of a full restructuring of social policies so as to build a 'real' social state instead of providing limited social packages. The party can also pay more attention to younger voters by responding to their demands, including an overhaul of its image to turn it into a more modern social democratic party with more liberal and 'good governance' anti-corruption values.

Both scenarios (more social policies or more good governance and liberal appeals) are very hard to implement simultaneously. The party's position is thus vulnerable to internal and also external uncertainties.

Smer-SD's support seems unlikely to return to previous levels for several reasons. Firstly, the party seems unable to successfully and convincingly distance itself from its 'donors', i.e. oligarchs. Secondly, Fico is very likely to continue with his pragmatic, i.e. non-programmatic approach, focusing on the party's short-term power interests. Thirdly, Smer-SD neglects the young generation's demands for more efficient policies in education, jobs and housing.

There is one crucial and long-term challenge that has to be faced by the party. So far the very existence of Smer-SD fully depends on Robert Fico, the party's founder and its current leader. The party is not very well institutionalised and, therefore, not yet stable. Even, if there are no official factions within the party, there are competing 'entrepreneurial' groups, which makes the long-term outlook for Smer-SD fairly uncertain. Smer-SD mostly owes its popularity to Robert Fico, who is able to address the identity and needs of voters who respond to the party's promises of security and shelter in the uncertain times of Europe's economic and migrant crises. His appeals to the traditional paternalistic culture seem to be still only partly effective in Slovakia, however. This cultural context and constitutive attributes of a social democratic party remains a definite advantage in a short-term perspective, but in the long term it might represent the main challenge for the party's survival. Thus the main uncertainty for Smer-SD's future lies in the indispensable position of Robert Fico as leader and founder. Without him Smer-SD might not only split into several factions but lose its raison d'etre.

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