

A stylized map of Europe composed of a grid of dots. Most dots are light gray, but several are red, highlighting specific countries or regions. The map is centered behind the title and subtitle.

Experts or Novices?

The prospects for the new Slovak government

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- The new government is likely to be conflict prone since none of the four coalition parties has a dominant position.
- The government has presented a wide-ranging reform programme, but how the reforms will be implemented is less clear.
- While containing many experienced ministers, the government also includes two new parties, and its economic expertise may not be matched by political skills.



The new Slovak government, which comprises four centre-right parties, is likely to be conflict prone since none of its four coalition partners has a dominant position. It has presented a wide-ranging reform programme, but while the government parties have succeeded in agreeing the general priorities, detailed implementation is already proving problematic. Although it contains many experienced ministers, the government also includes two new parties, and its economic expertise may not be matched by political skills. The initial debacle over the 'Greek loan', which has damaged Slovakia's standing in the EU, was overseen by experienced politicians who appeared unprepared for returning to power.

Background

The Slovak parliamentary election of 12 June 2010 unexpectedly led to complete alternation of government, with a broad centre-right coalition under Ivetta Radičová replacing a leftist and nationally oriented government under Robert Fico. This was a surprise because Fico's Direction-Social Democracy (Smer-SD), which dominated the previous three-party coalition, had grown in popularity over its four years in office, and fairly consistently polled about 40% in public opinion surveys.

The opposition victory was caused in part by a notable decline in the nationalist vote, which was the more remarkable given that the first half of the election campaign (prior to the disastrous floods that hit the country in late May) had been dominated by nationalist rhetoric in response to the new Hungarian government's offering citizenship to ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia. Yet the strategy of Radičová's Slovak Democratic and Christian Union-Democratic Party (SDKÚ-DS) and Smer-SD, which was to emphasise the differences in their economic policies, clearly tailored better with the electorate's preoccupations. The opposition 'camp' was also strengthened by the new party Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), which was like SDKÚ-DS a centre-right liberal party, but with a strong emphasis on anti-corruption campaigning. As it gained in strength in public opinion polls, partly because it took some of the progressive youth vote that had previously gone to Smer-SD, an opposition victory began to appear a real possibility.

Of the four opposition parties which together gained 79 of 150 parliamentary seats, the largest was Radičová's SDKÚ-DS, followed by SaS. This political direction was clearly strengthening, while the vote for the more conservative Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) remained constant. The ethnic Hungarian vote had been divided, and a new party, Bridge (Most-Híd), which emphasised Hungarian-Slovak cooperation, unexpectedly gained nearly twice as many votes and the rump Party of the Hungarian Coalition, which failed to enter parliament as it gained less than 5% of the vote.

Of the three former government parties, Smer-SD achieved its best result ever with over a third of the votes, and was by far the largest single party, but was defeated by its lack of coalition partners. The Slovak National Party (SNS) only just made it into parliament, demonstrating that playing the 'Hungarian card' was no longer effective in mobilising the Slovak electorate. The People's Party-Movement for a Democratic Slovakia of former prime minister Vladimír Mečiar, which had dominated Slovak politics in the 1990s, was finally eliminated from parliament.

Forming a government

Slovak governments can be divided into two types. The three-party nationalist and left-nationalist governments formed in 1994 and 2006 were dominated by one large party and took a protracted period to construct, while for the four-party reformist governments formed in 1998, 2002 and 2010, the composition of the government was clear from election night because of the programmatic affinity of the parties. However, the more even balance of parliamentary power between the coalition partners produces a complex process of negotiation and compromise between the governing parties throughout the four-year duration of the parliament. As a consequence of this, the Radičová government may be prone to minor or major crises throughout its duration. Its component parties will periodically cause difficulties because of their differences and their desire to promote policies that are core to their programmatic beliefs; and at times their similarities will also prove problematic as they indulge in posturing to emphasise their individuality for the purpose of future electoral gain.

The 'coalition agreement' between the four government parties was largely concerned with dividing up ministerial and parliamentary posts between the coalition parties. It had to find suitable roles for all the party leaders, which was complicated by the fact that former prime minister Mikuláš Dzurinda was still chair of SDKÚ-DS although he had not stood for parliament because of corruption allegations. In addition, both SDKÚ-DS and SaS considered their parties to be marked by expertise in running the economy and aspired to the finance ministry.

Radičová's right to lead the government was uncontested. Her party rival Ivan Mikloš returned as finance minister, and the main competitor for this job, SaS leader Richard Sulík, withdrew to the rather different office of chair of parliament, which made him one of the three main constitutional representatives of Slovakia, alongside the prime minister and president. Meanwhile, his party colleagues took the Economics and Labour, Social Affairs and Family ministries. Dzurinda was appointed foreign minister, which was potentially problematic because of the risk that he would undermine Radičová by overshadowing her on the foreign stage. KDH leader Ján Figel', who had been Slovakia's chief negotiator during EU accession negotiations and later its first European Commissioner, took over the Ministry of Transport. This rather curious choice was accompanied by a plan to rearrange ministerial competences so that regional development and tourism were attached to the ministry, and significantly, and equally curiously, the coordination of EU funds was also to be moved to Figel's ministry. Finally, Most-Híd leader Béla Bugár returned to the role of vice chair of parliament. Bugár was the most popular ethnic Hungarian in Slovakia, and had he taken over the chair of parliament Slovakia would finally have had a representative of the country's 10 per cent minority community in one of the three main constitutional roles.

The government programme

Radičová had been selected to lead SDKÚ-DS in the election in 2010 for the same reason she had been chosen as the opposition's presidential candidate in 2009: she was popular with the voters, who appeared to view her as the 'human face' of economic reform. A sociologist specialising in social policy, she had entered

politics in October 2005 when appointed Minister of Labour, Social Affairs and the Family, and was perceived to be more aware of the situation of the socially disadvantaged, rather than merely promoting the interests of business and the classic 'transition winners' – young, educated, urban and male. Shortly after the election victory, she emphasised that the era of radical reforms was over, and given the shock of many voters at Fico's defeat, this was a useful strategy.

The same idea penetrated the government programme, which in its introduction stated that: 'While in the past the themes of integration and reforms dominated, now the government of the Slovak Republic regards issues of the quality of everyday life of citizens to be the key theme'. At the same time, it stated that political efforts should focus more sharply on 'the everyday problems of the ordinary member of the middle stratum'. It seems likely, on the basis of both the government programme and the past records of the parties and politicians involved, that policy will change in a number of areas compared to the four years of the Fico government.

The first section of the government programme, 'The Democratic State', begins by stating that 'the trust of citizens in politics and politicians is low'. Corruption had indeed been rife in the previous government, particularly in three ministries controlled by Smer-SD's smaller coalition partners – the Environment Ministry, the Ministry of Construction and Regional Development and the Ministry of Agriculture – all of which played a substantial role in the use of EU funds. The functioning of the justice system was also questionable, and there was considerable concern that the justice minister nominated by ĽS-HZDS, Štefan Harabin, had proceeded to become chair of the Supreme Court and could not technically be removed by the incoming government.

Early measures planned by the new government were the limiting of legal immunity enjoyed by parliamentary deputies and judges, which required a constitutional majority of three-fifths to change. Simpler to implement was the publishing on the internet of all contracts resulting from public tenders on the Government Office's website, which was introduced at the end of August. Since the previous SDKÚ-DS led government had introduced the Freedom of Information Act, transparency in public life is likely to increase markedly.



The second area where change is likely is in economic policy in the broadest sense of the word. The Smer-SD government tended, despite its rhetoric, to preserve the *status quo* inherited from the Dzurinda governments. A Slovak consensus that achieving European integration was the acid test of government competence obliged Fico to adhere to the previous government's target of joining the Eurozone at the beginning of 2009, which circumscribed his ability to unravel the reforms achieved by Mikloš during his earlier tenure in office. Given the high growth rates inherited from the previous government's reforms, it was possible to let the economy ride without the electorate being overly affected by the recession. However, the new government is anxious to confront the budget deficit, and will continue the innovative modernisation of the tax and benefit system started when SDKÚ-DS was last in office, and SaS's leader Sulík was a Finance Ministry adviser on the flat tax system. However, it is clear that even within these two parties there are different views on how to pursue this goal. SaS's pet project of radically reforming the tax and social insurance systems was contentious, and lengthy debate took place before VAT was raised by 1 %.

The need for complex reform is also evident in education policy, which is now in the hands of SDKÚ-DS for the first time, having been controlled for most of the post-communist period by more conservative parties. The government programme notes that the creation of a knowledge society is necessary since it is no longer feasible for Slovakia to gain investment as a low-wage country. However, reforming the education system at all levels will face resource challenges since salaries have long ceased to compete with the private sector.

The third section of the government programme, 'The state for citizens', deals with health and education but also begins with the contentious area of protecting human rights, which includes the implementation of anti-discrimination legislation and the traditionally controversial issue of national minorities. Again, this was an area where the previous government made very little progress as Fico's conception of social democracy was largely restricted to economic issues and there was little commitment to the area of equal opportunities, the more so as Smer-SD's coalition partner SNS was unpleasantly phobic about Hungarians, Roma and homosexuals. Centre-right governments have traditionally had a far

better relationship with non-governmental organisations than the left or the nationalists, and this provides a better background for consultation on social issues, although the conservatism of the Catholic KDH places limits on the government's room for manoeuvre on gender-linked issues, particularly registered partnerships. The presence of a largely Hungarian party in the government inevitably improves the relationship with this community and with Hungary, although Most-Híd nominated an ethnic Slovak for the post of Deputy prime minister for human rights and minorities. The Roma agenda, which has a plenipotentiary under the Deputy prime minister, will be dealt with also by the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and the Family, where SaS appointed a state secretary (deputy minister) with a particular interest in the issue.

The most problematic issue to confront the new government and parliament so far, however, has been an inherited one: as a Eurozone member, Slovakia had to sign the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF) and approve its share of the EU loan to Greece. While the outgoing government had agreed to this at a meeting of EU finance ministers in May, after losing the election Fico refused formally to sign without the incoming government's agreement. This Radičová withheld since it opposed the loan to Greece and believed the previous government had negotiated an unfavourable arrangement for Slovakia, and that it was up to Fico to sign since he was still prime minister. Although, under pressure, the incoming government decided to sign the EFSF framework agreement in July, when parliament met in August, it endorsed the EFSF but refused the specific loan to Greece. This was widely criticised elsewhere in the EU as a denial of the principle of solidarity within the Eurozone.

This was an unfortunate debut on the international stage for the new government. It stemmed in part from the fact that it is easier for parties to indulge in euroscepticism while in opposition, and the incoming government was caught out by its unexpected ascent to power. However, the failure to grasp that EU agreements could not be reopened and renegotiated every time one of the members changed governments was alarming, and the dogmatic 'we are experts and we know best' attitude to economic issues (which is even more marked in SaS than in SDKÚ-DS) is more problematic at EU level than it is domestically.



Conclusion

The Radičová government has a number of marked strengths. More than half its members have previous ministerial experience, and the vice chairs of the parliament (though not the chair) are long-standing deputies, three of whom have been in parliament since the early 1990s. The government has a strong commitment to transparency and the battle against corruption, with a good if not flawless past track record among its established parties, which is reinforced by the addition of SaS. Its weakness, as in the 2002-2006 period, is likely to be internal disputes. On social issues, the coalition holds an array of left/liberal and right-wing views, with the conservative KDH opposed to the markedly liberal SaS. Economically, there is a consensus on issues such as support of private enterprise and individual responsibility, but there is some divergence between the everyday concerns of their core voters, since the electoral base of KDH and to an extent Most-Híd is more balanced in terms of age, education and rural/urban residence than that of the parties who control the major economic ministries. Radičová may, however, be more successful in seeking compromise than her predecessor Dzurinda.

On the opposition side, the dominance of Smer-SD has been strengthened, despite the fact that the decline of its previous government coalition partners sent it into opposition. Fico adopted a responsible attitude to entering opposition by taking the most senior role available to the opposition, which is as one of the vice chairs of the parliament. How Smer-SD will develop as a social democratic party is, however, uncertain. It is clearly the party of choice of the economically less advantaged parts of the electorate, and the decline in competition for the nationalist vote in Slovakia leaves it open to adopting more liberal stances on social and minority issues. However, there is little indication that Fico as leader feels any affinity to such causes, and business interests are still represented strongly among the party's politicians. Smer-SD is still strong at regional and local level and this may determine the development of the party's profile.



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