



Weekly Briefing

Slovakia external relations briefing:
The 2019 Elections to the European Parliament
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The 2019 Elections to the European Parliament

The 2019 elections to the European Parliament (EP) took place in Slovakia on Saturday, May 25. These were the fourth EP elections Slovakia participated in since becoming a member of the EU on May 1, 2004. Just as in elections to the national parliament, for the purpose of EP elections, Slovakia consists of one electoral district, with a 5% quorum to gain representation to the EP. In the last two terms, Slovakia had 13 Members of the EP (MEPs). This was originally supposed to increase to 14 seats due to the expected division of several British EP seats following Brexit, but the delay of Brexit forced a change – Slovakia will continue to have 13 MEPs, which will be increased to 14 if and when Brexit takes place. This arrangement caused trouble after the elections, as will be seen below.

Of the 31 political parties and coalitions that vied for seats in the EP, six of these groupings gained representation in the new EP. The unexpected winner was a new center-right coalition of two parties, the Progressive Party (Progresívna strana, PS) and the SPOLU party. This coalition of PS and SPOLU gained 20.11% of the vote, which translated into four seats. The runner-up in second place was the winner of all previous EP elections and the current favorite, the ruling center-left Smer-SD. It gained 15.72% which means three seats. In third place was the extreme right-wing Peoples Party – Our Slovakia (Ľudová strana – Naše Slovensko, ĽSNS) with 12.07% of the votes and two seats. This was the first time this party (or any ideologically similar party) gained representation in the EP for Slovakia. Next came the Christian Democratic Movement (Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie, KDH) with 9.69% which also means 2 seats. Fourth place went to the libertarian Freedom and Solidarity party (Sloboda a solidarita, SaS) with 9.62% and two seats. In sixth and last place came the center-right party Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti, OĽaNO), which got 5.25%, meaning 1 seat. Together, the total makes 14 seats, although only 13 will be occupied until Brexit. The method deciding the assignment of the 14th seat caused some scandal when it became known that this seat will be allotted to KDH – meaning that it will only occupy one of the two mandates it has won until Brexit, when it will gain the other. This is despite the fact that KDH received more votes than SaS, which will have two seats from the start. Such a development led KDH to turn to the Constitutional Court to dispute the method of mandate allotment.

But it is not only the result of the elections which are of interest in the case of Slovakia. Ever since its first EP elections in 2004, Slovakia has been the country with the lowest voter

turnout among all the EU member states. This election was no exception, with turnout in Slovakia standing at 22.74% of all eligible voters, compared to 50.62% for the entire EU. On the other hand, this was the highest turnout in Slovakia compared to turnout in all other EP elections since 2004. This fits into the projected upswing of voter turnout across the EU, reversing the trend of declining turnout in each successive election. The question could be posed whether this is merely a result of a massive campaign by governments, EU institutions and NGOs to get people to vote, or whether it reflects a genuine increase of interest on the part of the electorate in EU topics. In the case of Slovakia, EP elections are a clear example of what is called “elections of the second order”, meaning elections which are considered as less important in the public consciousness, compared to elections to the national parliament, or perhaps also presidential elections. This ties into the perception among Slovaks that the EU is something distant and irrelevant for their daily lives – unless there is a EU-wide controversy that impacts domestic politics, such as the migrant crisis or the eurozone debt crisis, which, however, have died down to a significant extent compared to previous years. When such EU issues are not significant, the election contest tend to become an extension of domestic politics and internal issues. This was the case this year as well.

Seeing the EP elections as elections of the second order leads to the necessity of analyzing what the results portend about the evolution on Slovakia’s political scene in the near future. As stated above, the result of the elections was an upset, as it was generally expected that Smer-SD would win and retain its dominance of the political scene. The fact that it was not so, ties into the decline of support for Smer-SD over the past year. This is connected especially with the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée in February 2018, while he was working on a case of land and tax frauds in Eastern Slovakia, which suggested links between organized crime and people close to Smer-SD. This along with several other scandals concerning several sponsors of Smer-SD tends to reinforce the idea among the general population that Smer-SD has been in power too long (since 2012, in fact, and previously in 2006-2010) and its elites have become complacent and corrupt. However, despite this general trend of decline, Smer continues to be the largest party in opinion polls, and the only party polling over 20%, with several of its rivals jockeying over second place at around 15%. While Smer-SD maintains a clear lead over its rivals, it has ceased to be the double-digit lead it consistently enjoyed over the past decade and a half. It is not expected to lose its privileged place in the near future, thanks to strong support among rural and less educated working class voters. However, it appears likely that while it still may win the next elections to the national parliament (scheduled for February 29, 2020), it will not be able to put together a majority coalition.

Connected to the previous development is the rise of the coalition PS-SPOLU, which won the election. This coalition has emerged as the main beneficiary of the reaction against Smer-SD and its coalition partners. This coalition, like most center-right parties opposed to Smer-SD, draws its support mainly from urban, wealthier and more highly educated voters. This however means that it is yet another center-right party fighting for the same voter groups. This is linked to the continuing fractured state of the center-right in Slovakia, with no party currently dominant on this part of the political spectrum. PS-SPOLU is merely the latest in a series of parties whose fortunes has risen to appear as the main challenger of Smer-SD, only to fall in the space of a few years. In this respect, PS-SPOLU has taken the place of SaS, which was the second strongest party since the previous national parliamentary election in 2016, but whose appeal seems to be waning since a new spate of center-right party formation occurred within the previous year. This new round of party formation, catalyzed by the murders mentioned above (as well as the looming 2020 elections) also led to the current rise of PS-SPOLU. The creation and rise of new parties mean that the center-right is splintering even more, instead of consolidating itself. In short, the more things change on the center-right, the more they stay the same.

But the most important and the most widely commented-upon consequence, is the accession of the far-right ĽSNS to the EP as the third-place finisher. This result confirms the continuing growth of the far right not only in Slovakia in the shape of the ĽSNS, but in the EU as well. The general reason for the rise of ĽSNS is discontent among poorer Slovaks with their low share of the fruits of Slovakia's economic growth and a perception that the current political elites are distant and corrupt and are doing nothing to promote their interests. But a more specific reason for the success of the far-right party can be traced to the controversy surrounding the migrant crisis when it seemed that Slovakia would be forced to take in a prescribed quota of immigrants over the objections of the government and public opinion. The result of this party is seen as strengthening its position before the national parliamentary elections, with it already predicted to finish in third place behind Smer-SD and PS-SPOLU in opinion polls. Whatever the consequences will be for the country, the EP, or the EU, Slovakia has to come to terms with it being one of the countries that contributed to the strengthening of the far right in the EP.

To get a clear picture of what the results of the EP elections mean for Slovakia, it is necessary to take a look at which parties failed to defend their mandates and will no longer be represented in the EP. The most relevant is the absence of either of the two main parties representing the Hungarian minority (which makes up 8.5% of the population of Slovakia), both of which were represented in the EP in the election cycle leading up to 2019. This means that the loss of representation cannot be attributed to splitting of the vote between them. Rather,

it is the result of a decline of support for the larger of the two parties, the governing center-right Most-Híd party. This decline is seen as the party being tainted among center-right voters by its cooperation with Smer-SD, which the party leadership previously claimed it would not do. The reversal of this party's stance was due to political deadlock after the last national parliamentary election in 2016. Be that as it may, this trend may result in a hardening of the stance of center-right parties in general towards Smer-SD, since a softer stance like that of Most-Híd would be seen as politically damaging. The result would be a greater polarization of Slovak politics. This would mean the weakening of the possibility of a united front of centrist parties against the rising far right. The second notable absence is on the part of SDKÚ-DS, the former dominant party of the center-right, which has disintegrated under the weight of corruption scandals. Its demise led to the above-mentioned fracturing of the center-right.

Nevertheless, the consequences of the latest EP elections for Slovakia do not depend merely on which political parties will or will not be represented in the EP, but also on the individual MEPs representing the country. The three most influential MEPs from Slovakia over the past three years, as defined by the NGO VoteWatch which does a survey of the most influential MEPs and releases a table ranking the top three most influential MEPs of each member state,¹ will not be present in the new EP. More broadly, only two Slovak MEPs were reelected, with the remaining eleven (or potentially twelve) being new to the EP. This fact will probably lead to a decrease of the influence of Slovakia in the new EP, since the new and inexperienced MEPs will probably have a harder time gaining positions in the EP, its committees, subcommittees and groups compared to their more experienced colleagues. According to VoteWatch, this influence of member states is measured in relation to the number of MEPs it has and ultimately to the size of its population in the EU. The most influential MEPs are generally those at the head of the EP, the chairmen and chairwomen of political groups (with larger political groups naturally bestowing more influence to its officeholders) and rapporteurs of legislative acts. In general, VoteWatch shows that Slovakia's MEPs were less influential than the EU average in the past couple of years. The subaverage results of Slovakia show a lack of success in obtaining these positions within the EP and thus making their mark on its work. While it is a matter of simple math that the senior positions in the EP and political groups go to the MEPs from the larger EU member states, due to the larger number of their fellow countrymen MEPs that support them as well as the size of their domestic party delegations in the specific political groups in the EP, the same excuse cannot be made in the

¹ As seen in: <https://www.votewatch.eu/blog/update-top-3-most-influential-slovak-meps-september-2017/>

case of rapporteurs. Slovak MEPs therefore have trouble dealing with the competition in the EP. Of course, in theory it could be argued that the EP should be independent of the influence of member states and should instead be an arena of contest of political ideologies and groupings. But in fact MEPs can have a valuable role in pushing bringing attention to issues concerning their native countries and influencing legislative acts in this direction. Due to the inexperience of the newly elected Slovak MEPS, this may prove to be a challenge in the coming European Parliament.

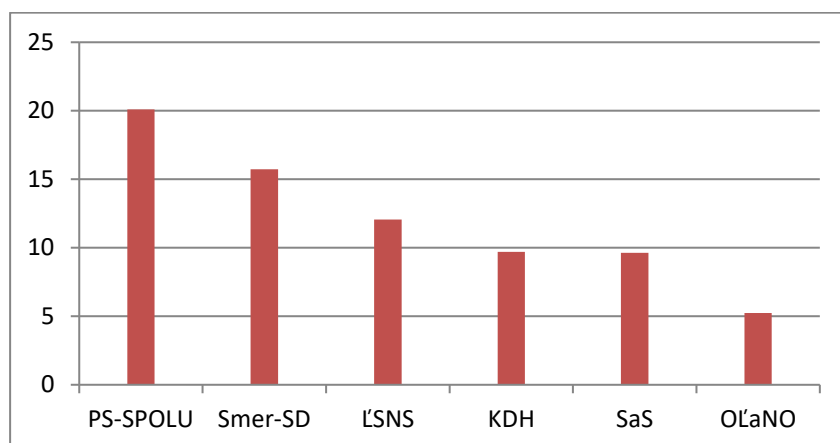


Figure 1: Parties gaining representation to the European Parliament for Slovakia – result in percentage points.

Source: Own processing according to <https://volby.pravda.sk/eurovolby/?rok=2019>