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Slovakia: 2002 Elections

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Summary

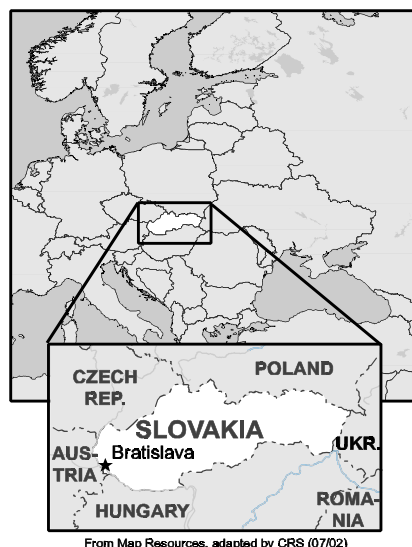
In their recent parliamentary elections, Slovaks surprised most outside observers by renewing the mandate of Prime Minister Mikulas Dzurinda and providing him with a more coherent governing coalition. The outcome may prove decisive in determining the country's foreign policy outlook. Slovakia is among the nine countries bidding for invitations to join NATO at the alliance's November 2002 Prague summit, and the ten leading candidate countries for European Union membership. Although no formal decision has yet been made on the selection of NATO candidate countries, U.S. and allied officials made clear during the months leading up to the election that a return to power of former Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar or his party, the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia, would likely preclude an invitation to Slovakia at Prague. NATO's enlargement will be subject to Senate ratification. This report may be updated as events warrant.

Recent Political and Economic Situation

During its first decade as an independent state (since January 1993), Slovakia has undergone dramatic shifts in political leadership. Through much of the 1990s, authoritarian leader Vladimir Meciar remained at the helm of Slovakia's government. Meciar's controversial domestic and foreign policies left Slovakia internationally isolated and behind the Czech Republic and other central European countries as they advanced toward joining NATO and the European Union. During Meciar's term in office, U.S. and European officials frequently expressed concerns about the Slovak government's democratic shortcomings, mainly stemming from Meciar's abuse of power. In the 1998 elections, a broad coalition of parties collectively defeated Meciar and his party, the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HzDS). During the period leading up to the recent 2002 elections, many observers expressed concern that Meciar and his party might return

to power, just as the country was being considered for admission into NATO and the EU.

After the 1998 elections, the government led by Prime Minister Mikulas Dzurinda was comprised of a broad spectrum of parties that had joined forces to block Meciar. The coalition included Dzurinda's Slovak Christian and Democratic Union (SDKU), the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH), the Party of the Democratic left (SDL), the Party of Civic Understanding (SOP), and the Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK). Meciar's HzDS party won the single largest share of votes and seats in parliament in 1998, but could not form a majority coalition.



The first Dzurinda government worked to restore Slovakia's good international standing and especially to advance relations and accession prospects with the EU and NATO. However, its tenure in office was difficult – wrought with disputes and divisions within the ideologically diverse coalition, and challenged by numerous no-confidence motions from the HzDS opposition. It completed its four-year term despite these tensions and steadily declining popularity.

Dzurinda's government stabilized the economy and launched structural reforms that, in the short run at least, restricted growth, increased unemployment, and fed public discontent. It was also plagued by high-profile corruption scandals, although it recently developed an extensive national strategy to combat corruption.¹ In a late June 2002 state of the nation address, President Rudolf Schuster criticized the quarrelsome governing coalition for proving unable to take more resolute decisions, resulting in delays in privatization sales and administrative reforms. Schuster expressed concern about high unemployment (nearly 20% of the workforce), problems in the health-care sector, and growing pessimism among Slovak citizens. Slovakia's GDP, which rose by 3.3% in 2001, is expected to grow 4% in 2002, and the outlook for 2003 and beyond is favorable, buoyed by increasing foreign investment and domestic consumption.²

The 2002 Elections

The Campaign. The 2002 parliamentary elections were held on September 21-22. Some new parties had emerged since the last vote, while some parties then in parliament were not expected to pass the 5% threshold for representation in the single-chamber, 150-seat National Council. Voter turnout was expected to play a major role in the results, since pre-election polls showed a large share of undecided as well as uninterested voters. National elections operate under a proportional electoral system.

¹ *Global Corruption Report 2002*, by Transparency International (non-governmental organization). In the report's 2002 Corruption Perceptions Index, Slovakia ranked 52nd, the same as the Czech Republic and above Romania, in levels of corruption.

² *Economic Outlook: Medium Term. DRI/WEFA*. October 18, 2002.

All of the parties in the last ruling coalition suffered to some extent from association with the unpopular Dzurinda government (except perhaps the Hungarian coalition, which has a stable support base). Some also endured splits and defections. Moreover, none of the main coalition parties opted to create an electoral coalition or unified front with each other or with other small parties.

Two new parties emerged in this campaign. The first, Smer [Direction], is led by former SDL member Robert Fico. While favoring EU and NATO integration, Fico sharply criticized Dzurinda economic austerity measures and concessions to the EU in accession negotiations. These criticisms focused on populist concerns about the economy, unemployment, and criminality, without providing many specifics about possible future policies. The second new party was the New Citizens' Alliance (ANO), led by media magnate Pavol Rusko. Owner of Slovakia's largest independent television station, Rusko has been likened to Italy's Silvio Berlusconi. ANO, which seeks to portray itself as a traditional European liberal – pro-business – party, fielded media personalities as its candidates. Rusko discounted post-election cooperation with HzDS, the SDL, and the Slovak National Party.

During the first half of the year, core support for Meciar's HzDS remained fairly consistent at around 25%. Meciar attempted to build a more pro-Western image – for example, by having the party support Slovak membership in NATO – and denied that his return to power would negatively affect the NATO and EU accession processes. However, the HzDS was beset by growing internal differences. In July, Meciar encountered opposition within the party over his list of candidates for the election; the slate excluded some prominent party members (and potential rivals), including former parliamentary speaker Ivan Gasparovic. Gasparovic broke with Meciar and formed a new party which siphoned off support. The HzDS was also hurt by the revelation that Meciar was constructing a villa worth more than \$900,000, financed by a private loan; Meciar, a former amateur boxer, assaulted a reporter who attempted to question him about the house.

The campaign was affected by an unusual degree by international factors. Slovakia is among the countries seeking membership in NATO and the EU. Although no formal decision has yet been made on the selection of candidate countries for either institution, high-ranking U.S. and allied officials made clear during the months leading up to the election that a return to power of Meciar or his party would likely preclude invitations to Slovakia. Shortly before the vote, Guenter Verheugen, the EU's commissioner for enlargement, exhorted Slovaks to “show up at the ballot and vote with eyes wide open.”³

The Results. On election day, 70.1% of the country's 4 million eligible voters cast ballots. Though high, the figure was well below the record 84% in 1998.⁴ Pre-election polls had suggested that voters, disgruntled with the harsh effects of the government's

³ Slovak Voters To Set Agenda For Enlargement Of EU. By Robin Shepherd. *New York Times*. September 20, 2002. p. 17.

⁴ According to the *Washington Post*, the U.S. Agency for International Development and other government-supported groups spent \$1.2 million to fund a targeted voter turnout drive. See: Moderate Reformers Win Slovak Election. Robert Kaiser. September 23, 2002. p. A15.

ambitious reforms, would oust Dzurinda. However, when the votes were tallied, the SDKU prevailed – by being runner-up.

Election Results of Slovakia's 2002 Parliamentary Elections (Coalition partners in italics)		
Party	% of Vote	Seats
Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HzDS)	19.5	36
<i>Slovak Christian and Democratic Union (SDKU)</i>	<i>15.1</i>	28
Smer	13.5	25
<i>Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK)</i>	<i>11.2</i>	20
<i>Christian Democratic Movement (KDH)</i>	8.3	15
<i>New Citizens' Alliance (ANO)</i>	8.0	15
Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS)	6.3	11

The HzDS received just under one-fifth of the vote – the party's poorest showing ever in a parliamentary election; although this figure constituted a plurality, Meciar was unable to persuade any other parties to form a coalition with the HzDS. Instead, the second-place SDKU teamed up with the SMK, the KDH, and ANO. Another surprise was the vote for the Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS); this was the first time in post-communist history that it had passed the electoral threshold to win seats in the legislature.

Although two-dozen parties ran candidates in the elections, only 7 surpassed the 5% electoral threshold. Nearly 20% of the vote went for small parties that failed to gain representation; the proportional distribution of their votes among the parties that crossed the threshold enabled the four coalition parties, which together received just 43% of the vote, to secure a majority – 78 of 150 – of the seats in parliament.

The election results surprised nearly everyone. Martin Simecka, editor of *Sme*, Slovakia's most influential newspaper, termed Dzurinda "phoenix-like," adding that "a week ago, no-one would have bet a penny on him."⁵ Many observers believe that the election results signaled a vote for moderation and reform. Markets reacted favorably, and the Slovak crown strengthened against the euro. The four parties that make up the new governing coalition are more ideologically compatible than the last government. And close cooperation will be necessary as the government grapples with a host of tough issues, including privatization, unemployment, health care, pensions, and the judiciary.

Western governments responded positively to the election results; U.S. ambassador to Slovakia Ronald Weiser stated that Slovaks had endorsed "those who share the democratic values and principles of the United States and NATO," while a Brussels

⁵ Centre-Right Poll Win Boosts Slovakia's EU Chances. By Robert Anderson. *Financial Times*. September 23, 2002. p. 3.

spokesperson said that the EU “looks forward to the formation of a new Slovak government that will be able to continue ... progress toward membership in the EU.”⁶

Foreign Policy Implications

Slovakia is among the nine countries being considered to join NATO and the ten leading candidate countries negotiating entry into the EU. NATO leaders will issue invitations to candidate countries at its November 2002 summit, and the leading group of EU candidates hopes to wrap up accession negotiations by December. The election outcome will likely have a strong impact on enlargement decisions by both institutions.

NATO. The Bush Administration has announced that it favors a robust enlargement, but it has declined to make public its preference for the selection of NATO candidate countries until shortly before the Prague summit. In part, this has been due to the uncertainty that surrounded Slovakia’s elections. While they did not publicly endorse any outcome for the Slovak elections, U.S. and other allied officials made clear on a number of occasions before the elections that the next Slovak government must demonstrate political continuity and sustain a commitment to NATO principles and values in order to be considered for membership. Many officials further expressed the view that neither Meciar nor his party demonstrated such a commitment to democratic values and the rule of law, implying that Meciar’s return to power would disqualify the country from consideration. On October 3, NATO Secretary-General Robertson said that Slovaks “voted for being part of integration, leading to stability and prosperity.”⁷

In reviewing Slovakia’s military program in March 2002, NATO officials reportedly praised its progress in implementing military reforms, but focused mainly on Slovakia’s election prospects and the stability of its democratic development. Slovakia’s military reforms center on establishing a small, well-equipped and trained Slovak military that is integrated into NATO structures and capable of operating in allied operations. Slovakia is participating in several international peacekeeping missions, including NATO’s operations in the Balkans. Slovakia recently approved the deployment of an army engineering unit to Afghanistan. The newly-appointed defense minister, Ivan Simko, announced he would seek to raise military spending to 2% of GDP in 2003.

With regard to non-military criteria, NATO has reviewed many of the same issue areas assessed by the European Union and has found many of the aspirants wanting in dealing with corruption, the treatment of minorities and judicial reform.⁸ Until last year, Slovak public opinion on joining NATO appeared somewhat ambivalent. The Dzurinda government, working with non-governmental organizations, launched an extensive public relations campaign on the issue of NATO membership. In an early October 2002 survey, 52% of Slovaks polled said that they supported NATO membership.

⁶ With Slim Margin, Slovakia’s Premier Looks Set To Return Elections. By David Holley. *Los Angeles Times*. September 23, 2002. p. A-3. Ex-Prime Minister Is Rejected in Bid To Regain Power. By Askold Krushelnysky. *Chicago Tribune*. September 23, 2002. p. 4.

⁷ REF/RL NEWSLINE. Vol. 6, No. 188, Part II. October 4, 2002.

⁸ U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on International Relations, Subcommittee on Europe, Hearing on NATO and Enlargement, June 19, 2002.

In May 2002, the Senate passed the Freedom Consolidation Act (P.L. 107-187, passed by the House in late 2001). In addition to endorsing the President's policies on NATO enlargement, the Act designated Slovakia as eligible to receive U.S. security assistance aimed at integrating NATO partner states into the alliance. The Senate will eventually consider a resolution of ratification to amend the NATO treaty. The Senate Armed Services Committee, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and the House International Relations Committee have begun to hold hearings on NATO's future and on the qualifications of aspirant countries for NATO membership.

European Union. In 1997, Slovakia was the only candidate that explicitly failed to meet the political criteria of EU membership due to its democratic shortcomings and the instability of political institutions. After defeating Meciar in 1998, the Dzurinda government steadily endeavored to advance Slovakia's EU prospects. Slovakia opened negotiations with the EU in February 2000; it has since caught up with most of the front-runners for accession, completing 28 of 31 negotiating "chapters" by October. Slovakia aims to complete negotiations on the remaining, most challenging chapters – including agriculture – before the December summit in Copenhagen, where EU leaders are expected to make further decisions on enlargement. At the July start of its six-month EU presidency, Denmark pressed for strict adherence to this deadline, but noted several potential obstacles, including Slovakia's internal political situation. The EU has set a target date of 2004 for the accession of the leading candidate countries.

The European Commission issued its annual progress reports on the candidates in October, shortly after Slovakia's elections. In the report, the Commission noted that Slovakia continued to fulfill the political criteria for membership and reported progress across many economic, administrative, and legal areas. The report stated that Slovakia had made "considerable efforts" in protecting minority rights, but cautioned that corruption remains a "serious" concern.⁹ A recent poll showed that 68% of Slovaks support EU membership.

Regional Relations. Slovakia's relations with its neighboring states are also likely to be affected positively by the election outcome. The first Dzurinda government gave priority to restoring cooperative regional relations, especially with the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary (the so-called "Visegrad" group), that had languished under Meciar's leadership. The other Visegrad states, now all full members in NATO, have pledged to support Slovakia's candidacy for NATO membership. All four have also consulted on coordinating their negotiation positions with the EU. Visegrad cooperation stalled in early 2002 as regional tensions arose over the nationalist pre-election rhetoric of former Hungarian Premier Viktor Orban (who subsequently lost in Hungary's April 2002 elections). Orban (along with some political leaders in Germany and Austria) revived demands that Slovakia and the Czech Republic repeal the World War II-era Benes decrees that led to the expulsion of ethnic Germans and Hungarians from Czechoslovakia. Another contentious issue stoked by Orban concerned Hungary's so-called "status law," which provides benefits and preferential treatment in Hungary to ethnic Hungarians living beyond Hungary's borders. Regional tensions over these issues have greatly eased since Orban's defeat, although aspects of both issues (especially relating to land and property restitution) will likely confront Slovakia's new government.

⁹ [http://europa.eu.int/comm/enlargement/report2002/sk_en.pdf]

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