



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

# Elections in Slovakia - do the EU and NATO have a way to prevent the penetration of Robert Fico's pro-Russian politics?



The EU and NATO may find it difficult to maintain their hard-won unity regarding support for Ukraine if Robert Fico - who describes himself as a social democrat, but is actually a xenophobic right-wing populist - succeeds in forming a new government in Slovakia in the course of the next 2 weeks.

Few have been surprised by the success of Fico's SMER party in elections in Slovakia last Saturday. Pre-election polls gave him an advantage. However, it is the political sentiment that should be more worrying for the Western partners of this Eastern European country.

SMER and its leader will have to secure the support of at least 2 parties to form a government because they won about 23% of the votes (42 seats out of 150 parliamentary mandates).

Last Monday, the President of Slovakia, Zuzana Čaputová, gave Robert Fico a mandate to form a government, because she is obliged to do so by law, even though she is his political and ideological opponent.

However, because of Fico's constant accusations that she was a "puppet of the West" and the numerous anonymous death threats she received (also probably from Fico's entourage), President Čaputová announced that she would not run for a new term in next year's elections.

## Discouraged pro-Western forces

Unlike the pro-Western president, who has admitted that she has been running out of steam in her fight against the populists, their leader, Fico, is not giving up.

This has followed him throughout his political career. After 2 terms as prime minister (2006-2010 and 2012-2018), he modified his political beliefs. Perhaps this is why he has been given a fresh opportunity.

President Čaputová's partners from the second-place Progressive Slovakia party share her discouragement. Their leader, Michal Šimečka, said that the elections and the success of Robert Fico were "bad news" for Slovakia.

"The fact of the matter is that SMER is the winner. And we of course respect that although we think it's bad news for the country. And it will be even worse news if Mr Fico forms the government", said Mr Šimečka after the announcement of the election results.

But he will have an even more difficult task than the pro-Russian leader of SMER to form a government because his party is behind by 5%, and the circle of potential coalition partners is even smaller.

## Polarisation regarding Ukraine

The key to forming the government is in the hands of the third-placed party, Hlas, which split off from SMER in 2018 after the government of Robert Fico was forced to resign due to large-scale street protests over the murder of an investigative journalist.

Peter Pellegrini, Hlas leader and one of 4 prime ministers in the last 5 years (2018-2020), said that without him [Pellegrini], it would be impossible to form "any kind of normal, functioning coalition government".

And he is probably right. Knowing that the voters were divided on the subject, Pellegrini maintained a very ambiguous attitude during the campaign about his support for Ukraine.

At the same time, he sent conflicting messages, which could satisfy the pro-Fico voters, about withholding further aid to Ukraine, saying that Slovakia "had nothing left to donate" to Kyiv. But he also supported the opposing, pro-Ukrainian camp, advocating the continued delivery of artillery ammunition to Kyiv.

## Will Fico maintain a pro-Russian course?

Even though Slovakia is one of the smaller members of the EU and NATO, with a population of about 5.5 million, it has been at the very top of the allies with respect to aid sent to Ukraine when compared to GDP.

It comes right behind the 3 Baltic states and Poland (as by far the largest donors), and it is also more generous (in terms of share in GDP) than all other, more developed Western European members of the EU and NATO.

Robert Fico has been saying for a long time that he was going to end such a policy. During the campaign, he said Slovakia "will not send a single bullet to Ukraine from the state stocks".

He has been indulging a widespread pro-Russian sentiment of Slovaks, where only about 40% consider Russia responsible for the aggression against Ukraine, and a high percentage blames the US and even the Ukrainians themselves. As many as half of Slovaks consider the US a security threat.

However, claims that Slovaks remained sympathetic to Russia even after the collapse of the USSR because they lived under the same social system for a long time have been rather unconvincing, even though widespread.

If this was really the case, how can it be that in the neighbouring Czech Republic, with which Slovakia had a common state until 3 decades ago, more than 70% of citizens blame Russia for the war?

The fact that Slovakia is the most susceptible member of the EU and NATO in terms of the transmission of disinformation and false narratives originating from Russia is one of the explanations for the success of Fico's pro-Kremlin policies.

The EU issued a warning about this based on the monitoring of content in the media and on social networks,

## The West has mechanisms to prevent negative developments

Even though it will not be simple in just 14 days, Fico will definitely forge an alliance with his conservative friend, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, if he succeeds in creating a cabinet.

The Hungarian populist has already congratulated him on the X platform " -Always good to work together with a patriot. Looking forward to it!"

Together, they could form a dangerous disruptive front within the EU and NATO regarding further support for Ukraine.

They are particularly intriguing for the Kremlin to continue disseminating its propaganda. They are hazardous because they are EU and NATO members that border Ukraine.

Through 2 significant Ukrainian neighbours, the Kremlin continues to torpedo Western sanctions, particularly regarding energy, considering that Hungary and Slovakia depend on Russian gas, oil and nuclear fuel.

The EU and NATO could prevent a negative political development in Slovakia if they discourage the formation of a government controlled by Fico or discourage him from implementing the policies he advocated during the campaign.

The EU has persuasive mechanisms in its hands to do both. First, the future Slovak government (whoever leads it) will need to tackle inflation, which is at 10% and twice as high as the average in the eurozone, and the growing budget deficit, for which the EU has funds.

Robert Fico, in his earlier incarnations as a statesman, has often displayed his xenophobic, nationalist and pro-Russian rhetoric within the borders of his country.

Regarding the EU and NATO, where he has the right of veto, he applied a pragmatic and pro-

Western policy, aware of where the principal economic and security support comes from.