

POSSIBLE FORWARD SCENARIOS FOR SLOVAKIA'S SNAP ELECTIONS

Centre-left-turned-populist ex-PM eyes electoral comeback amid increasing fears of political instability

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Slovakia is gearing up for one of its most anticipated elections in recent history. Following years of political turbulence under the country's previous, centre-right coalition governments, the upcoming snap election on 30th September could see the electoral comeback of longtime former Prime Minister Robert Fico and his centre-left-turned-populist SMER-SSD party.

Since the last parliamentary elections in 2020, Slovakia's ideologically and structurally diverse political arena has gone through a radical transformation. [Latest polls suggest](#) that the populist SMER, which fell out of power in 2020 due to anti-corruption protests, is leading against its main rival, the pro-European and centrist-liberal Progressive Slovakia (PS) movement, and is on course to form the country's next government with support from the Slovak far-right.

At the same time, multiple centrist parties are hovering around the electoral threshold, meaning a PS-led pro-EU coalition government also remains a possibility. Forming a functioning parliamentary majority and a stable governing coalition will be a significant challenge for either SMER or PS, while an inconclusive result is also a distinct possibility, leading to yet another re-run election and a new caretaker government.

Below, Aretera provides a pre-election overview, with implications for political stability.

This memo will cover:

-  the political instability of recent years and the lead up to the snap elections,
-  an overview of the pre-election landscape,
-  the possible forward scenarios,
-  short-term political and policy implications.

A MUCH-ANTICIPATED ELECTORAL CONTEST

On 30th September, Slovak voters will head to the polls to elect the 150 members of the country's unicameral parliament, the National Council of the Slovak Republic.

Following three years of political instability under consecutive centre-right coalition governments, the upcoming snap election could see the electoral comeback of longtime former Prime Minister Robert Fico and his centre-left-turned-populist SMER-SSD party. Fico, whose government was shaken by a series of mass anti-corruption protests spurred by the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak, fell out of power in 2020 after Slovakia's centre-right – led by the OL'aNO movement of ex-PM Igor Matovič – secured a decisive win in the February 2020 parliamentary election, uniting the fragmented centre-right in a four-party coalition government, led by Matovič as PM.

Despite initial political success against alleged corruption during the previous, SMER-led governments, Matovič's four-party government did not last long. His controversial handling of the COVID-19 crisis led to his resignation as PM in 2021 and his long-standing personal disagreements with the leaders of his coalition partners eventually resulted in the collapse of the government of his successor, former Prime Minister Eduard Heger. His government first transitioned into a minority government last September and then into a caretaker cabinet in February, while the Slovak parliament simultaneously agreed to hold snap elections, scheduled for this September. Heger's caretaker cabinet eventually fell in May due to internal disagreements and a lack of parliamentary support, leading to the formation of the country's incumbent (and technocratic-caretaker) government led by PM L'udovít Ódor¹.

PRE-ELECTION POLLING

Multiple Parties on Verge of Entering Parliament		
Party/Alliance	Popular Vote – February 2020 (%)	Polling Average – September 2023 (%)
SMER-SSD (centre-left-turned-populist, Kremlin-leaning)	18.3	21
Progressive Slovakia – PS (pro-EU, centrist-liberal)	ran in a coalition	16
HLAS-SD (centre-left, pro-EU)	did not run	14
Republika (far-right, Eurosceptic)	did not run	7
Sme Rodina (conservative, soft Eurosceptic)	8.2	6
OL'aNO & Za L'udi (pro-EU, multi-party alliance)	ran separately	6
KDH (centre-right, pro-EU)	4.7	6
SNS (nationalist, Eurosceptic)	3.2	6
SaS (centrist-liberal, pro-EU)	6.2	5
Alliance (Hungarian minority party)	ran separately	3
Demokrati (centre-right, pro-EU)	did not run	3

(Source: [POLITICO Poll of Polls](#). Threshold for single parties: 5%. Threshold for alliances: 7%.)

¹ See [here](#) for Aretera's overview of the Ódor Government from May 2023

PRE-ELECTION LANDSCAPE

The past two and a half years have brought tectonic movements in Slovakia's multi-party politics. With public distrust towards a number of parties and institutions on the rise, support for the parties of the previously ruling centre-right coalition – Matovič's OĽaNO, the conservative Sme Rodina, the liberal SaS and the moderate Za Ľudia – has dropped significantly.

Simultaneously, the country's once united centre-left became divided after Fico's successor as PM, Peter Pellegrini, left SMER to found HLAS, another social democratic movement. Last year, HLAS confidently led in the polls, however its lead has since faded. Fico's party has managed to regain its leading position in spite of multiple investigations and allegations of institutional corruption against the ex-PM and his associates during their rule. This comes as Slovak law enforcement continues its crackdown on several SMER-linked figures, who are accused of criminal conspiracy. Fico, whose critics believe formed a ["mafia state"](#), responded by claiming that the actions of the police are equal to political persecution.

Slovakia's (also fragmented) far right, which has a history of governing in coalition with the centre-left, has also undergone a radical transformation. The disintegration of the openly neo-fascist L'SNS party, which came fourth in the 2020 elections with 8%, led to the foundation of the extremist Republika, which campaigns on an anti-Western platform and wants Slovakia out of NATO.

[Latest polls suggest](#) that SMER is leading against its main electoral rival, the Progressive Slovakia (PS) movement, with 18-21%. Currently polling between 15-20%, the pro-EU and centrist PS, which was co-founded by Slovak President Zuzana Čaputová, failed to enter parliament in 2020 when it ran in a coalition with the since dissolved centre-right SPOLU party. However, public dissatisfaction with the current parliamentary parties has helped PS re-emerge as the leading pro-EU force in Slovak politics.

POSSIBLE FORWARD SCENARIOS

A week and a half before the elections, the outcome is becoming increasingly hard to predict. While most polls predict a SMER victory, a PS win over Fico's party also remains possible, although seems less likely. Since none of two parties is projected reach below 50%, the election will hinge on the performance of the remaining parties, with support for many verging on the parliamentary threshold.

Aretera's baseline scenario suggests that Fico's SMER will lead Slovakia's next coalition government. Fico, whose populist party has a controversial history of governing with far-right formations, looks set to return to power under a similar configuration. Following a potential electoral win, SMER would likely aim for a governing coalition with Pellegrini's HLAS, as well as the far-right Republika and the nationalist SNS. However, Fico and Pellegrini have their own personal disagreements.

A SMER-led government would mean Slovakia's pro-Western orientation would likely be weakened. Over the years, Fico's SMER has turned increasingly populist, while the ex-PM also maintains close political proximity to the Kremlin. Building on the use of pro-Kremlin disinformation and historically strong pro-Russian sentiments among the electorate, Fico would potentially join Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in calls to abandon or scale down the EU's sanctions regime against Moscow, as well as its financial and military support for Kyiv. Furthermore, fears are growing that the rule of law may also be undermined and that the new government might intervene in ongoing anti-corruption investigations against SMER-linked figures.

Equally possible, however is a pro-EU governing coalition led by the Progressive Slovakia movement.

As support for the parties of the previous ruling coalition has dropped, Progressive Slovakia has emerged as Fico's primary challenger. While polls suggest SMER has a higher chance of winning the election, a SMER failure to form a functioning majority in parliament would allow the second-place PS to form the next governing coalition.

A PS-led coalition could potentially include the Christian democratic KDH, the centrist-liberal SaS, the conservative Sme Rodina and – most importantly – the centre-left HLAS, although Pellegrini's party and the PS are yet to reveal whether they would join forces. Such a government would aim to maintain and strengthen the country's positions in the EU and NATO, while maintaining support for Ukraine.

A third, inconclusive scenario would be a hung parliament. Under this outcome, neither SMER nor PS would be able to garner a parliamentary majority, due to the ideological differences in the multi-party parliament and the lack of potential allies. Should both SMER and PS fail to form a majority, the incumbent technocratic-caretaker government (appointed by President Čaputová) would continue in office until another re-run election. The likelihood of this scenario will depend on the electoral performance of the multiple parties currently polling around the 5% parliamentary threshold.

COALITION PREFERENCES

Coalition Preferences of Incoming & Potential Parliamentary Parties									
	SMER	PS	HLAS	Republika	SaS	Sme Rodina	OL'aNO	KDH	SNS
SMER	Open	Refused	Open	Open	Refused	Open	Refused	Open	Open
PS	Refused	Open	Unknown/Unclear	Refused	Open	Unknown/Unclear	Unknown/Unclear	Open	Refused
HLAS	Open	Unknown/Unclear	Open	Refused	Unknown/Unclear	Open	Refused	Open	Open
Republika	Open	Refused	Open	Open	Refused	Unknown/Unclear	Refused	Refused	Open
SaS	Refused	Open	Unknown/Unclear	Refused	Open	Open	Open	Open	Refused
Sme Rodina	Refused	Unknown/Unclear	Open	Refused	Open	Open	Open	Open	Unknown/Unclear
OL'aNO	Refused	Unknown/Unclear	Refused	Refused	Unknown/Unclear	Unknown/Unclear	Open	Unknown/Unclear	Refused
KDH	Refused	Unknown/Unclear	Unknown/Unclear	Refused	Unknown/Unclear	Open	Unknown/Unclear	Open	Unknown/Unclear
SNS	Open	Refused	Open	Open	Refused	Unknown/Unclear	Refused	Open	Open

(Source: [Dennik N](#). Green: Open. Red: Refused. Grey: Unknown/Unclear.)

This table includes all parties close to/above the parliamentary threshold. Other parties with a lower chance of entering the National Council include the recently founded centre-right Democrats party of ex-PM Eduard Heger and the Hungarian minority Alliance, both of which are [currently polling](#) at 3%.

LOOKING BEYOND THE ELECTIONS

All three of Aretera's forward scenarios entail continued political instability well beyond the snap election. Taking Slovakia's ideologically and structurally diverse multi-party politics into account, forming a functioning parliamentary majority and a stable governing coalition will be a significant challenge, regardless of whether Fico's SMER or Progressive Slovakia wins the upcoming electoral contest on 30th September.

While a part of the Slovak centre-left has an unusually close proximity to the country's far-right, a SMER-led coalition with these parties could experience significant ideological differences, particularly on foreign policy matters, between the (rather) moderate HLAS and the extremist far-right parties. Given the strong ideological differences and a potentially strong SMER opposition in the case of a PS victory, such a government would also be very difficult to sustain.

Furthermore, centrist parties will have to perform better than currently expected for a pro-European coalition to be formed. Taking the multiple parties hovering around the parliamentary threshold into account, an inconclusive election also remains possible, potentially leading to a re-run election and a new caretaker government.

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