



KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM SLOVAKIA'S PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Centre-left ex-PM beats liberal challenger in Presidential election run-off

8 April 2024


SUMMARY

Centre-left ex-Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini, the leader of the social democratic Hlas-SD party, has beaten his centre-right challenger Ivan Korčok in the second round of Slovakia's Presidential elections, held on 6th April.

Having won the most closely contested run-off vote in Slovak election history, Pellegrini – also supported by the senior coalition Smer-SD party of Prime Minister Robert Fico – secured 53.1% of the vote against 46.9% for the pro-EU ex-Foreign Minister Korčok. The former PM also benefitted from his high approval rating, general appeal to different voting groups and PM Fico's Russia-leaning rhetoric.

With Pellegrini set to be inaugurated as President on 15th June, his upcoming Presidency is poised to influence the Fico Government's policy priorities along areas such as socio-economic reforms. It will also likely mean an uninterrupted legislative process for Fico's governing coalition, in contrast to the current tension with outgoing President Zuzana Čaputová. Accordingly, Fico's Smer is considered the ultimate winner of last Saturday's elections.

Pellegrini's victory will also be followed by a leadership contest in his centre-left Hlas party and a parliamentary vote on the next Speaker of the National Council. While Aretera assumes that the three-party coalition between the Fico Government will remain stable, the junior coalition Slovak National Party (SNS) will likely use the election's outcome to strengthen its positions within the ruling bloc.



Below, Aretera takes a deeper look at the results of Slovakia's Presidential elections, as well as its political and policy implications.

POST-ELECTION LANDSCAPE

In line with Aretera's pre-election forecast¹, centre-left ex-Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini, the leader of the social democratic Hlas-SD party, has beaten his centre-right challenger Ivan Korčok in the second round of Slovakia's Presidential elections. Pellegrini secured 53.1% of the vote against Korčok's 46.9% on 6th April.

Also supported by Prime Minister Robert Fico's senior coalition Smer-SD party, Pellegrini received 1.4 million votes against Korčok's 1.24 million, winning the race for the Presidency in all of Slovakia's regions except for Western Slovakia and – subsequently – the capital Bratislava. Turnout in the second round was 61.1%, nearly 10% higher than during the first round on 23rd March, making it the most contested Presidential run-off vote in Slovak political history.

While Korčok emerged victorious from the first round with 42.5%, his centre-left challenger not only secured more endorsements from the remaining candidates but also galvanized more support across Slovak society. Several other factors contributed to his victory, including his ability to appeal to various, ideologically different voting groups, including supporters of rival candidates and minorities, as well as his consistently high approval rating (35%+ against Korčok's average of 10%). Pellegrini also benefitted from echoing PM Fico's Russian-leaning rhetoric about the war in Ukraine, as well as from Korčok's defence of Slovakia's position on the Yugoslav Wars, which is rejected by a significant proportion of Slovak society. The centre-right ex-FM accepted the results but noted the campaign was unfair (stressing that the controversial question of sending troops to Ukraine is not even in the President's jurisdiction).

PM FICO SEEN AS THE ULTIMATE WINNER

Slovakia held Presidential elections just six months after the country's last parliamentary elections and two months before it is due to hold EU parliamentary elections. Last October's parliamentary election resulted in the return of former Prime Minister Robert Fico and his centre-left-turned-populist Smer-SD party, which currently governs² in a coalition with Pellegrini's centre-left Hlas-SD and the nationalist Slovak National Party (SNS) of Andrej Danko.

While the Fico Government has had several political disputes with Slovakia's outgoing (and liberal) President Zuzana Čaputová, Pellegrini's Presidency will likely mean a period in which the head of state will not move politically against the incumbent cabinet, striving instead to foster unity among Slovak citizens. For the country's three-party government, this could result in a smooth legislative process, as well as political synergies between the government and the Presidential office.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE RULING BLOC

Pellegrini's victory in the Presidential elections means that his Hlas-SD party, the second largest formation within the governing coalition, will have to elect a new leader and the Parliament a new speaker. Interior Minister Matúš Šutaj Eštok is seen as the most likely Hlas figure to succeed Pellegrini as party chair; other potential candidates include Economy Minister Denisa Saková or Richard Raši, Minister for Informatization and Regional Development.

¹ See [here](#) for Aretera's pre-election forecast from March 2024

² See [here](#) for Aretera's overview of the Fico Government from October 2023

While Aretera's baseline scenario assumes that Slovakia's three-party governing coalition will remain stable, junior coalition member SNS is hoping to secure a greater role within the ruling bloc. On 8th April, SNS leader Andrej Danko reiterated his desire to discuss the future functioning of the coalition, potentially aiming to secure more influence within the government for his party. The SNS, which currently has three ministers in the government, is also hoping to secure a new ministry or the speaker's position in parliament, which – following Pellegrini's election victory – was temporarily transferred to Hlas MP and Deputy Speaker Peter Žiga. As Hlas will also likely push to keep the speaker's position, disagreements with the SNS could potential impact the coalition's stability.

LIKELY POLICY IMPLICATIONS

With Pellegrini set to be inaugurated as President on 15th June, his upcoming Presidency is poised to influence the Fico Government's policy priorities. His stressed commitment to democratic norms, national unity and addressing socio-economic challenges will shape the policy agenda in the foreseeable future. Furthermore, Pellegrini's emphasis on political stability and continuity in government signals his intent to guide Slovakia through a period of transition and uncertainty.

Representing the corresponding interests of the Fico Government, Pellegrini's foreign policy aims to strike a balance between Slovakia's relations with its Western allies and cooperation with Eastern powers such as Russia and China. While this approach could enhance Slovakia's attractiveness to Eastern partners, it ultimately risks eroding trust towards Bratislava within the Euro-Atlantic community. Despite the Government's frequent Kremlin-friendly rhetoric, however, Slovakia will likely continue to align with the West, instead of emulating the Russia-friendly policy of neighbouring Hungary in the near future.


LOOKING AHEAD

Pellegrini's victory has reinforced the political position of Slovakia's centre-left and nationalist governing parties, while dealing an electoral blow to the structurally fragmented centre-right and liberal opposition. The election cycle will continue with EU parliamentary elections on 8th June, in which the leading opposition Progressive Slovakia (PS), which endorsed Korčok for President, hopes to overtake Fico's Smer as the most popular political party.

Since over 60% of the capital voted for Pellegrini's challenger, opposition discontent with the results of the Presidential elections may lead to protests in Bratislava. These could take shape along controversial issues such as recent government-proposed changes to the public media system, which critics and the opposition view as an attempt to push for political influence. This seems unlikely, however, to impact the stability of the government in the short term.

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