

**Natália Kováčová, Andrea
Jankurová**

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DIRECTION OF SLOVAK PARTY SYSTEM AFTER THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN 2016

NATÁLIA KOVÁČOVÁ, PH.D.
Danubius University, SLOVAKIA

ANDREA JANKUROVÁ, PH.D.
Danubius University, SLOVAKIA

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is in the context of the main specifics of the Slovak parliamentary elections in 2016 to highlight the party development in Slovakia and to predict its future direction. Parliamentary elections due to electoral instability and fluctuations determined the configuration of the parliamentary political scene. The proportion of new, non-system parties was increased and output was to create surprising ruling coalition which has dissolved the existing ideological and ethnic line. The ambition of the paper is to highlight the political situation that followed the elections and significantly modified the distribution of political forces existed previously.

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INTRODUCTION

In March 2016, the seventh parliamentary elections took place since the establishment of the independent Slovak Republic, which result is visible in

the radical reconfiguration of the party system, enfeeblement of standard moderate parties and election of anti-system forces to parliament.

Parliamentary elections have brought success to 8 political parties, which managed to pass the 5% threshold at the Election Day (SMER-SD, SaS, OĽaNO-NOVA, SNS, ĽSNS, Sme rodina, Most-Híd, Siet') (see Table No.1).

TABLE NO. 1. PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION RESULTS IN 2016

Political party	Share of valid votes
SMER – sociálna demokracia (SMER-SD)	28,28%
Sloboda a Solidarita (SaS)	12,10%
Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti (OĽANO – NOVA)	11,02%
Slovenská národná strana (SNS)	8,64%
Kotleba – Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko (ĽS Naše Slovensko)	8,04%
SME RODINA – Boris Kollár	6,62%
MOST – HÍD	6,50%
#SIEŤ	5,60%

Source: Statistical Office, 2016

The impact on the election results had several factors that greatly modified the behavior of electors. One of them were also electoral cases and issues that significantly influenced public opinion and participation of citizens in elections and contributed to the diverse electorate fluctuations. For example these subjects made their way to the fore: problems of migration crisis, Váhostav case, strike actions of teachers and nurses. Refugee crisis that broke out in Europe in mid-2015 bypassed Slovakia in radical form and its interference to the internal political development was indeed formative. Generally, the campaign before the parliamentary elections was held in spirit of protection of countries against refugees, the European Union, the invasion of Islam that threatens our national and cultural identity.

Curiosity about the elections is that for the first time there was set a two-week ban on opinion polls. Pre-election surveys differed in their arguments, which may be justified mainly by differential targeting on the exploratory sample and the fact that a third of the voters was at the last week

before the election doubtful. Precedence accent of parliamentary elections in 2016 was not given to the question of who wins the election, but with whom will the triumphal social democrats assemble next government. From the position of analysts, several coalition models came to the fore that predicted possible coalition partnerships:¹

1. The first coalition model may have been created by a political party SMER-SD and SNS. By leaving of SNS leader J. Slota it comes to a renaissance and the revitalization of the political subject and also thanks to the pragmatic leadership of the new president A. Danko. According to opinion polls before the election, SNS showed 7–8% public support. In the national issues and in the current refugee crisis the parties were cohesive, which told of a relative program and ideological homogeneity of possible aroused coalition.
2. Within the scope of the second model the conservative party KDH appeared to be suitable partner of winning party SMER-SD, which so far has always managed to defend the status of parliamentary party. Bond of coalition may have become with regard to constitutionally allocation of family. Questionable would be, how would the traditional electorate of Christian party answer to possible alliance. Probably there would be a decline of its preferences and destruction of political trust by HZDS model that was in the parliamentary elections in 2010 unsuccessful and for their coalition grouping that they have formed after the elections in 2006. Ultimately, this negative reality caught up with the KDH, which was after the elections in 2016 for the first time since 1990 unsuccessful to reach the 5% threshold needed to enter parliament.
3. The third model predicted a possible coalition of Social Democrats with party Most- Híd which in the polls showed stable results in the form of 8%. On the one hand, the possible cooperation would for the party SMER-SD meant the loss of nationally orientated voter, but on the other hand it would have received positive feedback i area of the minority policy.
4. According to the fourth model, the social democrats may have participated with the party of R. Procházka, Siet'. Opinion polls laid high hopes on the party and within them the party occupied third place in average. As a freshman on the political scene, the party managed to gain mainly disappointed voters from the political situation and protest orientated

¹ D. Vlček et al., *Ako volia Slováci*, Tribun EU, Brno 2016, p. 52.

voters. Just by possible coalition alliance would have the party unintentionally eliminated its preferences and become the party for single use only. From the strategic point of view, the more appropriate status for Siet' was opposition status and the party may have become gradually (analogous to SDKÚ-DS) strong alternative against the SMER-SD party. However, ultimately the election results were an unpleasant surprise for the party which has entered coalition with only 5.6% that meant it's political end.

5. The fifth model was carried in the similar spirit as after the 2010 elections when all parties had defined against the conquering Smer, so that Smer would not be able to form a government. Improbability of this model can be substantiate by the lack of political preferences of the two political parties SaS and SDKÚ-DS, which in 2010 ranged between 13–15%. Political subjects were not careless toward given problem, as proved by the creation of political partnership of parties OĽaNO and Nova. Potential opposition alliance, which R. Fico called conglomerate had another negative aspect, namely the absence of strong opposition leader, who would be suitable alternative toward Prime Minister R. Fico. Although the opinion polls predicted that the SMER-SD will form a coalition with the limit of three parties, the parliamentary elections in 2016 were finally striking when political party of R. Sulík which, according to surveys, was at the threshold of electability, gained on election day 12, 15%; which nominated him to the position of a potential prime minister².

Election results have generally brought up some unexpected conclusions... Curiosity of elections to the parliament was a decrease of electoral votes for SMER-SD and Siet' and ambush of KDĽ, since some opinion polls even labeled R. Procházka (Siet') as the new Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic before the election. After nearly 26 years of historical tradition the political party KDĽ did not fight its way into the parliament. On the contrary, for considerable success can be regarded acquired preferences of SAS and ĽSNS. Political party SaS that in surveys, exceeded on average 5% have ultimately become the second winning party with the support of 12.10%, which was above expectations of soli-

² Štatistický úrad, *Výsledky volieb 2016: Ako volili Slováci v zahraničí*, <http://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/319373/vysledky-volieb-2016-ako-volili-slovaci-v-zahranici/> (accessed: 08.01.2017).

tary liberals. Outside the gates of parliament according to the polls should remain political freshman ĽSNS, whose absolute result can be considered as considerable success and some electoral phenomenon³ Party, which was described by several foreign analysts as extremist, was supported mainly by frustrated voters, first time voters and young generation.

Due to the final results the five original prediction coalitionist models were replaced by four:⁴

- Coalition of so called national interest: included till now unimaginable cooperation of political parties SNS and Most-Híd, along with Siet' and Smer. By this they would have obtained 85 members of parliament in National Council, thereby the coalition would achieve a parliamentary majority. The problem, however, appears to be cooperation of two opposing parties SNS and Most-Híd, which would lose a significant part of the electorate by their potential partnership,
- Widely right-wing model: would consist of an alliance of SaS, SNS, OĽaNO-NOVA, Siet', Most-Híd, Sme rodina. Multilateral coalition, probably led by Prime Minister R. Sulík would be facing a serious challenge of maintaining long-term stability and self-existence,
- Caretaker Government: a similar model as in 2009 in the Czech Republic and at its head would be non-partisan,
- Early parliamentary elections: due to the forthcoming Slovak Presidency in the EU Council this step would damage the reputation of Slovakia abroad and therefore this solution is not an option.

The situation after the elections initially appeared as inconclusive and standoff but after a series of discussions and negotiations of party leaders it got across formation consisted of four political parties: SMER-SD, Most-Híd, Siet', SNS. The new system was created. According to S. Kováčová "System as such, incorporates in itself a number of elements – components and interactions between them ongoing, whereby the relationships are according to supporters of the system theory determining and crucial for the definition and characterization of the system". The new government became the target of criticism because of the varying decisions of party

³ A. Chlebanová, *Dopad volieb do Národnej rady SR 2016 na formovanie vlády*, <http://www.e-polis.cz/clanek/dopad-volieb-do-narodnej-rady-sr-2016-na-formovanie-vlady.html> (accessed 17.11.2016), p. 37.

⁴ *Rozloženie kresiel v parlamente a možné kombinácie vlády*, <http://www.hlavnespravy.sk/rozlozenie-kresiel-v-parlamente-a-mozne-kombinacie-vlady/752585> (accessed 01.01.2017).

leaders, who initially refused to form common government. The composition of the ruling coalition, which was formed after the parliamentary elections in 2016, denied actual main splitting line within the party system. The strongest party carries a “political legacy in form of controversial laws, doubtful government decisions and corruption cases which pose a risk that the price for the decision to join the coalition cooperation will be the loss of personal integrity of parties which Smer criticized during previous era and called for ending of its government”⁵. In case of Smer this risk turned into reality immediately after the election, and that caused that the party today in fact does not exist.

In an effort to predict the future development and direction of the party system the dominance of the social democrats plays the key role, which is within the left-right spectrum clearly left. The question is, till when R. Fico manages to retain his leading position in the party and if the party is supposed to offer a suitable alternative to a strong chairman who would be able to maintain at least 20% stable public support. Into the account for forehead of chair comes the younger generation of politicians, such as R. Kaliňák, P. Pellegrini or P. Kažimír. In comparison with neighboring Poland and the Czech Republic, the Slovak party system is characterized by more demand for charismatic leaders similar to V. Mečiar, or R. Fico. However, if there is no fulfillment of these assumptions, then the change of the party system can be expected, which will be reflected in the dominance of those political parties that are critically defining against government appointment such as OĽaNO, or it can come to the establishment of the political model similar to that of neighboring Czech Republic, where the movement of A. Babiš used the crisis of stable parties in the political system. Approach of Smer to the exercise of power in the areas that most influence the formation of a sense of justice respectively injustice among citizens after the 2016 elections did not modify in any way, even though the government is not monochromatic anymore. Also the principle of so called selective justice in detecting or investigating of scandals is currently applied identically to the previous term. Political scandal of case Bašternák is its clear evidence and testifies that in this setting practically nothing changed and suggests that changes will not happen soon, until the balance of power changes.

⁵ G. Mesežnikov, *Slovenský politický rok 2016 sa zrejme ešte nekončí*, <http://komentare.sme.sk/c/20419964/slovensky-politicky-rok-2016-sa-zrejme-este-nekonci.html#ixzz4Vj8VF99N> (accessed 11.12.2016), p. 5.

The problem, which was visible in the election in 2016, was the absence of a large right-wing party, which would be able to exceed the 15% threshold and took the concept of the political party SDKÚ-DS from year 2006 and 2010. The current center-right line is suffering disintegration and inability of compact mobilization. The system clearly lacks political party, which would strictly define itself (as in the past SDKÚ-DS) against the Social Democrats. The election results indicated that potential ideological opponent could have become the leader of a political party SaS, R. Sulík.

Following the elections polls were conducted through which we can predict the future party system of SR. In April the agency AKO published development of post-election preferences of political parties, in which the party SMER-SD maintained the primacy with 28.80%⁶. As already outlined, the future operation of this entity is in the hands of three-time prime minister, because if he leaves, the party may lose its stable preferences. Unlike other political parties, the Social Democrats have the advantage that in the political scene they act as a long-term stable and politically successful entity with a wide electorate base and regional cells. In late December 2016 party preferences decreased by two percent. It is likely that the decline in electoral support of Smer will not stop, whereby Smer is losing voters not in favor for another left-wing force, but primarily for the benefit of SNS nationalists and extremists from ĽSNS.

Post-election increase of preferences in April according to agency AKO recorded SaS (16.2%). The result can be attributed to the political situation, which occurred just after the elections and several political parties disappointed their voters, and Liberals subsequently harvested from that situation. They got on their side fraction of the original voters of Most-Híd and Siet'. In the future, however, also the internal party turbulence may affect the evolution of preferences such as leaving of R. Sulík from the chair post and his subsequent candidacy as well as opinion in which he refused to give up the mandate of the MEP, which can damage the reputation of the party itself. In December 2016 the agency AKO published polls which showed that the party allocate 15.80% public support⁷.

⁶ *Prieskumy agentúry AKO: Smer by vybral s 35%, Siet' by získala iba 8,1%, v parlamente aj SaS a Boris Kollár*, <http://www.netky.sk/clanok/prieskum-agentury-ako-smer-by-vyhral-s-35-siet-by-ziskala-iba-8-1-v-parlamente-aj-sas-a-boris-kollar> (accessed 16.11.2016).

⁷ *Prieskumy preferencií pre parlamentné voľby*, <http://preferencie.teraz.sk/> (accessed 13.01.2017).

A month after the elections the support of party SNS substantially increased, to which 13.7% of citizens expressed confidence according to the survey. In comparison with the election, its support is growing thanks to the chairman A. Danko and it is becoming the second strongest party, as evidenced by the December survey, when the party gained 14.10% of preferential points.

The similar example of this is the result of party ĽSNS, which preferences compared to the election results increased by (10.90%) and it can be assumed that they have not reached their ceiling yet. Under growing support of political party have signed primarily social trends in which young generation comes to the fore, which ceased to trust traditional political parties and it is characterized by dissatisfaction with the performance of state functions. The increase in popularity of the party leader can be supported by some modification of media communication, as M. Kotleba is trying to act seamlessly and expand his electoral base. By his presentation he is trying to deviate from the original image of the radical nationalist and xenophobic party. In the case of a hypothetical increase in preferences toward 20% and other parties with limited potential of coalition the violation of stability of political situation may occur, which would in turn lead to the creation of a broad right-to-left aggregations. This would apply especially to the two political parties namely SAS and SMER-SD, or in the other case the scenario with early parliamentary elections would occur because of plan incompatibility of parties.

Research of AKO placed OĽaNO-NOVA on further place with gain of 7%. After the election party focused on the sharp criticism of the current government coalition and it has opened several corruption cases linked to the party SMER-SD. Emphasis on criticism of political parties, which overshadowed ideological and programmatic line of party may cause that future status of OĽaNO-NOVA will act as a negative element in the ruling coalition. On the other hand, it is necessary to remark that even this strategy raises favor of certain part of the electorate where I. Matovič holds the position of unheard voice of citizens. In late December party preferences increased by one percent and it can be assumed that even if the party will not be part of the governing coalition it will manage to maintain a stable support.

One month after the elections, and consistently also in the December survey of already mentioned agency the political party Most-Híd man-

aged to maintain a stable percentage of preferential points, although due forming of ruling coalition party has faced fierce criticism. Argument of B. Bugár accentuating on the necessity of formation of ruling coalition due to the expected EU Council Presidency in most public did not arouse interest. To future, we can predict fade of voter support because of a misunderstood attitude of the party to the alliance with the foreclosed parties SMER-SD and SNS, to what the party can react by pragmatic cooperation with SMK to maintain its stability. Threat to the party Most-Hid would be the creation of a new center-right or center-left subject. Logically it may be expected that in 2017 the formation of one or two relevant center subjects will occur.

Based on the April after-election surveys would as the last party get to the parliament party of B. Kollár, Sme rodina with 5.40% of preferential points. After the elections, the leader of the political party started in bigger rate emphasize to populist rhetoric with the absence of a deeper program alternative, since he mainly made himself known through social networks by radical attitude toward minority politics. In December 2016 the party jumped over OĽaNO-NOVA in the polls and even showed 8.40% support⁸. In the case of future potential membership in the ruling coalition the party would probably lose its critical anti-establishment potential, by which would it hypothetically become a party of one ruling era.

Month after the elections the public opinions remained constant in case of political parties KDĽ and SMK. In comparison with April survey of agency AKO, KDĽ party in December amended and its preferences (5.50%) would be sufficient to obtain the status of parliamentary party. Weak electoral support in the elections felt the party Siet' whose political strategy after the elections in 2016 clearly demonstrated that it is party for single use only. The chairman of a political party who aspired to the President of SR and also imaginarily to the future prime minister in October 2016 announced his retirement from politics. The political party did not make it to face the pressure and cope with the post-election situation, as evidenced by the resignation of five members of the party⁹.

⁸ *Prieskumy preferencií pre parlamentné voľby*, <http://preferencie.teraz.sk/> (accessed 13.01.2017).

⁹ *Koniec koalíciej strany Siet'? Vzbúrení poslanci odchádzajú*, <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/365134/koniec-koalicnej-strany-siet-vzbureni-poslanci-odchadzaju/> (accessed 22.12.2016).

In general, we can say that the future direction of the party system and the development of political parties is conditioned upon the electoral behavior and very civil society, to which the globalization process has the impact. As a result of globalization new technological and communication trends came to the fore, which have contributed to improvement of policy by facilitating communication options. On the other hand, it is necessary to emphasize the negative aspects of globalization that deepened regional economic differentiation of west versus east and north versus south. Developmental stage of political parties is largely determined by new means of communication, as evidenced by the fact that parties in election campaigns use Internet – social networks expressively. Polls and analysis of voting behavior come to the fore, which in turn modify the programmatic orientation of political parties and the nature of their campaigns. However, this trend undermines the long-term vision of political parties and under the tendency of populism the parties focus most intense on its operations just in the pre-election era.

Populist strategies, when congressmen say to the voters what they want to hear often carry unrealistic promises, for example in the form of a salary increase, etc. It is clear that this style of communication is attractive to voters and during election they will sympathize more with the political parties who operate with increasing of living standards, as with those which are program-aimed to long-term savings for the purpose of dynamics of the economic progress of the country. The phenomenon of “endless ring of populism”¹⁰. Comes to the fore. The real problem, however, arises when the hitherto opposition parties become part of the ruling coalition and they face the challenge of fulfilling their promises. It is therefore not unusual that after coming to power, the percentage of electorate support decreases.

Perception of the current policy is largely influenced by the media, which are the creators of a political image, often linked with the theme of corruption and scandals. This fact invokes negative perceptions of the political situation when the voter departs from the political scene due to the umbrage and disappointment. Increase in meaning of electoral marketing is notable herein that under the influence of mass media dominance occurred the absolute modification of the communication strategy of parties in comparison with the previous type of election campaigns.

¹⁰ D. Vlček et al., *Ako volia Slováci*, Tribun EU, Brno 2016, p. 26.

Last but not least in modern politics play also an important role social links between political party and civil society. Currently, it is increasingly more visible that voter's behavior is more individualized and family mannerism within the meaning of the vote according to the model of relative gets into the background¹¹. Voters calculate and tend to a political party before the election that will bring them the greatest benefit. From this aspect the voter's behavior becomes unpredictable, as evidenced by the often erroneous polls. Economic caginess of voters leads to their frustration of unfulfilled expectations, which parallel negatively determines the participation of citizens in elections.

One problem in our society seems to be the low participation rate of first-time voters and younger generation. Their passivity is a risk to the effective functioning of democracy. The voluntariness of political participation in terms of using their right to vote has an important role because in the case of low voter turnout an undesirable phenomenon may occur, when demagogues or populists come to power.

Nowadays, the aspect of financial means needed for implementation of election campaigns of political parties is increasing. Then in ambitions to get their power they are using all available means and donations from sponsors, which brings them into positions of their guarantor, in terms of fulfilling their expectations that can be often in contrast with interests of the state. The success of political party in the election campaign depends primarily on media tools that require considerable financial resources. Therefore, according to some experts, the program line of the parties gets into the background that dominated for example in the 19th century and election managers who are able to provide adequate funding for quality marketing presentation come to the fore¹².

CONCLUSION

Parliamentary elections in 2016 have strongly influenced the configuration of the parliamentary political scene. The proportion of new, non-system parties increased and the outcome was to create "patchwork" of the ruling coalition. Its composition modified several till then dividing lines namely coalition-opposition (Smer-SD, SNS vs. Most-Híd, Siet'), ideological (Smer-SD vs. Most-Híd) and ethnic (SNS vs. Most-Híd).

¹¹ M. Antoš, J. Wintr, *Volby, demokracie, politické svobody*, PBtisk, Příbram 2010, p. 39.

¹² D. Vlček et al., *Ako volia Slováci*, Tribun EU, Brno 2016, p. 32.

In ambition to evaluate the current development after the parliamentary elections in 2016, we can conclude that there has been a modification of voting behavior, which had an impact on change of party system. By this the character of the elections has approached to some extent to the parliamentary elections in 2010, which also brought structural reform of system of political parties. Direction of the future development of the political system depends on the activity of the ruling coalition and on how it can operate consistently and meet the expectations of the public. As already indicated by polls, frustration from aroused situation mostly affected voters of party Siet', in front of which the gates of parliament have already closed. Stable preferential votes would in the next election hypothetically remain parties OĽaNO-NOVA, SaS. If no surprising and unexpected events occur, it is possible to predict the leader position of party SMER-SD although with gradually declining voter support and reinforcement of preferential votes for the party ĽSNS and SNS, which will get the original voters of the Social Democrats. The question is how voters will react to freshman on political scene party of B. Kollár and his political action, to which the following parliamentary elections will bring answers.

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