

Slovakia's general election: The impact of the refugee crisis is likely to push Robert Fico back to power

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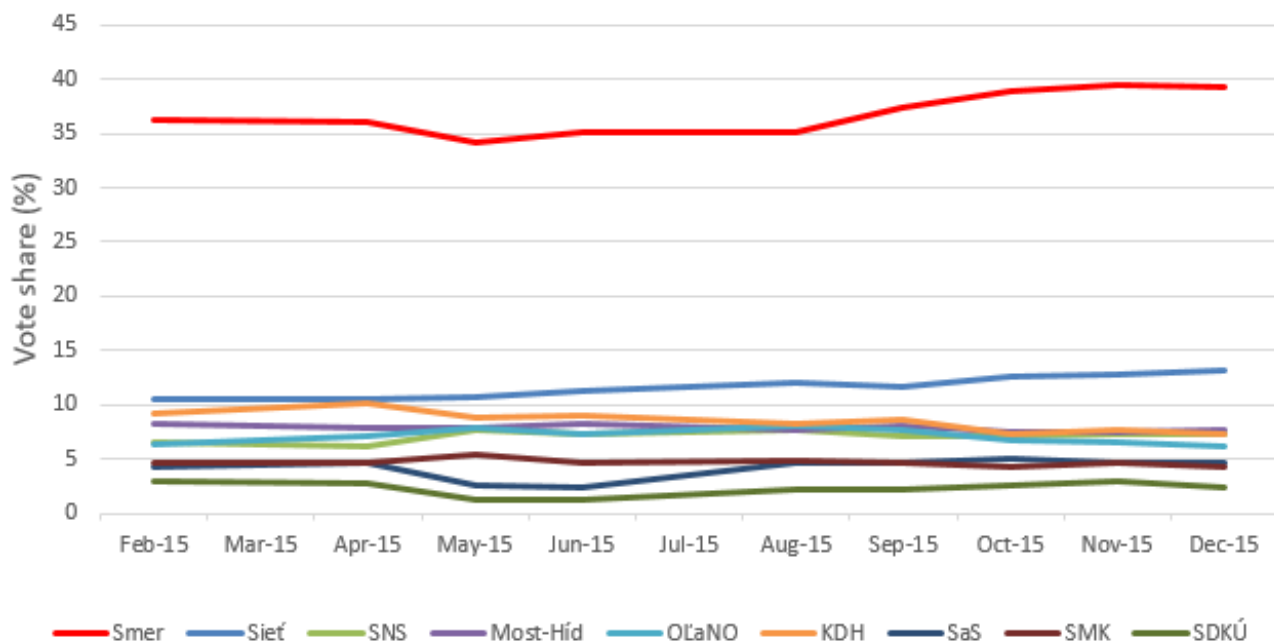
Voters in Slovakia will go to the polls on 5 March to elect their next government. [Daniel Kral](#) previews the election, noting that while the ruling Smer-SD, led by Robert Fico, is unlikely to win an absolute majority, it remains by far the most popular party in the polling and has been helped by the hard line taken by Fico against refugee quotas during the current crisis.



Parliamentary elections will be held in Slovakia on 5 March. The incumbent Prime Minister [Robert Fico](#), of the leftist-populist Smer-SD party, is hoping to secure a third full term at the country's helm and thus match the record of his most successful Central European counterpart, Hungary's [Viktor Orbán](#).

While Smer-SD is unlikely to win an absolute majority as it did [in 2012](#) – which enabled it to govern alone for the first time in Slovakia's democratic history – it remains by far the most popular party in opinion polls, as shown in the figure below. Although this time Smer will likely need a junior coalition partner, most of the smaller parties that pass the 5 per cent threshold and make it to parliament are bound to compete for its favour for a stint in power. Only the libertarian [SaS](#) and the populist-conservative [OĽaNO](#) have outright rejected any cooperation with Smer.

Figure: Average voting intention figures in opinion polls ahead of the 2016 Slovakian election



Note: Figures are an average from the Polis and Focus polling agencies.

Indeed, most parties are likely to prop up a future Smer government. First among them is the recently established centre-right Siet' (Network) party, which is consistently second in the polls, and led by [Radoslav Procházka](#), an unsuccessful presidential candidate. Promising a bottom-up modernisation of the state, Procházka has always dodged questions about post-election cooperation with Smer.

Alternatively, the nationalist [SNS](#), Smer's coalition partner between 2006 and 2010, has been resurrected and re-branded under its new leader. Campaigning for a strong role for the state in strategic industries and against multiculturalism, it is Smer's most natural ally. The Christian Democrats (KDH), a rare constant of Slovakia's political scene, or the moderates representing the Hungarian minority (Most-Híd) may also agree on common terms with Smer.

The two-time Prime Minister Dzurinda, and his close ally, former Finance Minister Ivan Mikloš, are not running for re-election. Indeed, SDKÚ-DS, their once dominant centre-right reformist party, has been abandoned by almost all its MPs and looks set to remain outside parliament.

Meanwhile, Fico's Smer benefits from Slovakia's fractured and quarrelling opposition. Following the fall of the centre-right [Radičová](#) government in 2011, and the [Gorilla corruption scandal](#) that emerged prior to the 2012 snap elections, the Slovak centre and centre-right consists of at least a dozen micro to small-size parties. Amid the multiple crises facing Europe and the Eurozone, Smer galvanises support by promising stability and security as opposed to the fragility and chaos that would allegedly ensue from any broad anti-Smer coalition.

Pre-election issues

An [unprecedented consensus](#) across Slovakia's political spectrum has formed regarding the migration crisis, which has become the central issue of the election. Virtually every political party is critical of the EU's current approach. In a move aimed uniquely at the domestic audience, PM Fico [launched a legal challenge](#) in December 2015 against the EU's mandatory relocation scheme. As is evident from the figure above, the migration crisis has been a blessing for Smer, whose popularity had been dwindling by summer 2015, and whose combative stance vis-à-vis the EU and often [strong anti-Muslim rhetoric](#) in the name of protecting Slovakia has seen it surge in the polls.

The president, Andrej Kiska, focused in his [new year's speech](#) on the appalling state of Slovakia's education and healthcare. Indeed, Slovak teachers have [the lowest relative pay](#) in the OECD, and the performance of Slovak students in the OECD's PISA tests [has deteriorated](#) over time. Since January 2016, many teachers have been on [strike alert](#), eager to draw the government's attention to their plight. In healthcare, Slovakia was rocked in November 2014 by a high-profile corruption scandal, culminating with [the resignation](#) of the health minister, the speaker and the deputy speaker of the parliament. The uncovered [close ties](#) among Smer's top politicians, boards of hospitals, senior civil servants and private suppliers raise questions about a fundamental capture of the sector by a well-connected clique.

The opposition has so far been unable or unwilling to bring these issues to the fore, often trying to compete with Smer on the party's strong anti-migrant rhetoric. Slovaks, who are not [particularly fond](#) even of fellow EU-citizens, continue to be overwhelmingly concerned about the unprecedented influx of migrants and refugees to Europe, and the EU's response.

What is at stake

The lack of credible political opposition to Smer has been damaging to Slovakia's system of checks and balances. While Hungary and Poland have been in the spotlight because of the ruling parties' moves to politicise the state and reverse earlier liberal reforms, a similar, more quiet, yet no less worrying phenomenon has been happening in Slovakia.

After eight years of Smer's rule, all key institutions of the state are packed with allies and party loyalists. From the [general prosecutor](#), who is Fico's former classmate, through to the highest placed judges, the public audit office, regulatory authorities, the public broadcaster, and the central bank governor, Smer has gained unprecedented influence over all walks of civil and political life to the extent that no public institution holds the Smer government to account. Only Kiska, who [beat](#) Fico in the 2014 presidential run-off, challenges government views and priorities, although even he is cautious in his criticism of Smer, refraining from using words such as corruption in his

speeches.

It is unlikely that Smer will ever have the two-thirds majority needed to [unilaterally rewrite the constitution](#), as Fidesz did in Hungary, or risk [street protests](#) and the [watchful eye of Brussels](#) by abrupt controversial moves, as Poland's government is presently doing. Instead, Smer has achieved similar objectives by a gradual proliferation of the state consistent with, even if not in the spirit of, the existing rules.

While Smer is undoubtedly Slovakia's most successful political party after the fall of communism, its total control of the public sphere and many corruption scandals make it averse to any change and much needed reforms. Indeed, Smer has become synonymous with the status-quo. Whether this status-quo continues largely undisrupted will be decided by Slovaks in early March.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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About the author

Daniel Kral – *University College London*

Daniel Kral completed his Master of Research at UCL's SSEES with his thesis on crisis adjustment in CEE published by UCL. He is currently working to expand the work into book form. He tweets [@DanielKral1](#)

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