



Political polarisation in Slovakia: the 2024  
presidential election in context

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## Summary

An assassination attempt against the prime minister of Slovakia Robert Fico sent shockwaves across Europe and drew attention to the political divisions within Slovak society. Since Fico's populist government assumed power in the autumn of 2023, the country has been bitterly divided into its supporters and its opponents. The opponents argue that Fico's administration is taking an illiberal turn and following in the footsteps of Hungary. Despite this, Fico's government remains popular among its supporters, exemplified by the election of Fico's ally, Peter Pellegrini, as president of Slovakia. This UI Report examines political divisions in Slovakia through the recent presidential campaign. It analyses how these divisions shaped the results of the elections and argues that the president's office now has to lead the way to reconciliation within the society.

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## Introduction

An assassination attempt against the prime minister of Slovakia, Robert Fico, on 15 May 2024 was a wake-up call for many. Political polarisation, which had characterised the country for several years, had reached a point at which the interior minister, Matúš Šutaj Ešťok, warned that Slovakia was “on the edge of civil war” and needed immediate de-escalation (Euronews 2024). A first attempt to reconcile the society was a joint statement by the outgoing president Zuzana Čaputová, a firm critic of the Fico government, and her successor Peter Pellegrini, a Fico ally and the chairman of a social democratic Voice (Hlas) party. The statement was given weight by the fact that, in a context of generally low trust in politicians, the two presidents, from different sides of the political divide, topped the list of most trusted politicians. Around half of the population declared their trust in both (TASR 2024). In this statement, Čaputová stressed the need to “step out of the vicious circle of hatred and mutual accusations” and acknowledge that the hostile atmosphere was “our collective work” (Associated Press 2024). Pellegrini called on all parties to scale down the ongoing European Parliament election campaign to avoid further clashes between politicians. Together, the two signalled a need to overcome political polarisation – a divide between the supporters of the ruling populist left-right Fico government and the opposition.

The joint statement directed attention to the role of the president in Slovakia and how the office has been shaped by the country’s political divide. This UI Report looks back to the presidential elections in March-April 2024, which preceded the shooting of prime minister Fico. The objective of the Report is twofold. First, through the presidential elections, it analyses the political polarisation after the controversial prime

minister Robert Fico returned to power. Second, it shows how these divisions led to an historically high level of electoral mobilisation. The paper argues that, even though Pellegrini was elected to office with the strong support of the Fico government, and the opposition has warned that Pellegrini is unlikely to oppose Fico, the president now has to reach across the political divides to reconcile society.

The Report begins with a brief overview of the key political events of recent years, starting from 2018, when the assassination of journalist Ján Kuciak greatly accelerated the polarisation in Slovakia. This is followed by an overview of the rules of electing a president in Slovakia and the presentation of candidates who participated in the 2024 elections, which helps us paint a picture of the political views that were represented in the elections. Then we analyse the key divisions and events of the 2024 presidential campaign. The last section presents concluding remarks.

## Background

Political polarisation in Slovakia has long roots and many facets. For example, the Velvet Revolution – which led to the fall of the communist regime – and the dissolution of Czechoslovakia created considerable controversy within society, a common problem among emerging democracies. Additionally, the country’s considerable ethnic diversity among its 5.4 million people has underscored political divides in the country. According to the CIA World Factbook, the biggest ethnic group in Slovakia is Slovak (83.8%), followed by Hungarian (7.8%), and Romani (officially 1.2%, but estimated to be between 7-11%) (CIA 2024). While the Hungarian minority is traditionally represented by ethnic Hungarian parties, the Romani people have faced discrimination. Both groups have been at times the target of attacks by nationalist



politicians. Additionally, the LGBTIQ+ community has been the target of hate speech and attacks, with two members of the community being killed in 2022 by a far-right perpetrator.

Since the early 2000s, the political playing field in Slovakia has been dominated by the populist social democratic Direction (Smer) party. The head of the party, Robert Fico, served as prime minister on several occasions until being forced to resign in 2018 by the biggest popular protests since the Velvet Revolution. The protests followed the assassination of Kuciak, who was investigating high-level corruption, and his fiancé. The assassination sparked anti-corruption outrage in Slovakia, which transformed the political field.

First, in 2019, Zuzana Čaputová, deputy chair of the liberal Progressive Slovakia (Progresívne Slovensko) party, was elected president. A year later, Direction suffered a considerable loss in the parliamentary elections and the party split. The elections were won by a populist anti-corruption party, Ordinary People and Independent Candidates (Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti), headed by Igor Matovič. The populist party formed a government with other right-wing parties and launched a forceful anti-corruption campaign. Nevertheless, the new government, and Matovič in particular, came under heavy criticism over its handling of the covid-19 pandemic, which erupted a few days after the new government had taken office. Matovič's unpredictability, and a stunt to acquire the Russian-made Sputnik V vaccine, was unacceptable for his coalition partners and the prime minister was forced to resign. The crisis presented former prime minister Fico with an opportunity to reinvent himself and lead the protests against the pandemic control measures.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine at the start of 2022 added oil to the fire. Slovakia's dependence on Russian oil and an inflow of refugees from neighbouring Ukraine accelerated tensions within society. Eduard Heger's government, which had taken office after Matovič had quit, was a strong supporter of Ukraine. Military equipment, including fighter jets and air defence systems, were donated. A share of the population, however, was less enthusiastic about support for Ukraine; some argued, among other things, that the government was undermining Slovakia's ability to defend itself. According to one survey, only 51 percent of Slovaks held Russia accountable for the war and 37 percent saw Russia as a strategic partner – one of the most Russia-friendly results in the Central European region (Hajdu et al. 2024).

Divisions created by the pandemic and the war in Ukraine led to early elections in September 2023, in which the incumbent right-wing coalition experienced a dramatic defeat. Instead, Fico's Direction re-emerged as the winner of the elections. To form a government, Fico needed the support of his former ally-turned-rival Peter Pellegrini, who led Direction's splinter party the social democratic Voice, and the nationalist Slovak National Party, led by Andrej Danko. This put Pellegrini into a king-maker position. He faced what seemed to be a tough choice between co-operating with the nationalists or allying with the social-liberal Progressive Slovakia and other parties across the political spectrum to isolate Fico.

Pellegrini opted to set aside his differences with Fico and form a common government. The inclusion of Danko's nationalists created international uproar and led to a suspension of Fico's and Pellegrini's parties from the Party of European Socialists, due to "the clear divergence from the values of the PES" (PES 2023). Domestically, the new Fico administration faced accusations of taking



an illiberal turn, after the government initiated several controversial reforms. The new government halted military aid to Ukraine, which it contended was because of depleted stocks. The fight against corruption was set back by the closure of the Special Prosecutor's Office, which dealt with high-level corruption, while cuts in penalties for corruption crimes were proposed by the government. The government pushed for more political control over the media, civil society and the judiciary. Harsh criticism followed from the European Parliament and the European Commission. The Commissioner for Values and Transparency, Věra Jourová, warning that Fico was trying to do "in ten months what Viktor Orbán managed in ten years" (Harzer 2024).

Domestically, the speed and nature of the changes provoked regular mass protests. The opposition has used obstruction in the National Council – the Slovak Parliament – to delay the approval of some of the reforms, which has induced the ruling coalition to choose shortened procedures. One of the fiercest critics of the new reforms was Čaputová, the outgoing president, who, for example, appealed to the Constitutional Court to protect the Special Prosecutor's Office and halt the changes of the criminal code. In this context, the presidential elections in March-April 2024 promised to be a moment of reckoning.

### **The role of the president**

Since 1999, the president has been elected directly by Slovak citizens for a five-year term and can be re-elected once. The election is conducted using a two-round system. If no candidate achieves a majority in the first round, the two most popular candidates compete in a second round, within 14 days of the first. The candidate with the higher number of votes in the second round wins the election. All

candidates must be Slovak citizens aged 40 or older. To be approved, each candidate requires 15,000 signatures or the support of 15 members of the National Council. Election turnout in Slovakia is customarily low. In presidential elections, it is usually around 50 percent, but sometimes lower.

The role of the president is largely ceremonial, as in most parliamentary states. The president has the power to appoint the prime minister and judges and to grant pardons. The president is officially the commander-in-chief of the Slovak armed forces and the representative of the state abroad. The president's scope to influence legislation is limited. He or she can veto legislation, which can be overcome by a majority vote in the National Council, and submit a motion to the Constitutional Court, which has the power to invalidate a law.

### **The candidates in the 2024 elections**

Despite the limited presidential powers, the 2024 presidential election was crucial for both the Fico administration and its opponents. The supporters were hoping for a president more supportive of their policies. Since coming to power in the autumn of 2023, relations between the populist Fico government and the incumbent liberal president Čaputová had been hostile. The two differed strongly on their approach to foreign relations, minority rights and the government's reforms. The supporters of the administration warned that a new oppositional president would divide the society even further. On the other hand, the opponents were afraid that a less critical president would make it easier for Fico to obstruct the fight against corruption and move towards illiberalism. This fear was not completely new, as it had accompanied Fico for many years. Even in 2014, Fico himself, whose party then dominated Slovak politics, lost in the presidential election to a





businessman and philanthropist, Andrej Kiska, whose campaign emphasised that Fico should not control both the presidency and the government.

As early as the summer of 2023, Čaputová, who then was the most trusted politician in Slovakia, had announced that she would not be running for re-election in the 2024 elections. The palette of her aspiring successors was colourful. Eleven men (and no women) announced their candidacies, among them a plethora of national-conservatives. In addition to experienced politicians, the list included a policeman, a historian, a judge and two diplomats.

The two clear favourites were Pellegrini, the head of the Voice party and the speaker of the National Council, and an independent liberal former foreign minister and diplomat, Ivan Korčok. Although Pellegrini announced his candidacy as late as mid-January 2024, rumours about his aspirations had circled long before that. He was seen as the most likely candidate to represent the Fico's administration, in which his party served. Pellegrini's charisma, moderate personality and man-of-the-people image made him less controversial than Fico and won him trust even among the supporters of other parties. Pellegrini's slogan for the elections was "Slovakia needs peace now", a direct reference to the war in Ukraine and the related divisions in Slovak society. During his campaign, Pellegrini emphasised the need for good relations between the government and president in order to achieve these goals.

Meanwhile, Korčok announced his candidacy soon after Čaputová's withdrawal became public in the summer of 2023. He represented a similar political line to hers: he sought to be a "counterweight" to the Fico government and advocate for

continued military support for Ukraine. Even though Korčok received support across the anti-Fico political opposition, he ran formally as an independent candidate, for which he collected the necessary 40,000 signatures. Still, Korčok struggled to create a connection with ordinary people. He was sometimes compared to Hillary Clinton, who, throughout her campaign in the US in 2016, remained more popular among the elites.<sup>1</sup>

Among the other candidates, four are worth noting, as they reflected the different divides in society. Two of them came from the national-conservative camp. The first was Danko, the chairman of the Slovak National Party, the third partner in Fico's administration (the other two being Fico's Direction and Pellegrini's Voice). Prior to the first round of voting, Danko refused to support Pellegrini, whom he saw as too liberal. Instead, Danko co-operated in the first round with Štefan Harabin, a national-conservative former president of the supreme court, who came third in the 2019 presidential elections with 14 percent of the vote. Harabin was a critic of Slovakia's membership of the EU and NATO and advocated closer relations with Russia. From the start, it was clear that Harabin was the more popular candidate among the national-conservative voters across the party lines.

From the opposite side, the largest ethnic minority, the Slovak Hungarians, was represented by Krisztián Forró, the chairman of one of the more influential ethnic Hungarian parties, Hungarian Alliance. Although he never fancied his own changes of winning, Forró's main goal was to bring up topics important for the Hungarian minority. Lastly, Matovič, the controversial former prime minister and chairman of the Slovakia (Slovensko) political party, set up

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<sup>1</sup> For this point, I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers of the Report.



his candidacy at the last minute.<sup>2</sup> Even though he too had no intention of winning, he justified his candidacy by saying that “[o]therwise, Korčok would face the Mafiosi in the elections alone” (Silenská 2024).<sup>3</sup>

## The 2024 presidential election campaign

The first round of the 2024 presidential election was set for 23 March, with a possible second round following two weeks later, on 6 April – not long before the European Parliament election in June 2024. One key observation, stemming from the fact that the presidential elections followed only six months after parliamentary elections, is that the campaign leading up to the first round was dominated by everyday politics and what the camps that the candidates represented, rather than by the personalities of the candidates. The Fico administration’s reforms overshadowed the campaign.

To some extent, this benefited Pellegrini, who, as speaker of the National Council, was regularly in the news. Other candidates often seemed to be reactive to what Fico’s government or Pellegrini were doing or saying. Korčok, himself criticised for being a candidate of the elites, attacked Pellegrini for using this spotlight to his benefit and rejecting open debates (Gupka 2024). The first televised debates only took place a week before the first round of voting. Some analysts even noted that the lack of debate between the candidates made the election invisible, with former president Andrej Kiska noting that “[i]t’s a strange feeling, as if the [presidential] elections did not even exist” (Murajdova 2024).

A big role in the campaign was instead played by social media, which helped the candidates to shape their image. For example, Pellegrini used Facebook and Instagram to publicise his work and foreign visits, enhancing his image as a representative of Slovakia in foreign relations. Only in March, he had work-related visits to countries like Cyprus, Germany and Hungary. The most notable was the latter, during which he also met the Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orbán. The press statement made by the Hungarian side said that the two discussed their common aspirations for peace and the protection of their national sovereignty, and recalled how the bilateral relations had improved during Pellegrini’s time as prime minister in 2018–2020 (About Hungary 2024). Korčok, on the other hand, showcased his tour of Slovakia, during which he sought to show himself as close to the people; his competence in foreign relations was already known. His trademark, which took social media by storm, was his round glasses. Korčok’s supporters started posting photos on social media with glasses on, after an actress claimed in a blog post that she was ordered to take off her glasses before a television show because it might have been seen as subliminally campaigning for Korčok.

One of the key topics in the presidential elections was foreign relations, where there were clear differences between the candidates. Under Fico, Slovakia’s foreign relations had made a U-turn. Former strong support for Ukraine had been replaced by pledging to stop military aid and advocating immediate peace talks, which earned the government a lot of criticism from domestic opposition and partner countries.

<sup>2</sup> Formerly known as Ordinary People and Independent Candidates. The party changed its name to Slovakia after the 2023 parliamentary elections.

<sup>3</sup> By referring to Mafiosi, Matovič was talking about the Fico administration, which he has accused of being connected with organised crime and corruption.



**Table 1. Election results**

| Candidate        | March 23         |                     | April 6          |                     |
|------------------|------------------|---------------------|------------------|---------------------|
|                  | Number of votes  | Percentage of votes | Number of votes  | Percentage of votes |
| Peter Pellegrini | 834 718          | 37.02               | 1 409 255        | 53.12               |
| Ivan Korčok      | 958 393          | 42.51               | 1 243 709        | 46.87               |
| Štefan Harabin   | 264 579          | 11.73               | -                | -                   |
| Krisztián Forró  | 65 588           | 2.90                | -                | -                   |
| Igor Matovič     | 49 201           | 2.18                | -                | -                   |
| Ján Kubiš        | 45 957           | 2.03                | -                | -                   |
| Patrik Dubovský  | 16 107           | 0.71                | -                | -                   |
| Marian Kotleba   | 12 771           | 0.56                | -                | -                   |
| Milan Náhlik     | 3 111            | 0.13                | -                | -                   |
| Andrej Danko     | 1 905            | 0.08                | -                | -                   |
| Róbert Švec      | 1 876            | 0.08                | -                | -                   |
| <b>Turnout</b>   | <b>2 254 206</b> | <b>51.91</b>        | <b>2 652 964</b> | <b>61.14</b>        |

Source: (Statistical Office of the SR 2024)

In March 2024, the Czech government announced that it would cancel a planned joint session with its Slovak counterpart. Different political camps quickly started to blame each other, which played out in the presidential race. Korčok and Matovič remarked that the Fico administration was leading Slovakia into isolation, while Pellegrini and Fico asserted that the opposition was damaging Slovakia’s reputation abroad. At the same time, customarily poor relations with Hungary were warming up, which was welcomed by the ethnic Hungarian minority in Slovakia.

All pre-election polls had predicted a close run between Korčok and Pellegrini, with most predicting a win for the latter. On election day, 23 March, citizens could choose between nine candidates, as two national-conservative candidates, Danko and Róbert Švec, had withdrawn.<sup>4</sup> In the first case, Danko was fulfilling an agreement

made with Harabin that the less popular one would avoid splitting the national-conservative vote (Denník N 2024). Švec, too, dropped out and supported Harabin. Turnout was high, at 51.91 percent. To the surprise of many, the most successful candidate in the first round was Korčok, who had succeeded in mobilising pro-European and anti-Fico voters. Still, he was not able to reach an absolute majority and had to face Pellegrini in a second round.

The results were a clear disappointment for Pellegrini, who now had to change his tactics. He started openly to confront Korčok on social media, a deviation from his formerly distancing and calm approach. Fico, the prime minister, also started to get more involved in the campaign. Both Fico and Pellegrini portrayed Korčok as a “warmonger”, which, in the context of the ongoing Europe-wide discussion about sending troops to Ukraine, got traction and was picked up by widespread disinformation

<sup>4</sup> The two candidates remained on the ballot and because of that received a marginal number of votes.





networks (Dubóczy and Ružičková 2023). This served Pellegrini in his bid to balance between his more moderate social democratic base voters and the three voter groups for which the two candidates were now competing: national-conservatives, Slovakia's ethnic Hungarians, and first-round abstainers.

Especially important for Pellegrini was to mobilise national-conservative voters. Korčok had almost no chance of winning over this group because of his liberal and pro-Ukraine views. This left lots of votes to Pellegrini – potentially, at least, because there was a risk that many might not vote in the second round (most had supported Harabin). Here, Pellegrini was helped by his coalition partners, Danko and Fico, who both had considerable authority in these circles. The third-placed candidate, Harabin, did not endorse either of the remaining ones, however, as both were seen in national-conservative circles as too liberal and pro-Ukraine.

The second important group that both candidates wanted to attract was the ethnic Hungarians. While other regions of the country had been won by either Pellegrini or Korčok, the Hungarian-dominated southern regions were won by Forró. In the second round, Pellegrini had an advantage: his promises of good relations with Hungary secured him the support of Forró's Hungarian Alliance party. Korčok, on the other hand, only managed to get the support of smaller ethnic Hungarian parties, because he had been critical of Hungarian prime minister Orbán during his time working as a foreign minister in 2021-2022. Korčok had to hope that enough Hungarian minority representatives would find Pellegrini's attempt to balance between the national-conservatives and the Hungarian minority implausible.

The non-voters in the previous round were the third important group still up for grabs. These voters either had no preference or were only interested in participating in the more important stage of the elections. Here, the more personal, confrontational aspect of the second campaign period was important. A sense of urgency was created, in which the voter was motivated to participate by the demonisation of the other candidate. Pellegrini used the already mentioned "warmonger" slogan against Korčok, while the latter tried to remind the voters of the threat to the rule of law and liberal democracy that the coalition – including Pellegrini – had created.

On 6 April, it became clear that the mobilisation of voters had raised turnout to a historically high 61 percent, lower only than the first direct presidential election in 1999. Both candidates managed to increase their vote significantly, but Pellegrini won by a margin of 1.4 million votes, with 53.1 percent.

The results were not a big surprise for those familiar with Slovak politics. First, Korčok's pool of potential additional voters was more limited than Pellegrini's, which left him with limited options to appeal to other groups without losing his already ideologically scattered core voters. That is why a high turnout was bad for Korčok. Second, Korčok struggled to create a strong connection with ordinary people in rural areas, who were more interested in tangible economic benefits and a decrease in political tensions than in what seemed to be abstract promises about the rule of law. Pellegrini won in poorer rural areas and Korčok in almost all cities and towns. At the same time, Pellegrini succeeded in reaching out to different voter groups and managed to distance himself enough from the controversial decisions made by the Fico government. This way, Pellegrini was able to maintain his image as a moderate man of



the people who offered the voters across party lines what he called “peace” after years of political turmoil.

Nevertheless, the election was always less about the candidates than about which sides of the multifaceted political divide they represented. This was made clear after the elections by a jubilant Fico. He called the election a referendum on the government and celebrated a victory over what he called “liberal media, activists, NGOs and progressives”, which only increased the fears of the opposition that, with Pellegrini as president, Fico would take new measures against the free media and civil society (Chastand 2024).

### **Concluding remarks**

This UI Report investigated the long roots of polarisation in Slovakia and how it shaped the results of the 2024 presidential elections. It showed that the election results were strongly influenced by social and political polarisation, although personal factors did play a role. Especially noteworthy was the divide between the supporters and the opponents of the Fico administration. The supporters of the government, who wanted to see an end to years of political fighting no matter the cost, were jubilant over the result of the election. Pellegrini hurried to assure them that his party, Voice, would remain a member in the governing coalition and that the supporters “do not have to worry that an opportunistic power centre will emerge from the Presidential Palace, as it has been for the last 10 years” (Sybera 2024). At the same time, many analysts were afraid that, with Fico as prime minister and Pellegrini as president, Slovakia’s slide towards autocratic rule was accelerating (Mihočková 2024). For example, soon after the election, the government decided to re-structure the public broadcaster, claiming that it was not “objective” enough, and to demand that

some civil society organisations to use the label “organisations with foreign support” (Jäär 2024).

Still, after the assassination attempt against Fico in May 2024, the biggest challenge for Pellegrini’s time in office was to reconcile the ever-polarised society. In his inaugural speech on 15 June, Pellegrini acknowledged the existence of “a high mental wall, behind which two separate groups of society shout at each other”, and stated that “I will unite Slovakia” (Pellegrini 2024). This will not be an easy task. Pellegrini has made statements that tie him strongly to the Fico administration. Yet the symbolic value of the president’s office necessitates that an effort has to be made in this direction. After gaining historically high support in the presidential election, Pellegrini had the opportunity to prove that he could reach across the party lines and be a president for all people in Slovakia.



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