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Slovakia

# Apathy and confusion

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**Less than one in five Slovaks participated in the European Parliament elections in June. A succession of demagogic and dishonest governments have created a culture of apathy and lack of interest, where neither social democratic nor anti-capitalist currents seem able to take root.**

Earlier this year the Christian-Democratic led coalition of PM Mikulas Dzurinda cut social spending by one third to finance massive tax cuts for the top 10% of taxpayers. There were food riots in Roma ("gypsy") villages and the army was deployed to bolster the police. Most of the population suffer gradually declining living standards, unemployment is high, and retirement pensions have declined 20% in real terms in recent years. In normal conditions, left parties of all descriptions would be on the rise, as people search for alternatives to the anti-social policies of corrupt and arrogant politicians.

The problem in Slovakia is that the left parties became so divided in the late 1990s that none of them could reach the 5% minimum vote to enter parliament. Not only did this hand power to a coalition of Christian Democrat and neoliberal parties, but also it allowed a series of opportunists and populists to capture the "opposition" label.

Slovakia's leadership problem is nothing new. Ever since Czechoslovakia's "velvet revolution" of 1989, the political elite has manufactured a series of pseudo-crises to distract attention from the underlying problems. Former Premier Vladimir Meciar liked to claim that Hungary was massing its troops on the Slovak border, or the Czechs were spreading malicious gossip in Wall Street to drive down the value of the Slovak Crown. Prime Minister Dzurinda is a little more sophisticated. He claimed to have secret evidence of an Al Qaeda planned terrorist attack against Slovakia, and sent 20 Slovak mine-removal experts to joint American forces in Iraq (despite massive popular opposition to the war), organised a huge NATO enlargement conference (which none of the invited heads of state bothered to attend), toured the country with Jeffery Sachs to promote the 19% "flat tax" and profited from the Pope's visit to introduce compulsory religious education in primary schools.

But the harder the government tries, the more it alienates part of its own fragile support base. Many devout Catholics dislike the government's anti-poor rhetoric and did not particularly want to see the imposition of religious education for seven year olds. Many neoliberals are more worried about the government's corruption than happy about the flat tax, which only benefits the very richest businesspeople. The Entrepreneurs Alliance of Slovakia (PAS) is also concerned that the government is "striving for competitive advantage based on cheap labour, and focused on sectors with low value added". EU structural funds are being allocated to prestige motorways and other infrastructure projects that raise the visibility of politicians, rather than the investment into education and training that entrepreneurs believe is holding Slovakia behind its Czech counterparts.

To make matters even more complicated, the government only has a majority thanks to support from the Hungarian-minority party, and this is unacceptable for hard-core Slovak nationalists.

These frustrations overflowed during the Presidential elections earlier this year, when the Christian Democrat candidate was overtaken by two nationalist-demagogic candidates, former premier Vladimir Meciar and his former deputy Ivan Gasparovic. Gasparovic took office on June 1, and has already begun to create a separate power base from the government. When the government announced a 2% increase in old age pensions, the first increase in three years, during which inflation has been over 20%, President Gasparovic insisted on the right to make a 25EUR one-off payment to each pensioner. A symbolic struggle between two - each ultimately inadequate - policies. In the Czech Republic, pensioners can at least express their frustration by voting for the Communist Party. In Slovakia, there is still

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no party that consistently defends the interests of the socially disadvantaged, workers and the self-employed.

There are some signs of non-party protest, such as recent actions by teachers and railway workers, or demonstrations by students to oppose the introduction of university fees. But when it comes to vote, the choice is not inspiring.

The main leftish force in parliament is a centre-left, populist party Smer. Largely a media-marketing creation, its star leader Robert Fic has carefully avoided making detailed policy statements, in the hope that frustration with the current government will carry him to power. But according to Topol, the slick marketing and lack of substance leads many potential voters to classify Smer as just another group of "politicos" who only have their own interests at heart. The smaller left parties, outside parliament, are hardly active outside electoral campaigns. Neither the Communist Party, nor the Democratic Left (ex Communist, now social democrat) has more than 2% support in opinion polls.

No wonder that it is harder and harder to persuade most people to vote at all. As Jakub Topol, editor of the [www.lavica.sk](http://www.lavica.sk) website comments, "the group of potential left voters continues to increase: people are suffering under government policies, but simply don't believe that "politicians" are willing or able to solve their problems. So they prefer to rely on their own resources. Instead of even a minimum political engagement (such as voting) they prefer to grow some vegetables, find a second or third part-time job, if possible for cash. In other words, to try to take care of themselves.

These are the people who, in opinion polls, say that "if there were elections tomorrow" they would vote for the left. But "tomorrow" is just another ordinary day, and when elections do come, most people just aren't interested in politics."