# Slovakia: Mixed Results of Populist Parties in the 2024 EP Elections

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## Abstract

Since Slovakia's EU accession in 2004, populist parties have dominated national politics, although they are less influential in European Parliament (EP) elections. While Smer–Slovak Social Democracy won five national elections and Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OĽaNO) triumphed in 2020, populist parties performed weaker in EP elections. Progressive Slovakia (PS) won in 2019 and 2024, signalling different electoral dynamics. The rise of populism in Slovakia reflects a shared narrative of a virtuous people vs. a corrupt elite, although each party incorporates populism differently. Smer, led by Robert Fico, has shifted towards far-right nationalism, while OĽaNO evolved into Movement Slovakia (MS), with a focus on anti-corruption. The neo-Nazi Kotlebists (ĽSNS), initially successful, has splintered, losing its foothold in national politics. The 2024 EP elections, held amid an assassination attempt on Prime Minister Fico, reflected the political tensions. Smer placed second with 24.8%, while MS and ĽSNS underperformed. These results highlight the varied impact of populist parties on national and EU politics in Slovakia..

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# Background

Since Slovakia's accession to the European Union (EU) in 2004, populist political parties have largely dominated the national political landscape. In countries with proportional electoral systems, electoral success is typically determined by the ability to form interparty alliances that command a majority in the national parliament. Nevertheless, in Slovakia, it has consistently been a populist party that has secured the largest share of parliamentary seats. Direction–Slovak Social Democracy (Smer) achieved this outcome in five elections, while the Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OĽaNO) – rebranded as 'Movement Slovakia' (MS) in late 2023 – emerged as the leading party in 2020. In five out of six cases, the victorious populist party also became the largest party controlling the government.

However, populist parties are notably less dominant in EP elections. While Smer emerged victorious in two EP elections (2009 and 2014), the now-defunct Slovak Democratic and Christian Union won the first EP elections in 2004, and Progressive Slovakia (PS) secured wins in both 2019 and 2024. These results demonstrate that the electoral dynamics in EP elections differ from those in national contests. The second-order status of EP elections contributes to this difference, with lower voter turnout and opposition parties effectively mobilizing voters against the incumbent government. However, mainstream opponents of populist parties tend to be more supportive of European integration, and their supporters are generally more motivated to express this stance at the ballot box, with consequences for the results of EP contests.

Populism is an elusive concept, often used not only to describe political phenomena but also as a value-laden term to discredit opponents. For the purposes of this briefing, I define 'populist' parties as those identified in the authoritative PopuList 3.0 database (https://popu-list.org/applications/). The latest edition identifies Smer, OĽaNO (now MS), We Are Family (SR),[1] and Kotlebists – People's Party Our Slovakia (ĽSNS) as the party-political embodiments of populism in Slovakia. The four parties differ in their ideologies, degree of popular support, stances on the European integration and many other important aspects. What they have in common is their depiction of society as being divided into two opposing groups: the virtuous people and the corrupt political elite, with the latter seen as betraying the interests of the former.

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1. The party failed to clear the 5% electoral threshold and did not enter the national parliament in 2023. It did not participate in the 2024 EP elections.

It is also worth mentioning that none of the populist parties analysed here has 'populism' as the sole defining characteristic feature. In fact, populism is understood as a thin ideology that can coexist with a host of other ideologies and may play only a secondary role in the party's profile. Smer is a case in point. Established in the late 1990s as a left-leaning statist party, it has transformed into a far-right party. Smer managed to return to power in 2023 after three years in opposition, during which its popular support plummeted and its parliamentary caucus suffered a break-up, after which the Voice-Social Democracy (Hlas), led by the former prime minister, Peter Pellegrini, formed as a separate entity. Although Smer has always featured nationalist, Eurosceptic and illiberal standpoints, from 2021 onward, Fico focused on building alliances with 'alternative media', extra-parliamentary opposition and far-right groups. The COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine crisis fostered a critical public sentiment (such as anti-vaxxers and pro-Russian authoritarians) that was opposed to the government, which Fico effectively harnessed. By collaborating with far-right politicians and organizing joint anti-government rallies, he further strengthened the nationalist elements of Smer's message (Haughton, Cutts and Rybář, 2024). Although nominally social democratic, Fico has effectively moved the party towards the illiberal far right.

In contrast, OĽaNO (now Movement Slovakia) began as an openly populist party, positioning itself as the voice of 'the ordinary people' against a self-serving and corrupt political establishment. Since it entered the national parliament in 2010, the party has centred its political agenda on anti-corruption rhetoric. Initially a loose coalition of anti-corruption and pro-life activists, it evolved into a Christian conservative populist movement with a fluid organizational structure centred around its leader and founder, Igor Matovič. In a surprising outcome, the party won the 2020 national elections, capitalizing on the disillusionment of voters drawn to its sharp criticism of corruption and clientelism associated with the Smer-led government. Following its electoral success, the party managed to form a four-party coalition government, with Matovič assuming the role of prime minister. However, the new government, composed of mostly inexperienced ministers, encountered significant governance challenges, including managing the global COVID-19 pandemic and responding to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Matovič's unpredictable governing style, characterized more by performance and sensationalism than well-considered policymaking, further exacerbated the government's declining popularity. His approach led to numerous personal conflicts, not only with the opposition but also with his coalition partners. After one year, Matovič swapped positions with Finance Minister Eduard Heger, becoming the new Finance Minister

himself. However, this move eventually failed to prevent the withdrawal of support from one of the coalition partners, resulting in a successful vote of no confidence in parliament. Consequently, the OĽaNO-led cabinet was replaced by a caretaker government appointed by President Zuzana Čaputová to lead the country toward early elections in September 2023.

Finally, the Kotlebists (ĽSNS) started as an extreme-right party that has used anti-establishment populist appeals combined with radical nativist ideology from its inception. The party managed to enter the Slovak parliament in 2020 and the EP a year earlier. However, the party caucus broke up in 2021, and the breakaway faction established a new party called Republika (Republic). It elected MEP Milan Uhrík as the party leader and distanced itself from what they portrayed as increasingly autocratic practices of the ĽSNS leader Marian Kotleba. Since then, popular support for ĽSNS has sharply declined; most former voters of the party turned to Republika, as did other far-right supporters, leaving ĽSNS out of the national parliament in 2023.

## The political context of the 2024 EP elections

The campaign and the results of the EP elections in Slovakia in 2024 were significantly shaped by two factors. Firstly, the elections took place just weeks after the direct presidential elections (held at the turn of March and April 2024) and several months after the national parliamentary elections of September 2023. Because of their temporal proximity, all three electoral contests were related. Secondly, the elections were organized in the shadow of the assassination attempt on Prime Minister Robert Fico of Smer that took place in May 2024. The assassination attempt shook the country and impacted the campaign and elections both directly and indirectly.

In the national parliamentary elections of September 2023, Smer emerged as the leading party, securing a plurality with 22.9% of the votes. The party formed a coalition government with Hlas, a splinter faction from Smer, and the Slovak National Party (SNS), which managed to re-enter the national parliament after being absent in the previous electoral cycle, with Robert Fico appointed as prime minister. The socially liberal PS finished second, securing 18% of the vote. During post-election negotiations, PS made an unsuccessful attempt to dissuade Hlas from aligning with Smer, offering its leader Peter Pellegrini the position of prime minister in exchange for joining a government with other opposition parties. However, Smer

provided a more favourable offer: Hlas would receive an equal number of ministries as the significantly larger Smer, and Pellegrini would gain Smer's backing for his bid in the directly elected presidential race. As a result, the presidential election effectively became a second round in the contest for control over national institutions.

The former governing parties faced a devastating defeat: two failed to secure any parliamentary seats, while OĽaNO, led by former prime minister Igor Matovič, saw its vote share diminish to less than one-third of its 2020 result. Only Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), an economically liberal junior coalition partner of OĽaNO, maintained its performance from 2020. Additionally, the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) succeeded in winning parliamentary seats for the first time since 2012.

Shortly after its formation, the new government embarked on a political course that, in many respects, starkly contrasted with that of the 2020–2023 administrations. The official Government Program included, among other things, plans to dismantle the national public broadcaster RTVS, abolish the Special Prosecution Office responsible for investigating the most serious criminal cases (including high-profile corruption cases), and overhaul the penal code, which would directly affect dozens of ongoing investigations. It also suggested preparing a special law targeting 'foreign agents', namely non-governmental organizations receiving grants from international donors.

Internationally, the new government pledged to halt all military assistance to Ukraine in its defence against Russian aggression and adopt a more neutral stance toward Russia. Significantly, many of these changes were set to be implemented not only without consultations with relevant stakeholders but also by using a special legislative procedure to fast-track the measures through parliament in a very short timeframe. The opposition criticized these plans and legislative proposals, arguing that they would obstruct the investigation and prosecution of corruption cases during the previous Smer-led administration. Furthermore, some measures appeared to enable the new government to bypass existing legislative safeguards and take control of independent public bodies.

In an effort to counter these legislative moves by the new parliamentary majority, opposition parties appealed to the European Commission and their partners in the EP to urge the Slovak government to reconsider its plans. However, the government made few changes and instead accused the opposition of damaging the country's reputation internationally. Consequently, the period following the parliamentary and presidential elections was marked by intense confrontation between the governing parties and the parliamentary opposition.

Although the opposition-backed independent candidate won the first round of the presidential elections, Pellegrini ultimately prevailed in the runoff and was elected president. His victory had two significant consequences for the dynamics of interparty competition. First, since Slovak presidents traditionally renounce their party membership and strive to maintain a non-partisan role, Pellegrini's departure as its founder and most trusted representative weakened the Hlas party. Second, it provided additional impetus for the opposition, particularly PS, to mobilize its supporters in the EP elections with the slogan 'they cannot have everything', a reference to the governing parties. Boosting its electoral prospects, PS 'recruited' Ľudovít Ódor, the former prime minister of the 2024 caretaker government and former Vice-Governor of the Central Bank, to lead its party list in the EP elections.

## Assassination attempt on Robert Fico and the campaign

Just before the most intense phase of the campaign was set to begin, the trajectory of domestic politics was dramatically altered by a failed assassination attempt on Prime Minister Robert Fico. On 15 May, while Fico was addressing a crowd of his supporters in the small town of Handlová, a 71-year-old man fired five shots at him, four of which struck Fico, causing gunshot wounds to his abdomen. Shortly afterwards, several leading representatives of Smer and SNS blamed the opposition and independent media for the attempt, claiming it resulted from a polarized political environment they allegedly created. They further suggested that unspecified measures were necessary to increase government control over the media and regulate the right of assembly to enhance public safety. While there were moderate voices within the government advocating for de-escalation, the coalition parties' primary message was to blame their political opponents. Although the assassin had no record of links to any political party, some government representatives attempted to associate him with PS, alleging he had attended opposition rallies in the months preceding the attack.

In response to the assassination attempt, PS and other opposition parties suspended their election campaigns and proposed a meeting of the highest representatives of all parliamentary parties, but the governing parties rejected this proposal. Similarly, President Čaputová and President-elect Pellegrini jointly suggested a national roundtable involving all major parties, but some government representatives also rejected this initiative.

Whatever campaign strategy Smer had prepared for the EP election was eventually reduced to two slogans: 'For Peace in Europe' and 'For Robert Fico'. The party sought to promote the narrative that the previous government had falsely criminalized Fico and his associates, and upon Smer's return to power, justice needed to be restored. Furthermore, Smer conveyed to its voters the message it had promoted in the 2023 national campaign: peace in Europe is endangered because previous governments (and the EU) supplied weapons to Ukraine. According to Smer, Slovakia should remain neutral, and such neutrality would restore peace. The Smer manifesto stated: 'We want to be the extended arm of Robert Fico's government, which will face increasing attacks from Brussels' warmongers for striving for peace and refusing to send weapons to Ukraine' (Smer 2024). Additionally, Smer attacked what it called 'extreme progressive gender ideologies' and sought to associate them with PS. Following the assassination attempt, Smer leaders and candidates attempted to rhetorically link 'progressivism' with 'extremism' to discredit their primary opponent.

Although PS, along with other opposition parties, initially suspended its campaign, it soon resumed its activities. The party sought to mobilize its supporters by arguing that the Smer-led government had undermined Slovakia's position within the EU and that its policies could lead to Slovakia's isolation or even result in the suspension of EU funds due to non-compliance with rule-of-law criteria. It also contended that achieving national reconciliation after the assassination attempt should not imply that the opposition would abandon its primary role of holding the government accountable for its actions and proposals.

# The main campaign issues and stances of populist parties

Smer, as the leading representative of party-based populism, produced a five-page manifesto summarizing its central positions concerning several crucial EU policies. It consistently promoted the key manifesto stances in public rallies, media interviews and on social networks. As mentioned, Smer blamed the EU for 'prolonging war in Europe' by supporting Ukraine. As in the past, the party questioned the rationale of sanctions against Russia and has been critical of the EU foreign policy against other authoritarian regimes by calling it 'a patronizing approach' and 'the imposition of the European liberal model' towards countries that 'have the right to their own historical path' (Smer 2024).

The party also rejected the recently adopted EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, particularly the scheme that includes the relocation of asylum seekers among the EU countries. It proposed no concrete measures but only generally stated that the EU external border should be protected more and that illegal migration should be dealt with in the country of origin. The opposition to compulsory relocation schemes has been central to the party's stance since the mid-2010s. Smer also claimed it would initiate reopening the European Green Deal, which was labelled as an 'extreme environmental initiative' and claimed it was pushed through by 'Eurocrats with no accountability'. It specifically rejected the target of reducing emissions by 55% by 2030 (Smer 2024).

Smer linked the EU's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic to control by supranational elites, particularly 'multinational corporations and pharmaceutical companies', leading to the 'imposition of experimental vaccinations' and the 'criminalization of people for their opinions' (Smer 2024). Since first gaining representation in the EP, Smer's Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) have been part of the leading Socialist group (Socialists & Democrats, S&D). However, in the previous parliament, their membership was suspended due to their alliance with the far-right Slovak National Party (SNS) (Euronews 2023). The examples above demonstrate that Smer itself has shifted towards the far right.

It is instructive to compare Smer's position with that of another populist party, the far-right neo-Nazi Kotlebists – People's Party Our Slovakia (ĽSNS). Although now electorally marginal, ĽSNS was represented in both the national (2016–2020) and European (2019–2024) parliaments. The party did not produce an official EP election manifesto in 2024 but instead promoted its views on various social media platforms.

The primary difference between the two populist parties in 2024 was their stance on Slovakia's EU membership. Smer claimed to support EU membership despite its many shortcomings. In contrast, ĽSNS argued that what it sees as the drawbacks of EU membership are inherent to how the EU operates and that the EU cannot be reformed. Consequently, it advocated for Slovakia's exit from the EU (ĽSNS 2024). The party leader stated that, if elected to the EP, ĽSNS would 'lay the groundwork for Slovakia's exit from the European Union and break the EU from within' (ĽSNS 2024).

However, the positions of Smer and ĽSNS were quite similar regarding their

assessment of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Green Deal and the COVID-19 pandemic. While their reasoning differed, their objectives overlapped:

ĽSNS opposed any military support for Ukraine, claiming it ran counter to efforts to achieve peace. It further argued that the ultimate goal of the EU was to escalate the conflict, with the final aim of full and open participation of European countries in the conflict (RTVS 2024). ĽSNS also blamed the West for the conflict, citing its overall unfair stance towards Russia and its legitimate interests.

Regarding their opposition to the Green Deal, Smer argued that it would harm Slovakia's automotive industry. In contrast, ĽSNS contended that the proposed measures were misguided: strict protection of water, soil and forests should occur at the national level. However, a clear nativist tone was evident in their proposed measures, suggesting that 'the fundamental solution was to prevent the purchase of land by foreigners' (Hlavný denník 2024).

Finally, ĽSNS's rejection of the EU's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic was similar to Smer's, but its reasoning was more extreme and conspiratorial. The party suggested that vaccination campaigns and deals with pharmaceutical companies were part of a broader plan to transform Europe. ĽSNS claimed that the EU was attempting to destroy the Christian tradition in Europe by promoting mandatory vaccinations that would prevent young Europeans from having their own children. This move, they argued, would align with the EU's alleged goal of 'replacing the original inhabitants of Europe with migrants brought in from all corners of the world' (ĽSNS 2024).

The positions of the third populist party, MS (formerly OĽaNO), differed most significantly from those of Smer and ĽSNS in the area of international politics. MS argued that the conflict in Ukraine was a result of Russia's imperial ambitions and that it was the duty of European democracies to help Ukraine defend itself. The party claimed that Ukraine was also fighting for 'our freedom and democracy' (Hnutie Slovensko 2024).

MS was also critical of the Green Deal but proposed a revision that would involve postponing the timeline for key targets, arguing that 'reckless and hasty implementation of electromobility will lead to greater poverty and reduced mobility for vulnerable groups' (Hnutie Slovensko 2024). The party's positions on other contentious issues, such as immigration and the COVID-19 pandemic, were

vaguer. Instead, its manifesto prioritized the need to combat disinformation and corruption at the EU level in an attempt to link its opponent, Smer, to these issues.

## The results and implications of the EP elections

The elections were held on a single day, 8 June and their results were remarkable in several respects. The turnout of 34.4%, although the fourth lowest among all EU countries, was the highest ever recorded in EP elections in Slovakia, an increase of nearly 12 percentage points compared to 2019. Of the three populist parties, only Smer managed to gain parliamentary representation, finishing a close second after PS with 24.8% of the vote, thereby expanding its EP representation from three to five MEPs. The other two populist parties failed to cross the 5% threshold, receiving just 2% (MS) and 0.5% (ĽSNS), respectively.

In the absence of exit polls or other opinion data, it is difficult to determine the factors that led to these results. As discussed, the outcomes were decisively influenced by the fact that this was the third nationwide electoral contest within nine months and by the assassination attempt on Robert Fico, the leader of Smer. The two electoral defeats of the parliamentary opposition and the polarizing effects of these losses likely bolstered support for PS, whose electoral base is strongly aligned with Slovakia's EU membership (Haughton et al., 2024). The assassination attempt likely increased sympathy for Fico and his party, prompting some voters of non-parliamentary opposition parties (other than Smer) to support Smer in the EP elections. Smer's two coalition partners performed poorly, with SNS failing to gain any seats despite its party list featuring all major figures, including the party leader. Since a sizeable share of their supporters view Fico favourably, they likely voted for Smer (Hopková 2024). In contrast, ĽSNS was electorally weakened by the departure of Republika, its breakaway faction, which performed well in the EP elections. Finally, Movement Slovakia's low support probably reflected disappointment with its performance in the 2020–2023 government.

The election results put the Slovak government in an awkward position, as none of its six MEPs (five from Smer and one from Hlas) are likely to sit in a major faction in the EP. In contrast, the parliamentary opposition parties will join the Renew (six from PS) and European People's Party (EPP) (one from KDH) groups in the EP. This constellation is likely to further alienate the Slovak government from its European partners.

Table 1: Results of the most recent national and EP elections

| Party | EP 2019 (%) | EP 2019 (seats) | NR SR 2023 (%) | EP 2024 (%) | EP 2024 (seats) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| PS | 20.1 | 4 | 17.96 | 27.8 | 6 |
| Smer | 15.7 | 3 | 22.94 | 24.76 | 5 |
| Republika | - | - | 4.75 | 12.53 | 2 |
| Hlas | - | - | 14.7 | 7.18 | 1 |
| KDH | 9.7 | 2 | 6.82 | 7.14 | 1 |
| ĽSNS | 12.1 | 2 | 0.84 | 0.48 | 0 |
| SaS | 9.6 | 2 | 6.32 | 4.92 | 0 |
| MS (OĽaNO) | 5.3 | 1 | 8.89 | 1.98 | 0 |
| SNS | 4.1 | 0 | 5.62 | 1.9 | 0 |

Source: www.statistics.sk. Electoral threshold of 5% applies for a single party in both types of elections. All parliamentary parties represented in at least one parliament are listed

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