

# Slovak Regional Elections and their Key Losers

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**Abstract:** *Slovak regional election brought a defeat for dominant Smer-SD. The defeat was not only symbolic. Voters symbolically rejected current political direction of Slovak republic but the voters rejected the presence of fascists on the regional level. In the media and analyst brought various reasons of the defeat of dominant Smer-SD, and some of them were calling this election as the start of the political end for social democrats. The main aim of this comment is to offer readers different view on regional election in Slovakia. The article will be focus on more and more visible changes in electoral campaigning and changes in Slovak political climate, toward the end of one dominant party era.*

**Keywords:** *regional election, campaigning, Smer-SD, party system, voter behaviour.*

The Slovak regional election brought a defeat both in a symbolic fashion and in the media for the thus far dominant Smer-SD party, with the voters also symbolically rejecting the presence of fascists on the regional level. It also established a trend as to how the Slovak party system would develop in the future, disclosing the potential risks regarding party competition and the movement of parties within the party spectrum. It also clearly confirmed a change in election campaigning and clearly demonstrated who effectively targeted the potential epicentres of support and who failed in the segmentation and in the “non” targeting of voters while preserving the strong personalization models of addressing the voters but without a party leader. This article examines the regional election from the above-mentioned perspectives,

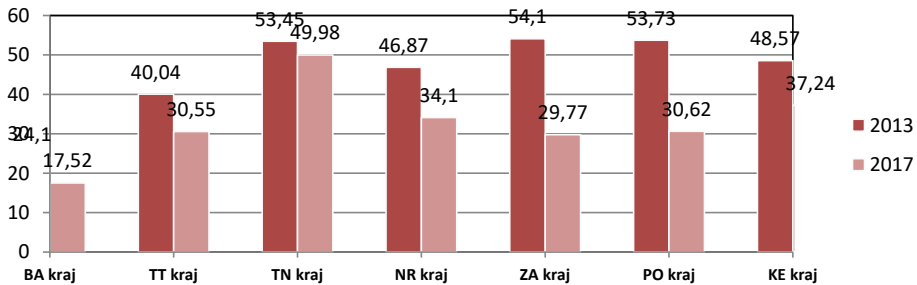
these being deserving of our attention and our analysis, and also the broader debate about the gradual change on the Slovak political map. The results of the regional election should be perceived from three different perspectives:

- The end of a dominant government party Smer-SD (?);
- (re) evolution in election campaigning;
- Trend towards changing the Slovak (political) party system.

## The end of the dominant government party Smer-SD (?)

The first one is the position of Smer-SD on the Slovak political map compared with its other election results, although it uses a different electoral system than the national election. The trend is clear, Smer-SD as the strongest election party thus far has been losing support, having reached its peak in the 2012 parliamentary election, when it was able to form a single party government, and in the 2009 regional election, when it dominated the election of regional presidents in six out of eight regions.

**Graph 1: Share of votes given to Smer-SD political party candidates running for the position of regional president**

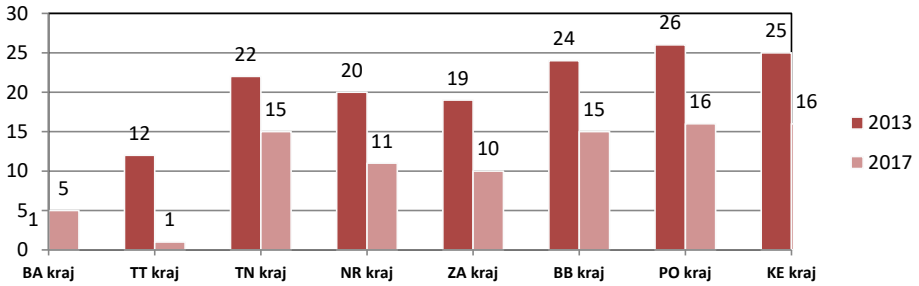


Source: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic

Note: The 2013 data show the share of votes in the first round of the regional elections, the 2017 election had just a single round.

The debacle of the social democrats is visible, not only on the level of regional presidents, where they kept only two out of the six offices, but also in the Trenčín and Nitra regions. A similar trend could be observed in the number of deputies elected to the regional parliaments, where Smer-SD lost in all but the Bratislava region, and kept only one seat in the regional parliament of the Trnava region. The sinking electoral support for Smer-SD and its defeat in the regional election can be perceived through multiple narratives. It should be said, however, that none of the narratives discussed below was a dominant one, as they were all interlinked.

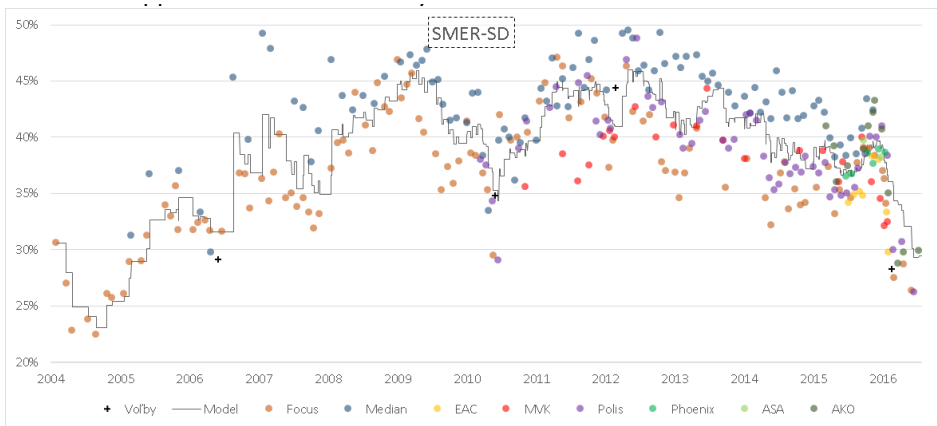
**Graph 2: Number of Smer-SD deputies elected to the regional parliaments**



Source: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic

The possibly most prosaic explanation of the Smer-SD electoral debacle rests in the election strategy they adopted and the relatively unfortunate choice of candidates for the positions of regional vice-presidents. The election techniques and strategies, which Smer-SD applied in the previous years, has long ceased to be an effective approach for segmentation and targeting of voters. A personalised campaign is an adequate strategy in a majoritarian system but addressing the potential voters through weak candidates and personalisation without a party chairman represent zero advancement in the acquisition of potential mandates. Smer-SD also underestimated the change in the electoral system, which it had initiated only a year earlier, this being a change from a double to a single round election. The underestimation rested exactly in the nomination of candidates, who would have been able to captivate a segment of the voters.

**Figure 1: Electoral support for Smer-SD in the years 2004–2016**



Source: <http://jednapatnula.blogspot.sk>

It should also be noted that the electoral debacle should be considered in its complexity and the inability of the current governmental coalition to agree on a common approach when compiling coalition candidate lists and proposing candidates. Typical examples were the regions of Žilina and Košice, where all three political parties failed to reach an agreement and nominate a common candidate. The analysis of the results in the Košice region demonstrated that the difference between the independent candidate Rastislav Trnka, who had the support of the opposition parties and KDĽ, and the Smer-SD candidate, Richard Raši, was 875 votes, while the candidates of the coalition parties Jarmila Tkáčová (SNS) and Karol Pataky combined received 18,481 votes.

The final interpretation of the Smer-SD electoral debacle focuses on its position in the political system, i.e., the decline in electoral support (cf. Figure 1). The stale party system ideas also impacted Smer-SD and their support gradually declined since they had become the only governmental party in the 2012–2016 electoral period. Relevant research would have made this statement obviously much clearer and more methodologically correct but this trend can be observed in the falling support for the Smer-SD politicians, who have the highest media exposure, as much as the falling electoral support. The data are obviously not supported by Slovak polling agencies, but clearly indicate the trend that individual political entities might follow. The trust in the Smer-SD chairman fell in the last year (from 48 % in May 2016 to 38 % in March 2017) and the distrust increased (from 50 % in May 2016 to 60 % in March 2017).<sup>1</sup> A similar decline was reported for other social democratic politicians with a high media presence as well.<sup>2</sup>

## (re) Evolution of electoral campaigning

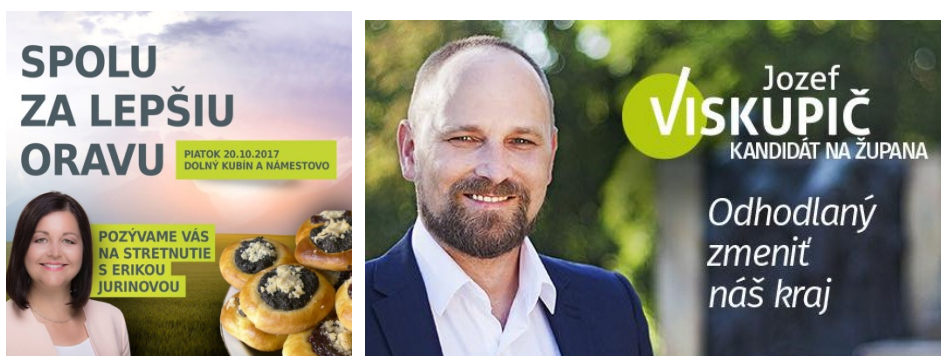
The regional election not only outlined possible future trends in relation to the party and political systems, but also indicated the already clear trends in electoral campaigning, which proved effective not only in the Slovak but also in Central European conditions. Building a modern effective campaign means creating a strategy, which would be able to not only effectively target potential voters, but also “*seek out decisive groups.*”

Numbers no longer mean victory, which rests instead in the effectiveness of targeting the strategic epicentres of influence. In other words, “catch-all” is not the key to electoral victory any more.

The first, old yet new component of campaigning is **intensive contact campaigning**, similar to what has been seen in the case of ANO and even more so SPD in the last Czech parliamentary election. Contact campaigning played an important role in

the Slovak regional election where regional presidents were elected from among new candidates, coming mostly from the opposition, nonparliamentary and independent ranks. Seeking out groups of people, who would decide the result of the election, was obvious in multiple cases during this election, and empirical research would definitely only confirm the long-term trends in the organization of political entities. OĽaNO relied on contact campaigning in the regions, where they nominated their candidates, Erika Jurinova in the Žilina region and Jozef Viskupič in the Trnava region. The campaign was designed so that positive news prevailed and to include the highest possible number of volunteers and party members. Grassroots campaigning was also visible with other successful candidates for regional presidency, who ran in the regions of Košice and Prešov.

Figures 2 and 3: Election posters of OĽaNO candidates in the regions of Žilina and Trnava



Source: Facebook profiles of both candidates

The third specific feature already mentioned several times is *targeting a group of people*, who will determine the result. It was clear in the strategy of every successful candidate, who won in the given region. The ideal example was though the targeting strategy of the two successful candidates for the presidents of the Prešov and Košice regions. Both candidates — Milan Majerský (KDH) in the region of Prešov and Rastislav Trnka (independent) in the region of Košice targeted the urban type of voter and the high concentration of these voters in towns. Milan Majerský's campaign strategy was based on the mobilization of urban voters and voters leaving the region to work in larger towns and in Western Slovakia. Election posters therefore appeared in the capital city before the regional election urging the potential voters to vote.

Figure 4: Mobilization poster of Milan Majerský, running for the president of Prešov region, in Bratislava



Source: Aktuality.sk

The third specific feature of the contact campaign was the use of positive news, i.e., a positive election campaign inspiring change. A typical example of this type of campaigning was the campaign of the successful candidate for the president of the Banská Bystrica region, Ján Lunter. His campaign carried the positive motto “*For a good region*” and its positive mobilisation was unique because the campaign’s fundraising focused on small donors (from the 240 thousand euro collected, around 40 thousand came in as small sums from 700 benefactors).

Figure 5: Election posters of Ján Lunter, candidate for regional president in Banská Bystrica



Source: Candidate’s Facebook profile

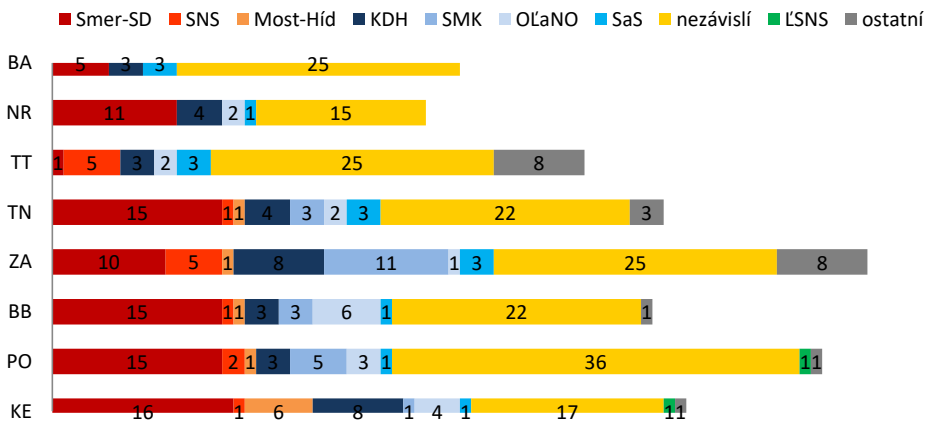
A positive motto with elements of a comparative message was also visible in the campaign of the candidate for the president of the Košice region, Rastislav Trnka. “*It is time to set our region in motion*” was a positive motto that carried a dynamic and young image of the region in the figure of the potentially new regional president. At the same time it used a contrast with the previous years characterised by social democratic rule. The common people and independents, whose candidates won the offices of regional presidents in the Trnava and Žilina regions, picked for their election statement a positive motto “*Our region, our home.*”

## Change in the political climate trend, the end of a dominant single party?

Despite the majoritarian electoral system, which carries different patterns and election strategies, and favours independent candidates and the better established and larger political parties, the result can forestall a turn, which the Slovak political map might take and how it might transform. The election result hinted a clear trend and differences in the voters' behaviour in the individual regions.

Several analysts claimed that the results of the regional elections rejected the current direction of the country and the candidates of the governmental coalition both through the media and symbolically. The defeat of Kotleba's People's Party candidates led to an initial euphoria, but should not hide their gradual consolidation on the national level. Let us not forget that its candidates received more than 108 thousand votes in total. The regional election result in the Banská Bystrica region confirmed the rise of Marián Kotleba and his ĽSNS.

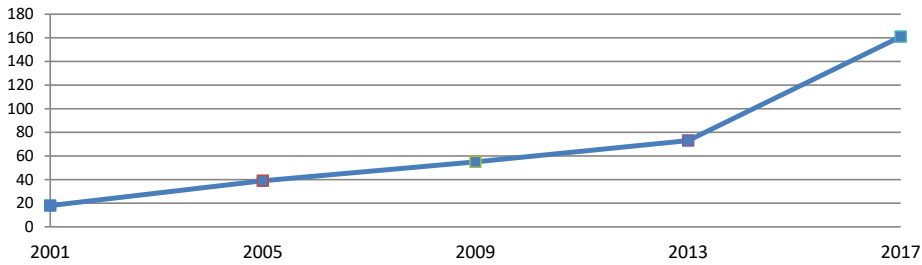
**Graph 3: Political parties' results in the 2017 Slovak regional elections**



Source: Statistical Office, data processed by author

The regional elections not only confirmed the new trends in election campaigning but also disclosed what had been obvious on the local level before, the growing influence of so-called independent candidates (cf. graph 3). It is a logical expectation in the majoritarian system, but has only been visible in Slovakia in recent years. The question is to what extent the independent candidates can form alliances on the national level and, thus, influence the country's political system, as in for instance in the Czech Republic.

**Graph 4: Number of independent candidates elected to regional parliaments in regional elections since 2001**



Source: Statistical Office, data processed by author

The trend in the Slovak political climate, which had less symbolism attached to it and received less publicity than the election debacle of Smer-SD, the defeat of the fascists, or the increase in independent candidates, was the fact that the Slovak political map will in the upcoming years continue to develop towards the domination of political forces that mostly represent conservative ideas in the political spectrum, with a clear division line emerging between the west represented by the region of Bratislava and the other Slovak regions. The growing support for OĽaNO on the regional level, the return of KDH to political competition, and the constantly growing support for Smer Rodina on the national level only confirm this observation.<sup>3</sup> The presence of ĽSNS in the Parliament foresaw this trend already a year ago. The emergence of conservative and Christian ideas in the Slovak political climate has several explanations and obviously several narratives, but this is not the subject of this article. The trend though is clear, the conservative-Christian tide is rising in strength.

The result of the regional election unveiled another trend, which had not been obvious in the previous elections, this being the incipient deflection of Bratislava and its region from the traditional polarization division — the choice between two alternatives. This was, in other words, the results of the election in the Bratislava region compared with other regions, but also with previous elections in the same region. The results of this year's and previous elections create in the majoritarian system an impression that the electoral competition is formed between two alternatives, two antipoles, either from the point of a coalition-opposition division, or ethnic division. The 2017 election in the Bratislava region revealed a future trend, i.e., the reasons why it is different from the other regions and other traditional patterns of behaviour. It obviously requires a deeper analysis that would unveil the increasing heterogeneity in the vote and voters' behaviour. Even the initial comparison of candidates, who were apparent rivals, provided a clear picture of the changing climate in the Bratislava region (cf. Table 1).



Table 1: Number of competing candidates for president of the Bratislava region in the individual electoral periods.

Election for president of Bratislava region	Number of relevant competing candidates/number of votes obtained in the BA region	
	Polarization in the competition (2 candidates)	Heterogeneity in the competition (+3 candidates)
2001	<b>Ľubomír Roman</b> (SDKÚ, KDĽ, ANO, SMK-MK/, DS) 65 901 votes vs. <b>Milan Čič</b> (HZDS, Smer, SDĽ, SOP, SZS) 38 366 votes	
2005	<b>Vladimír Baján</b> (NEKA) 30 471 votes vs. <b>Ľubomír Roman</b> (ANO, DS, SDKÚ, SMK-MKP, SZS) 23 091 votes	
2009	<b>Pavol Frešo</b> (SDKÚ-DS, KDĽ, SMK-MKP, OKS, SaS) 42 794 votes vs. <b>Vladimír Baján</b> (NEKA) 30 569 votes	
2013	<b>Pavol Frešo</b> (SDKÚ-DS, SZ, OKS, SMK-MKP, SaS, Most-HÍD, KDĽ) 57 777 votes vs. <b>Monika Flašíková-Beňová</b> (Smer-SD) 28 781 votes	
2017	<b>Juraj Droba</b> (SaS, OĽaNO, SMK-MKP, NOVA, OKS, Zmena zdolu, DÚ) 36 864 votes, <b>Milan Ftáčnik</b> (NEKA) 31 638 votes, <b>Rudolf Kusý</b> (NEKA) 33 489 votes, <b>Ján Mrva</b> (NEKA) 28 842 votes	

Source: Statistical Office, data processed by author

The Bratislava region showed not only heterogeneity in the vote but when examining the potential candidates for regional president, centrist tendencies are also apparent in the electorate. This trend of return to the centrist candidates obviously does not need to be automatically adaptable to the national conditions but it did create an expectation for other political parties and their behaviour in their future electoral policies and strategies.

## Conclusion

The Slovak regional election that took place in November both symbolically and in the media presented a clear rejection of the fascists on the regional level and confirmed the falling support for the strongest entity on the political map, Smer-SD. They also unveiled other trends, which will prove significant in the future for political entities who wish to succeed on the local, regional and national levels. They again confirmed the clear trend towards more intensive contact campaigning, with elements of grassroots campaigning. They also unveiled the changing segmentation

of voters through positive themes, a positive campaign with elements of a comparative message.

The Slovak regional election hinted at other trends as well, which could become more tangible in the upcoming elections on the local or national level. This relates to the gradual rise of the conservative-Christian tide on the Slovak political map, confirmed not only by the actual regional election results but also by the support for parliamentary and non-parliamentary parties in the recent opinion polls. With the exception of the Bratislava region, they also confirmed the polarization of Slovak society as people chose according to the majoritarian logic between what they interpret as two “extremes.”

In conclusion, it needs to be said that despite the low voter turnout, the Slovak political map will experience a change in the future in both election campaigning and the re-emergence of ideas that had been declining previously and been perceived very unfavourably by liberal democracy.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> It should be emphasized that it was an opinion poll conducted by questioning a sample of 1,000 respondents. (Agentúra AKO, for more see: <https://ako.sk/>)
- <sup>2</sup> The trust in the current Minister of Interior and the vice-chairman Robert Kaliňák dropped to 10.5 % in August 2017 from 16 % before the election in March 2016 (November 2015). The trust in the vice-president of the Parliament, Petr Pellegrini, dropped from 7 % before the 2016 election to 5.5 % in August 2017, while the Focus agency quoted 5 % in 2016. A similar situation is observed with the Minister of Foreign Affairs Miroslav Lajčák, Focus agency quoted that 7 % of people trusted him in 2016 and showed a decline to 5.4 % in August 2017 (Agentúra Focus, for more see [http://www.focus-research.sk/files/231\\_Dovera%20v%20politikov\\_august2017.pdf](http://www.focus-research.sk/files/231_Dovera%20v%20politikov_august2017.pdf))
- <sup>3</sup> The last opinion poll conducted shortly after the regional election by the AKO agency showed a rise in support for OĽaNO from 8.9 % in September 2017 to 12.5 % in November 2017. Smer rodina – Boris Kollár received 9.2 % and became the fourth largest party after Smer-SD, SaS and OĽaNO. According to the latest poll, KDH would with its 7 % also enter Parliament.

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