Regional Elections in Slovakia – a New Reformation of the Slovak Political Scene?

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Abstract: *The aim of the present study is to analyse the events and results of the elections to bodies of regional self-governments in Slovakia in November 2017. The elections were held under the conditions of the amended legislation after the abolition of the two-tier election system of the presidents of the regions. The study analyses the process of forming pre-election coalitions and the mobilisation of voters. The research is based primarily on official election results as well as political party documents and information published in the media. Although the strongest body of the ruling coalition, Direction – Social Democracy Party, obtained the highest number of seats, there was a marked drop in voter participation. This is a continuation of a trend in evidence in the parliamentary elections in 2016. The regional elections of 2017 signalled, in contrast, the consolidation of the right-wing opposition (SaS, OĽaNO, and KDH), whose agenda contains elements of anti-European and anti-party populism*

Keywords: *Slovakia; regional elections 2017; electoral turnout; Smer-SD [Direction — Social Democracy]; Marián Kotleba*

Elections to bodies of regional self-governments in Slovakia do not usually attract much attention of the expert community, media, but not even the voters. This is documented by the low dynamism of the turnout since establishing the self-governing regions in 2001 (Table 1). The election results confirmed the trend toward a decline in electoral support for Direction — Social Democracy Party (Smer-SD), a party that has been the leading party in Slovakia since 2006, but whose weakening in popularity was indicated by the results of the elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic (NC SR) in March 2016 when the party obtained a mere 28.28 percent of votes and 49 mandates (out of a total of 150) compared to 44.41 percent and 83 MPs in 2012 (Election 2016b). The drop was primarily caused by dissatisfaction with the party's social policy as well as numerous displays of clientelism, namely suspected corrupt behaviour on the part of the party's representatives.

The developments after 2012 confirm the high degree of voter volatility and organisational instability of political parties resulting in the advent of new political actors (Rybář and Spáč 2016: 153). Almost all elections therefore result in striking changes to the structure of political parties. The elections of 2012 brought about a marginalisation of the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union — Democratic Party (SDKÚ-DS), which received 6.09 percent of votes (Election 2012), despite holding a dominant position among the centre-right parties since 2000 and being the strongest part of government coalitions in 2002 and 2010.

A partial erosion of the model of division of the Slovak political scene into two camps could also be seen after 2012, this being a long-term characteristic of Slovak political culture since the first half of the 1990s (Leška 2011: 138–141). This was caused, among other things, by the growing influence of the right-wing authoritarian People's Party — Our Slovakia (ĽSNS) whose leader Marián Kotleba was elected President of the Banská Bystrica Region in 2013, but also by the consequent entry of this party in the NC SR in 2016 after receiving 8.04 percent of votes (Election 2016). Another contributing element was the conflict between the centre-right parties causing disintegration of the government coalition led by Iveta Radičová in 2011 and resulting in early parliamentary elections. The split on the right side of the political spectrum was also fuelled by the decision of Most-Híd and Network parties in 2016 to dismiss the negotiations aimed at creating a coalition government with the eurosceptic liberal party Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) and the populist grouping Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OĽaNO) and create a coalition with Smer-SD and the national conservative Slovak National Party (SNS). The two dominant, centre-right parties — SDKÚ-DS and the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) — also left the parliament in 2016. Since its creation, the coalition of Smer-SD with two smaller parties has faced sharp criticism by the opposition parties SaS and OĽaNO, casting doubts on its moral legitimacy and accusing Most-Híd, in particular, but also SNS, of treason. The aforementioned coalition is

not a stable one, however, a fact documented by the break-up of Network in 2016 and the termination of the coalition agreement by the SNS leader Andrej Danko in the summer of 2017, which led to the institution of new rules of cooperation within the coalition.

Another trend evident in the political development in Slovakia after 2012 is the decline in voter confidence in "traditional" political parties, i.e. those with an extensive membership and regional structures. This is expressed by the strengthening of the influence of parties lacking a solid organisational structure and membership (such as SaS, OĽaNO, We Are Family) and/or having an anti-political rhetoric (e.g. We Are Family). Similarly, the presidential elections of 2014 saw the victory of Andrej Kiska, a candidate accentuating his non-affiliation with any political parties. The present study is aimed at identifying the extent to which said tendencies took effect during the events and results of the regional elections held in Slovakia in November 2017. I will proceed, specifically, from an analysis and comparison of the results of the regional and parliamentary elections. Given the need to identify trends regarding similarities or differences in election behaviour in the parliamentary and regional elections, there is a need to utilise a diachronic approach since the first elections to bodies of regional self-governments were held in 2001. The influence of the election on the steps taken by representatives of political parties can be identified based on their public appearances

Regional elections as second-order elections

Compared to the elections to NC SR, elections to the bodies of regional self-governments are so-called second-order elections, as they do not decide on the structure of either legislative, or executive bodies at the national level. This category also includes the European Parliament elections (Šaradín 2007: 9–10). In view of the scope of matters decided by the bodies of regional self-governments, these elections usually face lower interest on the part of voters and political parties alike. K. Reif and H. Schmitt (1980: 3–44) define further characteristics that can be applied to regional elections, for instance, lower support for parties in power in comparison with nationwide elections, leading to better results for small and new parties, a higher degree of the application of personality principles to the detriment of the party principle in the voters' decisions, and the more important role played by the campaign in mobilising the voters. Moreover, the authors suggest that the voter turnout decreases in connection with the extent of difference of the voting rules from the national tradition. Reif later made the failure of parties in power conditional upon the dependence on the electoral cycle within the first-order elections, i.e. elections

to nationwide legislative bodies, where the support is the lowest in the middle of the term (Reif 1984: 244–255; Eik et al. 1996: 151). The second-order elections also contribute to better visibility of smaller parties and allow the voters to have "a more earnest vote," even in cases where the political party, they showed a preference for, is less likely to play an important role in the government. The influence between the first-order elections and second-order elections is therefore bi-directional (Eik et al. 1996: 157–159). Voters vote, on the one hand, for parties that promote politicians similar to politicians they would support in the first-order elections, and, on the other hand, voting in the second-order elections can also be strategically motivated — by tendencies to "punish" the current government (Binzer Hobolt and Wittrock: 2011: 31). Therefore the second-order elections can signify the results of the subsequent first-order elections. In addition, as emphasised by H. Schmitt based on the results of the first European Parliament elections held in the so-called Eastern European (i.e. eight post-communist) countries in 2004, in this case the electoral cycle principle does not have as much impact as in Western European countries (Schmitt 2005: 659, 663).

The present study aims to identify the extent to which the aforementioned characteristics of the second-order elections apply to regional elections in Slovakia. I will rely on the fact that since the parliamentary elections of 2006, Direction — Social Democracy Party has been the major political party in Slovakia, while being the dominant part of ruling coalitions since then, except for the period from 2010 to 2012. I will therefore look at what the events and results of the elections to the bodies of regional self-governments in Slovakia held in November 2017 meant to the position of the said party. I will also examine to what extent the first-order elections (i.e. elections to NC SR in 2016) and the post-electoral process influenced the behaviour of the actors in the regional elections and whether or not these elections empowered smaller or new political parties.

The electoral system

The self-governing regions as the second degree of regional authority, also referred to as higher territorial units, were constituted by amending the Constitution of the Slovak Republic No. 90/2001 Coll. and Act No. 302/2001 Coll. Their structure is based on the territorial division of Slovakia from 1996, which has been criticised by authors from various parts of the political spectrum for disregarding the borders of historical regions (Sloboda 2014: 4, 8, 37; Kyseľ 2017; Hrnko 2017). In contrast to the elections to NC SR that utilise the system of proportional representation with a five percent electoral threshold to enter the parliament within a single electoral district, being the entire territory of Slovakia, the electoral system for the elections to

the bodies of regional self-governments resembles the electoral system applied for the elections to bodies of local self-governments (Marušiak 2012: 127–132). In addition to the regional assemblies, elected using the majority electoral system in single- or multiple-mandate districts depending on the population of the district, the voters also elect the region's President through direct election. The Slovak Constitution prescribes a four-year electoral term (Art. 69). The electoral system permits the individual voting of candidates as well as the participation of independent candidates. The first elections to the bodies of regional self-governments took place in 2001. Up until 2013, the Presidents of the self-governing regions were elected in a two-tier system, and the two strongest candidates advanced to the second round unless one candidate received more than 50 percent of votes in the first round. The two-tier system for the elections to the bodies of regional self-governments was adopted by the so-called Electoral Code (Act No. 180/2014 Coll.). The majority voting system implemented for regional elections permits participation of various actors in the political competition. In addition to nationwide political parties, an even better changes to succeed lies with regional political parties. Independent candidates can also participate in the elections, i.e. individual candidates who are not endorsed by any political party. The system is distinguished by a high degree of personification of election campaigns.

Low turnout in the elections for self-governing regions (see Table 1), compared to the elections to NC SR, where the turnout has been, historically, between 54.67 percent (2006) and 84.24 percent (1998)[1], was the main reason behind the legislative changes in February 2017. The most significant change was replacing the two-tier system for the elections of the regional Presidents with a single-tier system due to the lower turnout in the second round in the past. Amendment to the Slovak Constitution allowed for extraordinary prolongation of the term for the bodies of regional self-governments, so that the subsequent regional elections could be held together with the municipal elections in 2022. The coalition parties also argued for financial savings as a result of cancelling the second round of elections of the Presidents and by weakening the changes of extremist politicians to gain control of the regional governments. The change was criticised by the opposition, arguing that it was passed very shortly before the elections (Webnoviny 2017b). Slovak President A. Kiska refused to sign the amendment of the respective acts, yet the deputies of NC SR approved the changes once again on 21 March 2017 (Aktuálne.sk 2017d)[2]. The change was even opposed by a number of Presidents of self-governing regions, for instance, the President of the Bratislava Region, Pavol Frešo (independent, leader of SDKÚ-DS in 2012–2016), and the President of the Nitra Region, Milan Belica (Smer-SD) (Aktuálne.sk 2017c). Another opposition figure, a non-attached Member of Parliament, Miroslav Beblavý, proposed cancelling the higher territorial units

altogether and re-alloting their authorities to cities and towns, a proposal which was disapproved by NC SR (Aktuálne.sk 2017a).

The argument in favour of cancelling the higher territorial units was, in particular, low interest on the part of the electorate, likely having multiple causes. In addition to the territorial division that disregards the borders of historical regions, it was in all probability due to a low awareness of the public regarding the importance of the self-governing regions in society as well as the fact that various elections take place in Slovakia on an almost annual basis (elections to NC SR, presidential elections, elections to the bodies of regional self-governments, municipal elections, and European Parliament elections), which is likely to cause voter fatigue. At the same time, one of the reasons for the low turnout may be the creation of pre-electoral coalitions that frequently do not correspond to the division into the coalition and opposition at a national level. Based on K. Reif and H. Schmitt (1980: 13), low turnout may also be caused by the introduction of the majority system which is contrary to the political traditions in Slovakia with a dominant position of the proportional representation system.

Table 1: The dynamics of turnout in the election to the bodies of regional self-governments (2001–2017) (in % of eligible voters)

Year / turnout	2001		2005		2009		2014		2017
	1st round	2nd round	1st round	2nd round	1st round	2nd round	1st round	2nd round	
	26.2	22.61	18.02	11.07	22.9	18.39	20.11	17.29	29.95

Source: Election to the bodies of regional self-governments

Since the second elections to the bodies of regional self-governments in 2005, the candidates of Smer-SD for the post of the regional President and independent candidates supported by this party were more successful than the candidates of centre-right parties. Six out of eight Presidents of the self-governing regions were elected with the support of Smer-SD in 2005. Four years later, in 2009, Smer-SD won seven out of eight Presidents, and in 2013, the ratio from 2005 repeated. To a certain extent, one can talk about the success of Smer-SD in the case of regional elections in 2001 where the opposition also took six out of eight regional Presidents. At the time, it was represented especially by the People's Party — Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (ĽS-HZDS), but numerous representatives of this party, on both the national and regional levels, later grew close to Smer-SD (for instance, Tibor Mikuš in the Trnava Region, Milan Belica in the Nitra Region, and Peter Chudík in the Prešov Region). It should also be pointed out that the election campaigns on a regional level focused primarily on winning the President posts.

Reif's electoral cycle theory, in contrast, is partially applicable only in the case of the regional elections of 2001, in which the opposition party ĽS-HZDS also

won the highest number of MPs. Even then, however, the majority of mandates in the regional assemblies went to centre-right parties of the ruling coalition. These parties then created a ruling coalition after the elections to NC SR in 2002 despite a failure in the elections of regional Presidents. The results of the elections of regional Presidents in 2005 foreshadowed the result of parliamentary elections held in June 2006, albeit the dominant position in regional assemblies was maintained in these elections by KDH, SDKÚ-DS and DS. The regional elections of 2009 corroborated the dominant position of Smer-SD, although this party was not able to form a ruling coalition after the parliamentary elections of 2010 despite receiving the largest number of votes. Similarly, the election results of 2013 do not point to a drop in support for the ruling party a year and a half after the parliamentary elections held in March 2012, albeit Marián Kotleba, leader of the far-right People's Party — Our Slovakia, won in the Banská Bystrica Region, where the post of President had been held by a candidate of Smer-SD since 2001. Kotleba's success marked the entry of ĽSNS to parliament after the elections of 2016. This, however, is the only instance of considerable success of a newly-formed, in this case radical, political party in the regional elections.

The results of regional elections mirror, to a large extent, the stable regional stratification of voters. The principle that the electorate votes similarly in both the first- and second-order elections therefore holds true (Binzer Hobolt – Wittrock 2011: 31). In the parliamentary elections of 2006, Smer-SD was the strongest party in all regions except the Bratislava Region dominated by SDKÚ-DS, analogous to all the electoral districts of the city of Košice. The strongest party in 11 electoral districts in South Slovakia, with an abundance of the ethnic Hungarian minority, was the Party of the Hungarian Community (SMK). The subsequent disruption of SMK and the creation of the Slovak-Hungarian party Most-Híd consolidated the visual dominance of Smer-SD in most multi-ethnic electoral districts. In the subsequent parliamentary elections of 2010, Smer-SD confirmed its dominance in most regions. SDKÚ-DS only won in the Bratislava Region (the city of Bratislava and the Senec electoral district), while Most-Híd was the strongest in the Dunajská Streda, Komárno, Galanta and Šaľa electoral districts and SMK won in the Štúrovo electoral district (part of the Nové Zámky administrative district).

In the early elections to NC SR held in 2012, Most-Híd won in the Dunajská Streda electoral district and SMK was the strongest in the Komárno and Štúrovo electoral districts. In all other electoral districts, including the city of Bratislava, Smer-SD prevailed. This party was also the strongest in 70 out of 79 administrative districts in the parliamentary elections of 2016, while the right-wing SaS only succeeded in the Bratislava Region (in the Bratislava I.–V. and Senec administrative districts) and in the Košice I. electoral district, and SMK won in the Dunajská Streda and Komárno administrative districts. In the Bratislava Region, long dominated by

centre-right parties, the candidate backed by Smer-SD, Vladimír Bajan only succeeded in being elected President in 2005 (Parliamentary Elections, Elections to the Bodies of Regional Self-Governments). The above-mentioned data confirm that regional stratification of the voters is stable and the election results on the regional level correspond to the results at the national level. With respect to the relatively stable stratification of the electoral support in the individual regions and in view of the legislative changes of 2017 that cancelled the second round of elections of regional Presidents, the success of the candidates of Smer-SD could have been envisaged in the regional elections of 2017.

Forming the pre-election coalitions

The defining characteristics for the composition of lists of candidates and for the election campaign as a whole was a defensive position on the part of the ruling coalition parties and considerable activity of the part of the opposition parties that succeeded in joining forces in all regions. While the centre-right parties (SaS, OĽaNO, KDH, and several minor right-wing parties such as OKS and NOVA in some regions) acted together on the regional level, joint activity of the ruling coalition was only achieved in the Nitra and Trenčín Regions. The decision of the trio SaS, OĽaNO and KDH was fuelled by the jointly organised anti-government protests since March 2016, implemented not just in parliament but also in the form of street rallies. Additional opposition parties — ĽSNS and We Are Family — ran separately. Some candidates, seeing the negative attitude of the part of the electorate towards political parties, decided to leave their parties and ran independently, for instance, Oto Žarnay and Viera Dubačová, OĽaNO Members of NC SR (Aktuálne.sk 2017b). The ruling coalition parties therefore acted on the whole in conflict with their nationwide commitments, their candidates competed with one another in all but two regions, which was one of the issues that led to the coalition crisis between Smer-SD and SNS in the summer of 2017.

The candidates nominated by Smer-SD for the post of Presidents of the self-governing regions were usually the acting Presidents. In the Bratislava Region, the party did not nominate its own candidate and did not officially give support to any other existing candidate. An internal letter was published immediately before the elections, in which Martin Glváč, the chairman of the regional organisation in the Bratislava Region and the chairman of the Smer-SD parliamentary group, called upon the party members to support the independent candidate, Milan Ftáčnik, the former Mayor of Bratislava in 2010–2014 supported by Smer-SD. Ftáčnik disavowed, however, the support from Smer-SD (Dugovič 2017b), probably due to the low support of Smer-SD in the Bratislava Region in the long term. The media, however, pub-

lished reports according to which the leaders of Smer-SD in the Bratislava Region, in reality, did not want Ftáčnik to win, but their intent was a victory of the acting President, Pavol Frešo, or any other candidate, although being a political opponent of the party in the past (Dugovič 2017a). Ftáčnik confirmed these reports after the elections, accusing Glváč of willful detriment to his campaign (Denník N 2017).

The coalition partners of Smer-SD nominated their own candidates for the President (Lukáš Parízek for SNS, and Daniel Krajcer for the coalition of Most-Híd, SKOK — European Liberal Democrats [SKOK-ELD] and the Slovak Green Party [SZS]). When nominating the candidates for the Members of Parliament, however, Smer-SD acted together with Most-Híd, SDKÚ-DS, SKOK-ELD and the grouping Mayors and Independent Candidates, while SNS acted on its own. In the Trnava Region, Smer-SD and SNS voiced support for the acting regional President, Tibor Mikuš, who ran independently, while Most-Híd nominated its own candidate, Konrád Rigó.

In the Žilina and Prešov Regions, Most-Híd, operating primarily in the multi-ethnic regions in the south of Slovakia, did not nominate its candidates for Presidents. Smer-SD and SNS, in contrast, did not nominate joint candidates. Smer-SD supported the acting Presidents (Juraj Blanár in the Žilina Region and Peter Chudík in the Prešov Region), while SNS proposed the former Slovak Education Minister, Ján Mikolaj, in the Žilina Region, and Miroslav Škvarek in the Prešov Region. The coalition parties also ran separately in the Košice Region. Smer-SD, in contrast to other regions, nominated the Mayor of Košice, Richard Raši[3], while the acting President, Zdenko Trebuľa, decided not to run again. Most-Híd in coalition with SKOK-ELD nominated Karol Pataky, and SNS proposed Jarmila Takáčová.

For the elections of deputies of regional self-governments, the coalition parties submitted individual tickets in all regions except the Trenčín and Nitra Regions and partly of the Bratislava Region, a possible signal of insufficient consensus inside the ruling coalition. The attitude of Smer-SD to the elections in the Bratislava Region also indicated internal conflicts within this party.

From the viewpoint of nomination of candidates for the Presidents of the self-governing regions, the dominant position was held by SaS in the block of centre-right opposition parties. Its candidate for President in the Bratislava Region was Juraj Droba (SaS), whom, however, KDH refused to support due to his liberal orientation. KDH participated, however, in the joint ticket for the block in the Bratislava Region. The right-wing block's appointee in the Trenčín Region was Renáta Kaščáková, a member of SaS (Aktuálne.sk 2017c). OĽaNO nominated the candidate in the Žilina Region (Erika Jurinová) and in the Trnava Region (Jozef Viskupič). The candidate of the right-wing block for the Prešov Region was Milan Majerský, a member of KDH and the Mayor of Levoča. Ján Greššo (Nitra Region) and Rastislav Trnka were nominated as joint candidates without specifying their party affiliation (Sme 2017a).

A specific situation arose in the Banská Bystrica Region where political mobilisation focused on efforts to defeat the acting regional President, the leader of the extremist ĽSNS, Marián Kotleba. It was incited, apart from other things, by the entry of ĽSNS to the parliament in 2016. Based on a previous agreement, Stanislav Mičev, an independent candidate who cooperated in the past with left-wing groupings, and the right-wing block candidate, Martin Klus (member of SaS), both relinquished their run in favour of an independent candidate, Ján Lunter, whose chances for beating Kotleba seemed the highest in August 2017 based on an opinion poll held by Focus agency (Vražda 2017). Mr Lunter was also backed by Smer-SD and other ruling coalition parties, which, however, acted independently when compiling lists of candidates for the members of the regional assemblies. The elections in the Banská Bystrica Region also pointed to conflicts among the far-right parties when one of Kotleba's opponents was Jozef Sásik, representative of the Slovak People's Party who, like Kotleba, expressed sympathies to the legacy of the Slovak Republic (1939–1945) led by Jozef Tiso.

In addition to nationwide issues that also resonated during anti-government protests organised by SaS and OĽaNO, specific regional issues resonated during the voter mobilisation by the opposition. In the Trnava Region, its President, Tibor Mikuš (2005–2017), was criticised, for instance, for the poor economic situation and the potential shutting down of Piešťany International Airport, the traffic situation in the town of Hlohovec, and protests against opening lodging house in the village of Voderady owned by a region that should house international workers employed by neighbouring industrial plants, all of which was actively communicated to the local electorate by Mikuš's right-wing opponent, Jozef Viskupič (Webnoviny 2017a). The main issues in the election campaign against the acting President, Juraj Blanár (2005–2017), in the Žilina Region were, among others, suspicions regarding the purchase of overpriced CT instruments for regional hospitals in 2016 (TVnoviny.sk 2016). In this regard, Smer-SD even speculated about replacing him with Ján Podmanický, a Member of NC SR and a conservatively oriented representative of a younger generation in the party, as a candidate for the President (Webnoviny 2017c). In the Prešov Region, long-term President, Peter Chudík (2001–2017), was reproached by his opponents, in particular, for providing state subsidies to his own companies and was also accused of electoral graft in villages with large numbers of inhabitants of Roma origin before parliamentary elections in March 2016 (Harkotová 2017).

Similarly to the period before the elections to NC SR held in 2016, the so-called religious right was an important factor in political mobilisation. A non-governmental organisation called the Association of Christian Youth Communities published its Christian Politician Manifesto, the signatories of which pledged to protect Christian values (primarily recognition of marriage as a sacred union between one man and one woman, and protection of life from conception up until death of natural

causes), but also to respect the principles of social solidarity and "fair, economical and transparent management of public resources" (Kresťanskí kandidáti 2017). Any candidate, regardless of party affiliation, could sign the Manifesto, although its signatories were mainly representatives of the opposition block of centre-right parties and independent candidates. The Manifesto was also backed by five candidates for regional Presidents.

Election results[4]

The elections to the bodies of regional self-governments of 2017 were distinguished by the highest turnout since 2001 when these elections were first held (Table 1). This was in part caused by the mobilisation of the right-wing opposition, but also by the high degree of voter mobilisation especially in the Banská Bystrica Region against Marián Kotleba and ĽSNS. The turnout in this particular region had never previously exceeded 27.05 percent, yet it reached 40.28 percent in November 2017, a number that far exceeds the national average (Elections 2017). A higher turnout compared to previous elections was also reported in other regions.

In terms of the positions of political parties, the elections brought about a weakening of Smer-SD at the regional level. While six out of eight regional Presidents, elected for the period of 2013–2017, were backed by Smer-SD (the post of the President of Banská Bystrica Region was held by Marián Kotleba [ĽSNS], and the President of the Bratislava Region was Pavol Frešo, an appointee of the centre-right coalition of SDKÚ-DS, KDH, Most-Híd, SaS, SMK, OKS and the Green Party), only two candidates of this party succeeded in November 2017 — in the Nitra Region (Milan Belica) and the Trenčín Region (Jaroslav Baška), i.e. regions where they ran supported by coalition partners of Smer-SD. Even the visit of the Prime Minister and leader of the party, Robert Fico, immediately prior to the elections was not enough to prevent the defeat of Smer-SD's candidate in the Žilina Region (Prušová 2017). Separate candidates of SNS for the post of President received only a low number of election votes, including those widely present in media.[5]

In contrast, candidates of the opposition block of centre-right parties succeeded in five regions, while the post of the President of the Banská Bystrica Region went to an independent candidate, Ján Lunter, backed by the ruling coalition parties as well as the centre-right coalition (see Table 2).

Among the right-wing parties, OĽaNO won two Presidents (Erika Jurinová in the Žilina Region and Jozef Viskupič in the Trnava Region), and two parties had one President each: KDH (Milan Majerský — Prešov Region) and SaS (Juraj Droba — Bratislava Region). Three of newly elected Presidents of the regions (Ján Lunter, Erika Jurinová and Milan Majerský were the signatories of Christian Politician Manifesto.

Table 2: Presidents of self-governing regions (2013, 2017)

Region /Year	2013	2017
Bratislavský	Pavol Frešo (KDH, SZ, SMK-MKP, SDKÚ-DS, SaS, OKS, MOST – HÍD)	Juraj Droba (SaS, OĽaNO, SMK-MKP, NOVA, OKS, Zmena zdola, DÚ)
Trnavský	Tibor Mikuš (independent backed by Smer-SD	Jozef Viskupič (OĽANO, SaS, KDH, OKS, Zmena zdola, DÚ)
Nitriansky	Milan Belica (Smer-SD)	Milan Belica (SMER-SD, SNS, MOST – HÍD)
Trenčiansky	Jaroslav Baška (Smer-SD)	Jaroslav Baška (SMER-SD, SNS, MOST – HÍD, SZ)
Žilinský	Juraj Blanár (SMER-SD, SZ, SNS)	Erika Jurinová (OĽANO, SaS, KDH, OKS, NOVA)
Banskobystrický	Marián Kotleba (ĽS NS)	Ján Lunter (independent backed by right-wing coalition and Smer-SD)
Košický	Zdenko Trebuľa (MOST – HÍD, SMK-MKP, SMER-SD)	Milan Majerský (KDH, SaS, OĽANO, NOVA)
Prešovský	Peter Chudík (SMER-SD, SMS, NÁŠ KRAJ)	Rastislav Trnka (OĽANO, SaS, KDH, NOVA, ŠANCA)

Note: The highlighted candidates were elected with direct support from Smer-SD.

Source: Elections to Bodies of Regional Self-Governments

Although Smer-SD retained the highest number of deputies of regional assemblies (89)[6] among political parties, this meant a drop by more than a third in comparison with the 151 deputies in the previous term. Second and third places were occupied by non-parliamentary parties, KDH (46 members) and SMK (33 members) respectively, with solid regional structures. Although SMK did not reach the election threshold in the elections to NC SR in 2010, 2012 and 2016, this being 5 percent for independent parties, it succeeded in the multi-ethnic territory of South Slovakia and beat Most-Híd which only secured 10 regional assembly deputies. Relatively poor results were achieved by the second-strongest parliamentary party, SaS (15 deputies), and OĽaNO (23 deputies), a fact likely caused by insufficiently developed (SaS) or even absent (OĽaNO) regional structures. Only 15 regional assembly deputies went to the coalition party, SNS. Among the smaller right-wing parties, 7 deputies were taken by Nova, a party whose candidates ran on the ticket of OĽaNO in the 2016 elections to NC SR. Change from Below (Zmena zdola) led by Ján Budaj (Member of NC SR elected for OĽaNO in 2016) won 5 deputies, while 2 deputies went to Prospect (Šanca). The right-wing OKS, the regional parties Independent Forum (Nezávislé fórum, in the Bratislava Region) and Sport for Košice and the East (Šport do Košíc a na východ, in the Košice Region), the party Home Sweet Home (Doma dobre), and the neo-communist Dawn (Úsvit) took one deputy each (Koník 2017).

Among parliamentary parties, only We Are Family led by Boris Kollár, a millionaire businessman, did not win any regional assembly deputies. The success of Change from Below (predominantly in the Bratislava Region) was primarily caused by the involvement of Ján Budaj and other party members in politics on the municipal level in Bratislava (Ján Budaj presides over the Club of Bratislava Representatives that groups together centre-right deputies of the Bratislava Municipal Council).

In the case of ĽSNS, only two candidates went to regional assemblies, who also are the most publicised figures since 2016 (Marián Kotleba, party leader in the Banská Bystrica Region, and the party's deputy leader, Milan Uhrík). The party's failure in the regional elections does not necessarily mean its marginalisation. In the majority voting system, its candidates were weaker than their opponents, and also less visible and prestigious in the local territory where they operate. On the other hand, the much-publicised representatives of ĽSNS were successful in the elections, and Kotleba took second place with 23.24 percent of votes in the election of the President of the Banská Bystrica Region. This means he retains the support of a significant segment of the constituency and his party with extremist views continues to have significant electoral potential, a fact that will likely be manifested in the elections to NC SR, utilising the proportional representation system.

Smer-SD only succeeded in increasing the number of their deputies in the Bratislava Region, from one in 2013–2017 to five after 2017, but their numbers dropped significantly everywhere else. The most striking drop occurred in the Trnava Region where Smer's regional assembly deputies went from twelve to one (see Table 4). Most-Híd won a single mandate in the Bratislava, Nitra, Trnava, and Banská Bystrica Regions, while only gaining more substantial representation in the Košice Region (6 mandates). SNS did not win any representation in the Bratislava Region, five mandates in the Žilina and Nitra Regions, and 1–2 mandates in the remaining regions.

As regards the regional assemblies, the coalition only takes precedence over the right-wing opposition in the Nitra Region (17 vs. 10), Banská Bystrica Region (17 vs. 4), Trenčín Region (16 vs. 9), and Košice Region (23 vs. 15). In all other regions, the right-wing opposition has more regional assembly deputies than the coalition parties.

Table 3: Mandates according to party affiliation of regional assembly members (2017)

Region / party	Bratislavský	Trnavský	Nitriansky	Trenčiansky	Žilinský	Banskobystrický	Košický	Prešovský	SR total
Smer-SD	5	1	11	15	10	15	16	16	89
SNS	0	0	5	1	5	1	1	2	15
Most-Híd	1	1	1	0	0	1	6	0	10
KDH	3	6	4	4	8	3	8	11	47
SMK	3	13	11	0	0	5	1	0	33
OĽaNO	2	3	2	1	6	0	4	3	21
SaS	3	2	1	3	3	1	1	1	15
Change from Below	4	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	5
ĽSNS	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	2
NOVA	1	0	1	0	0	0	2	3	7
Prospect	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	2
OKS	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Independent Forum	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Home Sweet Home	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Dawn	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Sport for Košice and the East (ŠKV)	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Independent incl. candidates without party affiliation	25	14	15	22	25	22	17	24	165
Region total	50	40	54	47	57	49	57	62	

Source: Koník 2017; Elections 2017

Table 4: Number of Smer-SD regional assembly members in the individual regions (2013, 2017)

Region/ Year	Bratislavský	Trnavský	Nitriansky	Trenčiansky	Žilinský	Banskobystrický	Košický	Prešovský
2013	1	12	20	22	19	24	25	26
2017	5	1	11	15	10	15	16	16

Source: Koník 2017

The highest overall number of mandates went to independent candidates — 161 mandates according to the official election results (Elections 2017), but as many as 165 according to the data obtained by Denník N, which succeeded in identifying the party affiliation of the candidates based on statements of the representatives of the running parties and coalitions (Koník 2017). In terms of the party affiliation of the elected candidates, these represent the strongest segment, which can cause problems in forming stable majorities in regional assemblies, because their political behaviour is hard to predict. On the other hand, one cannot exclude the fact that candidates, officially designated as independent, were members of political parties but failed to get on the coalition ticket because they had to share the allocated number of places with the candidates of the coalition partners.

Response of political parties to the election results

The regional election results triggered optimism among the representatives of the right-wing opposition (SaS, OĽaNO, and KDH). The leader of KDH, Alojz Hlina, stated that "Smer is finished in Slovakia" (Koník 2017). For KDH, the election results mean a strengthening of the party's position within the Slovak political scene and an increase in hope for the return to NC SR in the following parliamentary elections. The result also brought about, however, contradictions among the opposition parties. SaS and OĽaNO announced, in December 2017, their intent to cooperate in drawing up the lists of candidates for the municipal elections, planned for autumn 2018, exclusively in the two-party coalition format, i.e. without KDH, which provoked negative reactions from the KDH leader, Alojz Hlina (Sme, 19.12.2017). Influenced by the success of their candidates for the Presidents of self-governing regions, the leader of OĽaNO, Igor Matovič, cast doubts on the plans of the leader of SaS, Richard Sulík, for the post of Prime Minister if Smer was defeated, stating the MP for this party, Veronika Remišová, would be a better candidate for this function (Fakt24.sk 2017).

In February 2018, a Member of NC SR, Richard Vašečka, elected for OĽaNO, announced he would join KDH with the intent of competing for the post of party leader (Postoj 07.02.2018). Vašečka documented being supported by numerous party members, but the members of the KDH presidium voiced their support for the current leader, arguing by the party's success in the regional elections under his leadership (Smatana 2018).

Despite electoral success, there is an ongoing trend of fragmentation within the right-wing opposition. Internal conflicts were also reported in Smer-SD. Immediately after the elections, the deputy leader and the Slovak Minister of Culture, Marek Maďarič, called for "substantial changes in the party … as regards its policy, agenda,

and staffing," labelling the results as defeat (Aktuality.sk 2017). Partial criticism of the election results was also voiced by the Deputy Prime Minister and deputy leader of Smer-SD, Peter Pellegrini (TASR 2017). Criticism of the staffing policy of Smer-SD was also presented by the conservative MP for this party, Ján Podmanický (Pravda 2017).

Smer's leader, Robert Fico, refused to interpret the election results as the party's defeat, and on the contrary, spoke of a "clean sweep." Except for the Slovak Minister of Culture, Marek Maďarič, all the deputy leaders of Smer rejected information according to which they demanded the resignation of the Minister of the Interior, Robert Kaliňák, and the Minister of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, Ján Richter (Tódová 2017). After Maďarič failed to find support from the party leadership for his criticism of the current policy of Smer-SD, he officially announced his resignation as the party's deputy leader, but remained Minister (Hospodárske noviny, 07.12.2017). He also criticised the party's steps before the elections to the bodies of regional self-governments at the party conference on 9 December 2017. His criticism concerned the party's activity in the Bratislava Region, where Smer-SD failed to find a candidate the party could endorse. He demanded self-reflection on the part of the party and supported the existence of opinion platforms. His speech was condemned by the Smer-SD regional organisation leader, Martin Glváč (Sliz 2017). The election result in the Košice Region was questioned by the candidate of Smer-SD for the post of the region's President, Richard Raši. With respect to the narrow margin between him and the winner, Rastislav Trnka (875 votes) (Elections 2017), he voiced suspicions of falsification of election results and sent a petition to the Slovak Constitutional Court demanding the elections be declared invalid (Slovak Constitutional Court 2017). After the regional elections, Smer-SD intensified the confrontation campaign against the opposition as well as criticizing intellectuals (labelled "Bratislava Café") (Sliz 2017), but also increased attention paid to social issues. Robert Fico, in contrast, confirmed the social-conservative direction of the party by stating that Smer-SD would remain a Slovak, not "Brussels-like" social democracy.

Despite this rhetoric, Smer-SD carried out staffing changes on the level of regional organisation leaders (in the Trnava, Banská Bystrica, and Prešov Regions) and the party's leader, Robert Fico, announced the replacement of an unspecified number of chairpersons of the party's district organisations (Pravda 2018).

Conclusion

The elections to the bodies of regional self-governments held in November 2017 confirmed the tendency toward a decline in electoral support for Smer-SD, weakening its long-standing dominance of the Slovak political scene. On the regional level,

the decline is manifested by a drop in the number of its regional assembly deputies as well as the Presidents of self-governing regions elected with the party's support, in comparison with the situation between 2005 and 2013. For the time being, it is impossible to identify the extent to which this decline may influence the upcoming elections to NC SR, but Smer-SD substantially weakened its position in regions where it had long been supported in the parliamentary and regional elections. It remains, however, the strongest party. The results of the regional elections disrupted the long-term regional stratification of electoral preferences. The regional elections resulted in the political marginalization of the minor coalition parties of Smer-SD — both SNS and Most-Híd. The position of Smer-SD was also influenced by the consolidation of right-wing opposition parties (SaS, OĽaNO, and KDH), when said parties began to act jointly after the elections to NC SR in 2016. On the other hand, elections show weaker cohesion of the ruling coalition that managed to achieve a joint action only in two out of eight regions (Trenčín and Nitra Regions). Conflicts from the first-order elections therefore significantly affected the events and results of elections to the bodies of regional self-governments.

At the same time, political differentiation in Smer-SD became evident after 2016, the first signal of which was the departure of one of its co-founders, Member of the European Parliament, Boris Zala (Krbatová 2016). The results of the regional elections only intensified this trend. Although the assembly of Smer-SD in December 2017 voted to maintain the current party policy and critical opinions, voiced, for instance, by Maďarič and Podmanický, this did not gain significant open support among the members, and the differentiation processes within the party was leaked to the public. Thus far, this differentiation has not taken the form of a clash of opinions or values within the party. The election results also confirmed the decline in voter confidence toward political parties, and a reformation of the Slovak political party scene cannot therefore be ruled out in the near future. The relative success of Marián Kotleba (more than 23 percent of votes in the elections of the President of the Banská Bystrica Region) indicates that the extreme right has a substantial electoral potential, although it cannot gain significant representation in the majority voting system of the regional elections.

The election results did not confirm the theory according to which new and/or smaller political parties gain support in the second-order elections. This could be true in the case of the Change From Below or Nova parties, but these cannot be referred to as "new" in terms of the duration of their existence or in terms of the agenda they promote. Representatives of both parties ran on the ticket of OĽaNO in 2016, while the leader of OKS, Ondrej Dostál, was elected to NC SR in 2016 running on the ticket of SaS. Even regional parties failed, however. The election of one regional assembly deputy for the radical party Dawn, Ivan Hopta (who was deputy of the Prešov Regional Assembly in 2001–2005 for the Communist Party of Slovakia, and

has been a regional assembly deputy for Dawn, the party he founded, since 2009), is primarily the result of his personal authority in the town of Humenné, as the position of the party has been no more than marginal. Regional parties did not enjoy substantial success in the regional election either in 2017, or in the past.

The success of the right-wing coalition also confirms a turn to the right within Slovak society. Although SaS was originally formed as a liberal party, the eurosceptic attitudes of its leader brought it under the umbrella of the European Conservatives and Reformists Group. The group also comprises representatives of other right-wing block parties — OĽaNO and NOVA — while KDH, being a member of the European People's Party, differentiates from its partners by a more conservative attitude in so-called cultural and ethical matters, rejecting any potential co-regulation on the European level. Regional elections therefore confirmed the intensification of eurosceptic forces in Slovak politics where SaS, in particular, is distinguished by strong anti-immigrant rhetoric. The joint activity, in contrast, of the right-wing block parties, namely SaS and OĽaNO, between 2016 and 2017 and then during the regional elections in November 2017, and the determination to follow-up the activity in the upcoming municipal elections, suggests an interest in replacing Smer-SD in the government after the nearest elections to NC SR. Trends indicated by the regional elections indicate that Slovakia can grow closer to other Visegrád Group countries in terms of political culture, albeit somewhat later.

Notes

[1] In 2016, 59.82 percent of voters participated in the elections to NC SR in 2016. (Elections 2016a)

[2] See Act No. 69/2017 Coll. of 21 March 2017.

[3] Richard Raši was also supported by the Party of the Hungarian Community (SMK-MKP), Mayors and Independent Candidates, and the Slovak Green Party (SZS).

[4] The data were taken from official results published by the Slovak Statistical Office (Elections 2017).

[5] For example, the state secretary in the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of Slovak Republic Lukáš Parízek in Bratislava Region received mere 0.38 percent, the former Minister of Education Ján Mikolaj received in the Žilina Region – the area of traditionally high level of electoral support of the party – only 2.66 percent of the votes. The candidates in Prešov and Košice Regions Miroslav Škvarek and Jarmila Tkáčová received 2.18 and 2.3 percent of the votes.

[6] The analysis of the number of mandates allocated to the individual political parties and independent candidates leans on data provided by the Slovak Statistical Office (Elections 2017) and on data acquired by the newspaper Denník N from coalitions running in each self-governing region (Koník 2017).

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