



September 5, 2006

## **Selections from the International Press on Reactions to Developments in Slovakia**

**Le Monde**

05.09.06

### **L'extrême droite slovaque provoque la minorité hongroise**

Deux mois après l'arrivée au pouvoir en Slovaquie, fin juin, d'un gouvernement de coalition alliant la gauche populiste et l'extrême droite, les relations entre Bratislava et Budapest se détériorent, renouant avec le ton du milieu des années 1990.

L'agression d'une jeune femme de la communauté magyare de Slovaquie par deux skinheads, vendredi 25 août, à Nitra, dans le sud du pays, a fait brutalement grimper la tension qui couvait depuis le début de l'été. Les agresseurs avaient tagué dans le dos de leur victime l'inscription "les Hongrois de l'autre côté du Danube". L'incident a suscité une vive inquiétude dans la minorité hongroise, qui représente 500 000 des 5,4 millions de Slovaques, et des protestations du gouvernement hongrois.

Les autorités de Budapest ont exigé une "ferme condamnation" de l'agression par les dirigeants slovaques. Dès le lendemain de l'agression, le premier ministre hongrois, Ferenc Gyurcsany, avait appelé son homologue slovaque, Robert Fico, à dénoncer les actes antihongrois qui se seraient multipliés depuis l'entrée au cabinet du Parti national slovaque (SNS, extrême droite) de Jan Slota. Maire de Zilina (nord), où le Coréen Kia construit la plus grande usine de montage automobile de Slovaquie, ce dernier est un familier des diatribes antimagyares et antitziganes.

Le gouvernement slovaque a répondu très sèchement aux demandes hongroises, jeudi 31 août. Le premier ministre, dont le parti a été suspendu du Parti socialiste européen en raison de son alliance avec l'extrême droite, a attendu plusieurs jours pour constater que "ce genre d'événement se produit malheureusement dans n'importe quel pays" et que les "autorités slovaques n'avaient pas de leçon à recevoir pour lutter contre la xénophobie et l'intolérance".

Le ministre slovaque des affaires étrangères, Jan Kubis, a accusé les responsables politiques de la minorité hongroise de Slovaquie d'orchestrer avec les dirigeants de Budapest une "campagne de discrédit de la Slovaquie". "Les représentants de la Coalition hongroise de Slovaquie s'entretiennent très fréquemment à Budapest avec les députés hongrois siégeant au Parlement européen et au Conseil de l'Europe", s'est-il indigné.

#### **"ACTES IMPUNIS"**

M. Kubis a souligné que la police et la justice slovaques réprimaient durement toutes les manifestations de xénophobie, alors que "plusieurs actes antislovaques sont restés impunis en Hongrie". "La dégradation des relations entre la minorité hongroise et le gouvernement de Bratislava comme entre la Slovaquie et la Hongrie est liée à la présence de Jan Slota dans la coalition gouvernementale", estime Tibor Kovacs, un Hongrois de Nitra. "Nous craignons que nos droits et acquis des dernières années ne soient rognés", explique-t-il. Il traduit ainsi un sentiment largement partagé dans la communauté magyare.

Le gouvernement de coalition de M. Fico s'était pourtant engagé lors de sa formation à garantir les droits des minorités et n'a prévu aucun retour en arrière en la matière, malgré la présence en son

sein du Parti national et du Mouvement pour une Slovaquie démocratique (HZDS) de Vladimir Meciar.

Ces deux partis, aujourd'hui minoritaire dans la coalition, avaient gouverné ensemble entre 1994 et 1998, mettant la Slovaquie au ban de l'Union européenne, qui avait alors menacé de ne pas l'inclure dans les négociations d'élargissement en raison de leur nationalisme.

Ils avaient alors réduit les crédits aux associations hongroises, refusé la création d'une université en langue hongroise, finalement fondée en 2000, et mis en place un découpage administratif et électoral visant à affaiblir la représentation politique des Magyars.

**Martin Plichta**

**DIE  WELT**

29. August 2006

## **Fremdenfeindliche Attacken in der Slowakei nehmen zu**

*Die ungarische Minderheit des Landes erwartet nach Übergriffen jetzt Hilfe von Premier Fico. Doch der läßt alle Verbalattacken seines Koalitionspartners Slota bislang bewusst unkommentiert. Die sind jedoch wahre Brandreden.*

**Von Hans-Jörg Schmidt**

Prag - Nichts ahnend telefonierte am vergangenen Freitag eine 23-jährige Slowakin auf offener Straße in der Stadt Nitra (Neutra) mit ihrem Handy. Da sie ungarischer Abstammung ist, wie ein Zehntel aller Slowaken, sprach sie Ungarisch. Das wurde ihr zum Verhängnis. Mehrere Glatzköpfe umzingelten plötzlich die Studentin, rissen ihr das Mobiltelefon aus der Hand, schlugen auf sie ein, zwangen sie, ihr T-Shirt auszuziehen und schmierten darauf "Ungarn in die Donau!". Die junge Frau musste verletzt ins Krankenhaus gebracht werden.

Das war der jüngste Fall von ungarnefeindlichen Attacken in der Slowakei, die nach der Bildung der Regierung von Robert Fico, der unter anderem mit der rechtsextremen Nationalpartei koalitiert, zugenommen haben. Besonderes Betätigungsfeld für die Fremdenfeinde scheinen die Fußballstadien zu werden. In Banska Bystrica (Neusohl) entrollten sie jüngst bei einem Erstligaspiel ein riesiges Transparent mit der Aufschrift "Tod den Magyaren!". Auch die so gescholtenen Ungarn geben nicht klein bei. Bei Fußballspielen dort hieß es auf Spruchbändern unter anderem: "Ihr Slowaken bleibt stets unsere Sklaven."

Aber auch bei "normalen" Ungarn, egal ob in Budapest, am Balaton oder im nordungarischen Győr, verfinstert sich in diesen Wochen die Miene, wenn man sie zum Beispiel auf den Chef der Slowakischen Nationalpartei, Jan Slota, anspricht. Der hat wiederholt mit ungarnefeindlichen Aussagen für Aufregung gesorgt und die nationalen Leidenschaften auf beiden Seiten der Grenze angeheizt. Die sind geschichtlich begründet: Die Slowakei war rund tausend Jahre eine Provinz Ungarns und wurde auch so behandelt. Das können viele Slowaken bis heute nicht vergessen. Welche absurden Blüten das treibt, kann man unter anderem auf einer Gedenktafel im slowakischen Gabčíkovo besichtigen, wo ein gewaltiger Donau-Staudamm seinen Anfang nimmt, der bis ins ungarische Nagymaros reicht. Zu sozialistischen Zeiten war das ein Vorzeigeprojekt beider Staaten. Ausgerechnet auf der erwähnten Tafel gedenkt man dort der "Opfer der Magyarisierung" - und erst an zweiter Stelle der Arbeiter, die beim Bau des Staudamms verunglückten.

Folgt man der Partei der Ungarn in der Slowakei sowie der Führung in Budapest, dann sind die neuen Leidenschaften darin begründet, dass der slowakische Premier Fico alle Verbalattacken seines Koalitionspartners Slota bislang bewusst unkommentiert ließ. Nach dem Überfall auf die Studentin in Nitra platzte dem ungarischen Premier Ferenc Gyurcsány der Kragen. Er appellierte an Fico, endlich sein Schweigen zu brechen und ein klares Zeichen gegen die ungarnefeindlichen Auswüchse zu setzen. Fico tat dies nun auch, verurteilte aber nicht nur den Extremismus in der Slowakei, sondern auch den auf ungarischem Boden. Überdies verwahrte er sich gegen die Ermahnungen aus Budapest, wofür er jetzt wiederum von den Medien im eigenen Land scharf kritisiert wird. Der slowakische Polizeipräsident Jan Packa zeigte sich da handfester. Er kündigte an, notfalls Spezialeinheiten gegen Extremisten einzusetzen. In Ungarn mangelt es dagegen noch an Taten. Dort wurden die Ermittlungen gegen die nationalistischen Fußballrowdys eingestellt.

## Trouble in New Europe

In May, Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Jansa explained his government's dilemma. While his cabinet favors Slovakian-style reforms, including a flat tax, he said that many Slovenians are looking more to Germany's welfare state as a model. Anyone familiar with Germany's steady economic decline knows this isn't good news.

A few weeks later Slovakia itself elected the populist Robert Fico Prime Minister. He ran on a platform to reverse many of his predecessor's economic reforms, including the 19% flat tax -- a position he later softened. His victory is part of a worrying trend in several East European countries, including Poland and Hungary, which have seen a new generation of leaders take power pledging to roll back reform or rest on past achievements.

It's an unfortunate turn. After Western Europe had exported Communism out east, the "New Europeans" were busy returning the favor and exporting capitalism back west. The danger now is that the two sides of the Continent are converging toward some kind of "European social model."

Let's take Slovakia first. After the unsavory authoritarian Vladimir Meciar ran the country for much of the last decade, which kept Slovakia out of the EU and NATO, the Slovaks in 1998 elected a modernizer, Mikulas Dzurinda, whose swift reforms quickly secured them a place in both clubs. Slovakia became the poster child of economic renaissance, growing its economy almost 20% in the past four years.

Not everybody benefited, and Mr. Fico was able to tap into the pool of dissatisfied pensioners and unemployed (at 15.5%, almost as high as Poland's 16.4%). Lacking an absolute majority, Mr. Fico this month formed a government with the help of two fringe parties, including Mr. Meciar's party and a xenophobic nationalist grouping whose leader calls the country's half million Hungarian minority "nomads with crooked legs."

Mr. Fico says that he wants "Slovakia to become a modern social state." His government has mooted a special tax for banks and utilities and favors reversing the privatization of Bratislava airport. Investors' worries that the new regime will raise spending, scare away foreign companies and delay the adoption of the euro put pressure on the currency. The central bank has already intervened three times since the election to halt the koruna's decline.

Slovakian writer Peter Schutz, in the paper *Sme*, describes Mr. Fico's governing vision thus: "A socialist has emerged in Europe, whose motive is not to raise budget revenues but class hatred. The species has almost become extinct. Or, if it exists, it is called a Communist."

Unlike Mr. Fico's sanctuary for old Communists, the ruling Law and Justice Party of Lech and Jaroslaw Kaczynski -- Poland's President and Prime Minister, respectively -- had their democratic convictions steeled in years of fighting communism. Despite the Kaczynskis' regrettable alliance with two populist parties and the awkward situation of the twins filling the country's two most important political positions, the real risk today is not to Poland's democracy but to the economy.

The resignations of Finance Minister Zyta Gilowska in June and Prime Minister Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz this month left few reformers in the cabinet. As in many other East European countries, Poland is enjoying strong growth, fueled partly by the global economy. But this government has done little so far to tackle its economic problems, chiefly in the labor market.

The switch from heavy industry and agriculture to a more service-oriented economy has left many workers stranded with the wrong qualifications. Since unemployment benefits aren't far below the minimum wage, many people don't look too hard for jobs. Tight firing rules combine with high social taxes to make hiring new workers costly for business. As a result, Poles are again going abroad -- not only the mythical "plumbers," the *bête noire* of French politicians, but also professionals. Up to two million now work outside the country.

Hungary is another problem child. Soaring deficits, partly due to a failure to cut pension and health-care costs, led rating agency Standard & Poor's last month to downgrade its debt. The forint dived. Markets aren't too impressed with the tax hikes and spending cuts Socialist Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsany plans.

Further east, less than two years after its democratic Orange Revolution, Ukraine may finally get its first government in three months. A coalition of communists and a large pro-Russia party is about to take power, raising questions about the country's ability to modernize.

New Europe, whose growth rates remain the envy of Old, has hardly lost its shine. But these political problems are a serious concern since Eastern European countries still have a long way to go to catch up with the West. Now is no time to lose focus and indulge in fantasies about the 1970s "German model" of high welfare and short working hours.

The only German model relevant for New Europe today is the 1950s free-market reforms of Ludwig Erhard that brought the country back to life after World War II. Come to think of it, that's a good model for Old Europe too.

## **Fico's infamous march into soc dem history**

**By Beata Balogová**

IF NOTHING else, Robert Fico has already made it into the history of European socialist parties. His Smer will become the very first political party to have its membership in the Party of European Socialists (PES) suspended. Fico made great efforts a little more than a year ago to push his party into the PES so he could present Smer as a standard internationally recognised party pursuing a standard social democratic agenda.

However, his power marriage with the Slovak National Party (SNS) is something that the PES will simply not digest, no matter what interpretation Fico attaches to the union. For the PES, the SNS is a xenophobic and nationalist party with a history of collaboration with French ultra-nationalist Jean-Marie Le Pen and of making infamous statements addressed to the Roma and the Hungarians.

Fico had hoped to soften hearts in the PES with the argument that with the SNS and the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) as partners, it would be much easier to push through a socialist agenda.

But if Fico thought that the image of the SNS was a matter of discussion, he was wrong, as was his assumption that the PES was worried about the SNS due to a lack of information. Slovakia has had political representations in the past that claimed that international organisations criticised them because they lacked objective information, and because their opinions were based on ill-willed comments made by journalists and analysts who diligently worked on "denigrating the country". The former three-time prime minister, Vladimír Mečiar, quite often used this argument during the times of the deepest international isolation of his government. Another notorious Mečiar statement was that "if the West does not want us, we will turn to the East". Analysts suggest that if knocked by harsh criticism from the West, Fico too might try to seek international partners in parts of the globe that are less demanding and that do not mind his union with a far-right party. Smer indeed is the SNS' first serious partner; after 1998 and the end of its role in the Mečiar government, the SNS was left with no partner with whom to cooperate. Mečiar himself said that the SNS caused more evil than good to his former government. But this obviously was not enough to stop him from joining Fico and Slota in order to get back into power. The SNS did enjoy times when its former chairwoman, Anna (Malíková) Belousovová, who temporarily ousted Slota from the top position, tried to present the party as a modern and democratic body with international contacts. She even ended contacts with Le Pen, a move that did not appeal to the hard core of SNS voters and did not seem sincere.

Smer party members have tended to react carefully to the European socialist criticism and to argue that the PES should have waited to see the actual steps of the new government. Dušan Jarjabek, for example, said it was really all about the vocabulary that the SNS used, a vocabulary that it would have to change radically. As for the party and most importantly its boss' potential to change, many remain skeptical. The head of the socialist fraction in the European Parliament, Martin Schulz, told Le Monde that to expect Ján Slota to change was like believing "the wolf when it claims that it wants to become a vegetarian". In a way, making scandalous statements was often the only way for Slota to get media attention, and many doubt his ability to contain himself now that the attention is unwaveringly fixed on him. The PES sent out a clear signal that politics is not only about declared government programmes but also about unions and partners, statements and declarations, in the

same way that the future is about the past. While Slovak politics often took the approach of letting bygones be bygones, well-established western political circles have longer memories and obviously a limited appetite for metamorphosis by political parties with bad reputations.

However, Smer's suspended PES membership has another dimension as well, and opens up the question of whether Smer is truly a social-democratic party. It took time for Smer to make up its mind where to move from its "third way" beginnings, which politically meant only that Smer had emerged as a power party to fulfill the ambitions of its boss. Even the daily SME recalled in its July 7 issue that PES Deputy Chairman Jan Marinus Wiersma had doubted Fico's sincerity as a social democrat at the time when Smer was struggling to join the PES. During the pre-election campaign, Fico's opponents often pointed at Smer members and their links to business, suggesting that they were not really convincing examples of social democratic politicians. And yet, Smer is only one of Fico's two major problems. The second is obviously Vladimír Mečiar, who has already begun calling for "the civil and political rehabilitation of Ivan Lexa," the former boss of the Slovak Intelligence Service who is suspected of involvement in the abduction of the son of former president Michal Kováč to Austria.

Mečiar is not the darling of the international community either, and those who believed in his metamorphosis, now after his call for Lexa's rehabilitation, can see that he is the same old Mečiar with a little bit less energy, fewer supporters and fewer things to say. Fico said he only needed three months to prove that his government is a standard European government with respect to minority rights. The PES needed only three days to tell him to get stuffed.

## FINANCIAL TIMES

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### **Slovakia sets extremist challenge for Europe**

*By Robin Shepherd*

The European Union was presented with another serious challenge to its ability to contain hardline nationalism this week with the inclusion in the government of new member state Slovakia of a key party with rabidly xenophobic views and a nostalgic attitude to that country's pro-Nazi wartime government.

The far-right Slovak National party was invited into government by Slovakia's leading leftist party, SMER-DS, which came first in recent elections but needed coalition partners to form a government. The fact that far-rightists have been brought into power by Social Democrats is but one of several alarming precedents that have been set by these events, which come on the heels of the formation of a new government in Poland that includes the nationalist and homophobic League of Polish Families.

The Slovak National party, apart from its sympathies with the second world war clerico-fascist government of Father Jozef Tiso, which paid the Nazis to deport about 70,000 Jews to death camps, is unremittingly hostile to Slovakia's sizeable Roma and Hungarian minorities.

Among many inflammatory remarks, Jan Slota, its leader, once said that the best solution for the Roma was a "small courtyard and a long whip" and, in a drunken outburst in 1999, called on Slovaks to "get in their tanks and flatten Budapest" to defend Slovakia from the alleged encroachments of neighbouring Hungary. Mr Slota has also described Tiso as one of the greatest sons of the Slovak nation and has held gatherings to salute his memory.

Set in the context of recent events in Poland and the rise of Jörg Haider's Freedom Party in Austria in 2000, the concern now is that we are seeing the start of a trend in which each success for an extremist party in one country emboldens and helps legitimise extremist parties in others.

During the election campaign in Slovakia, leading figures in the Slovak National party successfully countered charges that their presence would be unacceptable abroad by pointing out that Brussels had been forced into a humiliating climb-down in its brief attempt to isolate Austria in 2000 and had done nothing significant in Poland.

So far, these groups have been junior partners to more mainstream parties who say they can prevent extremist rhetoric from translating into government policy. But if this trend continues, it may only be a matter of time before such a party becomes the leading force in government. If that happens, modern European history will have entered a new period.

All of this presents a mighty challenge to the EU's claims to "soft-power" influence and to be a club whose membership is defined by adherence to a set of core values. There is a very specific problem arising from all this with the credibility of EU anti-racism campaigns. Chauvinists, after all, are hardly going to take seriously the message that racism is unacceptable when they switch on their television sets and see the extremists they voted into power being wined, dined and otherwise legitimised by political leaders across Europe.

That problem is compounded in the new member states which, as of January 2007, will become eligible for almost €170bn (\$216bn) in structural fund aid. This promises to be a political bonanza for coalitions across the region who will inevitably claim the credit for the increased living standards and improved infrastructure such funds are intended to promote. Smaller parties in government will bask in the reflected glory as much as bigger ones.

In the case of Slovakia, Brussels will thus find itself in the monstrous predicament of providing a de-facto subsidy for the future political popularity of the Slovak National party which, to make matters even worse, has been given the key ministry responsible for distributing EU funds.

Outlining the nature of the problem is admittedly easier than suggesting a solution. These governments are being formed following free and fair elections and many in Brussels got their fingers burnt over the Haider affair. But if the EU is unable to find a way to put its house in order, and to do that sooner rather than later, it will only be storing up bigger problems for the future.

Membership of the union is not compulsory and subsidies from European taxpayers are not a God-given right. If the EU is serious about this problem, perhaps extremists and the people who form governments with them should be made aware of precisely what that last sentence means.

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**FINANCIAL TIMES**

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## **Concern for Slovakia's reforms as leftwing premier takes office**

*By Robert Anderson in Prague*

Robert Fico took office as Slovakia's first leftwing prime minister yesterday, against a backdrop of concern that he will destroy the country's hard-won diplomatic and economic reputation.

Diplomats and fellow European socialists are distraught that Mr Fico ignored foreign opinion and chose to ally himself with two parties that led Slovakia into international isolation in the mid- 1990s: the Nationalists and the HZDS of Vladimir Meciar, the country's authoritarian founder.



July 3, 2006

## **Slovak Victor and Rivals Form Government**

BRATISLAVA, Slovakia, July 2 (Agence France-Presse) — The left-wing winner of recent elections in Slovakia and the leaders of an extreme right-wing party and a nationalist party signed a coalition agreement on Sunday, paving the way to form the next government.

The winner, Robert Fico, the Smer Party leader, signed the agreement with Vladimir Meciar, a former prime minister and the leader of the nationalist Movement for a Democratic Slovakia, and Jan Slota, the leader of the extremist Slovak National Party, at a short ceremony.

Mr. Fico's party won 29 percent of the vote in elections on June 17.

The agreement means Mr. Fico will be the next prime minister, succeeding Mikulas Dzurinda.

Mr. Fico said in a speech that his government, expected to take office on Tuesday, would be pro-European, would fulfill its commitments to NATO and would respect minorities.



## Regression

Für die Slowakei, die den Rückstand gegenüber den postkommunistischen Nachbarn unter großen Opfern aufgeholt und sich in Nato und EU bewährt hat, ist die Bildung einer Regierung Fico unter Einschluß der rechtsradikalen Nationalpartei eine Katastrophe. Eine mutige und weitsichtige Koalition wird abgelöst von drei Populisten, die die Slowakei wieder dorthin führen, wo sie in den neunziger Jahren schon einmal war: an die Peripherie Europas, deren politische Kultur von Leuten wie Lukaschenka und eben Meciar, Slota und Fico geprägt wird. Die weißrussische Regression der Slowakei vollzieht sich nun allerdings unter sozialdemokratischen Vorzeichen, denn Ficos Bewegung nennt sich Smer-Sozialdemokratie und gehört der Sozialistischen Internationale an. Zum ersten Mal geht eine Partei, die den demokratischen Sozialismus propagiert, ein Regierungsbündnis mit einer rechtsextremen Partei ein. Angesichts der Vehemenz, mit der führende europäische Sozialdemokraten den Österreicher Schüssel einst wegen der FPÖ und den Italiener Berlusconi wegen der Lega Nord attackiert hatten, darf man auf ihre Reaktion nun gespannt sein.



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### Une coalition rouge-brune en Slovaquie

***Le parti de gauche Smer s'allie avec l'extrême droite xénophobe SNS et le parti nationaliste HZDS.***

Le parti de gauche slovaque Smer, victorieux aux dernières législatives, a opté pour une coalition avec l'extrême droite xénophobe SNS et le parti nationaliste HZDS, a annoncé son chef Robert Fico au cours d'une conférence de presse à Bratislava mercredi 28 juin.

Lors des élections législatives le 17 juin, Smer a obtenu 29,14% des voix soit 50 des 150 sièges du Parlement.

Le HZDS (Mouvement pour une Slovaquie démocratique) de l'ancien Premier ministre Vladimir Meciar (1992-1998) a obtenu 15 sièges, et le SNS (Parti national slovaque), 20 sièges, ce qui assure à cette coalition rouge-brun une majorité pour obtenir la confiance des députés.

Les trois partis ont déjà décidé de la répartition des portefeuilles ministériels: Smer aura le poste de Premier ministre, la présidence du Parlement et dix postes, l'extrême droite trois postes ministériels et le HZDS deux.

#### **Le marché inquiet**

"Nous commencerons à préparer demain l'accord de coalition et le programme du nouveau gouvernement", qui sera ensuite présenté au Parlement début août, a précisé Robert Fico.

Smer a fait campagne en promettant une révision des réformes libérales menées depuis 2002 par le Premier ministre chrétien-démocrate Mikulas Dzurinda.

Robert Fico a en particulier promis de revoir le système fiscal unifié qui consiste à tout taxer à 19% sans exception, TVA, impôt sur le revenu et impôt sur les sociétés, avec un taux parmi les plus bas d'Europe.

Alors que de nombreuses entreprises étrangères ont massivement investi en Slovaquie après les réformes radicales du précédent gouvernement, les intentions de rapprochement de Smer avec les nationalistes et l'extrême droite antihongroise et antitzigane avaient déjà soulevé les inquiétudes du marché.