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A Barrier Against Liberalism? The Coalition Formation Process after the 2023 Slovak Parliamentary Elections¹

This article focuses on the coalition formation process that followed immediately after the 2023 elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic. Using the framework of building barriers as a specific coalition strategy, the paper analyzes both the pre-election as well as the post-election coalition strategies of parties that succeeded in the parliamentary elections. It analyzes the factors that have been influencing these strategies, as well as factors that influenced the ultimate coalition formation. The major obstacles and challenges the formed coalition may face in future will also be mentioned. Finally, the article focuses on the key cleavage that has been present in Slovak (and other) politics in recent years: illiberalism vs. liberal democracy.

Key words: Slovakia, elections, party, government, coalition

Introduction

The government formation processes are almost as important as the parliamentary elections themselves. Once the election results are final and no party secures a majority in the legislative assembly, a strategic game that includes rational and irrational steps, arguments and positions begins to form a majority coalition. The outcomes of this stage of post-election development do not necessarily lead to forming a coalition around the winner. After all, there have been a number of cases in Slovakia where the party in charge of the post-election coalition formation (*formateur*) was not the winning one. This is a consequence of one of the features of positive parliamentarism where the factual winner is the one who is able to form an alliance with majority support in the legislative body.

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This article analyzes the post-election coalition formation process following the most recent elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic (on September 30, 2023), and the factors that influenced this process. The main objective is to identify the grounds on which the coalition was built with a particular focus on the contemporarily increasing importance of cultural and ethical issues that, rather than dividing parties on a socio-economic left-right scale, draws the line between national conservatism (often, but not exclusively, connected with illiberal, populist, and authoritarian features) regardless of whether it comes from the economic right or the economic left on one side, and liberal democracy (often, but not exclusively, connected with progressivism) on the other side.²

Special attention will be paid not only to the two actors competing for the electoral victory (Smer and PS), but also to the party that long before the elections had been considered a “tip on the scale” with the power to decide on the future coalition (Hlas). Another aim of the article is therefore to identify the factors that played a role in the decision-making of this decisive actor.

Concept of barriers as a coalition factor in theory and in Slovak political tradition

The traditionally programmatic proximity of political actors, especially in the socio-economic agenda, was a prevailing factor influencing the coalition formation processes. It was based on hypotheses that political parties programmatically closest to each other will more likely form a ruling coalition (Laver – Schofield 1992, pp. 110–111; Lijphart 1984, p. 50), that “parties that are ideologically proximate to the largest party are more likely to become members of the cabinet” (Savage 2013, p. 3) and that “parties connected in terms of principal policy questions – ultimately adjacent in the political spectrum – are more likely to coalesce, or at least maintain a stable government” (Pridham 2002, p. 78). Socio-economic issues were also the basis of the traditional cleavages of owners vs. workers. Lining up along the cleavage lines has also been the foundation for the coalition strategies, in which political actors sought to enter the alliance with like-minded partners from the same side of the conflict.

On the other hand, both fragile democracies of Central and Eastern Europe and stable democracies in Western Europe (and the USA) have recently witnessed substantial changes in the political, societal, cultural, and / or economic environments. These were caused by, among other things, the rise of populism, illiberalism, and nationalism, partly in reaction to several new or newly dominating issues (such as migration, Russia’s aggression in Ukraine, or the covid pandemics, and countries’ responses, which included several unprecedented restrictions to individual freedoms). These processes have been slowly overshadowing the left-right socio-economic divisions and have been putting forward different lines and cleavages that have begun to dominate politics, both during the electoral campaigns as well as during post-election government formation processes.

² The economic left usually advocates for “higher taxes for wealthy individuals, stronger regulations for businesses, and government spending on social infrastructure,” while the economic right usually calls for “reducing taxes, limiting government spending, and fewer government-imposed restrictions on businesses” (Decision Lab [s.a., accessed 2024]).

It is fair to say that in the case of Slovakia, such a situation is not new at all. Unlike many other Central and Eastern European countries, the left-right socio-economic division has been rather complementary to other factors that played more important and influential roles in the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s. Many coalitions formed in Slovakia in this period were not so much policy-based, but rather purpose-based following a specific Slovak cleavage of *Mečiarism vs. Anti-Mečiarism*. The central subject of this cleavage, which was also reflected in coalition formation processes, was the personality of Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar (HZDS) and the way he approached the governance, democracy (its institutions and procedures), rule of law, political culture, pluralism, media freedom, the role of opposition or Slovak foreign policy (Hloušek – Kopeček 2005, p. 17; Just 2020, p. 394-395; Mesežnikov 2002; Pridham 2002, p. 82). Thus, it was not the position of political parties on the left-right socio-economic scale that would be used as a cornerstone for coalition formations in this period, but the (un)willingness to accept Mečiar's approach in the aforementioned issues. This led to the application of the first type of barrier in the coalition practice in Slovakia when an alliance of four heterogeneous political actors – the Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK), the Party of the Democratic Left (SDĽ), Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK), and the Party of Civic Understanding (SOP) – formed a coalition after the 1998 elections with the purpose of keeping Mečiar out of power. Later in the 2000s, the left-right divide started to gain relevance (Dolný 2023, pp. 242-243).

The coalition for which the metaphor of barrier was used most frequently (because the term was used by its members on multiple occasions) was a kind of surprise alliance formed after the 2016 parliamentary elections. This coalition included not only Smer and SNS as parties that already had experience in joint governance before (the 2006–2010 electoral period) but also two other parties who until then defined themselves against Smer and SNS: the Slovak-Hungarian party Bridge (Most – Híd) and the newly established party Network (Siet') founded by ex-Christian Democrat Radovan Procházka (Just 2018, pp. 111–114). Formation of this surprise alliance came as a direct response to the unexpected success of the far-right party Kotlebists – Peoples' Party Our Slovakia (ĽSNS) in the 2016 elections. ĽSNS has generally been characterized as an extreme-right party, with Fascist/Neofascist features, anti-system appeals, ethnic nationalism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism (see e.g. Beneš – Charvát 2019; Klíma 2020; Kluknavská 2013; Kluknavská – Smolík 2016; Spáč 2020; Vasiľková – Androvičová 2019). Formation of this alliance with the goal of protecting the system against the influence of actors such as ĽSNS was described by some members of the new coalition as a “barrier against extremism” (Korda 2017).

As the second part of the paper will deal with the coalition formation process from the perspective of portfolio allocation, let us discuss briefly the importance of this process in general. While the basic assumption is that cabinet portfolios are allocated among coalition parties proportionally for each party's contribution to the parliamentary majority (Savage 2013, p. 3; Svačinová – Chytilík 2010, p. 4), political practice and empirical data show that the situation may vary country by country and case by case, considering specific political situations and realities. Therefore, we can witness both underrepresentation of senior coalition parties in favor of junior coalition partners, as well as the *formateur bonus* (Druckman – Roberts 2005, p. 537) where, contrary to the previous situation, a party in charge of cabinet formation is relatively stronger than its share of seats by which it is contributing to a parliamentary majority. Underrepresenten-

tation of the senior coalition party is usually based on a situation where the formateur does not have many realistic options to form an alliance and potential junior partners are aware of this limited manoeuvring space and can use it for increased demands for their representation in the cabinet. The formateur bonus on the other hand may refer to a situation when junior coalition partners have limited possibilities and options and are willing to join the cabinet where their share of seats will be lower than their contribution to a majority.

Besides proportionality of each coalition party's representation in a cabinet we also need to evaluate each party's intra-cabinet strength by the salience and importance of the portfolios which have been negotiated by each party during the coalition formation process. This process is based on several hypotheses. One of them is the assumption that parties entering the cabinet are competing either for portfolios that are salient, important, and / or influential in general, or portfolios that best reflect their policy priorities (Savage 2013, p. 2). We could apply the latter for example to social democratic parties' interests in gaining control over social affairs or health portfolios; similarly, green parties would very likely demand gain of the environmental portfolio, etc. Another assumption is that the strong parties "should gain the most salient portfolios" (Savage 2013, p. 15).

Regarding the portfolios that are generally perceived as salient, they include the positions of the prime minister, minister of finance, minister of foreign affairs, and minister of interior (Laver – Shepsle, 1996, pp. 152–153; Savage, 2013, p. 10). Above that, we could add cabinet members heading ministries and departments responsible for the distribution of significant funds (such as social benefits or European subsidies). This would add to this group of salient portfolios the Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, and Ministry of Agriculture (Kmet' 2011, p. 213), or specific positions established in the Slovak environment, such as the Ministry of Investment and Regional Development, and the cabinet member with the rank of deputy prime minister responsible for the National Recovery Plan and European Funds.

Pre-election development and its impact on the election result

The 2023 Slovak parliamentary elections were called early following the turbulent period between 2020 and 2023. During these three-and-a-half years, several cabinets were in power. First the surplus majority coalition of Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLaNO), We Are Family (Sme Rodina), Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), and For the People (ZL) was formed in March 2020 (Just 2020). Since its beginning, the intra-coalition stability had been fragile due to several conflicts between then-Prime Minister Igor Matovič (OLaNO) and the leader of the SaS, then-Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Economy Richard Sulík. In March 2021, almost exactly a year after the cabinet appointment, the ministers for the SaS left the coalition. The cabinet still maintained a parliamentary majority, as it was originally formed as a surplus majority coalition and the departure of SaS did not cause the loss of majority.

Following more than a week of political negotiations, then-Prime Minister Igor Matovič decided to step down, thus allowing the SaS to return to the cabinet. Matovič stayed in the cabinet as the minister of finance, replacing Eduard Heger (OLaNO), who became the new prime minis-

ter. The cabinet of Eduard Heger, appointed at the beginning of April 2021, was once again composed of four political parties and movements that formed the original Matovič cabinet in March 2020. However, the change at the position of prime minister didn't change the intra-coalition tensions (due to the continuous presence of both Matovič and Sulík), and the cabinet stability remained at stake throughout the entire period. In August and September 2022, cabinet members nominated by the SaS departed again. With concurrent problems in other coalition parties, the cabinet lost its majority and officially became a minority cabinet.

In December 2022 the ex-coalition party SaS initiated a no-confidence motion in the National Council of the Slovak Republic. Joined by the other opposition parties, the motion was passed and the cabinet lost confidence. As stipulated by the Slovak Constitution, President Zuzana Čaputová recalled the cabinet and concurrently asked it to continue exercising its powers until a new cabinet was appointed (Constitution 1992, as amended by constitutional act no. 356/2011, art. 115, sec. 1-2). In January 2023, following pressure from President Čaputová, the National Council of the Slovak Republic amended the Slovak Constitution to allow for the self-dissolution (Constitution 1992, as amended by constitutional act no. 24/2023, art. 73, sec. 3 & art. 86, letter n; Associated Press 2023). Early elections were eventually scheduled for September 30, 2023.

As the Heger cabinet-in-demise, temporarily assigned to execute its duties until the appointment of the new cabinet, was still experiencing a high level of instability and departures of individual ministers, President Čaputová decided to appoint a new caretaker and non-political cabinet. This constitutional act terminated the mandate of the Heger cabinet. In May 2023, then-deputy governor of the National Bank of Slovakia Ľudovít Ódor was appointed the new prime minister, followed by the appointment of the rest of the cabinet members. The Ódor cabinet, as expected, did not succeed in a confidence vote, but remained in office with limited powers until the appointment of Robert Fico's cabinet following the September 2023 parliamentary elections.

In September 2023, altogether seven political parties and / or their alliances surpassed the electoral threshold and took part in mandate distribution following the parliamentary elections. In comparison with the pre-election public opinion polls, the only party that was expected to get in, but at the end did not enter Parliament, was the Republic, a political party founded by a group of former ĽSNS members. The Republic party ended just below the bar with 4.75% of the votes (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic 2023).

The party Smer recovered from its previous loss in 2020 and regained the position of the strongest party in the system, the status it held from 2006 to 2020. Progressive Slovakia (PS) finished second, contradicting the exit polls released by two TV stations shortly after the polls closed on election day. Both exit polls favored PS, although the margin between PS and Smer in second was within statistical error. The final count, however, placed Smer ahead of PS with a 5% lead. Hlas, formed by former Smer members in the spring of 2020, finished third with more than 3% between them and second-place PS. The remaining four parties received less than 10% of the votes. Among them were two that had returned to parliament after one (SNS) or two (KDH) terms out (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic 2023).

Table 1. Results of the elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic (NR SR) held on 30 September 2023

Parties / movements abbreviation (full name)	Votes	% of votes	Seats in NR SR	% of seats in NR SR
Smer (Direction – Slovak Social Democracy)	681,017	22.94%	42	28.00%
PS (Progressive Slovakia)	533,136	17.96%	32	21.33%
Hlas (Voice – Social Democracy)	436,415	14.70%	27	18.00%
OLaNO, KÚ, ZĽ (Ordinary People and Independent Personalities, Christian Union, For the People) (hereinafter referred as OLaNO et al.)	264,137	8.89%	16	10.67%
KDH (Christian Democratic Movement)	202,515	6.82%	12	8.00%
SaS (Freedom and Solidarity)	187,645	6.32%	11	7.33%
SNS (Slovak National Party)	166,995	5.62%	10	6.67%
			150	100.00%

Source: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (2023).

Post-election coalition formation process

The number of political parties and movements that received mandates and their relative size allowed for a variety of the minimum winning coalition, i.e. the ideal type of coalition formation based on the rational behavior of negotiating actors (political parties and movements). The theory of minimum winning coalitions will be used as a default concept due to its importance in the study of coalition formations and classifications. It is built on the assumption that this ideal formation will secure majority in legislative body, but does not include a surplus member (political party), i.e. all members (political parties) forming the coalition are essential for maintaining the majority (Riker 1962; Geys – Heyndels – Vermeir 2006, p. 959).

Based on the election results, 18 variants of minimum winning coalition could be formed. Out of these, 17 could be formed by either Smer as the winning party or PS as the runner-up, including five options that would require both of them to enter the coalition. Only one possible coalition could be formed without both Smer and PS; however, it would require all the remaining parties to enter the coalition, and the size of such a coalition would be 76, i.e. exactly the number of mandates needed to secure the tightest majority. However, many of these 18 potential coalitions would be practically impossible to build as it would require the concurrent presence of actors that have ruled out mutual ruling.

Table 2. Theoretical combinations of the minimum winning coalition after the 2023 Slovak parliamentary elections (listed in order of their size)

Coalition structure (parties' names are shortened)	Size (mandates)
Smer + PS + Hlas(*)	101 ³
Smer + PS + OĽaNO et al.(*)	90 ⁴
PS + Hlas + OĽaNO et al. + KDH(*)	87
Smer + PS + KDH(*)	86
PS + Hlas + OĽaNO et al. + SaS(*)	86
Smer + PS + SaS(*)	85
PS + Hlas + OĽaNO et al. + SNS(*)	85
Smer + PS + SNS(*)	84
Smer + Hlas + OĽaNO et al.(*)	85
PS + Hlas + KDH + SaS	82
Smer + Hlas + KDH(*)	81
Smer + OĽaNO et al. + KDH + SaS(*)	81
PS + Hlas + KDH + SNS(*)	81
PS + OĽaNO et al. + KDH + SaS + SNS(*)	81
Smer + Hlas + SaS(*)	80
Smer + OĽaNO et al. + KDH + SNS(*)	80
Smer + Hlas + SNS	79
Hlas + OĽaNO et al. + KDH + SaS + SNS(*) ⁵	76

Note (*) Options marked by asterisk were unrealizable due to taxative rejection of the respective parties' representatives, expressed either before or after the elections (ev & TASR 2023; SITA 2023; TASR 2023a; TASR 2023b).

Source: Author's calculations based on official data from the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (2023).

The table above lists all the theoretically possible options for minimum winning coalitions. If we apply conditions set by some of the political parties both before and after the elections, we have to withdraw most of them as unrealizable. Namely we have to withdraw all alliances

³ Constitutional majority.

⁴ Constitutional majority.

⁵ The only option without both Smer and PS.

concurrently involving the two biggest rivals Smer and PS. Based on expressions of parties' representatives we also have to exclude the alliances including (concurrently) KDH and Smer, SaS and OĽaNO, Hlas and OĽaNO (ev & TASR 2023; SITA 2023; TASR 2023a; TASR 2023b).⁶

In the end, of the 18 options only two were realistically and seriously considered during post-election talks. The first one would include Smer, Hlas, and SNS, the second one PS, Hlas, KDH, and SaS. With that said it became obvious that the key to the new coalition was in the hands of Peter Pellegrini and his party Hlas. Hlas leaning towards either one option or another would have helped either the winning party Smer or the second party PS to secure the parliamentary majority. Hlas Chairman Peter Pellegrini was well aware of the power he had at that moment and didn't hide it in his public statements.

Despite the fact that both Smer and PS as the two strongest parties in the newly elected National Council of the Slovak Republic are classified as left (Smer) or center-left (PS) parties, which in general could mean the relative proximity of these two political actors, there are also substantial differences between them. They arise primarily not from the socio-economic platform, but from their perception of issues such as individual rights, minority rights, and tolerance to otherness, or foreign policy (currently mainly towards the war in Ukraine, in general from a long term perspective to relations with the European Union) (Mrvová 2018). From this point of view Smer is seen as the party leaning towards national-authoritarian and Eurosceptic principles, while PS is characterized as a pro-European, progressive and liberal movement (PS [2019]).

Moreover, Smer representatives often use the term *liberal* as pejorative and with negative framing for not only liberal-oriented political parties and politicians but also for media, non-governmental organizations, some representatives of public administration, and supranational organizations. Shortly before the September 2023 parliamentary elections, one of the most visible politicians of Smer, Ľuboš Blaha, claimed that the "liberal mafia headed by [President Zuzana] Čaputová captured media, NGOs, courts, special prosecutor's office and police," and that there are "growing concerns that it [liberal mafia] wants to rig the elections" (Kraus 2023). Blaha has been framing Čaputová as a ring leader of the alleged "liberal mafia" since her election as the president of Slovakia in 2019. In 2019, he called her the "godmother of the liberal mafia" (Blaha 2019).

Demonizing liberalism and liberal forces in Slovak politics and society has also been frequently present in the rhetoric of SNS representatives. The party's vice-chairwoman Dagmar Kramplová has talked about "[Bratislava Mayor Matúš] Vallo's liberal mafia" (Kramplová 2023) or "abnormal [then-Prime Minister Igor] Matovič's pro-Western reign of terror based on liberalism" (Kramplová 2024), usually in connection with cultural (art, theatre, media, television, etc.) and ethical topics and issues.

Given this, there has been a natural bond between the two political parties in their identification and definition towards liberal and progressive ideas and approaches to ethical and

⁶ Before the elections, many political parties ruled out possible cooperation with Kotlebists – LSNS or the Republic party (see e.g. ev & TASR 2023; SITA 2023; TASR 2023a; TASR 2023b). Eventually, neither of them surpassed the 5% threshold, and thus did not get into the National Council of the Slovak Republic and any thoughts on their (un)acceptability as potential coalition partners became irrelevant.

cultural issues. Also, both parties were on similar terms when it comes to the key issues of foreign policy, such as the war in Ukraine and the European Union's response. Their official general approach towards membership in the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is also similar. Although SNS was previously against EU and NATO memberships, today's official position is – despite strong ongoing criticism – supporting Slovak's membership. “The Slovak National Party supports the reform of the European Union and the improvement of the functioning of NATO. Our priority is the improvement of already existing functional international organizations,” said SNS press spokeswoman Zuzana Škopcová after a member of Parliament for SNS Rudolf Huliak called for a referendum on withdrawal from both organizations (Jabůrková 2023). Calls for exit from the EU and / or NATO are still present among SNS members, but they recently represent individual opinions, not the party's official position.

Electoral manifestos of both Smer and SNS also challenged the alleged liberal and progressivist ideological influence in the educational sector. Smer in its programmatic thesis “rejects the rewriting of history and the violent imposition of liberal and progressive ideology into school curricula” (Smer 2023). SNS's electoral platform includes an item titled “Modern and Ideologically Neutral Schools” that without any details calls for “unified textbooks for all schools without ideology” (SNS 2023, item 8).

The position of Hlas was in this perspective much less clear. Hlas had never before defined itself so strictly against liberalism. On the contrary, Smer and SNS saw Hlas as a liberal political party and months before the elections tried to draw a picture of Hlas joining other liberal political forces, such as PS and SaS, in a post-election coalition. “Only the voters will decide with whom and how to form the government. It's funny when someone camouflages some pseudo-coalition that we know nothing about,” said Pellegrini in February 2023 in direct reference to Fico's claims that Hlas leans towards cooperation with other liberal parties. Pellegrini also pointed to the fact that in none of the laws initiated by Hlas deputies and in none of the speeches of Hlas representatives would anyone find “any liberal action there” (Štenclová 2023). Information about the agreement on forming a coalition with PS and SaS Pellegrini characterized as “lies.” On the contrary, he did not rule out a post-election coalition government with Smer. The only political parties Pellegrini namely ruled out as potential coalition partners were LSNS and OĽaNO (Štenclová 2023).

Hlas's programmatic and electoral manifestos and documents did not include any challenges to liberalism and progressivism at all, and this issue was not frequently presented in the sharp and aggressive pre-election rhetoric of Hlas representatives either, unlike in the case of Smer and SNS. Despite this and despite the fact that Hlas participated in post-election talks with both Smer and PS, Pellegrini's party eventually ended up forming a coalition government with Smer and SNS. The answer to the question why Hlas chose to go with Smer rather than with PS takes us a few paragraphs back where we claimed that Pellegrini was aware of the key position he had during the coalition formation process. It allowed Pellegrini to take a powerful and pragmatic approach, perhaps even an approach which would benefit him personally. The basic question was – who could offer him more, Smer or PS?

Even before the elections, Pellegrini was leaning more towards cooperation with Smer, rather

than PS, although he left both variants open after the elections weighing the gains and losses of both options (Škopek 2023). On one hand, programmatically Smer and Hlas were relatively close to each other. After all, they were one party until spring 2020. On the other hand, Fico had never forgotten Pellegrini's betrayal by splitting from Smer.

According to Pellegrini, if Hlas were to join the coalition led by PS (and formed by SaS and KDH), PS would have to "be very generous" and there would also have to be safeguards of cabinet stability (Kalmanová – Baran 2023). By requesting safeguard of cabinet stability, he openly pointed to the fact that such a coalition would have four programmatically diverse political parties (social democratic, social liberal, right-wing liberal, conservative) "that can come into conflict at any time during the election period" (Kalmanová – Baran 2023). Obviously, a coalition with Smer and SNS provided Pellegrini with both more generous representation of Hlas in the cabinet (see later), as well as a higher probability of coalition stability. When justifying Hlas's presence in a coalition with Smer and SNS, Pellegrini pledged that his party would "guarantee that our foreign policy orientation will not change and we will continue to be sovereign members of the EU and NATO" (Kalmanová – Baran 2023). This came as a reaction to one of the most frequent criticisms of the coalition with Smer and SNS.

And we shall not forget one more aspect that could potentially play an important role in Pellegrini's decision whether or not to join the coalition led by Smer. The leader of Hlas was one of the most popular politicians in Slovakia at that time, which drew a lot of speculations about his potential presidential ambitions in the presidential elections scheduled for spring 2024 (later called for 23 March and 6 April 2024). Although it was not publicly disclosed that the issue of presidential elections was part of the coalition deal in October 2023, given the future candidacy of Peter Pellegrini (announced in January 2024; see ČTK 2024) endorsed by Smer, it would suggest that this issue could have been discussed among potential coalition partners at least on the unofficial level in fall 2023.

Table 3. Coalition government formed after the 2023 parliamentary elections

Party	Seats in NR SR	% of coalition seats in NR SR	Seats in cabinet	% of seats in cabinet
Smer	42	53.16%	7	43.75% / 41.18%(*)
Hlas	27	34.18%	7	43.75% / 41.18%(*)
SNS	10	12.66%	2/3(*)	12.50% / 17,64%(*)
	79	100.00%	16/17(*)	100.00%

Note (*) Originally there were 16 members of the cabinet when it was appointed on October 25, 2023. After the 2024 amendment to Law no. 575/2001 Coll., on the organization of government activities and the organization of the central state administration, a new Ministry of Tourism and Sport was created (Zákon 2001, § 3) and thus one more cabinet member was appointed on January 26, 2024. The Coalition Agreement signed after the elections already anticipated that the new portfolio would be allocated to the SNS (Koaličná dohoda 2023, annex n. 2, item 17), thus the number and share of SNS cabinet seats increased and the relative strength of Smer and Hlas slightly dropped.

Source: Author's calculations based on official data from the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (2023).

The quantitative view on the seat distribution proves the aforementioned argument that it was Hlas that held the key to the new cabinet. Despite making up only 34% of the coalition strength, compared to 53% of Smer's contribution, it ended up with an equal numerical position in the cabinet. The strength of Hlas in post-coalition talks was, however, reflected not only in the number of seats in the cabinet but also in its salience.

As we mentioned earlier when allocating portfolios, we (theoretically) assume that strong parties "should gain the most salient portfolios" (Savage 2013, p. 15). However, considering the aforementioned list of salient portfolios, adjusted by taking Slovakian specifics into account, we can conclude that Hlas got quite influential positions. Out of the seven ministerial positions allocated to Hlas, five can be evaluated as salient. These are deputy prime minister for European Funds and National Recovery Plan (overseeing distribution of substantial financial funds), minister of economy (salient portfolio in general), minister of investments and regional development (responsible for substantial budget), minister of interior (salient portfolio in general), and (since Hlas is a social democratic party) minister of labour, social affairs and family (also in charge of a substantial budget because of the social security benefits).

Moreover, Hlas, as the second strongest coalition party, also gained the position of the speaker of the National Council of the Slovak Republic, a post not always, but quite frequently, held by the representative of the second strongest coalition party.⁷ Until he was elected the new Slovak president in April 2024, this position was held by then-Hlas Chairman Peter Pellegrini. According to the Coalition Agreement, the speakership should remain in the hands of the Hlas party even after Pellegrini's departure, despite the interests of the SNS leader Andrej Danko to gain this position for SNS and for himself in particular. Danko's claim was supported by Prime Minister and Smer leader Robert Fico, arguing that the three coalition parties would all be represented in the three highest constitutional positions (president, speaker of Parliament, prime minister). However, Fico confirmed that the Coalition Agreement assigned this position to Hlas and if it wanted to keep it, it has full right to do so (Koaličná dohoda 2023, annex n. 1, item 1; TASR – SITA 2024).

Regarding the joint platform of the new government, there are only a few mentions challenging the liberal and progressivist tendencies. They refer to the two issues: 1.) marriage vs. partnership of same-sex couples and 2.) abortions. As for same-sex couples, the program declaration states that the government will "respect and protect the provisions of the Constitution of the Slovak Republic, according to which marriage is a unique union between a man and a woman. The government respects the cohabitation of persons of the opposite sex outside the institution of marriage defined by the constitution, as well as the cohabitation of persons of the same sex and is ready to solve practical issues related to their life in a joint household" (Programové vyhlásenie 2023, p. 44). In the case of abortion, the government, based on the program declaration,

⁷ Looking back at all nine elections in independent Slovakia (i.e. in the years 1994, 1998, 2002, 2006, 2010, 2012, 2016, 2020, and 2023), the position of the speaker of the National Council of the Slovak Republic was held by a representative of the second strongest coalition party in five cases (1998: SDL; 2010: SaS; 2016: SNS; 2020: We Are Family and 2023: Hlas). In 2002, the new speaker came from the third strongest coalition party (KDH). In two cases the speaker position was held by a member of the strongest coalition party (1994: HZDS; 2006: Smer). In 2012, the new government was formed by a single party (Smer) which nominated all the ministers as well as the speaker of Parliament.

“respects the provision of the constitution, according to which human life is worthy of protection even before birth. The government shall not exercise the authority to give orders to support or reject any kind of legislation governing matters relating to a woman’s decision-making about the life of a child during pregnancy” (Programové vyhlásenie 2023, p. 44).

As we mentioned earlier, the Hlas party was not defining itself against liberalism and / or progressivism before the 2023 parliamentary elections. However, this statement doesn’t apply to Pellegrini’s campaign before the 2024 presidential elections, especially before the second round where he faced a candidate supported by the parliamentary opposition Ivan Korčok. In his attempt to convince Smer voters to vote for him in the first round, and attract the supporters of anti-liberal and anti-progressivist candidate Štefan Harabín from the first round (which included SNS voters as well), Pellegrini himself and his party started using the liberal and progressivist framing of Korčok. Just after the first round of presidential elections that narrowed down the field of candidates to two finalists, in his video message posted on social media Pellegrini pledged “to be the president of peace, not the president of eternal conflict, which Ivan Korčok promises in advance when he talks about the counterbalance to the democratically elected government” (vra 2024). He added that “if a new progressive, liberal and right-wing power center is created in the presidential palace, it will work from the first moment to ensure that the current government does not complete its term” (vra 2024).

Conclusion

Analysis of the 2023 Slovak parliamentary elections were often built on an argument that the actual election winner was Hlas, despite finishing third. This argumentation reflected the post-election position of Hlas as a party whose inclination towards either the winner Smer or second-place PS would decide who would govern. It was a choice between either Smer led by former three-time Prime Minister Robert Fico who left office involuntarily in 2018 after the assassination of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée (Kuciak wrote a lot about corruption and clientelism in Slovak politics), or PS, a novice on the national level, but with experience in the European Parliament where the PS leader Michal Šimečka served as the vice president.

Although Smer has been considered a social-democratic party, it gradually moved away from many of the social-democratic features and started to focus on challenges against liberalism and progressivism, which on the other hand was represented by PS. Hlas’s dilemma therefore was where to position itself on that scale. Although a coalition around PS would also include other forces that would very likely not allow implementation of progressivist ideas and policies (e.g. KDH), Hlas chose to enter the alliance with Smer and SNS instead. The question therefore remains whether it was anti-liberalism and anti-progressivism that eventually played the key role in the decision of Hlas. It was more likely Pellegrini’s pragmatic (rather than ideological) consideration of which coalition set-up would be more beneficial for him, although ideology later played a key role in his presidential campaign.

Both the quantitative and qualitative representation of the Hlas party in the cabinet, obtainment of the speaker position of the National Council of the Slovak Republic for Hlas, in par-

ticular for him personally, as well as a Smer endorsement for his future run for the presidency suggest that the offer from Smer seemed to be quite generous. There are, however, more factors that could have played a key role in the decision of Hlas and Pellegrini. Pellegrini represented Smer in cabinets when a network of links between Smer, some oligarchs and top judges, prosecutors and police officers was established. This network began unravelling after Kuciak's assassination. Smer and Hlas, which was mainly formed by ex-Smer members, therefore had the same or similar interests in order to cover up the investigation. The fact that one of the first steps of the newly appointed cabinet was to dismantle the Office of the Special Prosecutor, which dealt with most of the cases, would support this argument. Smer, however, supported their intention to abolish the Office of the Special Prosecutor by arguing that it's allegedly politicized and biased (TASR 2024).

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