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ELECTIONS IN CONTEXT

The 2010 Czech and Slovak Parliamentary Elections: Red Cards to the ‘Winners’

TIM HAUGHTON, TEREZA NOVOTNÁ and
KEVIN DEEGAN-KRAUSE

In the spring of 2010, 20 years after the first free post-communist elections in Czechoslovakia, citizens of the Czech and Slovak Republics went to the polls for their seventh free parliamentary elections.¹ In both countries the 2010 elections produced a significant change in government, and highlighted elements of stability and instability in party politics. Parties that had been permanent fixtures on the political scene for two decades fell below the threshold while newly emerged parties not only entered parliament, but went straight into government. The elections ushered in new governing coalitions of the centre-right, but in each case it was a left-leaning party that won the largest share of votes in their respective countries, ensuring that the ‘winners’ of the elections emerged as ‘losers’. Yet, although there were similarities in the elections, there were also notable differences. While in Slovakia the election was in some senses a referendum on the government in power, the existence of a caretaker, technocratic government in the Czech Republic meant no party was the incumbent. Commentators were quick to label the results ‘earthquakes’, particularly in the Czech Republic where four resignations by party leaders on election night certainly made the elections feel dramatic, although a closer look indicates that whilst the political tectonic plates moved, the tremors were on a par with the norm for post-communist Europe.

Background

From the mid-1990s, Czech party politics has been dominated by a left–right socio-economic battle between the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) and the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) (Deegan-Krause 2006; Hanley 2008)

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with two other evergreens playing more minor roles on the party scene: the largely unreconstructed Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) and the centrist Christian Democrats (KDU-ČSL). The only major source of instability in the Czech system was a succession of parties representing the 'liberal centre' (Hanley 2010), although the similarity of these parties' ideologies and voter base represented a different form of stability.

Whereas the story of the Czech party political scene from 1990 can largely be told with reference to the four aforementioned parties, party politics in Slovakia has been much more fluid. Of the six parties elected to parliament in 2010, only the Slovak National Party (SNS) and the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) were in existence two decades earlier and even these had undergone splits, splinters and reformulations. Moreover, unlike in the Czech Republic, the very bases of political competition had shifted significantly. During the 1990s, politics in Slovakia was dominated by questions of the character of the political regime, illiberal democracy, nationalism and the place of Slovakia in the world (Deegan-Krause 2006; Haughton and Fisher 2008), but the neo-liberal policies of the 2002–06 government elevated socio-economic questions to equal – and sometimes greater – importance (Haughton and Rybář 2008). Yet amid all of this institutional and competitive instability, Slovakia's politics retained some coherence at a deeper level. Although there have been a proliferation of political parties in Slovakia, politics has largely revolved around rival camps. In the 1990s, the two camps consisted largely of allies and opponents of three-times Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar's Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS),² whereas in more recent times, the two camps have been led by Robert Fico's left-leaning Direction-Social Democracy (Smer-SD) and the centre-right Slovak Democratic and Christian Union – Democratic Party (SDKÚ-DS).

In both republics, the four-year electoral term starting in 2006 was anything but dull. In the Czech Republic, the 2006 elections produced a stalemate parliament in which the left and right each held 100 seats. It took seven months and defections from ČSSD for Mirek Topolánek's ODS to form a government with the Greens and Christian Democrats. Topolánek's centre-right coalition survived four no-confidence votes over the following two years before a fifth successfully brought down the government in March 2009, half-way through the Czech Republic's Presidency of the European Council. With blocs of both left and right fraying at the edges, the two largest parties agreed to support the creation of a caretaker 'government of experts' under the premiership of the relatively unknown head of the Statistical Office, Jan Fischer, who proved exceptionally popular in his stint as prime minister. That caretaker role grew in importance and duration when the Czech Constitutional Court struck down parliamentary attempts to legislate for early elections in the autumn of 2009, ensuring that elections to the Czech parliament would take place in May 2010.

In contrast, Slovakia's own eventful four years owed much to the assertive moves of a governing coalition that held a clear majority. The decision by Smer-SD's leader Robert Fico to form a coalition with two of the parties that had sullied the name of Slovakia in the 1990s (Mečiar's L'S-HZDS and the openly anti-Hungarian and anti-Roma SNS) provoked howls of criticism in international circles. Yet by toning down (if not eliminating) the more extreme elements of the previous government's neo-liberalism (Gould 2009), Smer-SD maintained extremely high levels of popularity. By the end, however, support for the government (especially the two junior parties) began to decline, at least in part because of a series of scandals highlighting the incompetence and the corrupt behaviour of ministers that provoked a steady stream of resignations.

Scandal also affected parties outside government. In Slovakia and the Czech Republic, former right-wing prime ministers Mikuláš Dzurinda and Mirek Topolánek were replaced by Iveta Radičová and Petr Nečas respectively. Following a party funding scandal, Dzurinda removed himself from his party's electoral list and was not elected to parliament, but he managed to continue as chairman of SDKÚ-DS and became foreign minister in the new government formed after the elections. Topolánek, in contrast, was not so successful: after a series of scandals during his time as premier he was finally forced to quit as party chairman of ODS after an interview that reflected clumsy use of language at best and at worst anti-Semitic and homophobic views.

Campaigns

The campaigns in both countries revolved around four common themes: the competence and personality of prominent politicians, anti-corruption, debt and electoral thresholds.

At the heart of both election campaigns were the personalities and ruling styles of two close friends and ideological soulmates: Robert Fico and ČSSD leader Jiří Paroubek. In part, the elections were referendums on whether these men should be prime ministers of their respective countries. In Slovakia, opponents of Fico distributed a red card like that used by football referees to encourage voters to eject him from power, whereas in the Czech Republic one of ODS's commonest refrains during the election campaign was 'Paroubek or Nečas? – Your vote decides'.

Although Fico's government had delivered record levels of growth in the first two years of its existence and promised stability in difficult times, his aggressive attitude towards the media had entrenched his position as a divisive love-me-or-hate-me figure and intensified the effect of campaign revelations that Fico himself had struck deals with rich individuals when he founded his party in 1999. Paroubek's strong leadership and combative style as party leader and prime minister had worked well in reviving the ČSSD's fortunes in the run-up to the 2006 elections. However, this aggressive style

not only promoted an anti-Paroubek campaign on Facebook calling for the ČSSD leader to be sent to Mars, but also contributed to a worsening of relations with former ČSSD leader (and former prime minister) Miloš Zeman, who was provoked into coming out of retirement to form the Party of Rights and Citizens (SPOZ). As one party poster put it ‘Who doesn’t want Paroubek should vote for Zeman’, an appeal that did not quite elevate SPOZ into parliament, but did draw 4.3 per cent of the vote (mostly from ČSSD) and damaged Paroubek’s standing.

Successful new parties in both countries played on the popularity, perceived competence and lack of corruption of their leaders and party members. The centre-right TOP ‘09 was formed in 2009, largely by a breakaway fraction from KDU-ČSL led by former Czech Finance Minister Miroslav Kalousek unhappy with what they saw as the leftist drift under Cyril Svoboda’s leadership of the party. Kalousek recruited former Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg (an appealing idiosyncratic aristocrat for whom the word *avuncular* seems tailor-made) as the new party’s leader and put him at the forefront of its campaign. In Slovakia, playing on the cult of the ‘expert’, the newly formed liberal party Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), made much of the expertise and intelligence of party founder Richard Sulik (an architect of the flat tax in Slovakia) with posters showing the leader with the slogan ‘120 ideas for a better life in Slovakia’ written on his bald head. SaS also emphasised the corruption of the older parties, both those in government and those in opposition, a message that was even stronger in the appeals of the Czech Republic’s Public Affairs (VV) (an active player in Prague municipal politics that sought a national constituency in 2010). Central to VV’s anti-corruption message was the popularity of its leader, the investigative journalist Radek John, and the party’s prominent call for ‘the end of the political dinosaurs’.

Tactical considerations also played a role in campaign efforts, especially since polls showed key parties in both republics hovering around the 5 per cent threshold of electability. In Slovakia, for instance, the two parties battling for the ethnic Hungarian vote, the Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK) and Most-Hid made frequent reference to the threshold. The latter had been formed 11 months before the elections by a breakaway of those unhappy with the leadership of Pál Csáky, and was led by former SMK leader Béla Bugár. By using the word for ‘bridge’ in both Hungarian and Slovak, Bugár’s party’s name encapsulated the desire to improve relations between the two ethnic groups.³ Although SMK claimed it was the only one of the two parties with a chance of crossing the 5 per cent mark, Most-Hid made an effective pitch for votes in the final days of the campaign, stressing that without the party a centre-right coalition would be impossible, and eventually receiving 8.12 per cent, whilst SMK fell short of the threshold.

In both the Czech and Slovak Republics, the internet played a key role in the campaigns of the newer parties and the decisions among younger voters. Not only were Paroubek and Fico the subject of Facebook campaigns

designed to mobilise young voters against them, but SaS and VV (and, to some extent, TOP '09) built their profile and campaigned effectively on the internet, especially through blogs and social networking sites, indicating the 'Heineken effect' of the internet in reaching the parts of the electorate that normal campaigning does not reach. VV pitched itself as a party of 'direct democracy', using internet referenda to decide policy and office-holders.

Substantial policy questions were not absent from the campaign. Indeed, aware of the travails in the European economy, how to deal with their country's level of debt and the danger of taking the 'Greek route' were frequently invoked in both countries. In Slovakia, SDKÚ-DS stressed that a continuation of Smer-SD in government would send Slovakia in the direction of Greece, whilst Fico lambasted the opposition for its 'vulgar politicisation' of the proposed EU bailout of Greece. In the Czech Republic, Nečas stressed that indebtedness would only be tackled if state activity was pruned back and reformed, whilst Paroubek was keen to emphasise the role of the state in promoting recovery and the deleterious consequences on public services and welfare of the centre-right's plans.

Another international issue played a key role in Slovakia's campaign: the assertive steps of newly elected Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to emphasise Hungary's national heritage and support Hungarians living in neighbouring countries, especially Slovakia. In the final few weeks before polling day, Smer-SD employed increasingly strident nationalist sentiments in campaign literature, emphasising the party's defence of 'national interests' against 'Greater Hungarian' politics and calling for a 'a strong, social and Slovak government'.

Results and Significance

Smer-SD performed well, but its success in increasing its support by more than 5 per cent was achieved largely at the expense of its coalition partners. Smer-SD's nationalism-lite – offering the taste of nationalism, rather than the full-fat variant – helped to attract voters at the expense of SNS, which was the party most compromised by corruption scandals. L'S-HZDS's failure also owed much to Smer-SD's improved appeal among the older, poorer and more rural voters more likely to vote for Mečiar, but its decline resulted mainly from the fading power of its leader's charisma and a series of splinters which were insignificant on their own but enough to shrink Mečiar's already small base. SDKÚ-DS's vote held up well, thanks largely to its position as the leading opponent of Smer-SD, while KDĽ managed to mobilise its core, loyal 9 per cent of the electorate as it had in all previous elections.

In the Czech Republic, the combined sources of support for ODS and ČSSD fell below 50 per cent for the first time since 1992 (when ČSSD was a minor player). The strategy of trading aggressive insults with each other,

which had reaped rewards in 2006, proved less effective in 2010. Not only did the technocratic Fischer government show that politics really could be conducted differently, but both major parties were also harmed by the emergence of rivals. While SPOZ took votes away from Paroubek's ČSSD, TOP '09 squeezed the KDU-ČSL vote and especially ODS's, while VV appealed to many voters who might have stayed home or voted Green in 2006. Kalousek's plan not only included Schwarzenberg (who won twice as many preference votes as any other politician in the country), but he also secured the support of local mayors, a strategy which helped the mobilisation of the vote on the ground and provided a core of parliamentary candidates. The election results are summarised in Tables 1 and 2.

The electoral systems shaped not only the campaigns, but also the results. In Slovakia, both L'S-HZDS and SMK fell below the threshold (and SNS survived by just 200 votes). While both coalition and opposition suffered, the result was more problematic for Smer-SD, which lost one of its key partners while gaining no new allies, whereas the opposition's loss of SMK was compensated for by the entrance of Most-Hid and SaS. In the Czech Republic, *both* junior partners of the 2007–09 ODS-led government fell below the threshold, but in this case the two new entrants to the parliament that decided the coalition were on the same side of the political spectrum and the influx of voters to these new options helped create the first significant centre-right parliamentary majority in 12 years. The share of votes cast for parties that did not achieve parliamentary representation in Slovakia was just under 16 per cent, close to the country's average over the previous 20 years, while in the Czech Republic it was nearly 19 per cent, considerably above the country's 13 per cent average and higher than in Slovakia for the first time since 1990.

TABLE 1
CZECH PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION RESULTS 28–29 MAY 2010 (PARTIES WITH MORE THAN 2 PER CENT IN 2006 OR 2010)

Party	% of the vote	Change since 2006	Number of seats
ČSSD (Czech Social Democratic Party)	22.1	–10.2	56
ODS (Civic Democratic Party)	20.2	–15.2	53
TOP 09 (Tradition Responsibility Prosperity 09)	16.7	+16.7	41
KSČM (Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia)	11.3	–1.54	26
VV (Public Affairs)	10.9	+10.9	24
KDU-ČSL (Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party)	4.4	–2.8	0
SPO-Zemanovci (Party of Rights and Citizens – Zemanites)	4.3	+4.3	0
Suverenita (Sovereignty)	3.8	+3.2	0
Greens	2.4	–3.9	0
Others	4.0	–1.5	0
Total	100	n/a	200

Note: Turnout 62.2%.

Source: Czech Statistical Office.

TABLE 2
RESULTS OF THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC
HELD ON 12 JUNE 2010 (PARTIES WITH MORE THAN 2 PER CENT IN
2006 OR 2010)

Party	% of the vote	Change since 2006	Number of seats
Smer-SD (Direction – Social Democracy)	34.8	+5.7	62
SDKÚ-DS (Slovak Democratic and Christian Union – Democratic Party)	15.4	–2.9	28
SaS (Freedom and Solidarity)	12.1	+12.1	22
KDH (Christian Democratic Movement)	8.5	+0.2	15
Most-Hid (Bridge)	8.1	+8.1	12
SNS (Slovak National Party)	5.1	–6.7	9
SMK (Party of the Hungarian Coalition)	4.3	–7.4	0
L'S-HZDS (People's Party – Movement for a Democratic Slovakia)	4.3	–4.5	0
SDĽ (Party of the Democratic Left)	2.4	+2.3	0
KSS (Communist Party of Slovakia)	0.8	–3.0	0
Others	4.0	–4.1	0

Note: Turnout 58.8%.

Source: Slovak Statistical Office.

Among the more unexpected results of the electoral rules was a dramatic increase in the importance of preference voting. Voters in both countries may cast up to four preference votes for individual candidates on their party's list, and in 2010 they did so to great effect. In the Czech Republic, preference voters elevated 49 candidates into electable positions at the expense of those ranked higher on party-created lists, a process only half-jokingly referred to in Czech political circles as 'defenestration'. Preference votes accounted for one in four MPs selected and in ODS the ratio approached one in three. A combination of voting for new parties and new faces within existing parties helped ensure that a remarkable 57 per cent of Czech MPs were newcomers.

Slovakia also saw a higher rate of candidates elected on the basis of preference voting – 11 of the 150 – but these seemed poised to have an even greater impact. Eight of the 11 were the product of deals struck by the leaders of new parties with outside groups in the interest of increasing their electorate: four of Most-Hid's contingent were ethnic Slovaks who were members of the small Civic Conservative Party and four of those elected on the SaS ticket were members of the 'Ordinary People' civic movement, whose leader used his firm – a distributor of regional advertising circulars – to attract preference votes and elevate his four candidates from the bottom four positions on the list to near the top. Whilst helping to boost support for the new parties by several thousand,⁴ the success of these non-party members not only raised questions about their commitment to the party line, but also provoked concerns about the new parliamentarians' capabilities.

Prospects and Conclusion

Although ODS recorded its worst parliamentary election result, it struck a deal with TOP '09 and VV to form a government – in Nečas' words – of 'budgetary responsibility'. A new Slovak governing coalition was formed more quickly. The participation of the SDKÚ-DS, KDH, SaS and Most-Hid ensured that, like the Czech Republic, Slovakia will be governed by the centre-right, though unlike the Czech government, which was formed without a single female member, Slovakia has its first female prime minister, Ivetta Radičová.

The new government's arithmetic in parliament looked decidedly rosy in the Czech Republic (118:82 seats), in contrast to the recent history of stalemates and minority governments. Slovakia's new government had somewhat less security (79:71 seats). Both governments quickly descended into internal squabbling, however, with early fights over the distribution and maintenance of cabinet posts and corruption scandals.

A generation after the first free post-communist elections, both the Czech and Slovak elections demonstrated the maturity of the countries' democracies, but also highlighted some of the weaknesses of party politics in Central and Eastern Europe. Both countries experienced sharp changes through the election results, showing the power of the ballot box, but the decision of many voters to shift to new parties indicated a degree of disillusionment with existing parties.

However, the same disillusionment that helped put VV and SaS into power may work against those parties in the not-so-long run. The parties' novelty strengthened their anti-corruption credentials, but Lord Acton's dictum suggests that no party in power can remain uncorrupted for long, and the current tabloid-driven transformation of Acton's dictum into conventional wisdom suggests that no party can now avoid the *presumption* of corruptibility. Nonetheless, new parties can occasionally thrive and survive. Indeed, Robert Fico's Smer-SD had begun life as a vague valence appeal party centred around a charismatic leader, but crucially it projected itself as the moderate left alternative to neo-liberal policies in the 2000s, and in government managed to appeal to more nationalist palates.

The critical question in both countries is how well the *current* new entrants cope with the rigours of government once the gleam of newness has worn off and whether these parties develop the capabilities they need for longevity or become one-term wonders. The answers will not only shape the politics of these two countries but will also help us understand the broader sources of (in)stability in party politics in Central and Eastern Europe.

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Notes

1. For other recent contributions to this series, see Allern (2010), Dinas (2010), Faas (2010) and Lisi (2010).
2. Formally renamed LS-HZDS in 2003.
3. Ethnic Hungarians make up approximately a tenth of the population.
4. The leading Ordinary People candidate received 38,429 preference votes (12.5 per cent of the total vote for SaS) and the leading Civic Conservative Party candidate 16,909 (8.2 per cent of the total vote for Most-Híd).

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