



## New European Democracies Project

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### *Slovakia After the Elections: Domestic and Foreign Policy*

#### *Implications*

*July 18, 2006*

*Washington, DC*

#### *Synopsis Report*

On 18 July, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) together with Friends of Slovakia (FOS) hosted a roundtable discussion on the domestic and foreign policy implications of the creation of a new coalition government in Slovakia. Grigorij Meseznikov, president of the Slovak Institute for Public Affairs (IVO), Martin Bútora, former Slovak ambassador to the U.S., Zora Butorova, senior analyst of the IVO program of Public Opinion and Political Culture, and H.E. Rastislav Kacer, the Slovak ambassador to the U.S., spoke at the event co-chaired by Ambassador Theodore Russell, former U.S. ambassador to Slovakia, and Janusz Bugajski, the director of the CSIS New European Democracies Project.

Meseznikov focused on the results and implications of the Slovak parliamentary elections in June 2006. *Smer*, claiming to be a social democratic party, received the largest percentage of votes, defeating the ruling coalition – the Slovak Democratic Party and Slovak Christian Movement. *Smer* recently formed a coalition government with the Slovak National Party (SNS) and the People’s Party – Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (LS-HZDS). SNS is a nationalist anti-EU party advocating for restrictions on minority rights, while LS-HZDS has a centrist platform.

Meseznikov contended that almost from its creation, *Smer* has not exhibited the social democratic credentials it claims to have. In 2001, one year after it was created, *Smer* displayed a protectionist economic orientation. In fact, since 2002 *Smer* has maintained a close relationship with SNS. Meseznikov believes that the new coalition is very troubling, potentially signifying a waning of democratic principles and economic liberalism in the country. *Smer* and other coalition parties have cut any ties to civil society. Meseznikov fears that these factors breed an environment where the political and economic reforms, which have helped Slovakia prosper in the past, might be endangered by the new government.

In terms of foreign policy, the Slovak government from 1998 until the present exhibited a strong commitment to EU enlargement, economic reform, ethnic representation, and democratic consolidation. Meseznikov feared that the new coalition government might jeopardize some of these achievements. However, he concluded that although there is some cause for concern in Washington and Brussels, it is too early to assess the consequences of government policy.



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Ambassador Bútorá appeared to be more optimistic about Slovakia's short and long-term future. He did concede that the new coalition government has touched off some alarm bells, but there is no need to be concerned about the overall stability of Slovakia or the region. Nevertheless, he did express a number of potential concerns, such as diminished transparency, reserved contacts with the media, and a more subservient judicial system. But he did not foresee any dramatic changes politically or economically and did not believe the leaders of the coalition government have cultivated a strong alliance. In his view, insufficient trust among party officials prevents them from shaping a unified government platform. Hence, the coalition will be relatively unsuccessful in dramatically changing the political and economic environment. Instead, parliamentary minority parties are likely to become stronger, more vocal, and more critical of the new government. Meanwhile, economic reforms will continue to spur further growth and a decline in unemployment. However, Bútorá warned that international and domestic watchdog organizations will be crucial in keeping the new government in check and help ensure continued economic growth. As long as civil society continues to thrive in Slovakia, Bútorá remained optimistic.

Ms. Bútorová, the third speaker, focused on public opinion in Slovakia. The most recent public opinion polls conducted by IVO found that a large majority of people are still very much pro-EU. She also found that only one-third of Slovaks were satisfied with the election results and only one-fourth were happy with the new government, while a just over one-half of respondents said they would prefer a different ruling coalition. The recent election had the lowest voter turnout of any previous general election, with 55 percent of registered voters participating.

Bútorová said that she sees the current situation as an opportunity for an increase in critical thinking and an opportunity for Slovak citizens to react and reinvigorate civil society. She hoped that the government would not try to hinder NGOs from facilitating civil society.

Ambassador Kacer asserted that he stood completely behind the democratic choice of the people of Slovakia. Even though it was a decision he does not necessarily agree with, he respects the choice of the majority. Kacer emphasized that in democratic countries people always have the opportunity to vote for another party in the next election. In terms of U.S. relations, the new government will not necessarily be anti-American, but it may be less enthusiastic to work closely with Washington. In terms of domestic relations, Ambassador Kacer emphasized that Slovak civil society is strong and that the economy would continue to develop regardless of the government.

### **Discussion:**

**Q:** The current government seems to be suffering from some degree of schizophrenia. On one hand, the government talks about the oppression of minorities and the reversal of economic and social reforms, but then at the same



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**time, people in the new government and this panel profess that this will not happen? What is the reality?**

**A:** Bútorá contended that the government will only introduce relatively minor policy changes and these would not impact on the long-term future of Slovakia. At the same time, the public, NGOs, and the international community should keep a close watch on the new government in case Bratislava does something unexpected.

**A:** Meseznikov was unsure of the future, especially the progress of liberal economic reforms. He argued that the government might even reverse some of these reforms.

**Q: Can the new government coalition replicate the Mečiar government like before 1998?**

**A:** Ambassador Kacer said this was unlikely. The current prime minister has a very different personality and educational background, and the political climate has changed dramatically since 1994 when Slovakia was still emerging from communism. Currently, Slovakia has a booming economy and benefits from EU and NATO membership.

**Q: What do you expect the new government to do in terms of regulating NGOs?**

**A:** Bútorová felt that the future state of NGOs may be in jeopardy, especially those that might be critical of the new ruling coalition. She fears that the government might find ways to eliminate current funding for these NGOs. She also expressed concern over a potential backslide of educational reforms aimed at better integrating Hungarian and Roma minorities.

**A:** Ambassador Kacer argued that there was still hope for these NGOs. What needs to be done is to continue talking with the new government and improve the political climate.

**Q: What would you recommend NGOs in Slovakia and other countries do to ensure continued minority rights in Slovakia?**

**A:** Bútorá argued that Slovaks would need to stand together with Hungarians to defend their rights, rather than just Hungarians defending themselves.

**A:** Meseznikov contended that the new government could seriously undermine the democratic integrity of Slovakia by disregarding minority rights. This could lead to a serious backlash by the Hungarian and Roma populations. NGOs must be sure to carefully examine any government's actions.

**A:** Ambassador Kacer believed that this is the area where NGOs needed to be most vigilant as a watchdog, making sure to alert the international community if domestic pressures are insufficient.