

The 2006 Parliamentary Election and its Impact on Party Political Scene in Slovakia

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Introduction

Throughout the 1990s, and virtually since the breakdown of the communist regime in late 1989, Slovakia belonged to the group of a few European countries where socio-economic issues did not structure political competition in a decisive way. It was questions of „stateness“, nationalism and democracy that dominated public life (Krause 2006, Malová 2001, Szomolányi 1999). At the same time, party political scene has been unstable, with new parties regularly emerging and gaining seats in the parliament and in the government, and older parties breaking up, phenomena preventing emergence of a party competition with systemic characteristics (Rybář 2006a). Developments in the first half of the new decade, culminating in the parliamentary election of 2006, however, represent a shift to party competition where socio-economic themes play increasingly important role and a more stable pattern of party interactions seems to be taking place. For the first time since 1990 no new political party gained parliamentary representation, and the socio-economic themes clearly dominated the election campaign. Moreover, a wholesale alteration in the party composition of the cabinet – the new government dominated by the left replaced a centre-right administration governing the country in the previous electoral cycle – also contributes to stabilisation of pattern of party competition in Slovakia.

The main goal of this contribution is to trace back the ascendance of the left-right socio-economic competition in the context of Slovak party politics and to identify key mechanisms and processes through which the dominant logic of party competition changed. It is argued that even though the extent to which the state should be involved in economy has indeed come to dominate party competition in Slovakia, other issues – prominent in the past – continue to shape both the electoral mobilisation and post-election government formation. The article is divided into three main parts. First, I characterise the Slovak party political scene between 1998 and 2006. I then deal with issues and divisions in party politics and especially in the 2006 election campaign. Third, I analyse the process of government formation and assess the impact of the 2006 elections on party system formation and development.

Party Politics before the 2006 Elections

With the exception of the 2006 parliamentary election, all previous elections in Slovakia have in one way or another been labelled “critical”. The 1990 elections were the first free and fair political contest after more than four decades of communist regime and as such were considered an informal referendum on the communist regime. The 1992 elections *de facto* decided about the break-up of the Czechoslovak state, while the 1994 election marked the beginning of Slovakia’s democratic backsliding. The 1998 elections are often interpreted as critical in terms of deciding about democratic future of the country, while the 2002 elections confirmed the country’s path towards democratic consolidation and membership in the European Union (see Szomolányi 2003, Malová 2004, Rybář 2005). While the extent to which these labels are accurate is open to discussion, it is striking that social and economic themes are in these short descriptions completely absent. It is not that individual political parties did not take positions on the overall character of the welfare state, involvement of the state in the economy, or the degree of spending on education, environmental protection or healthcare. At the level of party competition, however, left-right socio-economic themes did not structure the emerging patterns of conflict and cooperation. Rather, it was the rules of democratic game and the extent to which liberal aspects of democracy are to be applied in political life that prompted cross-party alliances, especially between 1992 and 2002. Hence, that is why we witnessed a close cooperation in government of the communist-successor Party of a Democratic Left (SDL) and the Christian Democrats in 1994 and again between 1998 and 2002, and why between 1994 and 1998 the national-authoritarian Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) cooperated not only with the Slovak National Party (SNS) but also with the radical left Association of Workers of Slovakia. Since 1998, however, the salience of left-right political issues became apparent. While the spoils of the office together with the need to renew democratic credentials of the country and accomplish Slovakia’s accession to the EU helped to hold the broad left-to-right *Dzurinda I* coalition government (1998-2002) together, a gradual decline of authoritarianism as an issue and everyday challenges of governing brought to the light severe conflicts among the political parties represented in the government. These conflicts reflected different attitudes of individual parties towards issues like investments into the public sector, flexibility of the labour code and the character of social policy more broadly. The results of the 2002 elections reinforced these trends by bringing about a surprising victory of the centre-right. Several factors contributed to this development. The representatives of other political camps, notably national-authoritarian and the left, suffered electoral debacles: The Slovak nationalists broke up in a dispute over leadership of

the party and none of its successors managed to cross the five per cent electoral threshold. In addition, the HZDS lost about ten percentage points of the expected vote (comparing pre-election polls and the actual electoral results) due to a last-minute formation of a breakaway faction of once prominent HZDS leaders who contested the elections under a Movement for Democracy (HZD) label. The SDE and another left-leaning party of the *Dzurinda I* cabinet – the Party of Civic Understanding – also received less than five percent of the vote, in part due to dissatisfaction of their voters with policies their parties carried out in the government, and did not gain any parliamentary seats. The restructured centre-right, on the other hand, fared quite well. While the Christian Democrats (KDH) and the Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK) received solid and expected electoral support, the Prime Minister's Dzurinda Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKÚ) came strong second just after the HZDS, a result that few opinion polls expected. In addition, the New Citizen Alliance (ANO), a party set up in 2001 by a group of successful individuals without previous direct political experience (Haughton and Rybář, 2004a) based its electoral strategy on stressing its novelty and managerial competence and managed to gain more than 8 per cent of the vote. The four parties combined controlled 78 out of 150 seats in the parliament and agreed to form the government (*Dzurinda II*) that several observers labelled as politically the most homogeneous government since the end of communism (Szomolányi 2003).

Homogeneity of the *Dzurinda II* existed in its unequivocal support for policies that limited public expenditures, introduced a more flexible labour code and flat tax regime, and pushed through a more targeted social benefits scheme. The ruling parties nevertheless significantly differed in their niche themes: The issue of Hungarian Status Law by which the Hungarian government intended to provide financial, material and technical support for Hungarian minorities living abroad divided the SMK and other three parties of the Slovak government. While the former, as one can predict, supported it, the latter claimed that the law was extraterritorial and contradicted the Slovak-Hungarian Treaty on good neighbourly relations. Tensions between the more conservative KDH and liberal ANO became significant as early as in 2003, when the latter joined the opposition parties to support a more liberal abortion law, against the will of its three coalition partners. The voting led to a serious crisis within the government and prompted the president to veto the law, after which the governing parties agreed not to take any steps until the Constitutional Court ruled about the subject matter of the law. Nevertheless, the ANO also later tried to present itself as a champion of secular and anti-clerical interests and thus to broaden its electoral appeal. In addition, the KDH's niche theme – defence of religious principles – led the party to leave the government in February 2006,

citing Prime Minister's unwillingness to submit to the cabinet for ratification the so-called Vatican Treaty that was to regulate the right of individuals to refuse to carry out activities contradicting their religious beliefs. These issues demonstrate that conservative-liberal and ethnic divides continued to exist and shape Slovak party politics alongside the emerging socio-economic divisions.

A relative decline of ethnicity and nationalism as politically contested issues was caused by three factors. First, with the SNS – a traditional representative of radical nationalism in Slovakia – out of parliament and preoccupied with search for a unity, the issue became less politically salient at the level of party politics, even though its significance at the popular level did not diminish, as demonstrated by an effort of other parties to tap occasionally into the “nationalist waters” (see Rybář 2006b for further discussion). Second, due to a conscious effort of the HZDS to become more “coalitionable”, the party's opposition activities became more moderate towards the centre-right government, a strategy that also included moderate position towards the Slovakia's Hungarian minority and its representatives. Third, where conflicts emerged within the government over ethnic and national issues, the coalition partners agreed to play down their importance and to refrain from excessive mobilisation on national issues (Malová and Világi, 2006).

The opposition parties between 2002 and 2006 did not represent a unified front against the government, and only rarely were they able to gain substantive concessions from the government in terms of public policies. The minority status of the government, following a departure of breakaway factions from the SDKÚ and ANO in 2003, did not significantly weaken its policy-making capacity. This was primarily because most of these parliamentarians, alongside several MPs who left the HZDS in late 2002/early 2003, continued to support the government despite their dissatisfaction with personalities who were leading the governing parties. Hence, the fact that the opposition parties gained little influence over government's policies increased the popular perception of policy differences between the centre-right government and the leftist opposition, and helped to develop more manifest programmatic (socio-economic) differences between the respective political parties. This development, however, was not self-evident. Rather, it was an outcome of a particular interplay between policies of the *Dzurinda II* government and the political mobilisation strategies of the opposition, primarily the Smer party.

After the 2002 elections, the only unequivocally leftist party represented in the parliament was the unreformed Communist Party, gaining the parliamentary representation for the first time since the hard-liners left the communist successor Party of Democratic Left in 1991

(Haughton and Rybář 2004b). The Smer party contested the 2002 elections with a mixture of law and order, anti-establishment and paternalistic slogans and proposals (Haughton 2003, Marušiak 2005, Učeň 2003). Since then, however, the party has undergone a significant programmatic transformation. Several structural and agency-related factors account for Smer's move to the left: First, many of its founders, including the undisputed leader of the party, have a history of active involvement in various leftist parties before their engagement in building up the Smer. Second, the failure of the moderate left in the 2002 election opened up a space at the party political level for a centre-left formation. Third, the Party of European Socialist (PES), in its effort to regain a relative majority status in the European Parliament, engaged in active search for, and a cultivation of, moderate centre-left parties in the new EU member states prior the 2004 EP elections. Indeed, there are interpretations that suggest the "socialdemocratisation" of Smer was in part a result of active influence on the part of the external factors including the PES. Fourth, a large part of the Slovak population is receptive to ideas of active involvement of the state in the economy (Krivý, 2005), a political option that was underrepresented at the party political level since 2002. Finally, the socioeconomic policies of the *Dzurinda II* government represented an opportunity for Smer to emphasise the importance of the state involvement in market processes and the need for more socially-minded approach to various policies.

The *Dzurinda II* government actively promoted further privatisation of state property, including the main electricity and gas suppliers. It not only argued that these sectors needed investments for further development that the state was unable to provide but also maintained that the private ownership was in general superior to public one. The Smer, on the other hand, criticised the government for selling out the state property (a process it also linked with corruption) and claimed that the state was as good an owner as a private person. Similarly, when the government embarked upon its programme of liberalising the system of interest representation (the plan also known as removing of corporativism), whereby privileged access of some organised interests to policy making was to be abolished, the Smer accused it of dismantling the welfare state (*sociálny štát*) infrastructure (Malová a Rybář, 2003). Smer even joined forces with the Confederation of Trade Unions (KOZ) to collect signatures to initiate a referendum on early elections in 2004, thus preventing the government to carry out its plans. Even though the referendum failed due to insufficient turnout (see Láštík 2005), the opposition party signed an agreement with the KOZ on close cooperation and before the 2006 elections the KOZ called upon the voters to support the Smer.

The government also initiated a health care reform, introducing largely symbolic but unpopular payments for medical treatment, and also promoted a system of increased individual responsibility not only of the patients, but also of individual healthcare providers (hospitals, doctors, health insurance companies). In addition, it also promoted a policy of individual targeting of social benefits with much stricter control of their entitlement than had been the case before. Many of these measures were unpopular with the public and their simultaneity made the general trend – the increased individual responsibilities and less reliance on the state – visible and open to political contest. Similarly, the 19 percent flat tax regime carried out by the centre-right government was defended not only on the basis of its efficiency but also as based on the equality of opportunities principle: The centre-right claimed that progressive taxation only punished the more successful and hard working individuals. Smer, on the other hand, regarded the flat tax as contradicting the principles of solidarity and pledged to reintroduce higher taxation of individuals with high income.

To sum up, actual policies introduced by the centre-right government were heavily criticised by the opposition and especially by the Smer. The party also increasingly frequently portrayed the government as neo-liberal, a label happily accepted by several ministers. These, on the other hand, labelled Smer policy proposals as irresponsible leftist populism. Hence, not only actual themes but also “semantics” of political struggles account for the ascendance of the social and economic themes and their association with individual political parties and their programmatic packages. On part of the government, it was primarily the SDKÚ that came to be associated with economic policies of the *Dzurinda II* administration, even though some Christian Democratic and ANO-nominated ministers also actively promoted liberalising measures in their departments.

The growing importance of socio-economic themes during the 2002-2006 election cycle is also confirmed by the results of two expert surveys carried out in 2004 and 2006, respectively. The Rohrschneider/Whitefield expert survey reported two economic issues – redistribution and state-run versus market economy – as the most prominent issues in the Slovak party politics, followed by issues of nationalism and democracy (Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2004). In an expert survey carried out before the 2006 elections (Rybář 2006c), two economic issues (state versus market and social welfare) were also judged the most important divisions of the party political scene, followed by issues of nationalism and social order (divisions over traditional authority and morality). These results show that socio-economic themes indeed dominate the current Slovak party political competition. At the same time, however, other issues (nationalism, democracy and social order) play an important role both in terms of their

structuration of the party competition and in mobilisation strategies of individual parties. We now turn to these issues as they manifested themselves in the 2006 election campaign.

The 2006 Elections and Campaign Issues

The 2006 election campaign was clearly dominated by parties that eventually also recorded the best results: the Smer-Social Democracy (a new name the party adopted in 2004) and Slovak Democratic and Christian Union – Democratic Party (SDKÚ-DS). The two parties not only set the overall tone of the election discourse but their representatives' televised debates were arguably the most visible manifestations of the political shift to socio-economic issues. To some extent, the two parties profited from their ability to organisationally incorporate some of the most significant potential competitors: Smer merged with three small centre-left parties in late 2004 while the SDKÚ absorbed a small Democratic Party in 2005. At the same time, the two parties also benefited from mistakes of their competitors: the campaign of the KSS lacked clear focus and in general the party was unable to project itself as a credible and competent leftist alternative. The Free Forum, an SDKÚ breakaway faction, also suffered electoral defeat, in part due to intra-party power struggles that broke out in the course of the campaign. The SDKÚ campaigned on the economic record of the *Dzurinda II* administration. The party emphasised that economic reforms, including a more flexible labour code and a simpler taxation system, encouraged an inflow of foreign direct investments, thus contributing to a healthy economic growth and fall of the unemployment. The party presented a carefully elaborated billboard campaign complemented with meetings with voters in all major Slovak towns. In the course of the campaign, the party somewhat moved to the centre, making education one of the central themes of its campaign. At the same time, the party nominated an academician-turned-social-affairs minister Iveta Radičová as one of the party leaders. The strategy proved very successful: Radičová's association with "sensitive solutions to social problems" campaign slogans probably won the party important votes from centrist voters, and Radičová herself received the largest number of preferential votes from among the SDKÚ politicians. Similarly, Finance Minister Mikloš's association with economic reforms and the need for investments into higher education also contributed to an electoral result of the party that exceeded general expectations. The party fared very well especially among the better educated urban voters from larger towns (see contribution of Gyárfášová and Krivý in this volume). Smer-SD also ran a well-prepared campaign. The party learned from its mistakes made in the 2002 campaign when it overemphasised negative messages that probably discouraged a great deal of its potential voters. Since the party led in the polls for most of the

2002-2006 period, the key task of the party was to motivate its supporters to actually take part in the election. While the party manifesto and also party leader's televised press conference statements and TV duels attacked the government, and especially the SDKÚ-DS, of ignoring growing disparities in social situation within the country, the party mobilisation campaign was very positive and relaxed. It was also more focused compared to 2002, presenting simpler messages ("Come and decide") and only a handful of election themes. The party nevertheless emphasised the need to return to basic principles of solidarity and state involvement in the economy by proposing changes in the labour code, pension and taxation systems. Smer-SD also pledged to increase public spending on healthcare, pensions and education and to introduce a second (lower) VAT on basic goods. While foreign policy issues played virtually no role in the campaign, the two main contenders were in the course of the campaign actively supported by leading politicians from abroad: The then Czech Prime Minister Jiří Paroubek repeatedly supported SMER-SD and visited the final party rally, the Czech leader of the opposition Mirek Topolánek together with the Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel of Austria, former Prime Minister Jerzy Buzek of Poland and Croatia's Prime Minister Ivo Sanader all supported the SDKÚ-DS in a Bratislava public rally.

Analysis of election manifestoes of the Party of Hungarian Coalition (SMK) and the Slovak National Party (SNS) reveals that economic and social themes also featured prominently in the respective parties' documents. Nevertheless, the two parties primarily campaigned on themes of national and ethnic identity. In fact, while the SMK has long been able to virtually monopolise the vote of Slovakia's Hungarian minority, the SNS's main concern, as manifested by the party's 2006 electoral slogans (We are Slovaks. Vote SNS!, For the Slovaks a Slovak government!), was to make sure that the new government would not contain the SMK. The leading SNS politicians would not even shy away from comparing the southern Slovakia, where most of the ethnic Hungarians live, to a 'second Kosovo', should the SMK be in the government again. The Slovak nationalists presented a very clear and simple message to their voters, capitalising in part on the fact that the HZDS almost completely abandoned nationalist themes in its effort to become more acceptable for the centre-right parties. It is also interesting to note that both the SMK and SNS ran relatively inexpensive electoral campaigns. This indirectly points to the importance of nationalism/ethnicity as a relevant issue in the Slovak politics that can be relatively easily mobilised for party political purposes. The two parties recorded an almost identical election result (11.7%), which was a great achievement especially for the SNS that spend the previous four years outside parliament.

The elections must have meant much less satisfaction to two former parties of the government, the ANO and the Christian Democrats (KDH). Having suffered a defection of almost all its members of parliament in the fall 2005, and having been expelled from the government as a consequence, the ANO ran on the agenda of economic and social liberalism combined with the promotion of women candidates in the campaign. The party emphasised its share on the increase of the foreign investments in the country and also returned to its theme of defending secular principles and separation of the church and state. Much of this agenda was directed against the Christian Democrats whom the ANO accused of mixing religion and public life. While the KDH's election manifesto contained few explicit references to religion or the role of church, its emphasis on traditional morality, family values and especially departure from the government over the 'Vatican Treaty' (see above) in early 2006 reinforced the 'religious' image of the party. This image was also strengthened by the fact that the party made little effort in the campaign to emphasise social and economic aspects of its programme. The KDH also resorted to a rather traditional style of campaigning, relying on face-to-face interactions of the party representatives with voters in the main squares of Slovak towns and villages, without organising big rallies. In addition, KDH's billboard campaign did not convey powerful messages, emphasising only a vague 'decent/polite life'. The party managed to receive almost the same percentage of voters as in 2002 (an increase of 0.06%) but this was a failure in light of the pre-election polls. The ANO, on the other hand, received only 1.42% and did not even qualify for parliamentary representation.

Mathematically, the biggest loser of the election was the Peoples Party - Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (ĽS-HZDS) that recorded a drop of more than 10 percentage points. Not only did the party fail to present any clear and coherent message in the campaign but it seemed almost paralysed in its effort not to provoke any confrontation. This to a large extent reflected the experience of the party with previous election campaigns when its opponents scored political points by pledging not to cooperate with the HZDS and/or its leader Vladimír Mečiar after the election. The 2006 failure, however, mirrors a broader confusion and disorientation of the party due to its inability to control and confront a rapidly changing political environment in which it operates. Most of the 2002-2006 period the party tried to reconcile the need for opposition criticism of the government, and its desire to win acceptance of the centre-right parties represented in the government. The decline of this once a powerful party very well illustrates weakening of the authoritarian-democratic divide prominent in the Slovak politics of the 1990s.

Government Formation and Consequences for Party System Development

The winner of the election was the Smer-SD, gaining almost 30% of the vote and one third of the seats in the parliament. It was the first victory of a leftist party in free and fair elections in Slovakia since 1920. Its main competitor the SDKÚ-DS also recorded a very solid result, gaining over 18 percent of the vote. Complete results of the election are given in Table 1.

Table 1:
Results of the parliamentary election in Slovakia, 17 June 2006

	2006		2002	
	Vote (%)	Seats	Vote (%)	Seats
Smer – Social Democracy (Smer)	29.14	50	13.46	25
Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKU)	18.35	31	15.09	28
Slovak National Party (SNS)	11.73	20	3.32	0
Party of Hungarian Coalition (SMK)	11.68	20	11.16	20
People’s Party – Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS)	8.79	15	19.50	36
Christian Democratic Movement (KDH)	8.31	14	8.25	15
Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS)	3.88	0	6.32	11
Free Forum (SF)	3.47	0	–	0
New Citizen Alliance (ANO)	1.42	0	8.01	15
Other parties	3.23	0	14.89	0
Total	100.0	150	100.0	150

Eligible electorate: 4,272,517; valid votes: 2,303,139; invalid votes: 32,778, Turnout: 54.67%.
Source: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (www.statistics.sk)

Before the elections the leader of Smer-SD Róbert Fico repeated that the new government was very likely to contain both parties of the former opposition and of the *Dzurinda II* government. After the official results were announced, it became evident that there were two most likely majority coalitions in the parliament: Smer-SD (50) – SMK (20) – KDH (14), and Smer-SD (50) – SNS (20) – ĽS-HZDS (15). The number of feasible coalition combinations was reduced by the fact that pre-election commitments excluded government cooperation between the two largest parties (Smer-SD and SDKÚ-DS), between the SMK and SNS, as well as between the Christian Democrats and the ĽS-HZDS. The KDH has long pursued a strategy of refusing cooperation with Vladimír Mečiar and his party, citing anti-democratic practices in which the ĽS-HZDS was involved in 1994-1998. Insistence on this position effectively precluded a centre-right government composed of the SDKÚ-DS (31), SMK (20), ĽS-HZDS (15) and KDH (14). Even though the SDKÚ-DS leaders engaged in an intensive behind-the-scene diplomatic effort to persuade the KDH to change its position (Mikloš,

2006), Christian Democrats were united in their rejection of cooperation with the HZDS. This, in fact, gave all the trump cards into the hands of the leader of the Smer-SD. After securing authorisation to do so² from the president, Róbert Fico started preliminary talks with all parliamentary parties. Since Smer-SD was a “strong party” without which no cabinet was possible, it considerably strengthened its negotiating position. Even though no official negotiations between the Smer-SD and the Christian Democrats were acknowledged, there are signs that the Smer-SD was engaged in two simultaneous negotiation games: with the SNS and ĽS-HZDS, and with the KDH. The prospect of governing together with Smer-SD, however, caused an intense controversy within the KDH. A significant minority of the party leadership that was against participation in the government made itself visible and heard, e.g. by active participation in TV discussions where they refused cooperation with the Smer-SD. However, a majority of the party leadership together with most of the regional party bosses favoured participation in the government. When the KDH eventually declared its readiness to start negotiation on government formation, the Smer-SD announced it was going to form the new government with the SNS and the ĽS-HZDS. Given that participation in the government was the most important goal for the two junior parties³, and that they were ready to make substantial concessions to the Smer-SD, it was the most rational strategy of the winner of the election. In addition, for both ĽS-HZDS and SNS a coalition government with Smer-SD was the only way to cabinet positions, a factor that further weakened their negotiating position. Hence, the coalition that was formed offered the most policy as well as office benefits for the Smer-SD and it is doubtful that the party would be able to secure similar gains in government with the SMK and KDH. In addition, it has been pointed out that the electorates of the three parties of the current government have very similar socio-structural profiles, a factor that could have also prompted the Smer-SD leaders to choose SNS and ĽS-HZDS as its coalition partners (see Gyarfášová and Krivý in this volume).

The inclusion in the government of the radical nationalist SNS met with a strong criticism from the leading representatives of the Party of European Socialists, of which the Smer-SD only recently became a member. In an autumn 2006 meeting of the PES, the Smer-SD's membership was even temporarily suspended and made a subject of further discussions. The PES criticised its Slovak member party for cooperating with nationalists, a practice considered a taboo for social democrats. Domestically, however, there was much less concern with the composition of the new government. While the SDKÚ-DS representatives in the European Parliament first suggested a close monitoring of domestic situation in Slovakia, the idea was quickly abandoned by the party leadership. The three centre-right party fully

accepted their opposition status and promptly engaged in criticising policy proposals of the new government. Even though two of the three parties in the 2006 *Fico* government (SNS and ĽS-HZDS) were represented in the executive 1994-98, when Slovakia became a pariah regime in Central Europe, few signs suggest that the history should repeat itself. The chief difference rest in the fact that Smer-SD is now the senior member of the government concerned more with pleasing its electorate with favourable socio-economic policies, and enjoying spoils of the office, than with trying to change the rules of the democratic game. The SNS, moreover, has come under strong pressures from Smer-SD to modify its radical nationalist rhetoric. In addition, neither the leader of the SNS, nor of the ĽS-HZDS, hold any significant positions within the executive and the parliament.

As I have argued elsewhere (e.g. Rybář 2006a), Slovakia did not have a *party system* in the strict sense of the world, due to instability of the constituent units – parties – of the would-be system. This, however, may be changing. First of all, the 2006 parliamentary elections were the first since 1990 where no new political party managed to gain parliamentary representation. The SNS, even though outside parliament between 2002 and 2006, cannot be considered a new political formation. Not only had it been represented in the parliament before (1990-2002) but most of their current MPs themselves have previous experience with the role of parliamentarians. Second, stabilisation of the party political scene was already evidenced by the results of the 2004 European Parliamentary (EP) election, when only five parties (SDKÚ, Smer, HZDS, KDH and SMK) gained seats in the EP. The SNS did not qualify for the EP seats due to existence of a breakaway nationalist faction (the Right Slovak National Party, the PSNS) with which it united a year later to compete effectively in the national elections. Third, a wholesale alteration of the government in 2006 may further stabilise a nascent pattern of conflict and cooperation. As in 1998 and 2002, in 2006 the three centre-right parties found themselves on the same side of the barricade: While in 2002 and 1998 the SDKÚ, SMK and KDH jointly governed the country, in 2006 they are getting used to their opposition status. This in itself has had some impact on their political strategies and activities, as evidenced, for example, in their cooperation in the December 2006 local elections. In addition, something of a strategic partnership may be emerging also between the Smer-SD and the SNS. The two parties closely collaborated in the 2005 regional elections and, following the formation of the 2006 Fico government, also joined forces in the December 2006 local elections. Even though further examination of the extent and forms of these partnerships is required, increased contacts between representatives of the respective parties and their joint public appearances before their voters may further strengthen these alliances

and thus contribute to emergence of a more stable pattern of party interactions in Slovakia. Important questions, however, open up on the political future of the ĽS-HZDS and developments in the Smer-SD. While the former needs to face a sharp decline of its electoral support and find a new political agenda, the latter will be confronted with various dilemmas of governing, and the need to routinise the charisma of its party leader to strengthen its institutionalisation (see Orogváni 2006).

Conclusion

In contrast with previous national elections, the socio-economic themes played a crucial role in the 2006 parliamentary election campaign. The two main contenders presented different and often mutually incompatible visions of how the state and economy should interact and how much redistribution should there be in various policy sectors of the economy. It was argued in this contribution that a mixture of structural and agency-related factors account for this shift towards socio-economic theme in Slovak politics. There are, however, other divisions that continue to be exploited by parties in their electoral strategies and the post-election attitudes: Most importantly, ethnic identity and questions of nationalism represent a division on which some political parties are able to score political points and mobilise voters. The remnants of the authoritarian-democratic divide so prominent in the mid-1990s now play only a residual role, mainly in the relationship between the Christian Democrats and the ĽS-HZDS. While important signs of party system consolidation are evident since 2004, it would be premature to draw any definitive conclusions on the issue of party system stabilisation. It remains to be seen how the new power holders will deal with demanding and often contradictory tasks of simultaneously legislate and implement new policies, strengthen their still rather fragile party organisations and maintain support of their voters.

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² Strictly speaking, this is a purely informal tradition, since the constitution only states that the president appoints the Prime Minister and does not specify how the *formateur* of the new government is chosen.

³ One of the HZDS representatives stated after the elections that it was a priority for the party to enter the government and it was not in their capacity to determine who its coalition partners would be. Similarly, the SNS leader repeated that it was the top priority of the SNS to be in the government.