

THE CONVERSATION

How Slovakia's prime minister handed an election to right-wing extremists

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Robert Fico is struggling to form a coalition after a national vote. EPA/Filip Singer

Slovakia, a predominantly Catholic Central European country of 5m inhabitants, recently held an election that produced some startling results.

This was a vote that should serve as a warning to any other European politicians who think fomenting hysteria against refugees will increase their electoral support.

That was exactly the approach taken by Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico and it backfired – badly. He was hoping to secure a comfortable re-election for his centrist party, Smer, by spreading fear about a non-existent influx of migrants, but ended up handing votes to some of the most extreme right-wing groups to be seen in a European legislature for decades.

Fico has lost his overall majority, winning a mere 28.3% of votes, which will give him only 49 seats in a 150-seat parliament. Henceforth, Fico's Smer will sit in parliament with seven other small, mostly rather unsavoury right-wing parties. At the moment, it seems unlikely that he will be able to form a coalition government.

Most shocking of all is that, for the first time, an openly neo-Nazi party has been voted into parliament. People's Party-Our Slovakia won 8% of the vote and 14 seats in the parliament. According to exit polls, this party was particularly popular among first-time voters, with 22%

of this demographic choosing them.

Party leader Marian Kotleba openly admires the 1939-1945 Nazi sponsored “independent” Slovak state, which sent 75,000 of its Jewish citizens to be gassed in Nazi concentration camps. Until recently, Kotleba and his followers marched in public in their own specially made uniforms, modelled on Slovak Nazi uniforms from the World War II era.



Kotleba, pictured in 2013. EPA

Kotleba and his party are **fiercely nationalistic and racist**. They are hostile to Romanians, refugees and Muslims. Kotleba calls NATO a criminal organisation and demands that Slovakia should leave the European Union. He wants to **kick out foreign companies** and create a self-sustaining Slovak economy, primarily based on agriculture and isolated from the outside world. He wants to ban same-sex partnerships.

Fico's mistake

So how did it come to pass that an openly neo-Nazi party has been able to enter the Slovak parliament? Some say it was primarily Fico's fault.

Slovakia has been economically rather successful under his leadership, achieving 3.6% GDP growth in 2015 and a very low level of debt. However, there is significant inequality and large parts of the country suffer virtual destitution.

In his recent term in office, Fico gained popularity by introducing completely free train travel for students and pensioners. But in the run up to the elections, his reputation was damaged when strikes by teachers and nurses raised questions about his record on education and health.

Instead of addressing these problems, Fico spoke constantly about the (non-existent) refugee problem and the danger which a “muslim invasion” poses for his “small Christian country”. He made a public pledge that as long as he was Prime Minister, he would not allow a muslim community to be set up in his country. He refused to accept any refugees when asked to do so by the EU, instead opting to sue Brussels for trying to impose a quota on his country.

Fico created the impression that his country faced a real danger, which he was unable to solve. He created a climate of fear and so, rather than voting for him, the Slovak voters cast their votes for the right-wing extremists.

Now the leaders of six of the seven right-wing parties in parliament have refused to form a

coalition with Fico, leaving the country without a government for the moment. And Slovakia is supposed to take over the rotating presidency of the European Union in July, just as the refugee crisis spirals into a humanitarian disaster.

The message for European political leaders is clear. It is tempting to “follow the people” and whip up fear and loathing in the hope of winning the populist vote. But they should be careful: when a mainstream party starts offering extremist solutions, voters might just opt for the real thing – the actual extremists.



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