

The Rise and Sustainability of Party Leaders in Slovakia: Robert Fico and Mikuláš Dzurinda

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Abstract: Given the fact that only two relevant parties in Slovakia since 1993 have managed to replace their leaders and maintain their relevance, the role of personality traits in the rise and success of party leaders in Slovakia is an especially important topic. Therefore this chapter focuses on two party leaders – Robert Fico and Mikuláš Dzurinda – who are closely tied to more than two decades of political development in Slovakia during 1998-2019. They both managed to utilize their high level of personal popularity to reach the party leadership and via electoral success achieve intra-party cohesion and increase the membership in their parties. However, while Fico relied on his public popularity for another decade after becoming Prime Minister for the first time, Dzurinda gave up on building the popular public image and focused on managing his heterogeneous coalitions. Fico's SMER thus remained an internally homogeneous party (to an outside observer) for as long as Fico was the most popular politician in Slovakia, while Dzurinda's SDKÚ was completely marginalized because Dzurinda was not willing to step down as chairman, despite his decreasing public support and increasing criticism from inside the party.

Keywords: party leaders; Slovakia; Robert Fico; Mikuláš Dzurinda

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Introduction

After the demise of the Communist regime in 1989, Slovakia opted for a model of parliamentary democracy. The emergence of democracy together with the proportional representation (PR) electoral system adopted in 1990 led to the establishment of a multiparty political competition which often changes with the frequent changes of parties represented in the National Parliament. In 1998, the country witnessed a moderate electoral reform including the adoption of a single nationwide constituency which endures until today (i.e. 2019). Since 1993, when the country became independent, only two relevant parties (the Christian Democrats and the Slovak Nationalist Party) managed to change the leader and maintain their relevance. Therefore, Slovakia is an especially important case to focus on in order to understand how the personality traits of party leaders shape the performance of political parties.

In this chapter, we examine two leaders who are inherently tied to the political development of Slovakia during 1998-2019 – Mikuláš Dzurinda and Robert Fico. They both represent relevant political leaders who led their parties during periods in which they served as Prime Minister as well as when they were in the opposition. At the same time, the length of their leadership offers enough variance to better understand the influence of their personality traits on political development in Slovakia. The central argument presented here is that both Robert Fico and Mikuláš Dzurinda had a strong need for power that led them to disregard political agreements and bypass leadership bodies in their previous parties to satisfy their greatest political ambitions. They managed to utilize self-confident communication performance to successfully consolidate power in their own hands. However, while Robert Fico maintained this pattern also after becoming Prime Minister and remained the most popular politician for almost two decades, Mikuláš Dzurinda shifted his focus to competent policy implementation while side-lining attention to his decreasing popularity, which led to the slow marginalization of his person as well as his party.

The next section presents events that led to Robert Fico and Mikuláš Dzurinda reaching the chairmanship in their parties. Subsequently, this chapter discusses dynamics in the personality traits of these two leaders throughout the several terms they remained in the leadership position of their parties. Later, the dominant personality traits during particular terms are compared and discussed with respect to consequences for the parties. Lastly, conclusions are added.

The history of Robert Fico and Mikuláš Dzurinda

Robert Fico has been one of the longest serving political representatives in Slovakia. He graduated from Law and before entering politics; he worked for the Legal department of the Ministry of Justice until 1995. He continued in his career as a lawyer even while serving as an active politician, holding the post of Representative of Slovakia at the European Court of Human Rights between 1994 and 2000. This experience assisted him later in building his image as an expert in law and politics (Kopeček, 2007).

Fico started his career in politics shortly before the collapse of the Communist regime in 1989. In 1987, he joined the ruling Communist Party. After the establishment of the democratic

system in 1989, the party lost its previous monopolistic position and began the process of its own transformation. As a result, the party dropped most of its Communist legacy, renamed itself the Party of the Democratic Left (SDĽ), and aligned itself with social democratic values (Hloušek and Kopeček, 2002).

Fico gradually improved his position within SDĽ structures. In 1992, he was elected as MP for the first time. After the early election in 1994, he became the leader of the party's parliamentary group. The low result of SDĽ in the 1994 election led to dissatisfaction inside the party and to a change of its leadership. Six contenders announced their desire to become party leader, Robert Fico being one of them. Although he did not occupy any higher party position except the one in the parliamentary group, he received the most support from the party regional structures. Despite the fact that Fico stepped out of the competition shortly before it took place, he was elected Vice-Chairman of SDĽ (Mesežnikov, 2000, pp. 119–120).

A breaking point in Fico's career was the 1998 general election. The election led to a victory of opposition parties including SDĽ against the bloc of parties grouped around semi-democratic Prime Minister Mečiar. Based on these results, four opposition parties created a new and ideologically heterogeneous government. However, Fico was not given any important office despite having received the highest number of preferential votes of all SDĽ candidates. What is more, Fico openly showed some reluctance towards the composition of the newly created government, especially the presence of the Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK) as the main representative of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia (Mesežnikov, 1999). In sum, this started a process that eventually led to the separation of Fico from his own party. In January 1999 he stepped down as the SDĽ vice-chairman, and as an MP he pursued his own political initiatives, which was not perceived well by the SDĽ leadership. Finally, in September 1999, Fico left the SDĽ ranks and founded his own party, Direction (SMER).

The new party continuously increased its support base and became one of the main pillars of the Slovak party system. This success was inevitably and primarily connected to Robert Fico. Not only has he so far been the only and unchallenged leader of SMER, but he also became the longest serving Slovak Prime Minister, serving from 2006 to 2018, interrupted only by a short period of two years.

Similar to Robert Fico, Mikuláš Dzurinda also switched partisan affiliation before becoming a party leader. After graduating in Economics, Dzurinda worked as economist and researcher for a transport research institute and later for the National Railways. He became active in politics shortly after the collapse of the Communist regime. In 1991, he joined the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH), a right-wing and conservative party with strong anti-Communist appeals.

During subsequent years, Dzurinda climbed through the ranks of KDH and became a solid part of its elite. He was elected MP for the first time in 1992. After the government led by Vladimír Mečiar failed to survive a vote of no confidence in parliament, a caretaker cabinet was created for a six-month period before the 1994 general election. In this government, Dzurinda occupied the seat of Minister of Transportation. With Mečiar back in the Office of Prime Minister after the 1994 election, KDH returned to the opposition and Dzurinda served the whole term as an MP. In 1996, Dzurinda competed for the position of KDH Chairman but lost

to the incumbent, Ján Čarnogurský. The rally, however, showed his high levels of party support and he was elected Vice-Chairman (Kopeček, 2007).

Table 11.1: The List of the Party Leaders for SMER and SDK/SDKÚ-DS (1999-2018)

Parties and their Leaders	Start of the term in office	End of the term in office
SMER		
Robert Fico	11 December 1999	10 May 2003
	10 May 2003	30 September 2006
	30 September 2006	13 December 2010
	13 December 2010	10 December 2016
	10 December 2016	Present (April 2018)
SDK/SDKÚ-DS^a		
Mikuláš Dzurinda	4 July 1998	16 November 2000
SDK was effectively transformed into SDKÚ which <i>de jure</i> is a different subject, but <i>de facto</i> constitutes a direct successor of SDK		
Mikuláš Dzurinda	17 November 2000	24 November 2002
	24 November 2002	17 November 2006
	17 November 2006	6 November 2010
	6 November 2010	19 May 2012
Pavol Frešo	19 May 2012	2 July 2016
Milan Roman ^b	2 July 2016	Present (April 2019)

^a The original party name was Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (Slovenská demokratická a kresťanská únia; SDKÚ) until 21 January 2006 when party Congress confirmed the merge with the Democratic Party (Demokratická strana; DS) and amended the party's name to SDKÚ-DS.

^b Milan Roman is not a Party Chairman, but the First Vice-Chair appointed by Party Congress to find a new Chairman. The Congress responded to the situation when former Chairman Pavol Frešo abandoned the party immediately after disappointing electoral results in 2016. Milan Roman was supposed to present a new Chairman by the end of 2016, but he has not done so as yet.

The period between 1994 and 1998 was crucial both for the political development of the country as well as for Dzurinda himself. In 1996, in response to Mečiar's authoritarian tendencies, three centre-right parties (including KDH) agreed on forming the Blue Coalition. In May 1997, the coalition was joined by two more parties – the Social Democrats (i.e. SDĽ) and the Greens – and was renamed the Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK). One of the struggles was to find a proper leader. Although KDH was the strongest of the founding parties, its leader was reluctant to vie for this position. As a solution, Dzurinda was first selected as 'speaker' of SDK (Mesežnikov, 1998).

Electoral success in the 1998 elections enabled the opposition parties to create a government led by SDK with Dzurinda as its Prime Minister. However, the following months revealed that the visions about the future political development were not shared between the leadership of SDK and the leadership of SDK's founding parties. While Dzurinda stressed the importance of the SDK and opted for its further existence as a political party, the founding parties, KDH in particular, preferred the dissolution of the SDK and a return to the form of an electoral coalition. As these two groups were unable to find a mutually satisfying compromise, Dzurinda and his close allies decided to establish a new party. Hence, the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKÚ) was established in early 2000 (Haughton and Rybář, 2004). The party expressed its will to carry on the legacy of the SDK (hence the similar abbreviation). Mikuláš Dzurinda was elected as the party's leader and remained in this position for the next 12 years (Rybář, 2011).

Robert Fico: Absorbing opponents to consolidate power

Robert Fico demonstrated a strong need for power from the very beginning of his political career. He became an MP on the ballot of SDĽ in 1992 and only four years later, in 1996, he unsuccessfully ran for the party's chairmanship.¹ After the 1998 elections, when SDĽ was among the parties which successfully defeated Mečiar and were about to create a government, Fico did not hide his aspirations to become Minister of Justice. However, his aspirations were denied, and it was obviously his unsatisfied desire for power that led him to leave SDĽ, create the new SMER (Fitzmaurice, 2004, p. 163), and step into its lead from the first day of its Founding Congress, held on 11 December 1999.

Thanks to his change of affiliation, Fico was able to heavily criticize the social and economic reforms of the first Dzurinda government (which SDĽ was part of) and attract disillusioned voters of the anti-Mečiar coalition (Gyárfášová, 2003, 2006). SMER was experiencing a fast and steady increase in its popular support, which satisfied the party membership and improved Fico's position within the party (Haughton, 2002; RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 2002a). Despite the fact that Fico was trying to fight the image of a one-man-show by introducing "new faces" (such as Monika Beňová, Milan Murgaš or Dušan Čaplovič) (Toft, 2003), all the new figures were overshadowed by Fico (Haughton and Rybář, 2008).

The 2012 election results confirmed the dominant position of SMER in the left ideological space, where the party self-positioned itself. As a competent party leader, Fico found

¹ Fico withdrew his candidacy shortly before the election.

opportunity in the weakness of the rest of the leftist parties after the 2002 elections (including SDĽ, which scored less than two per cent of the vote) and effectively absorbed them into SMER's structures (Haughton and Rybář, 2008). The merging process was formally confirmed at the Party Congress in December 2004 and this left SMER without any ideologically similar opponents.

Before the 2006 election, Fico was the main challenger for incumbent Prime Minister Dzurinda (Gati, 2007, p. 108; Bugaric, 2008, p. 196). The election brought a landslide victory for SMER and Fico took the lead in the creation of the next government. Despite other possible options and international criticism, Fico needed only two weeks to create a government with two parties – Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) led by Mečiar and Slovak National Party (SNS) led by Slota – obviously displaying the mentality of political authoritarianism (Rybář, 2007).

For Fico, the coalition with HZDS and SNS meant access to the highest state office while minimizing the possible intra-coalition conflicts. All other parties in Parliament were also previously included in the second Dzurinda cabinet, which had been heavily criticised by Fico. Thus, the cooperation carried the risk of a serious intra-coalition crisis. Moreover, this composition of government also satisfied Fico's need for power. During the negotiations, Fico easily outweighed Mečiar and Slota and ensured the most relevant cabinet portfolios for SMER (plus the Parliament Speaker), while SNS and HZDS got only three and two ministries respectively (Deegan-Krause and Haughton, 2012).

The relationship between the three parties included in the government remained unbalanced during the whole 2006-2010 period. Usually, being the biggest party in government tends to hurt its subsequent electoral performance. This case was quite the opposite. In 2010, SMER experienced another landslide victory and thanks to taking over voters from his two coalition allies, SMER added 15 percentage points to its result from 2006 (Spáč, 2014).

During the 2010 elections, Robert Fico's personality was heavily polarizing Slovak society. Therefore, all opposition parties were reluctant to join SMER and hence it was impossible for SMER to go on with governance. However, as the Opposition Leader, Fico did not hesitate to constantly point out the frequent conflicts among the governing parties during the 2010-2012 term and successfully positioned SMER as the party that could bring back the stability typical of the 2006-2010 period (Rybář *et al.*, 2017, pp. 146–165). As a result, SMER received a parliamentary majority (as the first and only Slovak party after 1993 so far) and governed alone for the next four years (i.e. 2012-2016).

However, this level of comfort lasted only until the 2016 elections. The public support for SMER had dropped and the results suggested that Slovakia was about to experience a hung parliament with no possibility for a government majority. Yet, Fico demonstrated his need for power again: He reacted quickly, invited the party leaders who did not fully reject cooperation with him during the pre-electoral campaign (or were at least hesitant to do so) and, only three days after the official announcement of the results, it became obvious that Slovakia would have a government led by Fico. To accomplish this, Fico managed to convince and put together the representatives of the nationalist SNS and the party representing the Hungarian minority, Most-Híd (Rybář and Spáč, 2017). In 2018, after the murder of an investigative journalist (and

his fiancée) who published several articles revealing SMER's corrupt practices, Fico stepped down as Prime Minister but kept his role as the party's leader.

With all this in mind, it is apparent that Robert Fico is well aware of the political game he is taking part in. On the intra-party dimension, he understands that his position as leader is only as strong as (a) the public support tied to him as the leader and (b) the political power controlled by the party in order to satisfy the demands of its members. Therefore, he makes sure that his personality is closely tied to the party and his personal popularity brings assets that are later distributed among party members to reinforce their loyalty (Kopeček, 2007). On the inter-party dimension, Fico is well-aware of the risks stemming from being surrounded by ideologically similar parties, which can easily attract his dissatisfied supporters. Thus, he does not hesitate to use his personal popularity to weaken close political allies to the point that they could be either fully absorbed into SMER's structures, or become completely politically marginalized (Gyárfášová, 2003, 2006).

Sophisticated campaigner with worsening issue selection

For most of his career, Robert Fico presented a fairly high level of self-confidence in terms of his personal political career as well as ambitions for his own party. Robert Fico tended to appear on primetime TV shows outside of political programs, which revealed his awareness that sophisticated marketing is necessary for the sustainability of any political career.

For the newly established party, Fico recruited Fedor Flašík, an enormously talented media figure who claimed to be able to "produce cola from water" (Vagovič, 2016). Before the 2002 election, SMER launched an aggressive election campaign, which Haughton (2002) describes as follows:

In early April, posters went up all around Bratislava declaring, "As they stole for Mečiar, so they are stealing for Dzurinda." These billboards followed a campaign depicting three dogs. "Who," ran the slogan, "is the best defender of Slovakia's interests?" A small, scrawny-looking mutt called Miki (Dzurinda), a bulldog called Vlado (Mečiar), or a large, friendly-looking "Slovak" dog called Robo (Fico)? Fico's desire to attack both Dzurinda and Mečiar is clear from his TV campaign, in which Monika Beňová stands in a kitchen holding up two dirty T-shirts, one emblazoned with a picture of Mečiar and the other with Dzurinda. Like an advertisement for washing powder, Beňová's distress for the state of her dirty laundry is only removed when Fico appears offering a new type of washing powder called "Poriadok" [what could be translated as "Order"] which will remove all the stains.

The campaign was very efficient, attracted a lot of attention and some of the slogans continue to echo within the Slovak society. However, despite how catchy the campaign was, its enormous aggression backfired and SMER ended up third with 13.5%, which fell far below Fico's expectations (Fitzmaurice, 2004). Fico did not allow the disappointing results to steal his determination and self-confidence. He had learnt his lesson and, in the next elections in 2006, ran a well-balanced campaign spreading critical as well as positive political messages, and he did not forget to add entertainment (Rybář, 2007). This confirmed that Fico sees communication performance as a crucial element for political success.

The second half of the 2006-2010 term, Fico's time as Prime Minister, was visibly tiring. The constant corruption scandals related to members of his government (although not necessarily nominees of SMER) resulted in his very rude behaviour towards journalists, who were labelled as "anti-government, but also against the nation [i.e. Slovakia] and against the people [i.e. Slovaks]" (Mesežnikov, 2009). However, with the approaching electoral campaign for the 2010 election, Fico did not hesitate to use his incumbency to his advantage. He emphasized SMER's major role in economic development (since Slovakia was only marginally hit by the 2008 economic crisis) and made sure that he personally appeared at every event that could be interpreted as a success of his government – e.g. opening a new terminal at Bratislava airport or new parts of highways (Henderson, 2010). This was enough to ensure that SMER received the highest number of votes in the 2010 election, however, the weak result of his former coalition partners sent SMER into the opposition.

As the Opposition Leader during the 2010-2012 term, Fico was mastering the art of political communication. Despite the fact that scandals tied to his previous government have not fully disappeared from the public space, he did manage to effectively point out conflicts between parties taking part in the Radičová government and emphasize that his party could bring stability to the country (Spáč, 2014). It paid off. After the 2012 election, Fico returned to the Prime Minister's seat and declared that "with the fall of the Radičová government [and the emergence of the single-party cabinet of SMER], stability has arrived" (SITA, 2013).

However, during the 2012-2016 term, Fico's self-confident communication performance turned to the ridiculous. He ran in the 2014 presidential elections and he often spouted that his non-partisan challenger, Andrej Kiska, was a member of the Church of Scientology (Rybář and Spáč, 2015). In the 2016 election campaign, he stressed the danger stemming from the migration crisis, despite the fact that migrants were a non-existent problem for Slovakia (Kroet, 2016; The Slovak Spectator, 2016), while ignoring the growing strikes of dissatisfied teachers and nurses (Tódová, 2016; Rybář and Spáč, 2017). For the greater part of his career, Fico had managed to respond to problems that resonated with the population (with the small exception of unnecessary fights with journalists during 2006-2010). However, in the 2014 presidential and the 2016 legislative campaigns, his attentive responsiveness disappeared, and Fico accentuated issues that made him sound both less trustworthy and less serious, and most probably negatively affected his electoral results.

Table 11.2: Character Traits of Robert Fico and Mikuláš Dzurinda

	Terms in office	Flexibility	Competence	Integrity	Need for Power	Self-confidence	Cognitive complexity
Robert Fico	First (1999-2003)	medium	high	medium	high	medium	high
	Second (2003-2006)	medium	high	medium	high	high	high
	Third (2006-2010)	high	high	low	high	high	medium
	Fourth (2010-2016)	high	high	low	high	high (until 2012)/ medium (after 2012)	high
	Fifth (from 2016)	high	high	low	high	medium	low
Mikuláš Dzurinda	First (1998-2000)	high	high	medium	high	high	medium
	Second (2000-2002)	high	high	medium	medium	medium	low
	Third (2002-2006)	high	high	medium	medium	medium	low
	Fourth (2006-2010)	medium	high	medium	low	low	low
	Fifth (2010-2012)	medium	high	medium	medium	low	low

Lack of content and ideology

Robert Fico has continuously proved his extraordinary capacity to understand the rules of the political game and to attract voters. However, when one is trying to understand his political positions and policy preferences, they reveal strategic flexibility and ambiguity and rather a lack of firm content.

Shortly after Fico founded SMER, he emphasised that “Slovakia does not need left- or right-wing policies,” but “strong pragmatic politics capable of solving problems” (Daily Pravda, 2000) and “thorough solutions” (Tóth, 1999), which were supposed to be reflected in the party program’s objectives “order, justice, and stability” (Wienk and Majchrák, 2003). Consistent with this framing, Fico attacked the Roma population, whose members, he said, “do not want anything except to lie in bed and survive on social security” (RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 2001). He also conditioned post-election cooperation with the party representing the Hungarian minority on “SMK [Party of the Hungarian Coalition] ‘distancing itself’ from defending ‘a foreign country’s [i.e. Hungary’s] interests’” (RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 2002b). No substantive (or reasonable) solution has ever been proposed or implemented by the party, however, and this rhetoric thus seems to be only an attempt by SMER’s leader to stimulate anti-Roma and anti-Hungarian sentiments to increase his popularity (Haughton, 2001). Very similar pictures can be seen in the cases of the 2012 elections when Fico defended against an unstable “conglomerate” of centre-right parties, in the 2014 presidential election, when the runner up was a member of the Church of Scientology, as well as in the 2016 when Slovakia was in danger of migrants for whom Slovakia was neither a transit nor a final destination.

It must be admitted that during the 1999-2006 period Fico was a strong opponent of economic liberalization reforms implemented by the first and second Dzurinda government (Fitzmaurice, 2004; Rybář, 2007), which makes his ideological position a bit less fuzzy. Nonetheless, despite Fico’s accentuation of his socio-democratic background, his rhetoric and actions are very inconsistent and ambiguous in terms of ideology (Haughton, 2002) and have remained so throughout his whole career. Being ideology-free ensures him a high degree of flexibility, which allows him to dynamically respond to current discourse and swiftly press the right buttons in order to maintain his popularity (Rybář and Deegan-Krause, 2008).

Mikuláš Dzurinda: Leader of the anti-Mečiar camp

After being confirmed as the leader of SDK, Dzurinda was able to effectively balance heterogeneous branches (ranging from Greens and Social Democrats to Christian Democrats and liberals) inside the party to defeat Mečiar. This made him a very competent party leader during those turbulent times (Rhodes, 2001, p. 6).

Outside the party, Dzurinda managed to improve his communication performance and boost his capability to sell the party to voters. Dzurinda had learnt his lesson from the 1994 campaign, which was heavily won by Mečiar. While still Vice-Chairman of Christian Democrats (KDH), he had paid too much attention to the urban parts of Slovakia. This time he ran the campaign as a competent and self-confident leader and he targeted mainly the rural areas;

and, despite not being able to work the crowds as well as Mečiar or Fico, he made himself an inherent part of the electoral campaign and successfully attracted the spotlight by bicycling around Slovakia and running a marathon (Fitzmaurice, 1999, p. 294). However, the 1998 campaign represents a peak in his communicative performance, and for the rest of his career he was only moderately responsive to the demands of the general public.

Competent Prime Minister with decreasing popularity

As Prime Minister in 1998–2002, Dzurinda showed great political skills. On the interparty dimension, he proved his competences through the survival of his very broad “rainbow” coalition, consisting of the already heterogeneous SDK, leftist SDL, ethnic Hungarian SMK and centre-left Party of Civic Understanding (SOP). Despite the heterogeneity of his government, Dzurinda, consistent with his pre-electoral pledges, implemented important economic and social reforms that earned Slovakia OECD membership and took it to the threshold of EU and NATO membership (Fitzmaurice, 2004).

On the intraparty dimension, Dzurinda realized that the creation of the SDK was a stepping stone in defeating Mečiar, but definitely not a long-term solution. The party was an immediate reaction to the new electoral law passed by Mečiar’s coalition before the 1998 elections, which implemented an additional legal threshold for electoral coalitions. It effectively meant that while a single party must pass the 5% threshold, for an electoral coalition each of its parties had to do the same, otherwise its votes were wasted (Spáč, 2010). In response, the five parties that had previously planned to cooperate transformed the SDK to a new single-party entity in order to bypass the additional electoral threshold. After the elections, some of the members went back to their previous parties, while others remained in the SDK. For Dzurinda, however, a return to the Christian Democrats would mean that he would need to comply with its leader Ján Čarnogurský, with whom he had already had several conflicts. Instead, Dzurinda refused to abide by the previous agreement, convinced several members of his government to join him, and founded the new SDKÚ as a direct successor of the SDK (Rhodes, 2001; Tódová, 2012).²

Violating the public agreement did not have a major influence on Dzurinda’s political career, however. Quite the contrary. SDKÚ followed up on the position of SDK, became a major power in Slovak politics and a counterbalance to Mečiar’s HZDS. Therefore, the foundation of SDKÚ consolidated Dzurinda’s position as a leading figure within the anti-Mečiar camp. At the same time, it proved that Dzurinda was a highly competent political leader who was decisive and understood the political game.

After the 2002 elections, Dzurinda managed to form his second cabinet. This time the coalition contained no leftist party and its ideological consistency allowed him to deliver another set of economic and social reforms. However, as Prime Minister, Dzurinda considerably decreased his effort to enhance his political reputation. He significantly worsened his communication style and even got into several conflicts with journalists. His self-confidence in communication performance as a leader was on the decline. In addition to that, the implemented reforms

² SDK was effectively transformed into SDKÚ which *de jure* is a different actor, but *de facto* is a direct successor of SDK.

were highly unpopular and opposed by the people. The combination of all these factors resulted in a significant decrease in Dzurinda's popularity (Gati, 2007).

Despite his damaged image, Dzurinda remained a consistent and competent political leader in his government as well as inside of SDKÚ. His political stances were ideologically consistent and publicly well-known. Despite the fact that Dzurinda's second cabinet was ideologically more consistent, the internal struggles were more visible to the public. However, also in this case, Dzurinda was successful in balancing various demands and the cabinet fell apart "only" half a year before the expected date of the elections, even though it had already lost parliamentary majority in 2005 (Haughton and Rybář, 2008).

Inside the party, Dzurinda had to face the criticism of several high-profile members (including e.g. Minister of Interior Affairs Ivan Šimko supported by SDKÚ's Vice-Chairwoman Zuzana Martináková). But Dzurinda successfully handled the resistance, and the group left the party (Balogová, 2003). Except for this short episode, SDKÚ remained internally stable mostly thanks to the fact that its leader had managed to retain the party's leading position in the Slovak government for eight years while still polling somewhere between 15–20%, which meant that it was the second strongest actor in the party system. To conclude, Dzurinda showed high adaptability to new cognitively complex conditions and reacted in a way that played in his own favour during his two terms as Prime Minister.

Dzurinda's move to the background while keeping the chairmanship

The government dissolution only three months before the preliminary elections was not the best campaign that the already-exhausted Dzurinda could have wished for. Moreover, he could not seriously compete with the well-balanced campaign of Fico, who was already quickly advancing during Dzurinda's second term as Prime Minister (Haughton and Rybář, 2008). After two terms as Prime Minister, Dzurinda was no longer perceived as the one who defeated Mečiar, but the one personally responsible for unpopular economic and social reforms (Gati, 2007). That was proven in the 2006 elections when Dzurinda, despite being a party list leader, got fewer preferential votes than the SDKÚ's Vice-Chairwoman Radičová or Vice-Chairman Mikloš (Tódová, 2012). At the same time, Dzurinda did not shy from his main ideological preferences and he was still convinced about the necessity of the implemented reforms. Therefore, his inability to understand and respond to peoples' dissatisfaction did not increase his popularity.

In the 2006 elections, the SDKÚ came in second, more than 10 percentage points behind Fico's SMER. Nevertheless, its vote share of 18%, which represents its best result since 2010 (Rybář, 2007; Balogová, 2012), significantly exceeded the pre-electoral polls. Under these circumstances, Dzurinda proved his political adaptability as he openly proposed a possible coalition government including centre-right parties and their former main rival – Mečiar's HZDS. The plan failed to be implemented, however, and for the next four years SDKÚ went into the opposition. During the whole 2006-2010 period, Dzurinda opted for a rather passive approach towards politics despite the corruption scandals related to Fico's first government, which offered plenty of opportunities to attack (Haughton, Novotná and Deegan-Krause, 2011, p. 398). A partial explanation may lie in the fact that SDKÚ was going through its own

scandal: Dzurinda was unable to explain several suspicious financial contributions to the party (Tódová, 2012).

During the whole 2006-2010 period, Dzurinda did not implement any strategy which could possibly improve his public image and increase popularity. His impending resignation as the public face of the party became fully clear when he agreed to hold party primaries to determine the party's leading candidate for the 2010 elections; he did not enter the contest. Later, when SDKÚ became the leading force in the government, Dzurinda seemed to be satisfied with becoming the Minister of Foreign Affairs while SDKÚ's Vice-Chairwoman Radičová became Prime Minister.

These were his actions outside the party. Inside, he was unwilling to step down as Party Chairman. The reason was that it was the chairmanship that allowed him to maintain his influence and pull the strings, even though the most visible person was the Prime Minister and SDKÚ's Vice-Chairwoman Iveta Radičová (Mesežnikov, 2012, p. 21). Even though Dzurinda kept himself in the background, his non-formal influence from the grey zone was very controversial and aroused a lot of criticism. Thus, after the poor performance of Radičová's government (which lasted only for 15 months and fell far below expectations), Dzurinda was automatically blamed too. Despite criticism from inside of SDKÚ, he argued that "it would not help if I were to step down from the position of election leader" (Balogová, 2012). However, the 2012 elections brought as little as 6.09% for SDKÚ, while SMER, as its main challenger, was able to create a single party government. Shortly after the elections, Dzurinda could not resist the pressure from inside the party and announced that he would not run for the chairmanship of the party for the next term (Tódová, 2012).

Analysis of the consequences: From well-performed campaigns to consolidation of power

Both discussed leaders understood that political success is determined by an appealing public image. In the case of Dzurinda, this was true mainly for the first years of his career as party leader. He was lucky enough to gain experience as the Vice-Chairman at Christian Democrats in 1994, and this allowed him to improve the targeting and performance of the newly-founded SDK (Fitzmaurice, 1999). The successful campaign positioned SDK as one of the main pillars of the party system in Slovakia, and this rapidly increased the membership of SDK and, later, SDKÚ. However, SDK was internally too heterogeneous and thus unstable, which led Dzurinda to bypass the initial agreement and found SDKÚ as the direct successor of SDK. Despite increased homogeneity, an internal opposition began to form within the new party after Defence Minister Šimko (in the second Dzurinda cabinet) failed to vote in accordance with party orders (Balogová, 2003). Dzurinda did not hesitate to rely on his high degree of support inside of SDKÚ and effectively silenced his loudest critics, who soon left the party. This kind of leadership allowed Dzurinda to stand in the lead of an internally very cohesive party during his whole Prime Ministership, ending in 2006.

Table 11.3: The Consequences for the Parties

		Electoral performance	Intra-party cohesion	Party membership
Robert Fico	First (1999-2003)	High vote share	Increased	Increased
	Second (2003-2006)	Additional increase in the vote share	Increased	Increased
	Third (2006-2010)	Additional increase in the vote share	Increased	Increased
	Fourth (2010-2016)	Additional increase in the vote share	Increased	Increased
	Fifth (after 2016)	Drop in the vote share	Decreased	Decreased
Mikuláš Dzurinda	First (1998-2000)	High vote share	Declined	Increased
	Second (2000-2002)	Small decrease	Increased	Increased
	Third (2002-2006)	Maintained vote share	No effect	No effect
	Fourth (2006-2010)	Maintained vote share	Decreased	Decreased
	Fifth (2010-2012)	Drop in the vote share	Decreased	Decreased

Fico learnt his lesson in political communication during the 2002 election campaign. Despite employing highly competent people and great positioning of the party, Fico went overboard with aggression and even though he got the highest overall number of preferential votes, SMER's result remained below expectations (Haughton, 2002). Nevertheless, the lesson was learnt and Fico subsequently developed a well-balanced campaign strategy that increased both electoral performance as well as party membership until the 2016 elections.³ It is hardly surprising that this continuous increase consistently pleased the structures inside the party and its internal cohesion was on the rise as well (Rybář, 2007).

Divergence in patterns after access to office

Fico and Dzurinda employed obviously similar strategies when entering party leadership office. However, from the moment their parties became the leading forces in the newly established coalitions, their strategies started to diverge. Dzurinda remained a consistent politician who competently balanced the heterogeneous demands of the parties included in his coalition(s) with the aim to implement social and economic reforms necessary to rebuild Slovakia's international recognition (Fitzmaurice, 2004; Haughton and Rybář, 2008). Reaching office in 1998 represents the peak in Dzurinda's public image and he did not implement any strategy to increase his popularity even when it became obvious that the implemented reforms were opposed by the people (Polák, 2004). Despite that, the electoral results of SDKÚ remained roughly comparable over time, which is the most probable explanation for why Dzurinda did not change his strategy as party leader and politician. However, the party growth stopped and later started to decline in terms of membership as well as intra-party cohesion (Rybář, 2011).

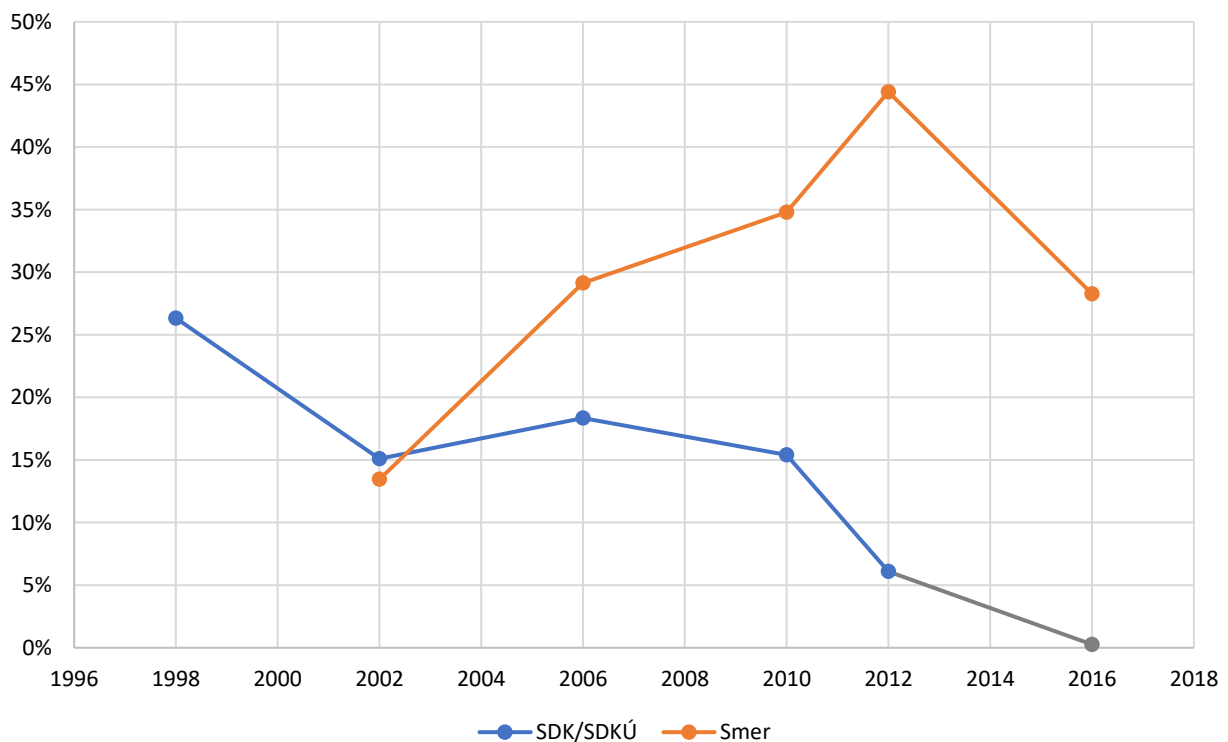
In 2006, despite international criticism (Bugaric, 2008), Fico eagerly created an authoritarian-style party government and stayed focused on communication performance, while policy implementation remained secondary (Gati, 2007; Henderson, 2010). What makes Fico a competent party leader is his capacity to use his personal popularity to reach public office and subsequently satisfy the demands inside of his party. The public support for SMER continuously increased from its formation until the 2012-2016 term. This was achieved only thanks to absenting ideology and policy content, so Fico could flexibly respond to popular demand, quickly adjust his communication performance and position himself as a possible solution (Rybář and Deegan-Krause, 2008). Obviously, constant electoral success and growing popularity is a very attractive attribute for new members and deeply satisfying for party structures. Therefore, SMER's intra-party cohesion was high and, in fact, there was no visible intra-party conflict visible from the outside until Fico's presidential campaign in 2014 and SMER's parliamentary campaign in 2016, which were both built around unfortunately chosen topics.

³ Part of the increase in the party membership is a result of mergers with other leftist and left-leaning parties.

Keeping the chair for too long

Despite staying in the opposition during the 2006-2010 term, Dzurinda came under the spotlight due to a scandal related to SDKÚ's party finances. His non-convincing response put him under pressure before the approaching 2010 election (Figure 11.1). Therefore, Dzurinda agreed to hold party primaries to determine the election leader and he himself did not run (Balogová, 2010). He did, however, keep the chairmanship. The pressure further increased after the disappointing government performance led by SDKÚ during 2010-2012 in which Dzurinda took on the role of Minister of Foreign Affairs. Nevertheless, he led the party to the 2012 elections while claiming "it would not help [SDKÚ's popularity] if I were to step down" (Balogová, 2012). Yet, the party ended with 6.09%, after which Dzurinda announced that he would not run for another term of chairmanship.

Figure 11.1: Electoral Support for Smer and SDK/SDKÚ (1998-2016)



During the period of SDKÚ's decline, Dzurinda remained consistent, which did not help the party at all. His decreasing popularity and passive approach towards communication performance caused the inevitable marginalization of the party. Interestingly, despite the rapid decrease in party support and the heavy criticism from inside the party, Dzurinda managed to keep the chairmanship, and intra-party opposition groups left rather than attempt to take the lead. This shows how Dzurinda set up the internal party functioning in a way that SDKÚ was unable to internally recruit another generation of leaders. Therefore, shortly after Dzurinda stepped down, SDKÚ was completely marginalized.

Fico was able to sustain his leadership thanks to his communication abilities. Despite corruption scandals related to his 2006-2010 cabinet, he managed to repair his image as a competent political leader (Deegan-Krause and Haughton, 2012), and his 2012-2016 single party government, which had made no significant achievements whatsoever, also did not hurt his or his party's top position in public preferences. Fico's poor selection of campaign topics in the 2014 presidential and the 2016 legislative elections brought disappointing electoral results (Rybář and Spáč, 2015, 2017) and intra-party opposition groups openly expressed their criticism for the first time in the party's history. Although Fico acted quickly to dampen the critique and secured SMER's position in the post-2016 government, the party lost the intra-party cohesion it had previously had, and it lost its attraction for new party members as well. Therefore, it seems that SMER's stability was heavily dependent on the popularity of the leader, which brought high electoral gains and access to public offices. This was a satisfying combination for the party structures, which appeared to be very homogeneous to outside observers. However, the decrease in Fico's popularity also brought intra-party struggles.

Conclusion

In Slovakia, where only two relevant parties since 1993 (i.e. Christian Democrats and Slovak Nationalist Party) have managed to replace their leaders and maintain their relevance, the focus on the influence of personality traits on party politics is especially important. This chapter examined two party leaders – Robert Fico and Mikuláš Dzurinda – who represent two politicians with the highest influence on Slovak politics during the last two decades (1998–2019).

While Robert Fico obviously left SDĽ because its leadership restricted him from reaching a high-profile office, Mikuláš Dzurinda reneged on the original temporary nature of the five-party cooperation against Mečiar and instead transformed SDK into a regular party – SDKÚ. It seems that in both cases it was the need for power that led them to establish their own parties and step into their lead. To consolidate power, they focused on self-confident communication performance through which they achieved high degrees of personal popularity and eliminated the opposition inside as well as outside of their parties during the early years.

Robert Fico maintained this pattern for another decade after first becoming Prime Minister. His personal popularity brought high election gains and therefore he was able to employ his political flexibility and ability to comprehend the cognitively complex political environment to access public offices. That was satisfactory for party structures and SMER appeared to be internally highly cohesive as long as Fico managed to maintain this pattern.

After becoming Prime Minister, Dzurinda gave up on his popular public image and focused on managing his heterogeneous coalitions to implement the policies he perceived as necessary. After moving into the opposition, Dzurinda did not do much to improve his popularity. Despite moving to the background and leaving the election leadership to others, he kept the chairmanship for himself. This resulted in increasing intra-party conflicts and decreasing party membership, which effectively brought the party to marginalization in 2012, when the previously dominant party on the Slovak political landscape ended with as little as 6.09%. Subsequently, Dzurinda announced that he would no longer seek the chairmanship.

In contrast with Dzurinda's clear ideological profile, Fico does not tie himself to an ideology or comprehensive political visions. This allows him to respond flexibly to current political developments and through his self-confident communication performance achieve electoral gains for the party. The sustainability of Fico's leadership seems to be a well-managed combination of (a) his capacity to turn high election gains into access to public offices, which (b) effectively satisfies party membership. What remains a question is how SMER will react to recent political developments in Slovakia. Since its emergence, SMER relied strongly on the popular personal image of its leader. However, the political crisis in 2018 that started mass civic demonstrations damaged the support of both Fico and his party. However, we must wait until the near future for conclusive evidence.

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