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Going in Different Directions? The 2023 Elections in Poland and Slovakia and Their Aftermath

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Introduction

Elections provide signals. They signal the state of public opinion, the robustness of a democracy and the direction of democratic travel. Poland and Slovakia went to the polls in the autumn of 2023 in parliamentary elections. In both cases, they were change elections marked by the electorate's reaction to the acts and performance of governing parties propelled into power at previous elections in the context of significant social and political disruption caused by the pandemic and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. But they also marked the return to power of prominent politicians whose domestic political careers had appeared to be over. Moreover, responding to the direction of travel their countries had been taking in previous years, the old–new politicians at the helm of their respective countries sought to chart a different course. This change of direction had significant ramifications for the state of democracy, the European Union (EU) and wider international politics. Furthermore, whilst the Slovak case offers additional insights into the causes and course of democratic backsliding that has been a prominent feature of Central European politics in recent times (e.g., Bakker and Sitter, 2022; Bernhard, 2021; Guasti and Bustikova, 2023; Vachudova, 2020), the Polish case provides pointers to the necessary ingredients for democratic resilience. In addition, both cases underscore the arguments about swerves and careening in the processes of democratization or autocratization (Cianetti and Hanley, 2021). Indeed, Poland and Slovakia not only illuminate that the path towards or away from democracy is rarely linear, involving many contingencies along the way, but also illuminate that journeys may involve many changes of direction depending on whose hands are on the steering wheel, particularly when the fate of democracy itself becomes central to political contestation.

Three-time Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico had looked a broken man in 2020. In 2018, the murder of a journalist and his fiancée, who had been investigating the murky links between politicians, organized crime and organs of the state, provoked an outcry and large-scale demonstrations. Fico stepped down as premier, although he remained as head of his party, Direction – Social Democracy (Smer – sociálna demokracia, Smer-SD). In the subsequent parliamentary elections in 2020, Fico was swept from power. Thanks in no small part to anti-corruption appeals, Igor Matovič's Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti, OĽaNO) hoovered up a quarter of the vote and was able to form a four-party coalition with a constitutional majority (Haughton et al., 2022). Moreover, in the aftermath of the election, several of Fico's

closest lieutenants broke away to form a new party, Voice – Social Democracy (Hlas – sociálna demokracia, Hlas-SD), luring away many Smer-SD voters. But after a political career that looked to be dying in the spring of 2020, Fico returned to the prime ministerial chair after Smer-SD bounced back to win the most votes in the election 3 years later.

In Poland, Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) and its leader Jarosław Kaczyński had dominated Polish politics for the 8 years prior to the 2023 elections. PiS and Kaczyński's great rival in Polish politics for much of the 21st century was the Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska, PO), led by Donald Tusk, who had also become Kaczyński's long-standing nemesis. Tusk, however, left Polish politics in 2014 to become European Council President, appearing to draw a line under his domestic political career. But in a surprising turn of events, he decided to return to Poland and lead PO in the forthcoming elections. In 2023, the party and its coalition allies mustered enough votes to remove PiS from power and ensure a triumphant return for Tusk to the post of prime minister.

Both elections, however, were about much more than the striking returns of former prime ministers. Not only did they highlight deep divisions in public opinion and mark the electorate's verdict on the governments formed after the previous elections, but depending on one's political stance, they ushered in a period of reversal, restoration or revenge politics, with profound consequences for democracy in both countries.

The elections were also defeats or victories for coalitions. Slovakia's anti-Fico coalition had fractured by 2023, and Poland's anti-PiS coalition managed to put aside differences to work together and mobilize a large turnout of voters. Moreover, the formation of the new governments owed much to the mechanics of the electoral systems. Slovakia's proportional electoral system operates with a 5% threshold for parties and a 7% threshold for coalitions of two or three parties, but the party lists are open, allowing preference votes to be cast for specific candidates. Poland's proportional representation system operates with a 5% threshold for parties and an 8% threshold for coalitions. Junior coalition partners were aided in both cases: in Slovakia, flexible lists helped one of Fico's coalition allies cross the threshold, and in Poland, a crucial campaigning decision to encourage voters to support a smaller electoral bloc helped ensure the anti-PiS forces mustered enough seats to form a new government.

This article begins by examining the election outcome in both cases. After exploring the similarities and differences of electoral politics, we examine the domestic implications of the elections, particularly what the new governments' opponents like to label as revenge and what their supporters prefer to label as the politics of restoration. We then examine the EU and wider international implications, particularly regarding the war in Ukraine, before concluding with some wider lessons for democratic backsliding and the resilience of democracy across Europe.

I. Framing and Mobilizing for Victory

Although nominally ideologically different parties (one belonging to the European Conservatives and Reformists and the other a long-time member of the Party of European Socialists, albeit having been suspended in 2006 for 3 years), PiS and Smer-SD entered their respective electoral campaigns not only as central players on their political scenes but also as offering a strikingly similar pitch to the electorate. PiS had emerged at the beginning of

the 21st century, quickly becoming the standard bearer of cultural conservatism, standing in opposition to the liberal Civic Platform. In its second spell in government from 2015 onwards, PiS not only pushed its socially conservative agenda, such as restricting women's reproductive rights and articulating an anti-LGBT agenda, but also pursued a strong welfarist agenda, for example, by increasing child benefits (Grzebalska and Pető, 2018). Moreover, under the party's watch, Poland experienced democratic backsliding. Following the 'Fidesz playbook', under PiS's rule, Poland saw not only the replacement of judges and the undermining of judicial independence but also a significant slanting of the media landscape and the use of identity politics to label certain sections of society as un-Polish – a set of developments that was important in mobilizing votes for PiS's opponents (Bernhard, 2025; Pirro and Stanley, 2022).

PiS's socially conservative, national-oriented and economically somewhat redistributionist policies (with an electorate based in the poorer, rural areas) were strikingly similar to Smer-SD. Smer-SD has been on a long journey since it was founded by Robert Fico in 1999. Originally a challenger party out of the new party handbook offering the country a new direction (hence the name) combined with centrist economic and social policies, the party orientated itself as the standard bearer of the left-leaning alternatives to the neo-liberal policies of the 2002–2006 government (Haughton and Rybář, 2008). The party's pursuit of power fuelled its shift in ideological stance towards a more conservative cultural stance after the migration crisis in 2015 (Malová and Dolný, 2016). The anti-Western and conservative elements in its politics were reinforced after the more moderate figures broke away from Smer-SD to form Hlas-SD and were encapsulated by the rebranding of the party as Smer – slovenská sociálna demokracia, indicating both a Slovak version of social democracy and an explicit nationalist appeal.

Standing in opposition to PiS and Smer-SD were an array of parties that broadly fit under the labels of pro-European, market orientated and culturally liberal. The fact that not all parties fall comfortably under those labels helps explain the fragmentation of the party-political scenes in both countries, although personality conflicts also played a central role in explaining and fuelling the fragmentation. Crucially, in both Poland and Slovakia, support for PiS and Smer-SD ran at well below 50%. Their chances of returning to power, therefore, owed much to how the non-PiS and non-Smer-SD voters would cast their ballots and whether they would turn out at all. The results of the elections are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1: Parliamentary Election Results in Poland in 2023.

Party/movement/electoral coalition	% of vote	Change since 2019	Seats
Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS)	35.4	–8.2%	194
Koalicja Obywatelska (KO)	30.7	+3.3%	157
Trzecia Droga (TD)	14.4	+5.8%	65
Nowa Lewica	8.6	–4.0%	26
Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość	7.2	+0.4%	18
Others	3.7	n/a	0

Notes: Turnout: 74.4%.

Source: Polish National Electoral Commission: <https://wybory.gov.pl/sejmsenat2023/en/sejm/wynik/pl>.

Table 2: Parliamentary Election Results in Slovakia in 2023.

Party/movement/electoral coalition	% of vote	Change since 2020	Seats
Smer – sociálna demokracia (Smer-SD)	22.9	+4.7	42
Progresívne Slovensko (PS)	18.0	+11.0*	32
Hlas – sociálna demokracia (Hlas-SD)	14.7	+14.7%	27
Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti (OĽaNO)**	8.9	−21.9%	16
Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie (KDH)	6.8	+2.1%	12
Sloboda a Solidarita (SaS)	6.3	+0.1%	11
Slovenska národná strana (SNS)	5.6	+2.4%	10
Others		n/a	0

Notes: Turnout: 68.5%. *Ran as part of the PS-Spolu coalition. **Formally, it ran as the coalition OĽaNO a priatelia in 2023. Source: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic: <https://volby.statistics.sk/nrsr/nrsr2023/sk/index.html>.

[Correction added on 2 August 2024, after first online publication: In the 'Change since 2020' column, the figure for 'Progresívne Slovensko (PS)' has been corrected in this version.]

The exceptional level of turnout for the Polish elections (74.4%) was significantly higher than the norm over the past three decades, when only around half the electorate cast their ballots. The high turnout pointed to the fact that this was much more of a mobilization election, although conversion played an important role. PiS sought to mobilize voters with its slogan, 'The Safe Future of the Poles', pointing not only to military safety in light of the Ukraine war but also to illegal immigration, crime and energy security. PiS saw its vote drop from 8 to 7.6 million votes, but given that PiS wins many of its votes from older cohorts of voters, some of that drop might have been a simple product of demographic trends. Nevertheless, significantly, it indicates that PiS largely managed to hold onto its voters after 8 years in government, and its defeat owed much to the mobilization of the party's opponents.¹

Exit poll data indicate that the key to the victory of the opposition parties was their ability to mobilize voters who had not voted in 2019. Two thirds of those who had not voted 4 years previously plumped for the opposition.² The increase in turnout was not just thanks to an urban-dwelling youth vote,³ although that group played an important role. Rather, voters in a range of age cohorts in both rural and urban areas across the country were mobilized to turn out to vote for the opposition (Szczerbiak, 2023). The success of mobilizing voters owed much to the way the opposition framed the election. Given the actions of the PiS government and its meddling with Poland's democratic institutions and media landscape, its illiberal Eurosceptic rhetoric and stance, combined with its crass and crude propaganda, helped the opposition frame the election as the last chance to save Poland's democracy. Another term of the PiS government was portrayed as likely to lead to the complete removal of individual rights like abortion and would push Poland out of the EU.⁴ Tusk portrayed his own return to domestic Polish politics as driven by a desire to help save Poland from the fate continued PiS government would deliver.

¹ *Liberté*, 10 November 2023. Available from: <https://liberte.pl/dlaczego-opozycja-wygrala-wybory/>.

² *Rzeczpospolita*, 16 October 2023. Available from: <https://www.rp.pl/wybory/art39272301-badanie-exit-poll-opozycja-zmobilizowala-nieglosujacych-w-2019-roku>.

³ *Dziennik Gazeta Prawna*, 16 October 2023. Available from: <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/kraj/artykuly/9323015,wybory-2023-jak-glosowali-mlodzi-exit-poll.html>.

⁴ *Financial Times*, 18 February 2024. Available from: <https://www.ft.com/content/e3b10baf-c508-4af1-ad25-8188cf60b174>. It is worth noting that abortion rights were already amongst the most restrictive in Europe.

Crucially, the mobilization of voters was not simply thanks to politicians but to civil society. Fear of what the PiS government was doing and would do if re-elected to women's rights and Poland's place in Europe were key mobilizing themes at the heart of a number of big demonstrations over several years that were themselves products of a sustained campaign of organization and mobilization (Bernhard, 2025).

Smer-SD's success in Slovakia owed much to the way Fico framed the election as a verdict on the four parties that had formed the government in 2020. Despite beginning with 63% of the seats in parliament, the coalition government led by Igor Matovič's OĽaNO failed to last,⁵ losing a no confidence vote in December 2022 with the country governed by a technocratic government until the elections. Disagreements over policy priorities played their part in generating friction between the coalition partners, but so did Matovič's chaotic governing style and blunt rhetoric. Whilst the pantomime of politics was playing out in parliament and cabinet, ordinary Slovaks were confronted first by the pandemic, followed swiftly by inflation and a cost-of-living crisis after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Contrasting his previous periods in power, where he could point to significant levels of economic growth and welfare payments to poorer parts of society, with the experience of the Matovič government, Fico's core pitch to the electorate was to offer stability, *poriadok* ['order'] and effective leadership. He focused on mobilizing his core voters, particularly older voters, with promises of higher pensions (which was also a key promise for his eventual coalition partners in Hlas-SD). But the Smer-SD campaign added to the mix an anti-immigration agenda that attracted some nationalist voters and trenchant criticism of the Slovak government's fulsome support of Ukraine. In TV debates, on Facebook and at campaign rallies, Fico promised not to send another bullet to Slovakia's neighbour in its war with Russia but rather to focus on the challenges facing ordinary Slovaks.⁶ This blend of socio-economic support, criticism of the Ukraine war and a promise of strong leadership was central to Fico's electoral success (Mikušovič and Kerekes, 2023).

Whereas Smer-SD portrayed a return of Fico to power as an opportunity, the former prime minister's opponents sought to frame the election partly around a fear of Fico and what a new Smer-SD-led government would mean for Slovakia. Progressive Slovakia (Progresívne Slovensko, PS), which had narrowly missed out on parliamentary representation in 2020, rose steadily in the polls and became the most likely leader of an alternative government. PS's leader Michal Simečka pointed presciently to the dangers of Fico returning to power during interviews and the set piece leaders' debates.⁷ Not only were there warnings of a return to dodgy deals for the benefit of Fico and his associates, but question marks were raised about the continuation of several investigations into the shady activities of businessmen and politicians close to Smer-SD's leader. PS sought to project itself as a party equipped with expertise and ready to take on the burdens of governing. The party's rise in the polls in the months before polling day hinted that PS could benefit from a bandwagon effect, similar to OĽaNO's success in 2020. In the end, however, the anti-Fico vote remained divided. This was partly a product of the voters. PS's socially

⁵Following criticisms of his ruling style by his coalition partners, Matovič engineered a job swap with Finance Minister Eduard Heger in April 2021 but remained leader of OĽaNO.

⁶*RTVS Jednotka*, 27 September 2023. Available from: <https://www.rtvs.sk/televizia/archiv/20442/428155>

⁷*Denník N*, 1 September 2023. Available from: <https://dennikn.sk/3548029/predseda-ps-simecka-urobime-vsetko-aby-robert-fico-nevladol>.

liberal stance had limited appeal in the heartlands of Slovakia, and Simečka's lack of executive experience underlined questions about his leadership abilities. But decisions by other politicians, particularly the creation of a flurry of new parties, also seemed to underline that party politics was mobilized more by personal ambition and a desire to be the top dog than to co-operate to defeat Fico.

In both Slovakia and Poland, the ability of Fico and Tusk to form governments owed much to the electoral success of their coalition partners and the functioning of the electoral systems. In Poland, the eventual government formed was a coalition of coalitions, providing a strong parallel to the victory of Slovakia's coalition of coalitions that removed the illiberal government of Vladimír Mečiar in 1998 (Fisher, 2006). Tusk's PO joined forces with an array of smaller groups, including greens, Silesians and the party Nowoczesna (Modern), in the Civic Coalition (Koalicja Obywatelska, KO). A collection of left-wing parties assembled together in The Left (Lewica) coalition. But it was the third coalition, The Third Way (Trzecia Droga, TD), that was arguably decisive in the election. At the heart of TD was Poland 2050, initially created as a social movement in 2020 around the TV personality and co-host of *Poland's Got Talent*, Szymon Hołownia, and one of Poland's perennial parties, the Polish People's Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe, PSL). PSL was formally at the head of a coalition itself, meaning that in some senses, the government formed after the election was a coalition of coalitions of coalitions. As the name might suggest, Third Way sought to offer an alternative path to the two parties that had dominated Polish politics in the 21st century, although at the core of its pitch was a moderate social conservatism: more conservative than PO and more moderate than PiS.

The success of TD owed much not only to its moderate stance but also to a deliberate campaigning strategy by Tusk and his team. The polarized nature of Polish politics meant PiS voters who had lost faith in, or enthusiasm for, the Kaczyński project were highly unlikely to switch to support the Civic Coalition, even with Tusk promising to maintain a number of social benefits introduced by the PiS government, such as increased pay for teachers and others in the public sector, and unlock EU funds withheld due to concerns over democratic backsliding.⁸ Cognizant that TD would likely be necessary for any majority KO-led government, Tusk even encouraged some voters to cast their ballots for Third Way to help ensure it would cross the electoral threshold.⁹ There had been some discussion prior to the election of a joint list of the coalition partners, but Tusk and his allies opted instead for separate lists, albeit sending a strong signal they would form a coalition government if they won a sufficient number of seats in parliament.

The mechanics of the electoral system also played a key role in Fico's return to power. Slovakia operates 'strongly flexible' lists, with voters able to cast preference votes for up to four candidates (Däubler and Hix, 2018). Any candidate who gets the preferences of more than 3% of voters for that electoral list gets bumped up the list. No fewer than 25 members of parliament (MPs) elected (one sixth of the entire total) owed their election to preference votes. Open lists provide the opportunity for party leaderships keen to boost

⁸ *Polskie Radio*, 11 May 2023. Available from: <https://polskieradio24.pl/artykul/3166639,tusk-twierdzi-ze-nie-zabierze-500-plus-minister-malag-wieku-emerytalnego-tez-mial-nie-podnosic>.

⁹ Research from the Polish National Election Survey indicates, however, that there may actually have been a greater flow of voters from TD to KO than vice versa (Szczupka, 2024). Nonetheless, Tusk's language underlined that TD was a partner in a larger struggle.

their overall support to offer places to individuals and organizations. The most striking beneficiary of preference voting was the Slovak National Party (Slovenska národná strana, SNS). Although one of the perennial parties of Slovak politics, it had fallen below the electoral threshold in 2020 and showed little sign of bouncing back in any subsequent election. But the party leadership struck deals, offering places to former members of neo-fascist parties and various nationalist personalities, many of whom had prominent profiles in the alternative media/disinformation scene. The SNS electoral list crossed the threshold with 5.62% of the vote, but of the 10 new MPs, only one, the SNS party leader Andrej Danko, was a member of the party. SNS indicated its willingness to join a government with Fico, and within days, a three-party coalition had been formed.

II. The Domestic Consequences: Reversal, Restoration and Revenge

Whilst the pre-election agreement meant the composition of the coalition government in Poland was clear once the results were known, the same was not true of Slovakia. Much hinged on the decision of former Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini and his party, Hlas-SD, which had broken away from Smer-SD after the 2020 election. Pellegrini had sought to project Hlas-SD as a moderate social democratic party, keen to tell diplomats and foreign politicians that they were distinct from Smer-SD and wanted Slovakia to be part of the European mainstream. Pellegrini's decision was going to be pivotal to the creation of any majority government. In the immediate days after the election, political circles and media coverage were awash with rumours and suggestions of deals and offers from both Fico and Simečka. Nonetheless, it became clear quite rapidly that Pellegrini and his party would return to the mother ship, at least in terms of coalition formation. Whether driven by a sense of ideological proximity, the likelihood Fico had some *kompromat* linked to personal peccadillos and less than angelic behaviour of Hlas-SD politicians when they were in Smer-SD, or that a PS-led government would likely be a more fractious and disputatious coalition, Pellegrini swiftly agreed to form a coalition with Smer-SD and SNS.

Both the Fico- and Tusk-led governments quickly embarked on what might be neutrally described as a rapid reversal of some of their predecessors' policies, but what supporters might label 'restoration' and opponents 'revenge' politics. Despite stressing socio-economic themes in the election campaign, the new Fico-led government's priorities appeared to be focused on judicial politics and self-protection. The police chief and several officials investigating allegations of criminal behaviour involving Fico and his associates were removed from office, followed by the replacement of the head of the security service a few months later. Moreover, much initial parliamentary time was taken up pushing through amendments to the criminal code involving a reduction of sentences for those found guilty of various crimes, including corruption and rape, and a shortening of the statute of limitations. Furthermore, the office of special prosecutor, designed to investigate high-profile crimes and headed by a former politician and critic of Fico, was abolished.

If the direction of travel in Slovakia was away from democratic norms in Poland, the stated aim – and indeed, the glue keeping the ideologically diverse coalition of coalitions together – was to restore democracy and reverse the 8 years of backsliding under PiS rule. But that raised profound questions surrounding the means by which those goals would be achieved. How far does a government seeking to reverse

democratic backsliding have to employ some of the methods their opponents used in power? Employing an ‘iron broom’,¹⁰ the new government, for instance, replaced the management and supervisory boards of the state media company and state-owned Polish Press Agency, switched off the broadcast feed for the 24-h news channel ‘TVP Info’ and began a process of reforming the judiciary, where over 3000 judges had been nominated since PiS had it overhauled.

Indeed, both Poland and Slovakia highlight dilemmas for opponents of backsliding regimes: ignore past lawbreaking and risk its return or prosecute the backsliders’ violations and risk accusations of politicizing the police and courts – a dilemma that is even stronger when the backsliders have themselves politicized the judicial system and induced their democratic opponents to cry foul. Moreover, when backsliders use legal means to lock in anti-democratic personnel and policies, they store up political resources for when they lose elections. Newly elected democrats again face a dilemma: allow their efforts at democratic reforms to be blocked by the previous government’s holdover appointments, making them look impotent, or find sufficient justification for changing the rules of the game to replace them, thereby risking undermining their own democratic credentials. If backsliders can cast enough doubt on the democrats’ commitment to the rule of law, then they may find it easier to return to office and continue their backsliding, now justified as the restoration of the rule of law.

Predictably, both new governments’ changes provoked domestic backlash. In Poland, PiS politicians and supporters fulminated and protested. Kaczyński labelled Tusk a German agent and even likened him to Hitler.¹¹ In Slovakia, with strong echoes of the reaction to the last time Fico was in power, the actions of the new government were met with a series of regular large-scale demonstrations across the country. But they also provoked sharp words from Brussels. EU Justice Commissioner Didier Reynders sent a letter in December asking the authorities not to abolish the prosecutor’s office, and a motion criticizing the Fico government’s steps was overwhelmingly passed by the European Parliament.¹² Fico and his allies placed blame for the resolution and the threat of withholding EU funds at the door of opposition politicians from Slovakia who were accused of painting developments in the blackest of lights in EU circles.

Although the posts of president in Poland and Slovakia have limited powers, they can help delay or accelerate a government’s agenda for change (Hlouchek et al., 2013). In the case of Poland, not only are the presidential powers notably stronger, particularly the three-fifths majority to overturn a veto, but also the president’s competencies stretch into foreign policy. Both Polish President Andrzej Duda and his counterpart in Slovakia, Zuzana Čaputová, were political opponents of Tusk and Fico, respectively. Duda had been PiS’s candidate in two elections, and Čaputová had been a member of PS, although both had formally renounced their party membership when they became head of state. Both presidents invited the leader of the party that had won the largest number of seats to form a government, which meant in Poland’s case that despite the fact that PiS would

¹⁰ *Wyborcza.pl*, 4 May 2022. Available from: <https://lublin.wyborcza.pl/lublin/7,48724,28410875,donald-tusk-w-lublinie.html>.

¹¹ *Financial Times*, 18 February 2024. Available from: <https://www.ft.com/content/e3b10baf-c508-4af1-ad25-8188cf60b174>.

¹² *Politico*, 29 February 2024. Available from: <https://www.politico.eu/article/slovakia-prime-minister-robert-fico-reduce-corruption-penalty-suspended/>.

not be able to muster a majority in parliament, the formal formation of the Tusk-led government was delayed by a fortnight. At a frosty meeting in the presidential palace, Čaputová, whom Fico had labelled an American agent, invited Fico to try to form a government, although, as noted above, a Smer-SD–Hlas-SD–SNS government looked likely but not certain in the immediate aftermath of the election.

In both Poland and Slovakia, the presidency played a role in obstructing or complicating the actions of the new government. Not only in a dramatic display of defiance did Duda allow two high-ranking PiS politicians convicted of abuse of power shelter in the presidential palace when the police had gone to their homes to arrest them, but he also sought to hinder the social agenda of the new government by vetoing a law liberalizing the use of the morning after pill. The need for a three-fifths majority in parliament to overturn a presidential veto meant that Duda had at his disposal a tool to hinder the new government until the end of his term in 2025. In Slovakia, Čaputová openly criticized the government for several of its priorities and for using accelerated procedures in parliament to ram home their changes. Moreover, she exercised her formal powers by referring the changes to the criminal code to the Constitutional Court, which found in her favour. Her actions only raised the stakes for the then-forthcoming presidential election. In the second round in April 2024, whereas Fico's preferred candidate Peter Pellegrini offered 'pokoj' [calm], his opponent in the second round, the former foreign minister and candidate backed by the opposition, Ivan Korčok, promised to be a bulwark against Fico. Pellegrini's victory seemed not only to confirm Slovakia's direction of travel but also to remove an actor with the potential to throw obstacles into the road.¹³

Post-election developments in Slovakia and Poland underscore the process and sequential nature of democratic backsliding and its reversal, shaped by constraints and opportunities. The new Fico government's decision to focus first on the judiciary and police had clear logic. One of the Matovič government's few successes was increasing the independence of investigative bodies, leading to many prosecutions of politicians and associates of the last Smer-SD-led government over corruption allegations. The new Fico government's almost immediate removal of personnel investigating these crimes and the abolition of the special prosecutor's office helped halt proceedings and sent out a strong signal about the limits of what the new government was willing to countenance. Moreover, the next step, changing the Criminal Code, would help to place a protective shield around less than angelic behaviour. Criticism of these steps and the decision of the Slovak Constitutional Court to block the legislation and stifle the new government's agenda were then met with accusations of unconstitutional behaviour and threats of dismissal. The criticisms were also levelled more generally at the media, which, after the first 6 months in government, became the next focus in Slovakia's illiberal turn as a new law overhauled the state broadcaster, creating a governing council predominated by government nominees. This new oversight body, combined with complaints of pressure placed on journalists on private TV stations and in newspapers, pointed to attempts to muffle or turn down the volume of criticism in the media. What is striking in the Polish case is that the desire to reverse the illiberalism of the previous 8 years does not involve a 'U-turn' in the strictest sense of sequencing. In fact, the initial steps in either direction are much the same: a focus on the judicial sphere and the media landscape.

¹³ On the presidential elections, see Láštík and Haughton (2024).

Electoral and unexpected events underlined and reinforced divisions in both societies. Despite giving the impression it would be a priority, little progress was made on Tusk's promises on LGBT rights, including a formalization of LGBT partnerships and a law on hate speech that got stuck in the parliamentary freezer. The lack of progress owed something to the sheer size of the government's in-tray, but social conservatives in the coalition also had one eye on impending local and European elections. In Slovakia, the assassination attempt on Fico in May 2024 underscored the polarized nature of society. Close allies of Fico pointed fingers of blame at opposition politicians and the liberal media for fostering a hostile environment, whereas opposition voices expressed fears the shooting could be used to justify an acceleration of democratic erosion (Alderman and Haughton, 2024).

III. The EU and International Implications: Ukraine, Regional Groupings and Underlying Vulnerabilities

The war in Ukraine cast a long shadow over European politics in 2023. Despite deep divisions in domestic politics, thanks to geopolitical vulnerabilities linked to historical experiences, there was broad agreement amongst Polish parties that the country needed to stand on the side of Ukraine and against the threat posed by Russia. Given Tusk's stature in Brussels and good relations with key European politicians, his election meant that the voice of those calling for greater support for Ukraine within the EU was further strengthened in the European Council. In contrast, the election of the Smer-SD government in Slovakia indicated a weakening of the EU's support for Ukraine.

Slovakia had long harboured contrasting views on Russia, with clear pro-Russian sentiments being expressed by SNS and various neo-fascist politicians. Smer-SD's position had consistently been more ambiguous. As far back as 2006, Fico had emphasized in his election campaigns and his government's declarations that foreign policy should be directed to all four corners of the globe, not just the West (Marušiak et al., 2007), a refrain he repeated in the 2023 campaign. But whilst in 2006, such language could be interpreted as a call for an outward-looking Slovakia, in 2023, it signalled sympathy towards Russia's side in the war.

Once in office the words and deeds of the new Fico government sent out mixed signals. On the one hand, Fico continued to use his campaigning line about not sending a single bullet to Ukraine but only offering aid to address the tragic human consequences of the war. Moreover, he spoke of the need for Ukraine to give up territory in order to end the war, and the new foreign minister, Juraj Blanár, was pictured shaking hands with his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, at an international conference. But these statements sat uncomfortably with a willingness to allow private firms (some of which had links to leading figures in Smer-SD) to continue to export arms to Ukraine¹⁴ and a joint meeting of the Slovak and Ukrainian governments in the eastern Slovak town of Michalovce in April, at which warm words were exchanged.¹⁵ Moreover, despite making

¹⁴ *Politico*, 16 January 2024. Available from: <https://www.politico.eu/article/in-post-election-reversal-slovakia-enables-weapons-exports-to-ukraine-fico/>.

¹⁵ *Slovak Spectator*, 11 April 2024. Available from: <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/23315310/for-a-while-fico-was-pro-ukraine.html?ref=njctse>. See also Fico's Facebook post. Available from: https://www.facebook.com/robertficosk/posts/pfbid0uhV51X4MCK53BXVSnQWZNjCAdUCRwZBQet8DjqospKJUraKJABMnCXCfHmbGZ7H7!?locale=en_GB.

strong critical noises about the war on the eve of European Council meetings, Fico tended to go along with the collective decisions reached, albeit with Slovakia taking a backseat. The mixed messages meant that under Fico, Slovakia had become an ‘unpredictable’ and unreliable player in the sphere of EU and foreign policy (Pisklová, 2024; Strážay, 2023).

Smer-SD’s mixed signals can be partly explained by a balancing act: a desire to send a strong signal to a domestic audience whilst not proving to be such a troublesome player on the European stage. The explanation for Slovakia’s stance under Fico, however, is also linked to deeper sets of vulnerabilities and how a power-seeking politician like Fico responds to those vulnerabilities. Over the course of its two decades of EU membership, Slovakia has offered challenges to EU policies in the fields of fiscal and foreign policies (Malová et al., 2005), but as a small, landlocked, highly trade-dependent country, Slovakia has no real alternative to EU membership (Högenauer and Mišík, 2024). Politicians may vent and criticize, but they are clear in stating where Slovakia’s place unambiguously lies. Nonetheless, the Michalovce meeting arguably points to Fico’s key motivations. The deals struck on energy, infrastructure and economic support for Ukraine’s reconstruction have clear benefits for the Slovak economy and the business interests of individuals close to the prime minister. Fico’s description of his planned trip to China as the ‘trip of the year’ only seemed to underline the priority of business interests.¹⁶

The new Slovak government did not just cause concerns in Brussels over the war in Ukraine; there were also fears the government’s domestic agenda would create a new chapter in the EU’s ‘autocracy problem’ with Fico posing similar rule of law challenges to Hungary’s Viktor Orbán and Poland under PiS (Kelemen, 2024). Loud critical voices, the threat of withholding funds and an overwhelming vote in the European Parliament [494 out of 630 members of the European Parliament (MEPs) supported the resolution] criticizing the changes to the Criminal Code, however, appeared to have no impact on the speed and direction of travel of Slovakia’s new government.

In contrast, the new Polish government was greeted with a sigh of relief in Brussels, given both its domestic agenda and the expected engagement in EU policy-making,¹⁷ even more so in light of Poland’s forthcoming presidency of the Council scheduled for the first half of 2025. As Slovakia was beginning to cause concerns, former European Council President Tusk was welcomed back to Brussels as a cure to the PiS-induced rule of law headache in Poland. The new Polish prime minister was able to deliver quickly on a promise to unlock EU funds, securing an initial €5 billion as an early Christmas present for his country. Moreover, the departure from the populist foreign policy approach to negotiations, which rested on the contestation of values as well as established ‘ways of doing things’ combined with the disruption of the daily conduct of negotiations, was welcomed in European circles (Juncos and Pomorska, 2021, 2024).

The Polish premier was not the only personnel change. An ‘iron broom’ also swept through the administration, with high-level changes also within the Polish representation to the EU, with Tusk’s former chef de cabinet in the European Council, Piotr Serafin, put in charge. Moreover, Radek Sikorski, who returned as foreign minister, was quick to

¹⁶ JOJ 24, 24 April 2024. Available from: <https://joj24.noviny.sk/rozhovory-joj24/916969-exkluzivny-rozhovor-joj-24-s-premierom-robertom-ficom>.

¹⁷ *Financial Times*, 18 February 2024. Available from: <https://www.ft.com/content/e3b10baf-c508-4af1-ad25-8188cf60b174>.

announce his intention to exchange 50 ambassadors. This plan, however, was complicated by the unwillingness of President Duda to co-operate.

What changed radically in the case of Poland was its reputational capital. Aside from Tusk's personal reputation in Brussels following his tenure as European Council president, his previous government had been mainly seen as constructive, including running a successful presidency in 2011 (Pomorska and Vanhoonacker, 2012). With the new government, Poland also re-gained its full coalition capacity, which had been damaged during the PiS government. Nevertheless, Poland under Tusk will not be simply an acquiescent member state. Indeed, in areas such as migration or the environment and climate, it is likely to run against the majority of the other member states. Following the protests by Polish farmers on both the Green Deal and the liberalization of trade with Ukraine, for example, Tusk was quick to request that Poland be given exemptions from some provisions of the Green Deal.

The election of the new governments had consequences for regional groupings, both symbolically and substantially. Whilst the revival of the Weimar Triangle was emblematic of Poland's return to the European mainstream, it did not bring the same good news for the Visegrád Four. Weimar became a convenient platform for the new Polish government to improve relations with Germany and France, both of which became strained under PiS's rule. The practice of exchanging information and co-ordination before important meetings has been one of the main functions of Weimar within the EU, practices that looked set to return under Tusk. As a symbolic gesture, after visiting President Joe Biden in March 2024, Tusk called for an immediate follow-up within an extraordinary meeting of the Weimar Triangle. Moreover, whilst Poland and France announced they were working on signing an interstate treaty akin to the one France signed with Germany, Sikorski announced in Berlin that the 'Polish-German partnership has to return to its normal state because we are a part of the same family'.¹⁸

But whilst there were smiles and handshakes when Tusk met Olaf Scholz and Emanuel Macron, despite some polite words and the articulation of common concerns about the Green Deal and migration, the press conference at the end of a Visegrád Four meeting in Prague in March 2024 exposed the deep divisions between the Czechs and Poles on the one hand and Hungary and Slovakia on the other.¹⁹ Although Poland and Slovakia had in some sense swapped places, this was just the latest iteration of what had been dubbed the 'V 2 + 2'.²⁰ In spring 2024, one of the most divisive issues remained sending arms to Ukraine,²¹ with both Hungary and Slovakia reluctant to support the efforts of the Czechs and the Poles. Visegrád may become an uncomfortable forum for Tusk if it is seen as providing additional legitimacy to Orbán. After all, Tusk himself emphasized at the summit that fundamental values like freedom, human rights and the rule of law were key when co-operation was established.²²

¹⁸ *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 30 January 2024. Available from: <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75399,30649556,sikorski-w-berlinie-naprawiamy-relacje-z-niemcami.html>.

¹⁹ *CT24*, 27 February 2024. Available from: <https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/10101491767-studio-ct24/224411058350227/>.

²⁰ *Politico*, 29 February 2024. Available from: <https://www.politico.eu/article/central-europe-divided-visegrad-v4-alliance/>.

²¹ *Euronews*, 21 March 2024. Available from: <https://www.euronews.com/2024/03/21/visegrad-group-still-deeply-divided-on-sending-arms-to-ukraine>.

²² *Kancelaria Premiera*, 27 February 2024. Available from: <https://www.gov.pl/web/premier/pdt-praga-v4>.

Conclusion

In both Poland and Slovakia in 2023 voters signalled a desire for change, for renewal and for reversal, although some politicians took this as a cue for revenge. But the results also provided signals for actors in the fluid world of parties and electoral politics. Defeat provoked internal debates over strategy and the leadership of parties. The results and a subsequent decline in PiS's poll rating fuelled a flurry of speculation about the future role of Kaczyński, whereas the electoral success of TD led to Hołownia's star appearing to rise again in discussions of future presidential candidates. In Poland, ideological differences, particularly between the social liberals and social conservatives in the eclectic coalition, soon came to the fore, highlighting not only that there are both centrifugal and centripetal forces that will shape the coalition's longevity but also that democratic backsliding and conservative backlash are not simply two sides of the same coin (O'Dwyer, 2024). Slovakia's own presidential elections in April 2024 seemingly confirmed that the course of Slovak politics was set for the foreseeable future. But Pellegrini's accession to the traditionally non-partisan presidency opened up existential questions over the future of Hlas-SD and indeed the coalition.

Despite the sharp change of direction after the elections, neither country's path is immutable. Decisions by government and opposition politicians and the response of the wider electorate in the coming months and years will shape the likelihood of tacking, veering and U-turns. But the experience of the first few months of the new governments indicates that it is easier to undermine liberal democracy than reconstruct it. Bulldozers and builders face different tasks and function in different ways.

More broadly, the election results in both countries underscored the increasingly common picture across Europe of complicated party systems. Within these fragmented and fluid party systems, there are sizeable slices of the electorate supportive of parties such as PiS and Smer-SD, but whether that translates into an ability to form governments still depends heavily on the choices of smaller and newer political actors in coalition formation.

Poland and Slovakia highlight three wider lessons for the study of democratic backsliding and resilience. First, electoral turnout matters. The Polish case underlines both the importance of civil society groups in mobilizing the electorate before and during election campaigns and the combination of urban-dwelling youth and middle-aged citizens in more rural areas turning out to vote. Second, the qualities of compromise, collaboration and self-limitation were necessary in the forging of a coalition that could end 8 years of PiS rule and halt Poland's illiberal and democratic slide. The recipe cooked up in Poland in 2023 – and indeed, the story of turnout – bore a strong resemblance to the coalition of coalitions elected in Slovakia in 1998. Moreover, the coalition's ongoing cohesion will determine whether the changes become entrenched or find themselves subject to overhaul. Third, Poland and Slovakia illuminate the means by which states seek to reverse direction along the liberal/illiberal path. The two cases show that judicial appointments and changes to the media landscape are clear priorities. For advocates of liberal democracy, developments in Slovakia show how quickly things can move in an unwelcome direction, whereas Poland indicates how the direction of travel can be changed, albeit in

ways that raise questions about the means and ability to achieve the stated aims. Democracy is, as the Slovak cartoonist Shooty put it, ‘makačka’ (‘a difficult job’).²³

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²³<https://dennikn.sk/1652526/shooty-november/?ref=list>.

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