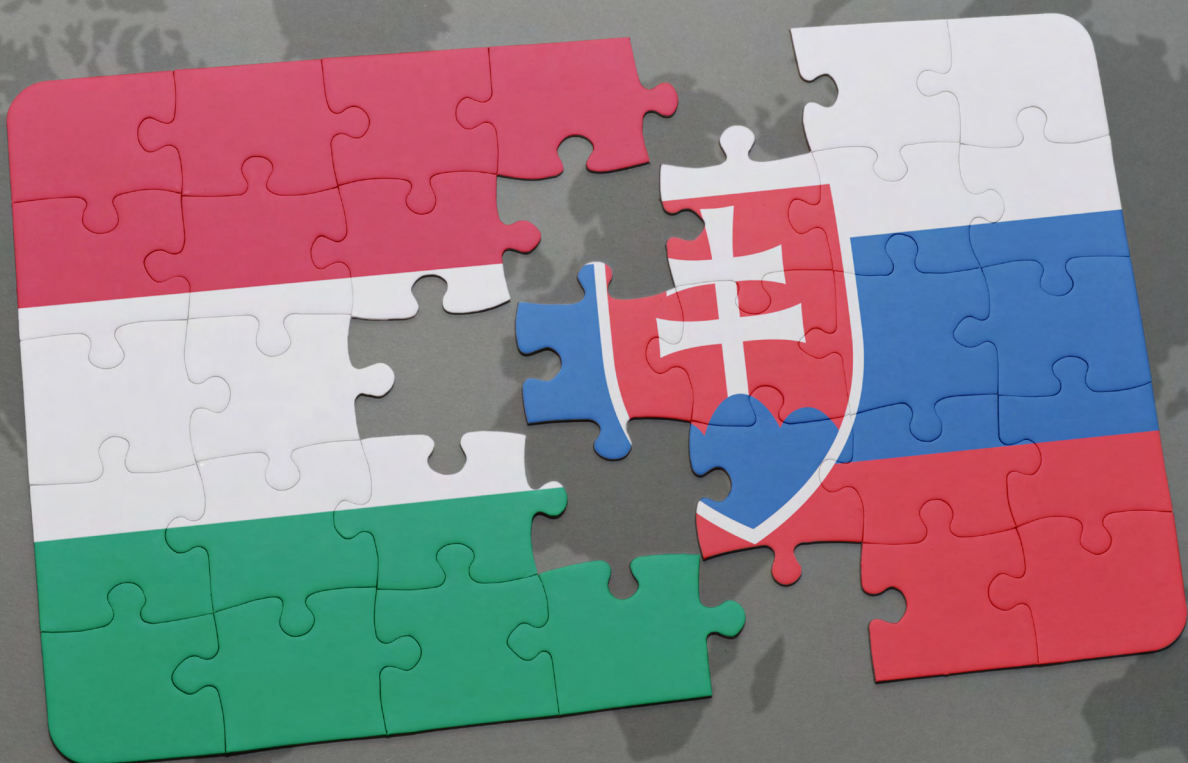


What is the path forward for Slovakia's Hungarians?

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The final results of the 2023 Slovak general election made it clear that there would be no Hungarian ethnic minority party in the Slovak National Council for the next four years. The result and the election campaign leading up to it open up questions on how to best address the country's Hungarian minority's issues for both Slovak national and local Hungarian actors.

This analysis takes a look at the 2023 Slovak general election campaign directed at the country's relatively sizeable Hungarian minority, as well as the election results. To achieve this goal, 39 Facebook pages were selected that predominantly post in Hungarian about Slovak public affairs based on the number of followers they have or their role in disseminating narratives concerning the election. The list included pages of politicians contesting the elections (e.g., Krisztián Forró, György Gyimesi, Konrád Rigó), parties (e.g., Alliance, Hungarian Forum), and Hungarian-language media outlets in Slovakia (e.g., Új Szó, Napunk, Piros7es).

The monitoring effort covered 13 weeks from July to September (30th June to 21st September). Every week, 20 relevant Facebook posts with the highest number of total interactions according to the CrowdTangle tool, published by the 39 pages, were selected (260 in total) and labelled according to the key themes and narratives spread. One or more labels from a total of 67 narratives could be used, helping to identify the main topics posts dealt with and the frequency of the occurrence of these themes in the posts.

Five conclusions from the Facebook campaign

Based on the monitoring effort, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. Concerns about the state of the south of Slovakia

Around a third of the 260 posts sampled for the research contained some form of reference to the

state of infrastructure, **social services**, or financial support in the regions where the Hungarian minority is concentrated. The posts often talked about “eastern and southern Slovakia” rather than the Hungarian minority specifically. Many of the posts on the issue were **bilingual**, indicating that the Alliance was hoping to gather some votes from the local ethnic Slovak population as well.

The essence of the “municipal aid” narratives was that the regions in question were not receiving adequate funding from the national government, and **infrastructural projects** that were **promised** to those living there had not materialised, so southern and eastern Slovakia (and the Hungarian minority within it) need to gain representation to push for their own **interests**.

The number of posts addressing these issues and the engagement on such texts indicates that there is certainly a perception among the Hungarian minority living in southern Slovakia that the national government is paying insufficient attention to them and their problems. The broad engagement with posts on this topic highlights that, regardless of the facts concerning the distribution of funds to regions, there is a concern in southern and eastern Slovakia that they are being left behind, which will have to be addressed in the long term.

2. The Alliance was the most popular voice in the campaign

Most of the posts analysed were posted by candidates affiliated with the Alliance – a party **encompassing** multiple ethnic Hungarian political forces active in Slovakia. Out of the 260 articles analysed, only a handful were posted by pages not associated with them.

For instance, Facebook users engaged with some posts of another ethnic Hungarian party, the Hungarian Forum, which targeted SMER-SD PM candidate **Robert Fico**. The Hungarian-language media outlet Piros7es generated engagement with posts negatively portraying the **LGBTI+** winner of a **Dutch** beauty pageant, Ukrainian President

Volodymyr Zelensky, or the alleged “agent government” of Zuzana Čaputová.

Regardless, the Facebook discussion during the campaign was dominated by Alliance-affiliated actors during the monitoring period, at least among the most engaging posts. The 2023 election results also indicate that the Alliance was the dominant actor in the Hungarian minority’s political space, as they collected 4.38% of the national vote, while other Hungarian ethnic parties failed to reach more than 0.3%.

3. György Gyimesi was a key voice

Out of the 260 articles analysed, 44 were posted by György Gyimesi, a former MP for the then-ruling **OL’aNO** who had left **OL’aNO** and made his way onto the candidate list of Alliance for the 2023 general election, prompting the more liberal Most-Híd to leave the coalition.

The posts he shared on Facebook focused on criticising **liberalism** for an alleged lack of tolerance, arguing against **aiding** Ukraine, and **accusing** Brussels of implementing policies negatively affecting member states in the fields of migration or gender issues. These narratives are similar to those advocated by populist parties throughout the EU, such as the Hungarian ruling party, Fidesz.

György Gyimesi also posted some of his content in **Slovak**, and these were often more popular than his **Hungarian** ones. For instance, his video alleging that Brussels wanted to “send migrants to Slovakia” and “Čaputová’s government agrees with this” generated 2,353 engagements in **Slovak** and 1,502 in **Hungarian**.

Based on the posts analysed in the context of this research, György Gyimesi was the main voice of populist narratives in the sample during the campaign. Whether this brought any additional votes to the Alliance is a question, as in March 2023, a poll found that only 28% of ethnic Hungarian respondents **would** vote for him.

4. The Hungarian ruling party itself was rarely featured

Among the posts monitored, the Hungarian ruling party and its officials were featured fairly infrequently. One exception was the yearly Băile Tuşnad speech of Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán. The key issue addressed regarding the speech was that the PM essentially “scolded” the Hungarian minority for **failing** to earn their representation in Bratislava. However, this statement did not re-emerge among the most engaging posts later; the Hungarian PM’s words were not used for mobilisation purposes at the end of the campaign.

The more popular posts were built around Slovak internal issues; Hungary itself was not frequently mentioned in the sample.

5. Facebook was used for mobilisation

About 12% of all monitored posts contained a clear call for voters to go out and vote, and 12 of the 20 posts from the last week of the monitoring did so. While it is standard for political forces to mobilise the electorate, the large proportion of posts – mostly by the Alliance – calling for the Hungarian minority’s participation in the ballot in the last days indicates that there were concerns among ethnic Hungarian politicians about voter turnout in the regions from which they can expect most of their votes. Pre-election polls were certainly a reason for concern, as the Alliance was **measured** at about 4%.

A visit to mobilize?

Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Péter Szijjártó **visited** ethnic Hungarian regions in Slovakia on the Tuesday and Wednesday before the 30th September general election. On both occasions, he encouraged the Hungarian minority to go and vote for the “united Hungarian party.” He added that Hungarian representation in Bratislava could improve relations between the two countries.

This prompted a strong response from the Slovak side, as they **summoned** the Hungarian ambassador to Slovakia for interference in the country's election. Péter Szijjártó explained to the Hungarian-language Slovak media *Új Szó* that he saw no problems in participating in public events with the Alliance, and his support for Alliance stems from the desire for strong Slovak-Hungarian relations. The Hungarian ruling party and government officials, however, had accused others of election interference for similar visits; such as the European Parliament for having a delegation meet opposition parties and independent institutions in **September 2021**, months before the 2022 general election in Hungary.

The effects of the Hungarian foreign minister's visit cannot be measured, but as the results show, it was not enough to bring enough ethnic Hungarians to the ballot box to vote the Alliance into the National Council. The fact that Péter Szijjártó visited Slovakia instead of PM Viktor Orbán indicates that the Hungarian ruling party did not have full confidence that supporting the Alliance would yield results. If that full confidence existed, it would likely have prompted PM Orbán's visit. The Hungarian PM, for instance, visited ethnic Hungarian parties in Romania just **days before** the 2016 general election. Another indication that Fidesz was not confident that the Alliance could get into the National Council might have been their open **embrace** of prospective PM Robert Fico's SMER-SD as a key Hungarian ally.

Why is there no Hungarian representation in Bratislava?

One of the takeaways of the campaign and the election for some ethnic Hungarian political actors in Slovakia was that **ethnicity-based politics** might be over in the country. The results raise the question of what has happened over the years that blocked ethnic Hungarian parties from entering the Slovak National Council. After all, in the 2021 Slovak census, **7.7%** of the population considered themselves to be ethnic Hungarians. While it is

a significant decrease compared to the 10.8% measured in 1991, it should theoretically be enough to propel a Hungarian party into the Council.

Results from elections between 2006 and 2023 partly explain the results. According to the **Slovak Statistical Office**, election turnout in Slovakia increased gradually between these elections: from 54.67% in 2006 to 68.51% in 2023. However, in four electoral districts selected for this analysis, where Hungarian parties do traditionally well (Dunajská Streda, Komárno, Nové Zámky, and Rimavská Sobota), this increase is not as visible.

The difference between turnout in these four districts and the national average (with rounded numbers) serves as crucial evidence:

Year/ District	Dunajská Streda	Komárno	Nové Zámky	Rimavská Sobota
2023	-8	-13	-5	-16
2020	-4	-13	-4	-12
2016	-4	-11	-3	-9
2012	+2	-7	-1	-7
2010	+9	+1	+2	-3
2006	+8	0	+2	0

Table 1 Difference between Turnout in Select Electoral Districts and the National Average. Turnout numbers were rounded. "+" and "-" indicate turnout compared to the national average. Data for calculations: <https://volby.statistics.sk/index-en.html>

While in 2006-2010, turnout in the four selected districts was generally higher or equal to the national average, by 2023, all four were well below the national average. Turnout rates did not fall significantly in these four districts; in some, they actually increased slightly. The main difference is that the majority-Slovak parts of the country became significantly better mobilised. This factor, however, is not the only contributor to the lack of Hungarian representation in the National Council, since Most-Híd won seats in 2016 as well, when turnout rates in these four districts were already below the national average.

Most-Híd's emergence after a **split** from the Hungarian Coalition Party in 2009 was another factor that affected results in the long term. The move split the ethnic Hungarian vote in Slovakia,

which meant that no single Hungarian political party managed to repeat the 11.68% result of the Hungarian Coalition Party in 2006. However, together, ethnic Hungarian parties garnered more than 10% of the vote until 2016, and Most-Híd reached the parliamentary threshold in 2010, 2012, and 2016 as well. In 2020, voters likely had a harder time **forgiving** Most-Híd for sticking with SMER-SD in a coalition government even after the murder of Ján Kuciak. Even after this, Most-Híd and the Hungarian Coalition Party together would have been over 5% mathematically in 2020 (although it is possible that some would not have voted for an alliance between the two).

Ethnic Hungarian parties also lost some of their voters. In **2006**, the Hungarian Coalition Party (MKP) gained 269,111 votes. In **2012**, Most-Híd gained 176,088 votes, and the MKP had 109,483, for a total of 285,571. In 2023, the **Alliance** ended up with 130,183 votes, while the joint Modrí, Most-Híd list had 7,935, and the list led by the Hungarian Forum had another 3,486. This only adds up to 141,604.

It is also worth comparing the 2006 and 2023 election results in the four voting districts selected above, as both elections were characterised by a single, strong ethnic Hungarian party. In 2006, the MKP won all four districts, while in 2023, the Alliance won three of them and came second in Nové Zámky. However, what is clearly visible in the table below is that the strongest ethnic Hungarian party's share of valid votes decreased substantially even in the three districts they won, which indicates that some Hungarian votes have potentially moved on to parties with majority Slovak candidates.

Year	Dunajská Streda	Komárno	Nové Zámky	Rímovská Sobota
2023	Alliance: 46,37	Alliance: 48,78	Alliance: 19,21	Alliance: 24,96
2006	MKP: 86,31	MKP: 76,17	MKP: 46,01	MKP: 40,85

Table 2 Voting results (%) of the strongest ethnic Hungarian party in four selected electoral districts.

Why the strongest ethnic Hungarian party ended up below the parliamentary threshold in the 2023 general election is hard to pinpoint. One possible reason could be that the Alliance could

not present faces that convinced voters they would do a better job at representing the minority than their predecessors. The **debates** within the coalition leading to the split with Most-Híd or the Alliance's more open sympathy towards Fidesz and its representatives could have been contributing factors as well.

A Possible Opportunity for All

Although there will be no ethnic Hungarian party representation in the Slovak National Council for the next four years, the problems this minority faces – which might not be different from those shared by the majority Slovak population – need attention. The most important issue seems to be the fact that substantial layers of the Slovak population in the southern and eastern parts of the country feel left behind, or possibly even as “second-tier” citizens of the country. The dissatisfaction that it might generate can easily be exploited by populist or authoritarian political actors, both internal and external ones, representing a key vulnerability towards Slovakia's alignment with the West.

This necessitates that political actors pay more attention to the needs of these regions and, at the very least, communicate their plans to them more effectively and start implementing these promises in practice. Actors that can offer a credible development path to these regions can not only improve Slovakia's resilience against hybrid influencing attempts but potentially gain a substantial number of votes.

For ethnic Hungarian politics, there are two potential paths forward. First, they could potentially formulate permanent, long-term cooperation with majority-Slovak political parties to increase the number of ethnic Hungarian political representatives in the National Council. Second, if they seek to continue focusing on ethnicity-based politics, they will have to find more credible, fresh political faces and ensure that instead of divisions, the focus will be put on common goals, with necessary concessions on some issues.

Posts by the media included in the monitoring sample were rarely among the most engaging ones. When Facebook users did engage with the posts by the monitored media outlets, it was mostly with posts negatively portraying actors such as Volodymyr Zelensky, Zuzana Čaputová, or LGBTI+ people. Therefore, it would be advisable to increase support for mainstream, independent Hungarian-language media to enhance their outreach, allow them to make their social media posts more engaging and help the Hungarian minority in Slovakia to access balanced coverage on domestic and international affairs.

Overall, it is key that Slovakia's minorities are not forgotten even if they do not have strong representation in Bratislava. Leaving them behind could, in fact, lead to negative consequences for the entire country.