

## A tug of war in Poland and Slovakia

Elections in the two central European countries will test support for Ukraine and measure the appeal of illiberalism



The 2018 murder of journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancée, Martina Kusnirova sparked rallies among protestors angry at the deep-rooted problems with corruption in Slovakia that the killings had flagged up © AFP/Getty Images

Tony Barber SEPTEMBER 23 2023

---

### Receive free Slovakia updates

We'll send you a *myFT Daily Digest* email rounding up the latest Slovakia news every morning.

Enter your email address

Sign up

---

This article is an on-site version of our Europe Express newsletter. [Sign up here](#) to get the newsletter sent straight to your inbox every weekday and Saturday morning

Welcome back. It came as quite a shock this week when Poland, one of Ukraine's staunchest European allies, declared that, although it would honour existing contracts, [it would stop new weapons supplies to Kyiv](#). We shall see how long the measure lasts — but, one way or another, it underscores the importance of parliamentary elections to be held in Slovakia on September 30 and in Poland on October 15.

Each contest will measure the strength of political illiberalism in central Europe. Each will also test the depth and solidity of the region's support for Ukraine in its war of self-defence against Russia. I'm at [tony.barber@ft.com](mailto:tony.barber@ft.com).

The Slovak and Polish elections fall at a delicate moment for the EU. On the one hand, the 27-nation bloc is trying to maintain a united front of military and financial backing for Ukraine. But [cracks are appearing](#) in that support, and there is deep concern about what will happen if the Republican party wins the White House in next year's US presidential election and scales back Washington's commitment to Ukraine.

On the other hand, the EU is preparing the ground for [potentially far-reaching internal reforms](#) to open a path for Ukraine and other countries, mainly in the Balkans, to join the bloc. Election victories for populist or conservative nationalist parties in Slovakia and Poland would raise questions about whether such reforms might be paralysed by disputes among existing EU member states, leaving Ukraine and fellow candidates languishing on the sidelines.

## A thorn in the EU's side

Political illiberalism, in its central European guise, has been a thorn in the EU's side since Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán won the first of four consecutive election victories in 2010. The trend gathered pace with the ascent to power in 2015 of Poland's rightwing Law and Justice (PiS) party, which was re-elected in 2019.

However, it isn't one-way traffic in central Europe, as Soňa Muzikárová, a Slovak political economist, [reminded us in the FT](#) this month. In the Czech Republic, opponents of populism won parliamentary elections in 2021 and [a presidential election](#) last January. Slovenia's parliamentary contest of April 2022 produced [a similar result](#).

Now attention is turning to Slovakia and Poland — a pair of countries where we must be careful to highlight the differences as well as the similarities in political culture and foreign policy.

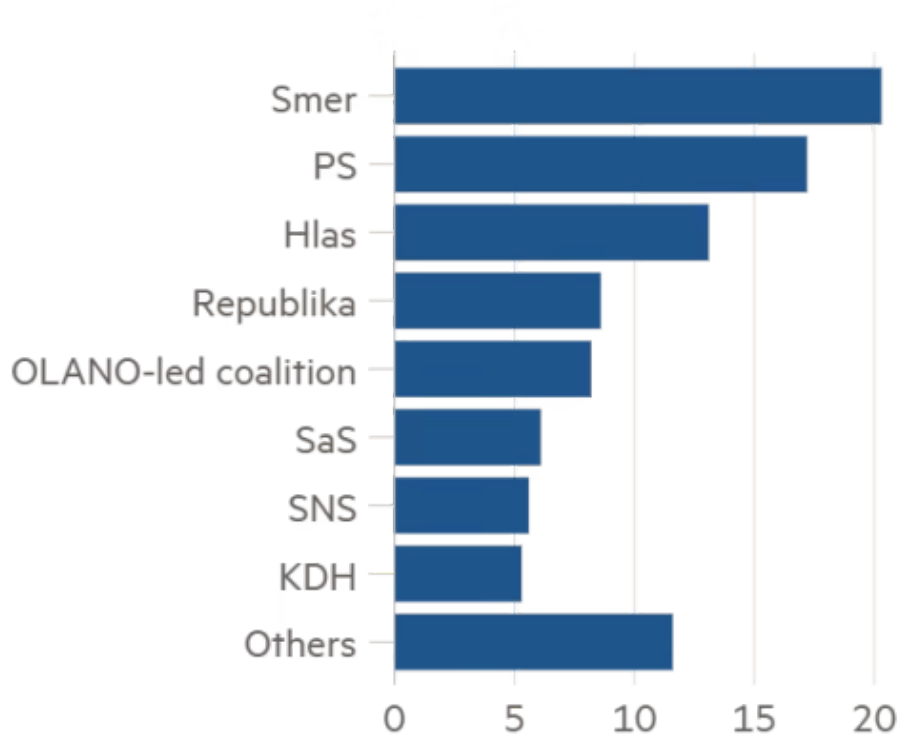
## Robert Fico: Slovak bogeyman or blusterer?

The central questions in Slovakia's election are whether former premier [Robert Fico](#) will return to power, perhaps taking the country down an Orbán-style illiberal path; and whether the next government, whatever its political leanings, will continue Slovakia's present policy of firm support for Ukraine.

Right now, [opinion polls](#) put Fico's ostensibly centre-left Smer party ahead of all its rivals, but far short of the support needed to form a government on its own.

# Slovakia's Smer is in the lead

Percentage of vote in opinion poll,  
September 21 2023



Survey conducted September 15 - 19. Sample: 1,026

Source: Ipsos for Pravda

© FT

I'd like to draw your attention to two first-class analyses of Slovakia's political scene. One is by [Tim Haughton and Petra Alderman](#) of the UK's University of Birmingham, and the other is by [Alena Kudzko](#) for the Carnegie Europe think-tank.

Haughton and Alderman write that Slovakia is cursed with "a party system whose only stable characteristic is its instability". Since the collapse of Czechoslovak communism in 1989 and Slovakia's emergence as an independent state in 1993, political parties have been created, won power, lost power, renamed themselves and disappeared with disconcerting frequency.

Smer was [defeated in Slovakia's last parliamentary elections](#) in 2020, dealing a blow to Fico. That outcome appeared to confirm the disenchantment with illiberalism that had found expression a year earlier with the [presidential election victory of Zuzana Čaputová](#), a pro-western, anti-corruption campaigner.

Haughton and Alderman explain:

Fico's Smer lost power at the 2020 election in part as a product of the widespread revulsion at the murder of a journalist and his fiancée.

Those tragic events and subsequent investigations helped to expose murky links between politicians, businessmen and organised crime and led to the biggest demonstrations since the fall of the communist regime.

Now Fico and Smer have bounced back, assisted by difficult economic conditions after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and by the chaotic style of rule practised by the coalitions that have governed Slovakia since 2020.

## Low public support for Ukraine

In her article, Kudzko observes that Smer and various nationalist groups display [lukewarm support for Ukraine](#), blaming the west for provoking Russia and demanding an end to the war in order to stabilise Slovakia's economy.

These views chime to a considerable extent with [public opinion in Slovakia](#), which is one of the EU's most Russophile societies — along with Bulgaria.

However, Kudzko makes an astute point:

Fico has not displayed the same level of ambition as . . . Orbán in seeking to remake Europe and global politics in his own image.

Smer's outreach to respected diplomats and former government officials to potentially assume the foreign policy portfolio if the party wins the election suggests that a constructive way forward on foreign policy may not be far-fetched.

Keep in mind, too, that Slovakia — unlike Poland — is part of the 20-nation eurozone. This in itself ensures a certain restraint in Slovak government policies.

All in all, it seems plausible that a Smer-led coalition might not make a decisive break with western policy on Ukraine. However, it could put Slovakia on a collision course with Brussels if it tried to remodel the judiciary, media and civil society institutions in the way that Orbán has done in Hungary and PiS has done in Poland.

## Poland's frictions with Ukraine

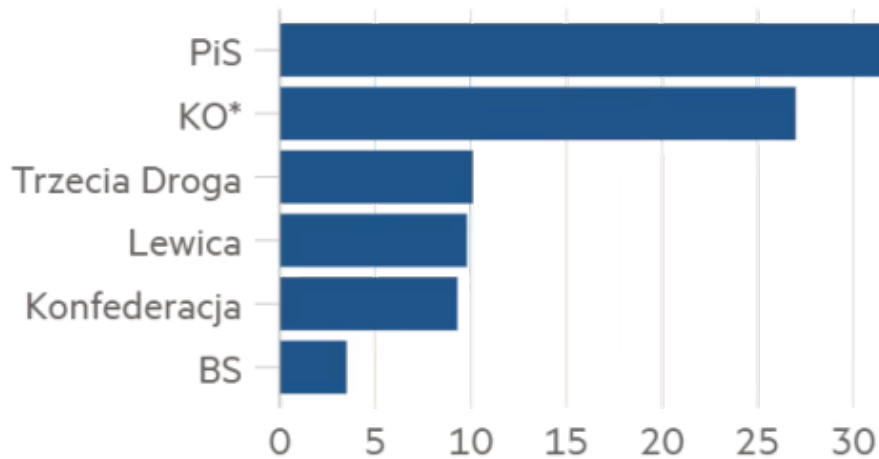
Few countries have been as determined as Poland to support Ukraine's resistance to Russian aggression. It was therefore startling this week to hear [Polish president Andrzej Duda](#) describe Ukraine in scathing terms as "like a drowning person clinging to anything available".

Poland's decision to halt weapons supplies followed an earlier move to extend unilateral curbs on imports of Ukrainian foodstuffs, overriding an EU decision to lift restrictions. Slovakia briefly joined Poland in that act of agricultural protectionism.

We don't have to look far for an explanation of Poland's move. In next month's election, PiS will have its work cut out to win a clear parliamentary majority, and it needs every vote it can muster in the rural and small-town areas that are the base of its support.

# Polling suggests PiS will remain largest single party but may struggle to secure parliamentary majority

Percentage of vote, September 21 2023



\*The Civic Coalition (KO) includes PO, which is led by Donald Tusk, .Modern, led by Adam Szałapka and smaller parties. Survey conducted September 18 - 19. Sample: 1,000  
Source: United Surveys for RMF FM and Dziennik Gazeta Prawna  
© FT

However, there are deeper historical roots to the present upsurge in Polish-Ukrainian tensions. These centre on [Stepan Bandera](#), the Ukrainian ultranationalist whose followers massacred Jews and Poles in the second world war.

The memory wars fought over this dark period in Polish-Ukrainian relations are lucidly laid out in [this commentary](#) by Alex Perez-Reyes for the Washington-based Kennan Institute. Suffice to say that Poland is deeply frustrated that parts of the Ukrainian political elite and society accord [heroic status](#) to Bandera.

## Kingmaker on the far right

As far as next month's election is concerned, my impression is that it won't seriously derail Polish support for Ukraine, for that backing is cross-party and rests on solid public perceptions of Russia as Poland's long-term adversary.

However, the atmosphere in which the election is being fought is [truly unpleasant — it's probably the dirtiest contest](#) since the return to democracy after 1989. (For the most reliable, up-to-date survey of modern Polish politics, see Jarosław Kuisz's new book, [The New Politics of Poland](#).)

The opposition is making the most of a corruption scandal concerning the [illegal sale of visas](#) at Polish consulates abroad. For its part, PiS has called a referendum on migration policies to coincide with the parliamentary contest — a blatant attempt to blur issues and drive up the pro-government vote.

As Aleks Szczerbiak points out, this referendum may backfire by [boosting turnout for the far-right Confederation party](#), which could end up holding the balance of power in the next legislature.

Szczerbiak is among those who think that the opposition, led by centre-right former premier Donald Tusk, [will find it hard](#) to chart a course to victory.

If that is correct, and PiS stays in power, we can expect more friction with Brussels over the rule of law, EU treaty reform and other areas where conservative Polish nationalists have little in common with the western European political mainstream.



Jarosław Kaczyński, Polish deputy prime minister and leader of the Law and Justice (PiS) ruling party, which during the past three years has lost some support © Maciej Kulczynski/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

## More on this topic

What's at stake in the Polish election? — An [analysis](#) by Jacek Lepiarz for Germany's Deutsche Welle broadcaster

## Tony's picks of the week

- Canada's claims that Indian government agents were involved in the [assassination of a Sikh activist](#) on Canadian soil has drawn global attention to the cause of Sikh separatists who want an independent state in northern India, the FT's John Reed reports from New Delhi
- A summit last month of the Brics countries — Brazil, China, India, Russia and South Africa — made clear that [a common currency is an illusion](#) for now, Herbert Poenisch, senior fellow at Zhejiang University and former senior economist at the Bank for International Settlements, writes for the Omfif research group

## Recommended newsletters for you

**Britain after Brexit** — Keep up to date with the latest developments as the UK economy adjusts to life outside the EU. Sign up [here](#)

**Working it** — Discover the big ideas shaping today's workplaces with a weekly newsletter from work & careers editor Isabel Berwick. Sign up [here](#)