

# Success or Failure of a Newcomer? The HLAS-SD Party as a New Player in the Slovak Party System<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article is an analysis of the establishment and subsequent role of the HLAS-Social Democracy (HLAS-SD) party on the Slovak political scene with a focus on its position in the system of cooperative-competitive interactions in the early elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic in September 2023. First, it examines the new party in the broader context of the emergence of new political parties generally, which has been a long-term characteristic of the formation and development of the Slovak political system. Second, it investigates the ideological programmatic orientation of the party and its position in the scheme of cooperative-competitive interactions and cleavages in Slovak politics over the last three years. HLAS-SD represents a particular form of Slovak social democracy and, with this ideological orientation, faces competition not only from political parties of a different orientation but also from the programmatic sister party SMER-SD. Finally, the article maps the development of electoral support for HLAS-SD as captured by regular opinion polls and shown by the results of recent elections. Shortly after its establishment, HLAS-SD became for a time preferentially the most supported political entity, but later its electoral strength declined significantly. In this case study we analyse the party positions following the elections and, considering all three mentioned dimensions, explore the development of electoral support for HLAS-SD and its subsequent role in the party system.

**Keywords:** HLAS-SD; National Council of the Slovak Republic; NR SR; new political party; newcomer; elections; Slovakia

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# 1. Introduction

New political parties may play very different roles. They can be the actors who change the existing patterns of party competition. Although some may be forgotten very soon, others can be perceived as so-called ‘game-changers’; one such game-changer has gradually emerged in the Slovak party system since 2020.

Here we are talking about the party *HLAS-Social Democracy* (HLAS-sociálna demokracia, abbreviation HLAS-SD), which recorded its best result in the early elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic (Národná rada Slovenskej republiky, NR SR) in September 2023. ‘Hlas’ means ‘voice’, but also ‘vote’, in Slovak. Our study consists of three levels of analysis. First, we analyse the entity as a new political party in the broader context of the emergence of new political parties generally, which has been a long-term characteristic of the formation and development of the Slovak party system. At the second level, we analyse the ideological programmatic orientation of the party and its position in the system of cooperative-competitive interactions and cleavages in Slovak politics over the last three years. HLAS-SD represents a particular form of Slovak social democracy and, with this ideological orientation, faces competition not only from political parties of a different focus but also from the programmatic sister party SMER-Social Democracy (SMER-sociálna demokracia, SMER-SD, ‘smer’ meaning ‘direction’). Finally, we map the development of electoral support for the party as captured in regular opinion polls and by the results of the 2023 parliamentary elections. We aim to answer the following research questions: RQ1: What was the trajectory of the creation and development of the HLAS-SD party? RQ2: What programmatic anchoring was significant for the party from its inception to the 2023 elections? RQ3: Where did HLAS-SD receive key support in the 2023 elections?

Shortly after its establishment, for a time HLAS-SD became preferentially the most popular political entity, but later its electoral strength declined significantly. We look at the development of electoral support in connection with the issues mentioned above and analyse the characteristic features of HLAS-SD in the context of all three research questions. In a single-case study, we use qualitative and descriptive analysis methods to examine the origin and development of the party. Our primary sources are current academic research, monitored media outputs, legislation, party regulations, and the public statements of key political actors.

## 2. New political parties: research phenomenon versus Slovak practice

Researching new political parties is a well established area in political science. Such studies gradually appeared in the second half of the 20th century, especially the 1970s-80s. The following century saw the first systematic attempts at analysis – as part of large-scale comparative studies or theoretical and methodologically oriented contributions (see, e.g., Deegan-Krause, 2012; Bardovič, 2016; Havlík & Voda, 2016; Šárovec, 2016; Bakke, 2020).

The dynamics of the development of party systems in democratic countries make this a permanently relevant topic. In the countries of Central Europe, it is understandably relevant only after 1989 in the context of the establishment of democracy and the further development of political parties and party systems. All of this is evidenced by recent literature reporting individual case studies and by papers on comparative research on new parties and electoral volatility in post-communist Europe, including Slovakia (see, for example, Gyárfášová & Mesežnikov, 2004; Leška, 2013; Marušiak, 2017; Gyárfášová, 2018; Hynčica, 2019; Kerekeš, Pink, & Šedo, 2019; Linek & Gyárfášová, 2020; Linek et al., 2023).

Founding a new party is primarily a political project, but there are also legal barriers that must be overcome. Slovak Act No. 85/2005 Coll. on political parties and political movements sets the condition of a minimum of 10,000 petition signatures from citizens over 15 years of age. The preparatory committee of the new party must notify the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic that it has started collecting signatures of citizens who agree with the creation of a particular political party. The notification must be in writing and signed by each member of the preparatory committee (Slov-lex.sk, 2024; Minv.sk, 2024).

**Table 1:**  
**Extract from the Register of Political Parties and Political Movements**

<b>Name</b>	HLAS-sociálna demokracia
<b>Type</b>	Party
<b>Address</b>	Lazaretská 2400/15, 811 08 Bratislava-Staré Mesto, Slovak Republic
<b>Registration date</b>	11 September 2020
<b>Members of the preparatory committee</b>	Peter Kmec, Matúš Šutaj Eštok, Peter Pellegrini

Source: lves.minv.sk, 2024.

As Table 1 shows, HLAS-SD was registered on 11 September 2020. The total number of collected signatures was 94,414, as reported by the politician Peter Žiga on the social network Facebook on 14 August 2020 (Žiga, 2020). Peter Pellegrini was appointed the representative of the preparatory committee. The party uses

red and blue as its colours; the logo consists of a stylised speech bubble representing the voice, or the vote, of each voter/citizen (see Strana-hlas.sk, 2024).

### **3. The trajectory of the emergence: development in the SMER-SD party in 2018-2020 and the founding of HLAS-SD**

The seeds of the formation of HLAS-SD can already be seen in events at the beginning of 2018. In March of that year, there was a change of government after Robert Fico's cabinet, which emerged from the parliamentary elections in 2016, resigned as a result of a political crisis that arose after the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak and his partner Martina Kušnírová. Fico's colleague in the SMER-SD party, Peter Pellegrini, who in the Fico government of 2016-2018 held the position of deputy prime minister for investments and informatisation, became the new prime minister in place of Robert Fico. Pellegrini was already an influential and established politician and, as the dominant figure of his party, held numerous important positions during the rise of his political career. In 2006, he became a member of the NR SR; in the second Fico government (term of office 2012-2016), he held the position of minister of education for a while and also served as chairman of the NR SR (2014-2016). At the SMER-SD party congress in June 2014, he was elected vice-chairman, and since then, has been among his party's most important representatives (see Sekerák & Němec, 2023).

The period 2018-2020 was characterised by a *de facto* dual government in the SMER-SD party. Peter Pellegrini was prime minister, while former prime minister Robert Fico remained SMER-SD chairman. A certain level of disharmony in relations between Peter Pellegrini as prime minister and Robert Fico as SMER-SD chairman was already visible shortly after the change of government in 2018 and became ever more evident over time as the parliamentary elections approached in 2020. A crucial milestone in this deteriorating relationship was the decision that the electoral leader of SMER-SD would not be the party's chairman, Robert Fico, but Peter Pellegrini (for the broader context see Marušiak, 2021; Smolecová & Šárovec, 2022; Sekerák & Němec, 2023).

The campaign before the elections in 2020 was marked by intense action and a strategic offensive by the political opposition at the time, represented mainly by the parties Freedom and Solidarity (Svoboda a Solidarita, SaS), Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti, OĽaNO), the coalition of Progressive Slovakia (Progresívne Slovensko, PS), and the Together (Spolu) and the For the People (Za ľudí) parties, the last of which was founded by former president Andrej Kiska shortly before the elections. This opposition

primarily exploited the affair of the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée, and the connection between this crime, either directly or indirectly, and the SMER-SD government; this became one of the cornerstones of the opposition's election campaign. In a broader context, this controversial matter is related to the deepening dissatisfaction of a large part of Slovak society with the long-term operation of governments in which SMER-SD held a decisive position. The facts mentioned above are evidenced by the development of SMER-SD's voter support.

After the 2016 elections the party had voter support of 25-30% (Gyárfášová, Bahna, & Slosiarik, 2017; Charvát & Just, 2018; Filipec, 2019). The crucial turning point was the events following the murder of Ján Kuciak, after which support for SMER-SD fell below the 20% threshold, and the party did not break back above this level until the 2020 elections (for more see *Preferencie.teraz.sk*, 2020).<sup>3</sup>

In the 2020 elections, SMER-SD won 18.3% of the vote and was placed second after the winning formation OĽaNO (which received slightly over 25% of the vote) (Havlík et al., 2020; Lysek, Zvada, & Škop, 2020; Smolecová & Šárovec, 2022). Thus, for the first time since 2006, SMER-SD was not the electoral winner and, compared to the previous long-term position of this party<sup>4</sup> on the Slovak political scene, the election results achieved were generally assessed as a failure, a view supported by the fact that, after the 2020 elections, SMER-SD found itself, after a long time, in opposition (Just, 2018, 2020).

The not-very-convincing election results and the subsequent role of the opposition contributed fundamentally to worsening relations between the two critical representatives of SMER-SD, i.e., Robert Fico and Peter Pellegrini. In April 2020, i.e., less than two months after the elections, Pellegrini announced that he intended to run for the chairmanship of the party while the incumbent, Fico, declared his interest in continuing in that role. In June of the same year, at a press conference in Banská Bystrica, Pellegrini announced his resignation from the position of vice-chairman of SMER-SD and, for the first time, expressed his intention to leave the party in the foreseeable future, which he then did (*Domov.sme.sk*, 2020a). Subsequently, ten other deputies announced their departure from the party (among them SMER-SD leaders Richard Raši, Denisa Saková and Peter Žiga, as well as deputies Erik Tomáš, Matúš Šutaj Eštok, Ľubica Laššáková, Peter Kmec, Róbert Puci, Ján Ferenčák, and Ján Blcháč). This group became the basis of the newly founded HLAS-SD party (*Strana-hlas.sk*, 2020). As shown in Table 2, the whole process can be summarised with seven essential milestones connected with the beginnings of the existence of this new party.

3 Support for political parties is regularly examined by several pollsters and the data are available in the media and on websites.

4 Let us recall the most significant electoral success of SMER-SD in 2012, when the party won 44% of the vote and was subsequently able to form a single-party government with majority support in parliament, all under a proportional electoral system (Stískala, 2014).

Table 2:  
Seven crucial milestones in the foundation of HLAS-SD in 2020

Date	Milestone
10 June 2020	<b>Announcement of a new political party</b> At a press conference in Banská Bystrica, Peter Pellegrini announces his intention of founding a new political party.
17 June 2020	<b>'Pelle's Eleven'</b> Peter Pellegrini is joined by another ten members of the Slovak National Council. 'Pelle's Eleven' is born.
29 June 2020	<b>Party name and logo</b> Presentation of the name and logo of the party. At the press conference in Bratislava, the name of the party, HLAS-Social Democracy, and its visual identity is presented.
13 July 2020	<b>Start of 'Pelletón'</b> Pelletón – a series of events to collect signatures for the establishment of the party HLAS-Social Democracy – is started in Banská Bystrica.
14 August 2020	<b>94,414 signatures</b> 'Pelle's Eleven', together with volunteers, submit to the Ministry of the Interior 94,414 signatures, which were collected in one month.
11 September 2020	<b>The creation of the HLAS-SD party</b> At a press conference in Banská Bystrica, Peter Pellegrini announces the successful registration of the party HLAS-Social Democracy at the Ministry of the Interior.
28 November 2020	<b>Constituent Congress of the HLAS-SD party</b> At the congress, Peter Pellegrini becomes the chairman of the party HLAS-Social Democracy.

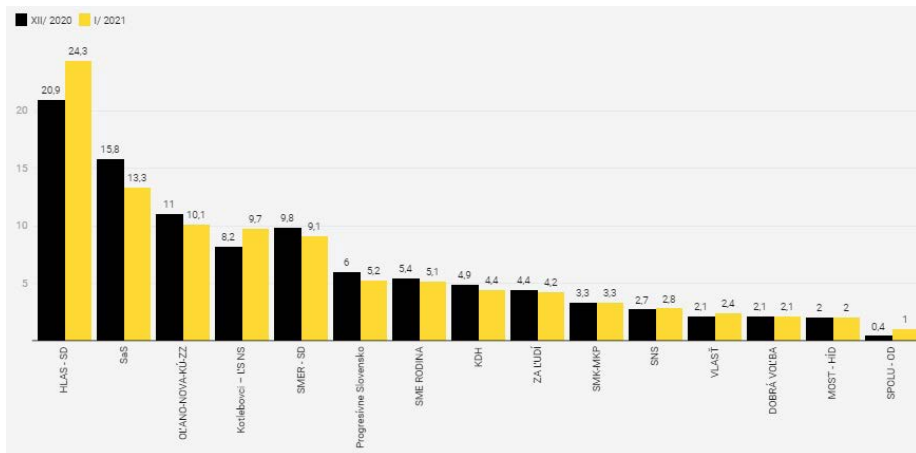
Source: Strana-hlas.sk, 2020.

HLAS-SD thus emerged as an independent political entity from the differentiation process in SMER-SD, which had been visible for a long time, as is evident from the previous discussion. The development of this new party contributed in many ways to a fundamental reformatting of the Slovak political scene and a shift in the positions and roles of individual party-political actors.

#### 4. Successful development of HLAS-SD in Slovak politics: 2020-2023

Shortly after the establishment of HLAS-SD, the party achieved significant political success through strong polling performance. It garnered the support of a considerable number of voters, around 20%, while the original party SMER-SD fell below 10% after Pellegrini's group seceded (for more see Preferencie.teraz.sk, 2020). These changes are shown by the results of public opinion surveys by the Focus agency from 2020 and 2021 (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1:**  
**Support for political parties December 2020 and January 2021 (%)**



Source: Focus-research.sk, 2021.

Peter Pellegrini's personality was a crucial factor in the high level of support and successful establishment of HLAS-SD. He became highly visible, especially in the role of prime minister. At the end of his tenure in this role, he was briefly caught up in the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, and thus there was a need to solve all the associated problems. Pellegrini was perceived as a breath of fresh air (especially in comparison to Robert Fico). His moderate and non-confrontational manner and willingness to solve issues in a practical way were repeatedly highlighted as his strengths. Pellegrini's popularity is shown in the results of the 2020 election, in which he received 413,555 preferential votes, almost double the number received by Robert Fico in this election (243,463) (Statistics.sk, 2020). And much of this support for Pellegrini from a significant part of the electorate persisted after the elections.

Although HLAS-SD was formed, essentially, by secession from a long-established political entity (SMER-SD), its strong voter support was primarily because it presented itself as a new political party, and in this respect it is similar to other successful new political parties in recent years and reflects the increasing importance of novelty in party politics (for more, see, e.g., Hynčica & Šárovec, 2018). Let us recall that the Slovak party system has long been considered relatively unstable, highly variable, and fragmented; that the increased rate of change of party-political actors is a long-term characteristic; and that there has been a constant stream of new political entities emerging (see Krno, 1999; Henderson, 2001; Hloušek & Kopeček, 2004; Kopeček, 2006, 2007). In almost every parliamentary election to date, a new political party has gained ground, and this is

especially characteristic in recent electoral terms (for more, see, e.g., Charvát & Just, 2018; Hynčica & Šárovec, 2018).

From its beginning, the position of the HLAS-SD party was evident – as a specific political alternative both to the government coalition comprising OĽaNO, SaS, We Are Family (Sme Rodina), and For the People, formed after the 2020 elections, and to the SMER-SD party consisting after the departure of Pellegrini's group of those who remained loyal to the chairman Robert Fico. Further political development in Slovakia since the 2020 elections was primarily determined by the advancing governance crisis of Igor Matovič's cabinet that emerged from the 2020 elections (Smolecová & Šárovec, 2022). Corresponding to this is the clear and continuous drop in support for OĽaNO after the 2020 elections (from the 25% obtained in those elections support fell to approx. 8-10%) (see *Preferencie. teraz.sk*, 2020).

The government was repeatedly criticised for its lack of ideas, for its chaos, and for its improvisation in solving severe social problems. OĽaNO leader Igor Matovič fundamentally contributed to this. Matovič is generally a very singular politician characterised by an unusual political style (radical anti-establishment rhetoric, non-standard forms of communication with excessive confrontation, etc.). This is how he presented himself, significantly as an opposition politician; but even after entering government, he did not change his unique political style substantially. Matovič was the main personal symbol of unsuccessful governance in Slovakia in the period after the 2020 elections. In line with this, he gradually became the least popular politician in the long term. A key milestone in the long-term governance crisis of Matovič's cabinet was the change in the head of government at the turn of March and April 2021, when Matovič was replaced as prime minister by Eduard Heger (Sekerák & Němec, 2023).

In this situation, HLAS-SD took advantage of the long-term problematic governance and associated low popularity of Matovič's government as one of the opposition parties, further consolidating its position as its support stabilised at around the 20% mark as mentioned above. For a certain period, the party became the strongest political entity in terms of voters' preferences. It was easier for HLAS-SD to win over disillusioned voters of the government parties than it was for SMER-SD, mainly because of the long-standing opposition to Robert Fico (Domov.sme.sk, 2020b). This contrasted with the continuing high popularity of Peter Pellegrini, who led the popularity ranking of politicians.

After the secession of Pellegrini's group and the formation of HLAS-SD, SMER-SD found itself in an even more pronounced political defensive position and, in a certain sense, the crisis of the party that had been germinating since 2018 came to a head (Rossi, 2020). The party suddenly had to cope with new competition from HLAS-SD, with whom it vied for similarly focused voters. Statistical data confirm the movement of some former SMER-SD voters to HLAS-SD (for more, see, e.g., *Preferencie.teraz.sk*, 2020). Thus, in the 2020-2023 electoral



term, the dimension of competition between the old and new political parties was manifested in the opposition camp (cf. Linek & Gyárfášová, 2020). Among other reasons, HLAS-SD stated that it wanted to distance itself from the past of SMER-SD and focus its politics more on the future (Strana-hlas.sk, 2020).

## 5. HLAS-SD and the re-establishment of SMER-SD

Slovak politics in the 2020-2023 electoral term was characterised by the parallel operation of two very similar political entities with subtly different ideological programmes, positions in the political scene and electorate characteristics. Both SMER-SD and HLAS-SD had a social democratic orientation, but they perceived aspects of this orientation a little differently. HLAS-SD emphasised universal values, the importance of European integration and the European dimensions of politics in general (Strana-hlas.sk, 2020), thereby identifying itself more with the social democratic politics of such parties in (especially Western) Europe.<sup>5</sup> With this emphasis on universal and European values, HLAS-SD was also close to liberal parties, particularly regarding values (for more on this, see below). In contrast, SMER-SD moved ideologically in a nationally conservative direction after the separation of Pellegrini's group. Fico increased emphasis on the national pillar in the politics of social democracy. SMER-SD presented itself as a specifically Slovak variant of social democracy, which held conservative and rustic values (Marušiak, 2021; Strana-smer.sk, 2023). Accordingly, he rejected more progressive topics (the LGBTQ+ and environmental agendas etc.) and placed more emphasis on traditionally left-wing issues (see, e.g., Blaha, 2018; Marušiak, 2021).

In terms of their positions in the political scene, the parties were characterised alike by their oppositional role. They were political allies, cooperating and coordinating their activities, especially when expressing no confidence in the government of Igor Matovič and Eduard Heger or its individual ministers (Hnonline.sk, 2022).<sup>6</sup> At the same time, however, SMER-SD and HLAS-SD were political competitors within the opposition to the government coalition, especially to some of its constituent parties (for more see below). SMER-SD presented itself as a fundamental and uncompromising opposition to the government coalition and, for a long time, declared this in relation to all its political components. There

5 In this context, let us recall the current official name of the social democratic group in the European Parliament: the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats.

6 The opposition parties SMER-SD and HLAS-SD tried to express no confidence in the government quite often in the 2020-2023 electoral term, targeting certain ministers, especially the minister of the interior, Roman Mikulec.

were mutual antagonisms between government and opposition (Hnonline.sk, 2020; Ta3.com, 2022).

The deepening crisis of governance in the coalition formed after the 2020 elections was a fundamental factor in the significant political rise of the opposition and, within it, the part that was more radical and uncompromising towards the Matovič and Heger governments. It became increasingly clear that, unlike HLAS-SD, SMER-SD could take full advantage of the real or imagined transgressions of the governing coalition, especially the significant decline in its popularity among voters. In 2022-2034, SMER-SD was known as the party that could take the strategic initiative and actively bring topics and agendas to the public debate. Mainly, these have been economic and social issues fitting the basic profile of the party, which promotes a form of social democracy based on solving people's (primarily social) problems (with an emphasis on traditionally left-wing topics; see above). Such problems have been exacerbated by a number of serious crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and its consequences (see Ta3.com, 2022). Beyond that, SMER-SD placed the rule of law on the public agenda in connection with problems such as the control of part of the judiciary, the prosecutor's office and the police by people politically close to the government coalition and the subsequent abuse of these bodies against the opposition, and the so-called war in the police. The significantly offensive political strategy of SMER-SD manifested itself in particular through the party's frequent and repeated press conferences, which received significant attention in the media (see Hnonline.sk, 2023). SMER-SD effectively consolidated itself after the internal party crisis, culminating in the secession of Pellegrini's group, and this consolidation contributed to SMER-SD's subsequent political rise. The more active SMER-SD became in opposition, the more HLAS-SD found itself on the political defensive. Pellegrini's public profile became less and less prominent, and over time, HLAS-SD was less able to compete with SMER-SD, especially in showing it had the ability to take the strategic initiative and raise issues, for example, at press conferences (Marcišiak & Kiššová, 2023; Schuster, 2023).

Due to the historic strong personification of Slovak politics, comparison of the party leaders, Robert Fico and Peter Pellegrini, and their roles in the activities of their parties became clearer. A unique phenomenon of the development of Slovak politics in 2021-2023 was the dramatic political comeback of Robert Fico, who, above all, personified the political rise of SMER-SD. As he became more politically active, his popularity rose to the top of the rankings. Peter Pellegrini maintained a relatively high popularity among Slovak voters, but compared to Robert Fico, he symbolised indecisiveness.

The different degrees of intensity of the political activities of Fico and Pellegrini were limiting factors in their mutual relations, which had been complicated for a long time, stemming from the party split in 2020. It became more and more evident that this complicated relationship was a crucial factor

in preventing SMER-SD and HLAS-SD from being considered political allies until the 2023 elections (whether such an alliance would be ideological, programmatic, or interest-based). At the same time, Fico exploited the growing popularity of Pellegrini, both for himself and the SMER-SD party, and also for a vigorous opposition strategy, while support for the government coalition declined continuously.

An example of this strategy was Fico's repeated calls to Pellegrini to state clearly whether HLAS-SD was counting on a coalition with parties such as PS or SaS after the elections. In this way, Fico pushed Pellegrini further into a defensive, centrist (and thus, in a certain sense vacillating) position. In a political scene sharply divided into the two blocs mentioned above, this was the only option left for HLAS-SD somehow to defend the meaning of their existence (Biró, 2023). A clear tilt by HLAS-SD, either towards SMER-SD or to the progressive liberals (PS, SaS), would only contribute to the outflow of voters from the party. Even the continuing relatively autonomous position of HLAS-SD vis-à-vis SMER-SD did not prevent the growth in support for SMER-SD continuing, while support for HLAS-SD stagnated at best, or declined (for more, see, e.g., *Preferencie.teraz.sk*, 2020). Here we are dealing with distinct trends, which were fully confirmed by the results of early parliamentary elections at the end of September 2023.

## **6. HLAS-SD and early elections to NR SR 2023**

The long-term deepening crisis of the government coalition formed after the 2020 elections ultimately led to early parliamentary elections on 30 September 2023, which confirmed the distinct trends we have analysed above. SMER-SD won with over 22% of the vote (see Table 3). The factors involved in this success, such as strong leadership, explicit opposition to the government coalition, an emphasis on a nationally conservative form of social democratic politics and on topics with a strong mobilisation potential (criticism of migration, etc.) were more and more evident in the politics of this party as election day approached. On the other hand, HLAS-SD's (above-mentioned) defensive position became more evident during the election campaign (Strana-hlas.sk, 2023a). Not very favourable forecasts of HLAS-SD's election result were made by its representatives during the election campaign.

Table 3:  
The 2023 Slovak parliamentary election results

Party	Votes	Vote (%)	Seats
SMER-SD	681,017	22.94	42
PS	533,136	17.96	32
<b>HLAS-SD</b>	<b>436,415</b>	<b>14.70</b>	<b>27</b>
OĽaNO, KÚ*, and Za ľudí	264,137	8.89	16
KDH	202,515	6.82	12
SaS	187,645	6.32	11
SNS	166,995	5.62	10

Source: Statistics.sk, 2023. Only parties winning more than 5% of the vote are listed.  
\* Christian Union (*Kresťanská únia*)

A geographical breakdown of HLAS-SD support shows that the ‘Pellegrini factor’ led to the greatest support for the party in Pellegrini’s home district of Banská Bystrica, where it received 22.09% of the vote, the most of all the candidate lists. There was a relatively strong position in central Slovakia and HLAS-SD pushed SMER-SD into second place in four districts of eastern Slovakia – Svidník, Medzilaborce, Snina, and Sobrance (Mikušovič & Kerekeš, 2023a; Tomečková, 2023).<sup>7</sup>

Compared with the 2020 election, there was a swing of more than 150,000 votes from SMER-SD to HLAS-SD. It won support from tens of thousands of voters who previously preferred Sme Rodina, OĽaNO, or SaS. The party also attracted new voters who, for various reasons, did not come to the polling stations in the NR SR 2020 elections (Mikušovič & Kerekeš, 2023b).

While during the campaigning SMER-SD only confirmed its profile based on traditionally left-wing and national-conservative attitudes, HLAS-SD and the statements of some of its representatives showed a partial reassessment of the orientation of the party to embrace a European and more liberally oriented form of social democratic politics, making the party appear more progressive than SMER-SD. HLAS-SD entered the elections with messaging that supported the idea of a strong state, which was one of the basic building blocks of the party’s entire campaign. The key election slogan that appeared on the party’s billboards was ‘Only a strong state helps the people’ (Silnystat.sk, 2023). Chairman Peter Pellegrini dominated the visuals (see Picture 1).<sup>8</sup>

7 Despite this, SMER-SD won in most of Slovakia’s districts (Tomečková, 2023).  
8 The message *Your VOICE for a strong state* is powerfully present in the visual as depicted in Picture 1.

Picture 1:

An outdoor poster for HLAS-SD in Bratislava in September 2023



Source: Author's archive, 2023.

The party created a new website, *silnystat.sk*, meaning ‘strong state’, to present its manifesto (*Silnystat.sk*, 2023) to distinguish itself clearly from liberal-oriented entities that promoted a more limited role of the state, especially SaS. At specific points, it indicated its conditions for post-election cooperation with other parties. Before the elections, HLAS-SD declared it would prefer to cooperate with parties that would support social policies aimed at helping older people, families, and working people. It stated that it would not cooperate with parties that rejected ‘13th month’ pension payments, the state’s decisive role in food, energy, and banking policy, and those that would abandon plans to equalise regional differences (*Silnystat.sk*, 2023; *Strana-hlas.sk*, 2023). This shows a clear shift towards traditional left-wing themes on the part of HLAS-SD.

Another indication of a shift in the politics of HLAS-SD was in the statements of numerous HLAS-SD representatives, which said the party was abandoning its central position between two distinct party-power blocs, one around SMER-SD and the other around Progressive Slovakia, and preferred cooperation with SMER-SD as a programmatically close party. This was the initiative not so much of HLAS-SD chairman Peter Pellegrini himself, who had a complicated relationship with SMER-SD leader Robert Fico, but rather of other senior party figures Matúš Šutaj Eštok and Erik Tomáš. On the one hand, they openly admitted the possibility of post-election cooperation with SMER-SD while, on the other, they explained why HLAS-SD should not enter into coalition with Progressive Slovakia

(Spravy.pravda.sk, 2024). Ultimately, the party joined a government coalition with SMER-SD and SNS.

7. HLAS-SD after the 2023 elections

After the announcement of the election results, it was not clear which direction HLAS-SD would take in the post-election negotiations between the political parties that had been elected (Strana-hlas.sk, 2023b). The distribution of forces confirmed the existence of two power blocs on the Slovak political scene, and accordingly two possible variants of government coalition with majority support in the parliament – SMER-SD, HLAS-SD, and SNS (with a majority of 79 seats) and PS, HLAS-SD, KDH, and SaS (with a majority of 82 seats). Such a possible distribution of forces, including the electoral leaders of individual parties, is shown in Table 4; in both variants HLAS-SD would play a significant role.

Table 4: Two possible government coalitions including HLAS-SD

National Council of the Slovak Republic (total 150 seats)						
SMER-SD (42 seats)	HLAS-SD (27 seats)	SNS (10 seats)	PS (32 seats)	HLAS-SD (27 seats)	KDH (12 seats)	SaS (11 seats)
R. Fico	P. Pellegrini	A. Danko	M. Šimečka	P. Pellegrini	M. Majerský	R. Sulík
Total 79 seats			Total 82 seats			

Source: Statistics.sk, 2023.

Within the political constellation emerging, a visible ‘centre’ position for HLAS-SD was becoming clear. However, more important than the position of HLAS-SD itself, the statements of other political parties, especially the progressive liberal ones, became a more decisive factor. The primary intention of Progressive Slovakia and SaS was to create a government without SMER-SD. To this end, both parties wanted to negotiate a coalition with HLAS-SD, with representatives of PS and SaS offering significant concessions to achieve this. These parties proposed that the prime minister of a potential coalition of HLAS-SD, PS, KDH and SaS would be the leader of HLAS-SD Peter Pellegrini, even though HLAS-SD only came third in the elections (with 14.7% of the vote) after PS (which was placed second with 18% of the vote) (Statistics.sk, 2023).

HLAS-SD held parallel negotiations with both major power blocs (i.e., SMER-SD and SNS on the one hand and PS, KDH, and SaS on the other). At the same time, news of internal conditions in HLAS-SD and the opinions of its leadership in the party’s presidium indicated which of the two potential coalitions had greater

support in the party. The post-election negotiations resulted in a memorandum of understanding to form a coalition between SMER-SD, HLAS-SD, and SNS, confirming the hints by HLAS-SD in the run-up to the election that they favoured a coalition with SMER-SD. What was crucial, as reported by the media at the time, was that HLAS-SD had played a significant role in the formation of a new Slovak government (Chovanec & Luppová, 2023).

The relatively smooth course of the post-election coalition negotiations among the parties only further confirmed the gradual convergence of ideas, programmes, and interests of SMER-SD and HLAS-SD. Just a few days after the signing of the memorandum, as mentioned earlier, a coalition agreement was signed between SMER-SD, HLAS-SD and SNS, based on which a new government was formed, with the leader of the winning SMER-SD party, Robert Fico, as prime minister. It was agreed that HLAS-SD would appoint seven ministers in the government: Denisa Saková (deputy prime minister and minister of the economy), Peter Kmec (deputy prime minister for the recovery and resilience plan and the use of European funds), Richard Raši (minister of investments, regional development, and informatisation), Matúš Šutaj Eštok (minister of the interior), Erik Tomáš (minister of labour, social affairs, and family), Tomáš Drucker (minister of education, science, research, and sport) and Zuzana Dolinková (minister of health). As part of the agreement between the three coalition parties, Peter Pellegrini became the speaker and Peter Žiga one of the deputy speakers of the National Council of the Slovak Republic, while important government and parliamentary positions were taken by key representatives and founders of HLAS-SD, Pellegrini, Saková, and Žiga (Vlada.gov.sk, 2024).

This staffing of the highest constitutional institutions indicates the possible later direction of HLAS-SD within the government coalition. In the case of ministers M. Š. Eštok and E. Tomáš, the issues mentioned above concerning the development of the HLAS-SD profile in social and security policy were confirmed in a form that is very close to the SMER-SD policy in terms of programme and interests. On the other hand, the fact that HLAS-SD members who had been somewhat critical of SMER-SD (T. Drucker, Z. Dolinková, and P. Kmec) also became members of the government indicated efforts to satisfy and balance the not always compatible interests and attitudes within the party (Vlada.gov.sk, 2024). For the government term 2023-2027, the prerequisites for the stable functioning of HLAS-SD within the newly formed government coalition had thus been created.

## 8. Conclusions and further challenges

As a newcomer to the party system, Peter Pellegrini's HLAS-SD party received *de facto* immediate support from Slovak voters shortly after its establishment, when it led the polls for a significant time. It was primarily the personality of the founder and leader of the party that attracted massive crowds of supporters. But how to identify a party as such in the context of its newness?

In response to RQ1 we note that even though HLAS-SD collected an impressive number of signatures on the petition sheets necessary for establishing a new party, it was definitely not a genuinely new political party built from scratch. Although HLAS-SD fulfilled all the necessary formal requirements determined by law for a new party, crucial for its success were factors directly linked with SMER-SD. It was to Peter Pellegrini that a part of the SMER-SD electorate, as well as some former politicians of the party, switched. Pellegrini and his fellow party members also had particular political and organisational experience and a suitable and clearly set out centre-left programme.

In response to RQ2, we have showed that the party was strengthened by its criticism of the government, the figure of its leader, and by its liberal style of social democratic politics. The slogans promoting a strong state, generous social policy, help to the needy, and the intention of balancing regional differences were repeatedly emphasised. Compared to SMER-SD, it was, on the one hand, a competitor, and, on the other, a new entity (with familiar faces), which profiled itself as a left-wing alternative for Slovak voters.

In response to RQ3, it can be said that although HLAS-SD gradually dropped from first to third place in opinion polls taken as the 2023 elections to the NR SR approached, it became a real game changer, on which the further post-election development in Slovakia in large part depended. From the range of options, the two most plausible remained on the table, and HLAS-SD thus had to decide whether to form a coalition government with Fico's SMER-SD or with Šimečka's PS. The first option won for several reasons described above.

The importance of the role of the HLAS-SD party and its chairman, Peter Pellegrini, was no less crucial after the 2023 NR SR elections, with two more contests, the 2024 presidential election and the 2024 European Parliament elections. The presidential election was a major turning point as Pellegrini became the new Slovak president when he defeated Ivan Korčok in the second round in April 2024 (Statistics.sk, 2024a). Just before the elections to the European Parliament in June 2024, Pellegrini was replaced as the head of the party by Minister of the Interior Matúš Šutaj Eštok (Spravy.pravda.sk, 2024). In the EP election, HLAS-SD won one seat with 106,076 votes, which represented 7.18% of the total (Statistics.sk, 2024b).

These election results confirmed that the Peter Pellegrini 'brand' scored in the presidential elections. However, as Slovak president, he is expected to adopt a certain degree of non-partisan approach, and this may affect not only the



position of HLAS-SD in the government coalition but also the party's performance in the next elections. It is, therefore, a challenge for further research to analyse whether HLAS-SD, even if Pellegrini becomes substantially non-partisan as president of the country, will continue to be able to anchor itself as a stable element in the Slovak party system, which is characterised by the frequent formation of new parties that are short-lived.

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