

# [***Slovakia's populist prime minister shot in assassination attempt, shocking Europe before elections***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6C1M-R461-JC5B-G14C-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

BANSKA BYSTRICA, Slovakia — Slovakia’s populist prime minister, [*Robert Fico*](https://apnews.com/article/robert-fico-slovakia-shot-prime-minister-751051f2a36391919790c62d664a5e6d), was shot multiple times and gravely wounded Wednesday while greeting supporters at an event in an attempted assassination that shocked the small country and reverberated across Europe weeks before an election.

Doctors were still fighting for his life several hours after the pro-Russian leader, 59, was hit in the abdomen, Defense Minister Robert Kalina told reporters at the hospital where Fico was being treated.

An operation on Fico was not yet complete, said Kalina, who described his condition as “extraordinarily serious.”

Five shots were fired outside a cultural center in the town of Handlova, nearly 140 kilometers (85 miles) northeast of the capital, government officials said. Fico was shot while attending a meeting of his government in the town of 16,000 that was once a center of coal mining.

A suspect was in custody, and an initial investigation found “a clear political motivation” behind the assassination attempt, Interior Minister Matus Sutaj Estok said as he briefed reporters alongside the defense minister.

Fico has long been a divisive figure in Slovakia and beyond, but his [*return to power last year*](https://apnews.com/article/slovakia-parliamentary-election-c417efef2f33d38086d7229ddc3e24c0) on a pro-Russian, anti-American message led to even greater worries among fellow European Union members that he would lead his country further from the Western mainstream.

Kicking off his fourth term as prime minister, his government halted arms deliveries to Ukraine, and critics worry that he will lead Slovakia — a nation of 5.4 million that belongs to NATO — to abandon its pro-Western course and follow in the footsteps of Hungary under populist Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

Thousands have repeatedly rallied in the capital and across Slovakia to protest Fico’s policies.

A message posted to Fico’s Facebook account said he was taken to a hospital in Banská Bystrica, 29 kilometers (17 miles) from Handlova, because it would take too long to get to the capital, Bratislava.

The attack comes as political campaigning heats up three weeks ahead of Europe-wide elections to choose lawmakers for the European Parliament. Concern is mounting that populist and nationalists similar to Fico could make gains in the 27-member bloc.

But ***politics*** as usual were put aside as the nation faced the shock of the attempt on Fico’s life.

“A physical attack on the prime minister is, first of all, an attack on a person, but it is also an attack on democracy,” outgoing President Zuzana Caputova, a political rival of Fico, said in a televised statement. “Any violence is unacceptable. The hateful rhetoric we’ve been witnessing in society leads to hateful actions. Please, let’s stop it.”

President-elect Peter Pellegrini, an ally of Fico, called the shooting “an unprecedented threat to Slovak democracy. If we express other political opinions with pistols in squares, and not in polling stations, we are jeopardizing everything that we have built together over 31 years of Slovak sovereignty.”

The recent elections that brought Fico and his allies to power have underlined deep social divisions, exacerbated by the war in Ukraine, Slovakia’s neighbor to the east.

Gábor Czímer, a political journalist at Slovakian news outlet Ujszo.com, said Fico’s return to power had uncovered signs that “Slovak society is strongly split into two camps” — one that is friendly toward Russia and another that pushes for stronger connections with the EU and the West.

“At the same time, I couldn’t imagine that it would lead to physical violence,” Czímer said.

Estok, the Slovak interior minister, told reporters outside the hospital that the country was “on the edge of a civil war” from the political tension.

“Such hateful comments are being made on social networks today, so please, let’s stop this immediately,” he said.

U.S. President Joe Biden said he was alarmed by the assassination attempt. “We condemn this horrific act of violence,” he said in a statement.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg posted on the social media platform X that he was “shocked and appalled” by the attempt on Fico’s life. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen called it a “vile attack.”

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy denounced the violence against a neighboring country’s head of government.

“Every effort should be made to ensure that violence does not become the norm in any country, form or sphere,” he said.

Slovakia’s Parliament was adjourned until further notice. The major opposition parties, Progressive Slovakia and Freedom and Solidarity, canceled a planned protest against a [*controversial government plan to overhaul public broadcasting*](https://apnews.com/article/slovakia-public-broadcaster-fico-87c067ca93437f4cfb4ebf30fa9fe10b) that they say would give the government full control of public radio and television.

Progressive Slovakia leader Michal Simecka called on all politicians “to refrain from any expressions and steps which could contribute to further increasing the tension.”

Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala wished the premier a swift recovery. “We cannot tolerate violence, there’s no place for it in society.”

The Czech Republic and Slovakia formed Czechoslovakia until 1992.

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Janicek reported from Prague. Associated Press Writer Justin Spike contributed from Budapest, Hungary.

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