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A symbolic figure with limited powers

Claudia Ehing on the first woman to be elected head of state in Slovakia: Zuzana Čaputová

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Zuzana Čaputová, a young, progressive candidate, won the presidential election in Slovakia with 58 per cent of the votes. What does she stand for?

In her campaign, Zuzana Čaputová stood for an end to corruption and an independent and functioning justice system. This meant that she carried the hopes of all those who had taken to the streets to demand political change following the murder of the journalist Ján Kuciak in February 2018. She takes a clear stand in support of protecting the environment, and she supports abortion and the rights of homosexual couples.

Her rival, the EU Commissioner Maroš Šefčovič, consequently sought to present himself as a Christian politician representing conservative values in order to secure the support of the Catholic rural regions of Slovakia. Although he won more votes than in the first round, in the end it was not enough. He remained too closely associated with the ruling social democratic party Smer-SD, which had been the target of massive demonstrations the previous year. In the end, the desire for change prevailed.

In the first round of voting, a right-wing populist and a candidate from the extreme right won 25 per cent of the votes together. Slovakian society is deeply divided. What can Čaputová do to overcome the polarisation?

It will certainly be difficult for Čaputová to reach those Eurosceptic parts of society which are susceptible to right-wing populism. In fact, her outspoken commitment to the EU, to NATO and to liberal values offer right-wing groups a broad front on which she can be attacked. Many of those who voted in the first round for the two right-wing candidates did not vote in the run-off. The fact that the

parties on the right-wing spectrum are so much at odds with each other has prevented them from forming a stronger, more united front.

Čaputová will try to use her less confrontational and more empathic communications style to reach out to people. We can however doubt whether this will be enough to put a halt to the rise of the forces ranging from right-wing populism to the extreme right, since the office of the President in Slovakia is mainly representative, and has only limited power or influence over day-to-day politics.

The current ruling coalition is divided and facing sharp criticism. To what extent can Čaputová and her party be seen as heralding a political change in Slovakia?

We can observe that, at the moment, there's an increasing polarisation and fragmentation of the Slovakian party system. Čaputová's party, "Progressive Slovakia", doesn't yet have any representation in parliament, but her election has given it greater visibility and a clearer public profile with which to represent the liberal, pro-European forces in the country. At the same time, the extreme right-wing party L'SNS is currently second in the polls behind the governing party Smer, followed by the SaS, a nationalist, anti-European party. Before the last parliamentary elections, Smer was still rejecting the idea of cooperating with the L'SNS, but now it relies on their votes when it needs to get its own political projects through parliament. Čaputová's election is a clear expression of dissatisfaction with the prevailing style of politics and the established parties – but only the European elections and the parliamentary elections in 2020 will show whether it actually heralds bigger political changes.

This interview was conducted by Joanna Itzek.



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