EUROPE 03.03.2020 | Anne Seyfferth

Slovakia's politics turned upside down

Slovaks are fed up with the criminal nexus between politics, judiciary and unscrupulous businessmen. That's why a protest party won the elections

Read this article in German.

'The reign of evil has ended.' That is how Slovakian ex-president Andrej Kiska succinctly summarised the outcome of the National Council elections. Kiska ran with his newly founded conservative-liberal party Za ľudí (For the People). With almost 6 per cent, it will take a few seats in parliament. With the 'reign of evil', he was referring to the social democratic party Smer-SD in general, which has ruled since 2006 with only a brief interruption, and in particular to its party founder, chairman and longtime prime minister Robert Fico.

With a loss of ten percentage points, the social-populist Smer-SD was able to attract just 18 perc ent of the vote, thus suffering a significant defeat. It had already lost its absolute majority in the last parliamentary elections in 2016. At that time, in the midst of the debates on how to manage the large flow of refugees, Fico had tried to score points with massive anti-migration rhetoric. He successfully fuelled fears – and thus helped the right-wing extremist People's Party-Our Slovakia (ĽSNS) to enter the 150-member parliament for the first time.

This time, Fico appeared in only second position on his party's list. He had relinquished his position as prime minister almost two years ago. In particular, Fico was pressured to resign by the weeks of mass demonstrations that took place after the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée. In view of the Mafia methods exposed by Kuciak, the demonstrators called for 'a decent Slovakia'.

Anti-corruption wins the day

The massive extent of the criminal links between politics, the judiciary and unscrupulous businesspeople in Slovakia was highlighted by the investigations surrounding the murder trial, which were conducted in

recent weeks in parallel to the election campaign. Things are looking bad for Fico in particular. The fact that he didn't bear the consequences, but instead managed to hold onto his post as party chairman – and was even elected parliamentary group leader – made things all the more tough for his party's top candidate, Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini.

Matovič focused his electoral effort on an anti-Fico and anti-corruption campaign, established a strong presence for himself and undertook media-effective initiatives.

Therefore, it's now difficult to vote for this social-democratic party even for many progressive forces. Consequently, its defeat brought with it two surprising results. First, the winner of the elections was the conservative protest party, Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OĽaNO) – and by an unexpectedly large margin. Its chairman, Igor Matovič, a media entrepreneur, founded the party in 2011 and continues to run it as a one-man show.

Matovič focused his electoral effort on an anti-Fico and anti-corruption campaign, established a strong presence for himself and undertook media-effective initiatives. For example, he drove personally to Cannes to put a sign reading 'Property of the Slovak Republic' on the house of the former socialist finance minister. Matovič managed to collect votes from all camps and double his result, reaching 25 per cent. All previous forecasts had seen him in second place at best, behind the Social Democrats. The conservative Matovič succeeded in what the liberal forces failed to do: to take advantage of a mood for change on the part of the voters.

Čaputová's alliance lost

The second big surprise in the elections was the failure of the alliance of the two relatively new extra-parliamentary opposition parties to win any seats, namely Progressive Slovakia (left-liberal) and SPOLU (bourgeois-liberal). This alliance unexpectedly emerged from the 2019 European Parliament elections as the winner, with over 20 per cent. It therefore seemed certain that it would do well with a double-digit result, but things turned out differently. In the end, the alliance didn't make it into parliament, because a threshold clause of seven instead of the usual five per cent applies to alliances.

The alliance wasn't staffed well enought and had not campaigned on the anti-corruption issue as much as the other parties. At the same time, this shows that – despite all of the protest marches – the mainstream of Slovak civil society has remained conservative with little affinity for

liberal values. There's still great fear of admitting migrants and reservations regarding minorities, same-sex marriage, environmental and gender policies.

The electoral defeat of this alliance, which managed to get liberal president and former environmental activist Zuzana Čaputová elected last year, is not merely a bitter setback for all left-wing Slovaks. It's also a disappointment for the liberal forces in the other Visegrád countries – the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland.

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On the other hand, the election result of the extreme right People's Party-Our Slovakia ĽSNS offered some relief. The party's share of the vote remained at eight per cent. Since its entry into parliament four years ago, it had gradually gained approval as a protest party on the far right. In addition to OĽaNO, the right-wing nationalist voters obviously preferred to vote for the right-wing populist Sme Rodina (We Are Family) of the entrepreneur Boris Kollár, who surprisingly ended up in third place with a decent eight per cent. The party is openly xenophobic, while making big social spending promises in the electoral run-up. As a result, it went on to capture votes in the social-democratic camp.

What will the Social Democrats do?

And so the voters opted for change. The previous opposition will now constitute the government. Smer-SD has already announced that it will not seek participation in the government. Mathematically, for a comfortable majority, Matovič needs only two of the three opposition parties – Sme Rodina and the liberal economic party SaS, Freedom and Solidarity. Negotiations are also planned with former president Kiska. There's a need to quickly prove that such an alliance can go after the sleaze of corruption and dodgy dealings. These parties are also united by a conservative and pro-European worldview.

With his strong result, Matovič will lead the new centre-right coalition with little willingness to compromise. He is considered authoritarian and unpredictable, and ideologically not easy to put into a box. He has announced three main goals for his new government: zero tolerance for corruption; greater involvement of the people, for example through citizen surveys à la Viktor Orban; and doing politics for everyone and not

just the top ten thousand. It remains to be seen whether the new government will be able to regain Slovak citizens' trust in democracy.

Hopefully the Social Democrats will not only lick their wounds while in the opposition. It is only with changes at the personal level, and in particular the complete withdrawal of Robert Fico, that the party has a chance to fundamentally reform itself to earn the label 'social democratic' again.



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