



Weekly Briefing

Slovakia Political briefing:
Domestic Political Developments in 2017
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After the successful first ever presidency of the Slovak republic in the Council of the European Union, the start of the year was relatively slow, with all the state institutions evaluating the presidency and their performance.

After all, the year has brought several significant events that will be closely elaborated below. These selected events have been intensely discussed in the public, they have affected the current government and also signaled the feelings and perceptions of the society towards the development in the country.

From the most significant events we have selected those related to the stability of the coalition government that rules currently in Slovakia (SMER, SNS, MOST-HÍD) looking at the most crucial decision the government was facing. The second selected topic is connected to the ongoing discussion and cases of corruption in the country, this includes the anti-corruption protests organized by the young generation of students, to the sentence by a specialized court of two former ministers. The third topic is related to the discussed regional election of the heads of units of the higher regional administration that has brought a few surprises and blows to the coalition parties. This issue is related to the fourth, and that is the overall discussion of growing extremism of the country and rising popularity of nondemocratic regimes among the younger generation. The last issue is related to the coming to terms with the early years of the existence of Slovakia in the second half of the 1990s and scandals that have been related to the misuse of political power by that time political representatives of government.

Stability of the ruling coalition

The current coalition is created by three political parties – SMER (Direction) the strongest party led by the Prime Minister Robert Fico, SNS (Slovak National Party) led by Andrej Danko, who serves as the chairman (speaker) of the National Council and MOST-HÍD (Bridge), a Hungarian

minority party with several experienced (and of non-Hungarian nationality) politicians being members of it.

In general, the coalition governments in Slovakia are created based on negotiations among parties and creations of the so-called Coalition Agreement, where parties agree on the division of positions within the state, as well as on the program of the coalition for the four years' period. The decisions are adopted de-facto by a non-constitutional body, the Coalition Council that meets regularly to discuss positions of the coalition partners and the topic on the agenda of the National Council or particular ministerial proposals.

The current government seems to be rather fragile with ongoing differences between its members that are never openly discussed, but nevertheless influence the relations of the coalition. Some of these differences have lead in summer 2017 to a renunciation of the Coalition Agreement by the chairman of the Slovak National Party Andrej Danko, who did not agree with some of the practices of the government. The crisis was finished by the adoption of an amendment to the Coalition Agreement. The amendment focuses on the rules of communication among coalition members to avoid public disagreements, criticism and confrontations.

In addition, based on the strong demand by the Prime Minister, the Minister of Education, nominated by the Slovak National Party, stepped down in August. The main reason was the unclear and suspicious processes in the allocation of the Euro funding for science and research, as the funds of 300 million euros were assigned only to private companies and none of the universities or academies of social sciences have been among the awarded. Based on the allegation of misconduct, payments were postponed as the European Commission has raised its own suspicions and the possibility of stopping the funding for Slovakia was discussed in Brussels.

The new Minister of Education Martina Lubyová was later appointed; she comes from the Slovak Academy of Science.

Anti-corruption demonstrations

After a series of corruption scandals discussed in the media and by opposition politicians (several demonstrations organized by the opposition party Freedom and Solidarity-SAS throughout the summer 2016), the initiative was taken up by university students who organized the Great Anti-Corruption march in April, June and September in Bratislava and other Slovak cities.

The students have six requests towards the government: to abolish the so-called Meciar's amnesties, investigate two cases related to a high-level politicians' corruption – the Gorila case¹ and the Basternak case². In addition, the students demanded the removal of Minister Kalinak, President of the police corps Gaspar, as well as the Special Prosecutor Kovac.

The first of those marches was attended by approximately 7 000 people, the second, which took place in two cities, was based on estimates attended by 10 000 people in Bratislava and over 4 000 in Kosice. The third march was attended by thousands of people. Besides this public presentation of discontent of young people who have been supported not only by opposition parties but also by representatives of the artistic community – actors and directors, and publically known figures, such as famous sportsmen, etc., the students formulated demands delivered to the Prime Minister. His reaction was one what we can call a display of arrogance - he recommended students to go back to school. In addition, Minister Kalinak has stated that there is no corruption present among the high level political representatives and therefore there is nothing to investigate.

¹ The so-called Gorila case is an open case dating back to 2011 when a Slovak Intelligence Agency's file marked Gorila was leaked consisting of information about surveillance and tapping of boss of PENTA investment group who has been meeting with representatives of political parties governmental and opposition. The file includes information about alleged financing of these parties. The case is still under investigation at the special office of public prosecutor.

² The Basternak case is another open case, however this dates back to 2016, when information about connections between the lawyer Ladislav Basternak and several high ranking members of the current and former governments, including Minister of Interior Kalinak, as well as the Prime Minister, was revealed. Mr. Basternak is suspected of tax evasions and tax deductions related to one luxury housing complex in Bratislava.

Regional administration election

On 4 November, the highly expected regional election took place. The Slovak territory is divided into eight territorial areas, which are represented by a representative body and a head of each area. In general, the regional election does not receive much attention by the media, or the public. However, last year was different.

First of all, in summer 2017 the electoral legislation was amended, changing the period between elections from 4 to 5 years, and changing the two-round electoral system of the head of the region to a one-round system, a winner-takes-it-all system.

Secondly, one of the regions – namely the Banska Bystrica region – was closely monitored by the media and the public. The reason was that the region administration was during the last four years lead by a chairman from a neo-Nazi party, Kotleba and his People's Party of Slovakia, who won the election in 2013 and shocked the whole country. Kotleba was running for re-election. From among 17 candidates, a relatively high number, one received in the polls the highest support, an entrepreneur, Mr. Lunter. Some of the other candidates pulled of the race and declared their support to Mr. Lunter, who at the end won the election.

In other regions the results were surprising and confirmed the growing distrust of the public towards the ruling parties. From among six acting heads of regions, who were members of SMER or were supported by it in coalition with others, only two were re-elected to their position - in Trenčín and Nitra. The Bratislava region was won by a member of the opposition SAS party, the Presov region elected a candidate of the non-parliamentary party KDĽ (the Christian-Democratic Movement), while the Kosice, Trnava and Zilina regions chose candidates who are members of the political movement OĽANO (Ordinary People and Independent Personalities) or supported by the coalition of opposition parties.

The abolitions of Meciar's amnesties

In April, the National council adopted a legislation, which after entering into force would abolish the most controversial amnesties in the 25 years' history of Slovakia. The amnesties were granted by the acting President, who was at that time also the Prime Minister, Vladimir Meciar, in 1998 - concerning cases allegedly related to some members of the that time government. One case concerned hampering with a referendum in 1997, another case was related to the abduction of the son of the first President of the Slovak republic from Slovakia to Austria in 1995. In addition, the abolition was related to a general pardon granted by the first President of Slovakia Kovac to his son in 1996.

As not all cases are of a negative prescription. Investigations will be reopened, even though over the course of summer it became clear that the former Prime Minister will not be investigated.

The abolition of these amnesties is an important step for the whole country - to come to terms with the period of the second half of the 1990s when Slovakia was in the process of transition to democracy and experienced severe interference in power division, corruption cases, criminal cases related to the mafia and the government, etc.

From among the other important events that have taken place in 2017 we can mention the success of the Slovak government in the arbitration against Slovenské elektrárne a.s., an electric utility company. The decision of the specialized court to sentence two former ministers in cases of corruption was taken as an important sign of the ongoing anti-corruption campaign in the country. In addition, the issue, which will influence events in 2018, and especially ahead of the 2019 election, is the ever growing dispute between President Kiska and the Prime Minister and the whole government.

In addition, two influential members of the opposition SAS party have left and joined two emerging opposition parties/movements, which were in early 2018 registered by the Ministry of Interior and will probably join the municipal election that will take place in Autumn 2018.

