



Weekly Briefing

Slovakia Political briefing:
The Recent Domestic Political Development in Slovakia
Juraj Ondriaš


China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

As a member state of the European Union, EU issues are always a topic of debate in the internal politics of the Slovak Republic. While the previous years were dominated by the migration crisis (which is still a relevant topic, albeit one whose importance has waned due to the decrease in the flow of migrants to the EU over the past year), the current top issue is slow pace of the drawing of European funds. For the current 2014-2020 drawing period, Slovakia has been allocated up to 15.5 billion USD in aid, mostly from the European Regional Development Fund, Cohesion Fund, European Social Fund, and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development. With more than half of the seven-year period already over, opposition politicians and experts are criticizing the government for falling behind in the rate of drawing, and thus raising the risk of Slovakia not being able to draw all the funds it has been allocated. This would mean these funds would be forfeit and would revert back to the EU. Slovakia was in a similar position in the same time of the last 2007-2013 period, which resulted in a rush to draw as much funds as possible in the time that was available. To compare, currently only 34% of all available funds have been allocated to specific development projects, compared to 50% in the equivalent time of the last period. As for the drawing itself, only 11.2% of the available money has been drawn, in comparison to 13.4% for the same timeframe in the previous period. Slovakia could thus find itself in the same predicament as it was in the last time around, when it was forced to resort to rushed, and thus less effective, drawing at the last moment. The issue is becoming all the more urgent because of voices in the EU calling for a reduction of EU funds in the next period after the UK leaves the Union.

These calls for reducing the EU funds for poorer member states, as well as freezing them in case of irregularities in drawing (as is demonstrated on the example below), are unfortunate because they might lead to a rise in euroskepticism in Slovak society. The EU is already being accused by hard-line euroskeptics and populists of destroying the native industries of the poorer states,

which cannot compete with the richer Western European “old” members within the common market, not to mention the limitations imposed on businesses by the strict, and often seemingly bizarre, regulations of the European Commission. This drawback was compensated, apart from having access to the same common market, by the possibility for the poorer members to access EU funds to help develop their infrastructure. For example, in Slovakia up until the previous year, EU funds covered around 80% of all public investment. Even these funds have become a target of criticism, however, with detractors claiming that they are one of the main sources of corruption in the country. Even the EU anti-fraud agency OLAF corroborates this claim to a certain extent, saying that the negative influence of various interest groups permeates the process of allocating and drawing of EU funds on all levels. The government of Slovakia has promised to implement measure to ensure greater transparency in the drawing of these funds, but the problem persists across all governments to date.

Part of the aforementioned slowdown in the drawing of the funds is linked to a corruption scandal at the Ministry of Education, when EU funds were allocated to science projects based on unclear criteria. The Minister of Education, from the SNS party, had to resign and the drawing of 600 million Euro worth of funds for this area has been frozen until changes that will guarantee greater transparency can be implemented. This has led to uncertainty among scientists as to whether they will be able to continue to work and receive funding on their projects.

The new Minister of Education added a new dimension to the scandal at the end of January of this year, in an attempt to stop the brain drain of scientists and university graduates abroad and persuade them to return to Slovakia. In a televised interview she claimed that the conditions for scientists in Slovakia are actually much better than they are made out to be in the media, calling the poor state and financing of science in Slovakia a myth, and stating that Slovak scientists who live and work abroad are simply unaware of this fact. This was linked to a government project to help researchers returning from abroad to re-

establish themselves in Slovakia. The project, however, did not have much success, with only about 20 scientists coming back to Slovakia.

All this triggered an ongoing debate in Slovak society about the status and viability of science and scientists in Slovakia. A petition signed by 400 scientists from Slovakia and abroad was delivered to the Minister at the end of January 2018, asking for a dialogue on the state of science and the financing of scientists and their projects. While the Ministry of Education has promise to engage with the scientists, the government has not taken any specific steps so far. This delay seems to suggest that the government is simply waiting for the issue to go away. On the one hand, the issue of corruption is a permanent and very relevant fixture in the political debate in Slovakia, with major scandals erupting nearly on a yearly basis, and each major political party designating the fight against corruption as a priority. On the other hand, the issue of the state of scientific research is not as relevant, even though science and research are facing ever increasing problems, such as a lack of funds, low salaries and low attractiveness of the jobs, and the resulting brain drain of the most highly qualified researchers and graduates. There is even talk about an impending crisis of science in Slovakia. This neglect from the political establishment can be seen as a lack of political will, with each successive government claiming the need to deal with more pressing priorities. One reason is that tackling the issue would be a long-term process, therefore not attractive to governments whose vision only extends to the nearest election cycle. Another reason is that this is not an issue that affects many people personally; therefore it is not easy to gain political points from it. This is especially the case for the dominant social democratic (or even left-wing nationalist) Smer party and for the conservative and nationalist SNS, which manages the Ministry of Education, since both parties gain most of their support from the less educated working class, for which the problems of science in Slovakia is a distant and not very relevant issue. These parties are among those that focus the most on problems of the “common man” and the regions in their political rhetoric. Apart from that, both parties have been accused of anti-

intellectualism and populism, as well as a disproportionate amount of corruption. This has led to the center-right and right-wing opposition monopolizing the issue of the discontented scientists. Therefore, the problem has become politicized, which, due to the increasingly polarized nature of the political scene in Slovakia, makes it less likely that a solution will be arrived at, since each party will perceive any concession to the other side as a political defeat. In any case, it does not seem that the debate is going in the direction of greater financing of science and research in Slovakia this time around either, nor of stopping the brain drain.

This issue is linked to the ongoing fallout from the November 2017 regional elections. The decline of Smer is generally chalked up to voter fatigue with the party after being in power for 9 of the last 11 years, as well as numerous political scandals of its members. But there is distrust of the political elites in general among the population, due to the widespread perception of corruption. As mentioned, the most frequent target of accusations of corruption is Smer, due to being in power for most of the previous decade. The corruption scandals would explain the trends of growing disillusionment with politics among voters, the decline of support for the long-standing moderate parties (both Smer and those on the center-right), and the rise of support for opposition parties, especially populist and anti-system extremist parties on the political right, which has been going on for several years. An important move was made in October of this year, with two former ministers from the SNS party being convicted of corruption going back to 2007. That makes them the highest-ranking convicted politicians to date. It is still too early to assess whether this will have an impact on the perception of corruption in the country, especially since other scandals are currently being investigated and medialized.