



Weekly Briefing

Slovakia Political briefing:
latest political development in Slovakia
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Briefing on the latest political development in Slovakia

Summary

In 2017, thousands of anti-corruption protesters went to the streets of Bratislava and Košice. Protesters led by students called on the Interior Minister, the Police Chief, and the Special Prosecutor to resign and demanded a full investigation into the corruption scandal from 2012, known as Gorilla. Many Slovaks, mainly the younger generation, believed and still believes that the government has failed to tackle corruption and demand change. Even though the Interior Minister Róbert Kaliňák resisted the pressure to step down over his business relations with the real estate developer Ladislav Bašternák, who is suspected of fraud, and the government hasn't done anything significant to root out corruption in higher positions, the political situation remained stable until February 2018. The murder of the investigative journalist working on multiple topics related to fraud and corruption cases linked to many Slovak politicians and public figures caused another uproar and this time, the pressure on the ruling government was high. Multiple new protests made the Interior Minister Kaliňák, Prime Minister Fico and some others, including the Minister of Culture Marek Mad'arič, resign and a new government was formed.

The Slovak government has been ruled by the SMER-SD party since 2006, with a short break in the years 2010-2011. In the parliamentary elections held on 5 March 2016, left-wing populist SMER-SD gained 28.28% of votes and thus remained the strongest party, forming a coalition with parties SNS, Most-Híd, and #SIEŤ, a party that left the coalition on 1 September 2016. SMER-SD claims to have managed to secure thousands of new job opportunities, to get new investments in towns such as Púchov, Vranov nad Topľou, and Rožňava, to help the economic growth and unemployment in Slovakia, but at the same time, the party has also faced multiple serious corruption accusations.

Murder of the investigative journalist Ján Kuciak

The political situation in Slovakia changed drastically after the murder of the 27-year-old investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová. On 26 February, Police chief Tibor Gašpar announced that the victims were found dead in their house in Veľká Mača, 65km east of Bratislava, on Sunday, and that their death was most probably linked to Kuciak's investigative work. Ms. Kušnírová was shot in the head and Mr. Kuciak in the chest. The police arrived at their home at 22:30 after being called by Kušnírová's mother who had been unable to reach them both by phone since Wednesday evening. Gašpar said they were both killed with the same weapon, which the police still don't have, and that the murder might have taken place between Thursday and Sunday.¹ According to many people and professionals, the police failed to follow proper procedures while examining the bodies at the crime scene, a failure criticized mainly by the Slovak Forensic Pathology Association (FPA): *“The Slovak Forensic Pathology Association takes vehement objection to Thursday's (March 8) statements by Police Corps President Tibor Gaspar regarding the absence of a medical examiner at the site of murders of investigative journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kusnirova, TASR learnt on Saturday. Gaspar claimed that proper procedures were observed even despite the fact that only a doctor with a certificate to conduct inquiries on corpses was present. The Slovak Forensic Pathology Association considers Gaspar's statement to be a purpose-built attempt to excuse the professional failure of the police and the denigration of the forensic pathology as a medical field that needs to be represented at the crime scenes where death occurred because of violence or harm. The association also pointed out that medical examiner is also a specialist in determining the times of death and conducting death investigations, and the information collected at the crime*

¹ R. Cuprik and P. Kapitán, “Policajný prezident Tibor Gašpar hovoril o vražde investigatívneho novinára Jána Kuciaka,” SME, 26 February 2018, <<https://domov.sme.sk/c/20768811/vrazda-jan-kuciak-tibor-gaspar-vysetrovanie-zurnalistika-investigativa.html#ixzz5Bi2qaT00>>.

scene by the medical examiner is invaluable during autopsy and the drafting of expert testimony.“²

After his death, Kuciak’s latest unfinished report, in which he had been investigating activities of the Italian mafia in Slovakia and possible links to people close to Prime Minister Fico, has been published by media both in electronic and printed form. Aktuality.sk, the media company Kuciak worked for, in cooperation with the Czech investigative journalism research center Investigace.cz, the journalist organization Investigative project of Italy, and the international consortium of investigative centers Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project have mapped how people close to ‘Ndrangheta, an organized crime group centered in Calabria, Italy, have settled in Slovakia.³ According to Kuciak’s report, the crime group has connections to Slovak politicians. Kuciak named Antonio Vadala, an Italian businessman living in eastern Slovakia, who is supposed to be a member of the Mafia clan Libri, one of the most powerful within ‘Ndrangheta. Vadala is now accused of cocaine smuggling and has had a personal and also a business relationship with Mária Trošková, a 27-year-old former Miss Universe contestant who became Fico’s main state advisor despite her relative lack of political experience.

On 26 February, Prime Minister Fico, who is known for regularly slandering journalists as “hyenas” and “presstitutes“, said in a statement: *“If it turns out that the death of the investigative reporter was connected to his work, it will mean an unprecedented attack on the freedom of press and democracy in Slovakia.*“⁴

² --, “Forensic Pathology Association Criticises Mishandling of Kuciak's Case,” TASR, 10 March 2018, <http://195.46.72.16/free/jsp3/search/view/ViewerPure_en.jsp?Document=..%2F..%2FInput_text%2Fonline%2F18%2F03%2Ftbtbexga06b.dat_200900.1%40Fondy&QueryText=>>.

³ --, “Italian mafia in Slovakia: Tentacles reaching out to politics,” The Slovak Spectator, 28 February 2018, <<https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20770432/italian-mafia-in-slovakia-tentacles-reaching-out-to-politics.html>>.

⁴ P. Zachar, “Premiér ostro odsúdil vraždu novinára Jána Kuciaka, pozostalým vyjadril úprimnú sústrasť,” TASR, 26 February 2018 <<http://www.vlada.gov.sk/premier-ostro-odsudil-vrazdu-novinara-jana-kuciaka-pozostalym-vyjadril-uprimnu-sustrast/>>.

President Kiska stated: *“I am shaken and terrified that something like this could happen in Slovakia. The coldblooded murder of young people is an atrocity that must be punished. We have to find the people who did this and secure the safety of journalists.”*⁵

Mass protests

Kuciak’s murder is the second murder of an investigative journalist in the EU in less than six months. Kuciak’s death caused a new mass wave of anti-corruption protests in Slovakia, organized by the initiative For a Decent Slovakia, which started on 2 March and took place in many Slovak towns and cities all around the world. The first protest was supposed to be apolitical and a memorial to Mr. Kuciak and Ms. Kušnírová. On Sunday, 4 March, President Kiska announced that he spoke to Fico about the current political situation and that he saw only two options – a government reconstruction or new elections. As a reaction, Fico accused the current political situation of it being an attempt at country destabilization led by outside forces, namely George Soros, whom Kiska met in 2017.⁶ Another protest took place on 9 March, one week later, and according to the organizers, 40. 000 people came to protest in Bratislava alone. This time, the protesters demanded not only proper investigation of the murder, but also demanded resignation of Interior Minister Kaliňák, Prime Minister Fico and Police Chief Gašpar. At first, Kaliňák once again resisted the pressure to step down. According to Kaliňák, the main priority was to find the murderer and to focus on other issues later. Even after Kaliňák’s resignation on 12 March and Fico’s resignation on 15 March, the protesting public was still unsatisfied and another mass wave of protests took place on Friday, 16 March. The protesters demanded Gašpar’s resignation and new elections, expressing dissatisfaction

⁵ M. Germanová, “Slovak Journalist Found Shot to Death at Home,” The New York Times, 26 February 2018, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/26/world/europe/jan-kuciak-slovakia-journalist-killed.html>>.

⁶ M. Kern, „Fico vidí za tlakom na Kaliňáka pokus o prevrat a Sorosa,“ Denník N, 5 March 2018, <<https://dennikn.sk/1050737/fico-vidi-za-tlakom-na-kalinaka-pokus-o-prevrat-a-sorosa/>>.

with the new Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini, who has been accused of being Fico's puppet.

Establishment of a new government

Despite the protests, which are said to be the biggest since 1989, President Kiska entrusted Pellegrini with the establishment of the new government. On Tuesday, 20 March, President Kiska met with Pellegrini, but refused to appoint the government in the proposed lineup and asked Pellegrini to propose a new nominee list of members of the government by that week Friday. Kiska emphasizes that Pellegrini must convince people that the new government will bring about the changes people expect and must establish a stable government whose members can ease the tense atmosphere in society. According to Kiska, the new government should be able to convince the public that it will secure an independent and impartial investigation into the murder of Kuciak and Kušnírová, as well as the suspicion of organized crime that the murdered investigative journalist wrote about.

On Thursday, 22 March, the organizers of protests from For a Decent Slovakia decided to cancel the upcoming protest in Bratislava planned for Friday, 23 March. The reason behind this decision was the appointment of the new government. Protests in other towns still took place and the protest in Bratislava was taken over by university students, who decided to turn the protest into a silent march. While appointing the new government, Kiska emphasized that its new responsibility is to fight for public trust and to change the style of governance. The President also found a consensus with the new Interior Minister that it is essential to change the leadership of the police.

Even though the organizers of previous protests from For a Decent Slovakia decided to cancel the latest protest, they stressed that they are not leaving and that they will closely monitor the systemic changes the new government promised to make. They also plan to develop various forms of civil pressure to make sure the investigation of the murders of Kuciak and Kušnírová

is completed without suspicions of connection between the state institutions and organized crime groups.

Conclusion

The political situation doesn't seem to be any calmer than a month after the horrible murder, multiple protests, and government reconstruction. The death of Kuciak and his fiancée remains unsolved, Police Chief Gašpar hasn't yet been replaced, and the protesting public seems to be dissatisfied with some of the newly appointed Ministers of a government, that some call a puppet government of former Prime Minister Fico. More than a thousand artists have already signed a petition against the new Minister of Culture Ľubica Laššáková, the new Minister of Health Andrea Kalavská is being criticized by the Slovak Chamber of Nurses and Midwives, the nurses' trade unions, the doctors' trade unions and others, and a new protest organized by For a Decent Slovakia will take place on 5 April as a result of Interior Minister Tomáš Drucker's decisions and lack of changes demanded by the protesting public.