



Weekly Briefing

Slovakia Political briefing:

**Protest by For a Decent Slovakia joined by Slovak farmers and
President Kiska's critical state of the republic address**

Institute of Asian Studies, Bratislava


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

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Summary

In June, Slovakia witnessed another mass protest organized by the initiative For a Decent Slovakia. This time, the protest seemed to be weaker in numbers, but it was not the only aspect in which it differed from the previous protests. This month's rally was joined by a group of angered farmers that came to protest to the Capital on their agricultural vehicles in hopes of solving their problems caused by corruption in the agricultural sector. Their goal was to meet the Prime Minister Pellegrini and discuss the issues with him personally, but their stay in Bratislava did not go entirely according to their plan. In the beginning of the month, President Kiska gave his very last state of the republic address, summarizing the biggest issues that the country is facing since the beginning of this year, angering the coalition and gaining harsh criticism.

The protest

On Friday, 22 June, the initiative For a Decent Slovakia organized the eighth protest since the murder of a 27-year-old investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová. The main protest was held in Bratislava while other smaller protests were also organized in Košice, Banská Bystrica, and Levice. The protesters in Bratislava gathered in front of the Government Office, but this time they were also joined by protesting farmers from all around the country. One group of protesting farmers began their journey in Michalovce, a town in eastern Slovakia, and were later joined by other farmers on their way to the Capital. Farmers dissatisfied with the situation in the Slovak agricultural sector came to Bratislava on their agricultural vehicles, causing concerns for the city's traffic flow. Patrik Magdoško, who was

representing the Initiative of Farmers sheltering small and medium-sized farmers from the whole of Slovakia, stated that the farmers had come to Bratislava to start a dialogue. The protesting farmers chose this form of protest because they believed that it was the only way of making themselves heard. The problems that these farmers face surfaced after the murder, but according to Magdoško, even after more than three months nothing significant has happened. They wish to find solutions to the problems which they listed in “Košice Appeal” – in particular, they demand a creation of a special investigation team that would investigate the cases of oppressed farmers to ensure that the Agricultural Payment Agency pays farm subsidies only to an entity that has a valid legal relationship to the subsidized land, and the creation of fair and transparent rules for the distribution of usage rights to the land.¹

The farmers began their protest on Tyrš Waterfront. Their original plan was to make protest drives around Bratislava, but the police only allowed small groups to go at a time. The farmers wished to meet the Prime Minister Pellegrini, who refused and recommended the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development Gabriela Matečná to meet them instead. However, the meeting did not take place as the farmers refused to send their selected representatives to Matečná, who according to Magdoško does not have the farmers’ trust, and the Minister refused to come out to meet the whole group. Eventually, after a one-hour discussion, the representatives of the opposition parties SaS, OLaNO and We Are Family, as well as the non-parliamentary parties Together-Civic Democracy, Progressive Slovakia, SMK-MKP and KDH, signed a memorandum on reforming the agriculture in order to express their sympathies with the protesting farmers, while the representatives of the three ruling coalition parties Smer-SD, SNS and Most-Híd did not participate in the

¹ --,“Farmers on tractors head to Bratislava for better justice and transparency,” Spectator, 18 June 2018 <<https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20852587/farmers-on-tractors-head-to-bratislava-for-better-justice-and-transparency.html>>.

discussion. The lawmakers are expected to submit the final document to the parliament as a collective proposal in autumn.²

According to the media, only around seven thousand people attended the eighth protest organized by For a Decent Slovakia in Bratislava. During this protest, the crowd stopped near the place where Henry Acorda, the Filipino expat who lived in Slovakia, was brutally beaten and later died of his injuries. The organizers criticized the appointment of Denisa Saková as interior minister and Milan Lučanský as Police Corps president, actress Petra Polnišová came on stage to read the letter of the sister of the murdered journalist Ján Kuciak, and Trend weekly journalist Xénia Makarova mentioned the recent arrest of tycoon Marián Kočner stating that if the new Prime Minister and his government took their role seriously, they would not need 100 days to send people like Kočner behind bars, the best people wouldn't leave the public-service broadcaster and farmers would not have to come to protest in the midst of the high season. The protesting farmers also took to the stage stating that because of the signed memorandum, their protest had been successful.³ Some of them also talked about the problems they had to face at home, mainly the corrupt and unfair behavior of politicians and police officers. According to farmers mostly from eastern Slovakia, the land they previously tilled was, at some point, shadily transferred to organized groups. These groups did not refrain from using physical threats to achieve their goals and they allegedly had the backing of local authorities. The farmers claimed to be facing intimidation, blackmail and violence.

An official complained of the initiative For a Decent Slovakia

On Friday, 15 June, only a week before the protest, the initiative For a Decent Slovakia filed an official complaint with the General Prosecutor's Office

² --," Slovak farmers, opposition sign memorandum on reform in agriculture," Financial Observer, 25 June 2018 <<https://financialobserver.eu/recent-news/slovak-farmers-opposition-sign-memorandum-on-reform-in-agriculture/>>.

³ --,"Another For a Decent Slovakia protest was also joined by farmers," Spectator, 22 June 2018 <<https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20855675/another-for-a-decent-slovakia-protest-was-also-joined-by-farmers.html>>.

against MP and former Prime Minister Robert Fico of the ruling Smer-SD party for fear-mongering and defamation as a response to Fico's statements about the organizers behind the public protests. According to the organizers, the former Prime Minister is trying to create an imaginary enemy. As a Prime Minister, Fico issued a statement concerning the destabilization of the country and the presence of pavement blocks stacked and hidden near the Slovak Government Office that were, according to Fico, ready to be used to cause disruptions to public order during the protests. The organizers said that they have been hearing accusations concerning the alleged preparation of a coup d'état, the disintegrating fabric of society, the group's supposed collaboration with foreign powers and the Hungarian-born American George Soros for months. At first, they tried to ignore it, but since Fico kept repeating the same claims, they decided to take appropriate action.⁴

Reactions to the protest

According to publicist Juraj Hrabko, the reason why only a few thousand people attended the latest protest in Bratislava and just a few hundred in Košice and Banská Bystrica is that the protest lacked a specific objective that would mobilize the public. This time, the organizers did not demand early elections and they lost their former purpose. Hrabko also criticized the farmers' demands for not being clear, simple and comprehensible for the public and the fact that they refused to select representatives that would meet Minister Matečná.⁵

The Prime Minister Pellegrini also criticized the farmers, pointing out that most of the country's farmers rejected the current form of protest. According to Pellegrini, the situation in the country did not justify such protests. Since the farmers haggled about the format of a meeting with Minister Matečná, Pellegrini believes that the farmers did not come to simply solve their personal problems.

⁴ --, "For a Decent Slovakia organise another protest for June 22," Spectator, 21 June 2018 <<https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20852133/for-a-decent-slovakia-organise-another-protest-for-june-22-as-they-sue-ex-pm-fico.html>>.

⁵ --, "HRABKO: Na posledné protesty prišlo málo ľudí, lebo nemali žiadny cieľ," Teraz, 30 June 2018 <<http://www.teraz.sk/publicistika/hrabko-protesty-nemali-ciel-mala-ucast/334052-clanok.html>>.

He also criticized the protesting farmers for giving the government ultimatums. Pellegrini promised to travel to eastern Slovakia in the first week of July to visit several small farms and discuss the problems there.⁶

According to Matečná, eleven of the eighteen demands have already been met within adopted laws and amendments. The remaining ones are either on the way or are unrealistic. She also stated that the farmers should discuss the issues before going into the streets. However, one of the farmers, František Oravec said that the farmers have been trying to explain the problems to the Ministry and the Agricultural Payment Agency for two-and-a-half years. After meeting the Prime Minister on Wednesday, the Interior Minister Saková stated that a special investigative team had already started to investigate the farmers' complaints.⁷

When Pellegrini announced that he did not have the opportunity to meet the farmers due to other appointments, President Kiska offered to meet them instead. The meeting took place on 20 June. Kiska criticized the situation in the agricultural sector and supported the protesting farmers. He also promised to monitor the situation in the agricultural sector and stated that it was time for the government to start sensitively addressing the demands of Slovak farmers.

Kiska's state of the republic address

On 13 June, President Kiska gave his last state of the republic address to the Parliament, which revolved around the main issues Slovakia has been dealing with since the beginning of 2018 – the murder of a journalist and his fiancée and the political crisis that followed. Kiska spoke about the unsolved murder, deep mistrust in the country prevailing in Slovak society and the determination to change it, the lack of trust in the state and the recent killing of expat Henry Acorda, the problems of farmers, the upcoming parliamentary votes about the new rules for police and the election of Constitutional Court judges, as

⁶ --," Slovak farmers, opposition sign memorandum on reform in agriculture," Financial Observer, 25 June 2018 <<https://financialobserver.eu/recent-news/slovak-farmers-opposition-sign-memorandum-on-reform-in-agriculture/>>.

⁷ I. Sečíková," Farmers express no trust in Agriculture Minister," RTVS, 21 June 2018 <<http://enrsi.rtvs.sk/articles/topical-issue/167731/farmers-express-no-trust-in-agriculture-minister>>.

well as the demographic challenges which the country is failing to respond to. He also labeled the last article of the murdered journalist Ján Kuciak as “the most important state of the republic report in 2018”. In the beginning of President’s speech, the MPs of The People's Party – Our Slovakia, who were holding banners saying “Traitor”, had to be expelled from the room, since they refused to put down the “visual aids” which are not allowed based on the parliament’s rules of procedure.⁸

As a response to the address, Kiska has been slammed by the coalition politicians. The former Prime Minister Fico accused Kiska of becoming an opposition politician and Prime Minister Pellegrini suggested that he was no longer a non-partisan President. Fico continued to remind of Kiska’s scandals and added that judging by the tone of his speech, he plainly misused his post for partisan purposes. Pellegrini seemed to agree with Fico, adding that he was disappointed with the speech since Kiska did not say anything positive about Slovakia. According to Pellegrini, since Kiska also spoke about the rule of law, ethics and returning public trust in state bodies, it would be pleasing to see him facing suspicions that he probably exceeded the expenditures limit for his election campaign in 2014. Coalition Most-Híd party leader Béla Bugár does not think the speech was Kiska’s way of preparing for his future role in Slovak politics, but he agreed that President only focused on the negatives.⁹

Conclusion

Even four months after the murder of Ján Kuciak and Martina Kušnírová, the case has not yet been solved and no information has been made public. The Interior Ministry stated that the law does not allow publishing an evaluation of the course of the investigation of any crime not concluded and the General Prosecutor’s Office stated that such a complex process may last for several

⁸ --, “10 quotes from the president’s speech,” Spectator, 13 June 2018 <<https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20849144/10-quotes-from-the-presidents-speech.html>>.

⁹ --, “Coalition politicians slam Kiska for his State of Republic Address,” Spectator, 13 June 2018 <<https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20849389/coalition-politicians-slam-kiska-for-his-state-of-republic-address.html>>.

weeks, but despite this, the protesting public, the opposition and victims' families still do not seem to trust those in charge of the investigation, the police nor the ruling government which seems to be focusing more on fighting the President and the criticism of the public and the opposition. Now, it still seems that nothing in the political sphere has changed.