



# Weekly Briefing

**Slovakia political briefing:**  
**Briefing on the latest political development in Slovakia**  
**Institute of Asian Studies, Bratislava**

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## **Briefing on the latest political development in Slovakia**

### **A summary of 2018**

#### **Summary**

It could have been an ordinary, predictable year, if it wasn't for the murder of a 27-year-old investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová in late February. Corruption is present in politics of every country, but in case of Slovakia, the country did not follow the example of others and the government hasn't done anything significant to root out corruption in higher positions. This problem combined with the murder of one of the brave people that decided to do the hard work that the police was supposed to do instead, who wanted to uncover the truth, finally made people voice their dissatisfaction. Since February, the political situation in Slovakia changed and people began to hope for a brighter future in which justice would not be laughed at.

#### **The beginning of a potential end**

In his latest unfinished report, Kuciak had been investigating activities of the Italian mafia in Slovakia and possible links to people close to former Prime Minister Róbert Fico, therefore, many people believed that the politicians could be responsible for the murder, which at the time happened to be the second murder of an investigative journalist in the EU in less than six months. It caused a mass wave of anti-corruption protests attended by thousands, sometimes even tens of thousands of people, organized by the initiative For a Decent Slovakia, taking place in numerous towns and cities not only in Slovakia, but also abroad. The first few protests demanded a proper investigation of the murder, resignation of former Interior Minister Kaliňák, former Prime Minister Fico and former Police Chief Gašpar. At first, they all resisted the pressure to step down, but eventually gave in and accepted the defeat, only to be replaced by people considered just as bad, or in some cases, their mindless puppets, example being new Interior Minister Denisa Saková, a woman very close to former Interior Minister Róbert Kaliňák, and new Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini. Later protests were held in order to show how dissatisfied the protesting public was with the decisions made, but also to protest against corruption in agriculture, to demand resignation of the Parliamentary Chairman Andrej Danko, accused of being a plagiarist, and so on. Some of the demands had been met, but the protesters were never fully satisfied, for it seems that the changes were made only to silence them, and not to change the country for the better.

## **Political reaction**

The murder and the mass protests polarized not only the public, but also the political sphere. The coalition and opposition were always at war with each other, but after the murder, it all got worse. The murder also worsened the relationship between the ruling coalition and President Kiska, who kept suggesting either a government reconstruction, or new elections. The former Prime Minister Fico did not handle the situation well, as he accused outside forces (namely George Soros) of trying to destabilize the country, with Kiska being one of the people betraying the country. Fico kept mentioning Soros even after his resignation from the post of Prime Minister, together with conspiracy theorists, implying that the protesters might be paid to go to the streets, to what protesters reacted with banners saying “we are here for free”. Eventually, an anonymous complaint against the organizers of the protests turned the National Criminal Agency’s attention to the initiative For a Decent Slovakia, fueling the anger of the protesters.

Slovak politicians keep repeating how important it is to fight and not to be afraid to report corruption, but every time someone gets brave enough to report crimes these politicians themselves might be involved in, all those fancy speeches turn into empty, meaningless words. Slovak politicians want people to report the everyday corruption, to report doctors who accept sausages and homemade cheese as gifts from patients, not important political figures possibly stealing millions of euros every year. Some of the people, who tried fighting the powerful, appeared on stage during the anti-corruption rallies just to share their sad stories with the protester. Sad not for them, but for the country, because if the police questions those reporting the corruption more than those accused of it, it is a sign that there is something very wrong with the country.

## **The rebelling media**

The independent media never seemed to be in favor of the ruling government, with the government sharing the very same sentiment. After all, former Prime Minister Fico is known for regularly slandering journalists as “hyenas” and “*presstitutes*” – *those journalists, who repeatedly try to uncover what some wish to keep hidden. After the murder, the media decided to work together and to work even harder – for example, it was Denník N daily with the help of German daily Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung that first reported the abduction of a Vietnamese businessman Trinh Xuan Thanh, sentenced by the communist regime in his country to life imprisonment for corruption, that was supposed to happen with the help of the Slovak government, namely former Interior Minister Róbert Kaliňák; and it was also Denník N that decided to look at the degrees of Slovak politicians earlier in September and discovered that the Parliamentary Chairman Andrej Danko’s rigorous thesis might have been plagiarized.*

After RTVS, a state-owned nationwide public broadcasting organization canceled the last investigative reporting program available on television called Reportéri despite it being critically acclaimed, it was Aktuality.sk that offered an online platform for the former reporter of Reportéri Pavol Fejér, who was therefore able to cooperate with an anti-corruption foundation Zastavme Korupciu and create a new investigative reporting program available online called Cez Čiaru. Since then, Fejér helped uncover scandals such as wrongdoings of Slovak police or a communist-like political situation in one of the smaller towns in eastern Slovakia Humenné, ruled by a Smer-SD party member.

When it comes to politics, as a state-owned public broadcaster, RTVS should stay neutral. However, many reporters left the broadcasting organization during the year and people became very unsatisfied with the new management, for it appears that the broadcaster leans heavily towards the ruling coalition.

### **Possible political future**

Despite the demands of the protesting public and President Kiska, no early elections were held this year. It is unclear what would have happened in case of early elections, but the results of the municipal elections held this autumn showed that many voters might be done with the left-wing populist Smer-SD party. The clear winners of these elections were independent candidates and even though Smer-SD came out as the strongest parliamentary party in the municipal elections taking around 20% of mayoral seats, it was a significant drop compared to the elections held in 2014, compared to which Smer-SD lost almost 10% of seats. The party also reported a big drop in the number of municipal councilors<sup>1</sup>.

There is a chance that Smer-SD party will keep its status as the strongest party even after the next parliamentary elections. The party is popular mainly with the elderly and the socially disadvantaged. The population of Slovakia is aging, the elders often do not have access to online media that might offer them new perspectives and they are easily manipulated. Despite all the scandals and accusations, this huge group might still vote for those who lost the trust of many, including the independent media, the protesters, and the opposition. However, sometimes the problem is not the lack of access to the Internet or the lack of interest in research, as many elders simply believe that only this one party truly cares for them and provides them with stability and small, often meaningless benefits. They are often aware of the worsening situation, which drives the young citizens away from the country, but they are too afraid and are not willing to accept change, since it might be a huge risk for them. Another significant

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<sup>1</sup> R. Minarechová, "5 most significant results of the municipal elections," Spectator, 11 November 2018, <<https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20958942/5-things-you-should-know-about-the-municipal-elections.html>>.

group are the socially disadvantaged. While living in a countryside or in a smaller, much poorer town than the major towns in Slovakia, one can often hear suspiciously common rumors saying that certain politicians and political parties pay for their votes either by small gifts, or even by money. One also cannot forget the regular voters who simply believe in the party or agree with its program and decisions.

The fact that the Slovak opposition is a weak one, with many scandals of its own, might also help the party win once again. It is a fact that Slovakia has too many political parties and there is no party yet that could compete with Smer-SD and win. However, with Smer-SD losing popularity and other parties gaining support, it might not be able to form a coalition in the future. There is also a possibility of President Kiska forming a new political party, which could potentially gain enough votes to become Smer-SD's biggest rival.

## **Conclusion**

When it comes to politics, people in Slovakia tend to be very pessimistic. They rarely believe in justice, and looking at the current political situation, it is quite understandable. Slovak politicians keep holding onto their seats despite numerous accusations and scandals, as if their lives depended on it, and rarely face any consequences. Many have been accused of corruption, yet it seems that they are never being investigated properly. But even though Slovaks do not tend to believe in happy endings, they still want to fight. The murder still keeps people going, even though as of right now, it seems that it was not connected to Slovak politicians, and despite the demands of protesters not being fully met, this year could still become known as a beginning of an end of a corrupt era, since it seems that more and more people are fighting their own fears of being punished by those in power and are willing to join those trying to make the country a better place. 2018 was especially difficult, but also an important year. During the next one, police might finally shed light on some of the big corruption cases and prove that no one, no matter how powerful, is untouchable.