



Weekly Briefing

**Slovakia social briefing:
2018: A landmark year for Slovakia?
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2018: A landmark year for Slovakia?

Very few would dispute that the year 2018 has been a very eventful one in Slovakia. In Slovak history years ending with “8” have often brought about landmark changes in the direction of the nation. In 1918, the Czechoslovak Republic was formed, giving Slovaks for the first time in their history a state they could legitimately call their own. In 1948, the democratic legacy of Czechoslovakia was dealt a fatal blow by a communist putsch that put Czechoslovakia firmly behind the iron curtain. In 1968, the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia brought about a sudden end to the liberalization movement called the Prague Spring and sealed the fate of the country for two more decades. The year 2018 was in a big part marked by the commemoration of these events, and also uncovering significant truths about the nature of modern Slovakia. Yet, it has also become important by itself. The large-scale anti-government demonstrations the like of which independent Slovakia has not seen before have divulged the large level of dissatisfaction of a substantial part of the population with the direction their country is headed. At the same time, the divisions among the different groups of the population have reached new heights, touching upon the questions of the very civilizational belonging of the country.

The hopes of “Decent Slovakia”

The single most impactful event of 2018 was undoubtedly the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancé Martina Kušnírová in February. In Slovakia’s history, no journalist had ever been killed for his work before, with killings of journalist seen as something that only happens in third world countries (although we sadly know by now it happens also in other European countries). Therefore, the act itself has shaken the whole Slovak society.

What was even more important though, was the content of Kuciak’s investigative work. Just before his violent death, he had been working on the story about the links between the Italian mafia and people in the immediate circle of the Slovak Prime Minister Róbert Fico. While a direct link between the murder and the government is unlikely, the murder galvanized the opposition to the government, driven by the anger over corruption, the imperfect rule of law and the general state of the country that had been ruled by the party of the Prime Minister, with short intermezzo, since 2006. The movement for “Decent Slovakia” was born, organizing many demonstrations all around the country. Their scale even passed the demonstrations of the democratic revolution in 1989. In the end, Prime Minister Fico was forced to resign, as well as

the Minister of the Interior. While the movement for Decent Slovakia had lost its momentum and the unity of its supporters eroded, the success of independent candidates supported by the movement in the local elections has underlined its lasting impact.

Growing polarisation

This outburst of civic activism has brought about feelings of optimism about the healthy state of the civil society in Slovakia. The protests have managed to bring together many people from different backgrounds that were united in their hope for change. However, other developments of this year have pointed to the growing Slovak polarization on crucial issues.

One of the markers of the growing polarisation Slovak society was the fierce debate around the Istanbul Convention that engulfed Slovakia at the beginning of the year. Adopted by the Council of Europe in 2011 in Istanbul under the full name Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, the Istanbul Convention seeks to “design a comprehensive framework, policies and measures for the protection of and assistance to all victims of violence against women and domestic violence” as well as to “contribute to the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and promote substantive equality between women and men”.

While the Convention in itself is uncontroversial, it had become highly contentious. Critics, among them also the Slovak Catholic Church, were riled up by the definition of “gender” as “socially constructed” in the Convention and reference to the need to introduce teaching material that would reflect this. It has been argued by many that such a definition ignores the “natural” differences between men and women and tries to “sneak” them into legislation binding for Slovakia as a “wolf in sheep’s clothing”. The Convention was seen by its critics as an example of the dissemination of “gender ideology”, foreign to the traditional Christian-based morals prevalent in Slovakia. Liberal circles have lambasted the conservatives for their “backward” views, leading to a polarization of the public debate. In the end, the government refused to ratify the Convention and after the murder of Ján Kuciak the issue has largely disappeared from the public eye.

Another international document has become a domestic policy and social issue as well. The Global Pact for Migration spearheaded by the United Nations was signed in Marrakesh in December. The Slovak government refused to participate, citing its opposition to some of its propositions. This was preceded by a vivid debate in the Slovak society. While, the migrant crisis in Europe had already ebbed and had never really directly affected Slovakia, it has

nevertheless become a number one issue in the country. Marrakesh, just as Istanbul, became a symbol for some of the fate of Slovaks being decided outside of Slovakia's borders. Big parts of the population have feared that Slovakia would be overrun by migrants, forced on by the European Union through the proposed quotas. The government has, along with other V4 countries, become a leading dissenting voice in Europe on the issue. Although the quota proposal was scrapped in the end, Slovakia has maintained a negative stance towards all the multilateral efforts to deal with the migrant issue.

For a significant part of the Slovak population, refugees, especially as the majority of them are Muslim, present an "existential threat" to Slovaks and their way of life. Politicians used the refugee crisis as an opportunity to further their populist agenda and contributed substantially to spreading fear among people - although most Slovaks have never even met or seen any refugee in their lives.

The fact that due to the demographic trends Slovakia may need to rely on immigration in the future has not become widely accepted. Indeed, while many have defended their opposition to immigration based on the difference of the cultures, the growing number of culturally closer migrants from Serbia and Ukraine working in Slovakia has also not been very welcome. Again, the dividing lines between different groups of the population have been exposed.

The question of belonging

The controversy over the aforementioned issues leads to the question of the civilizational belonging of the people of Slovakia. In the end, this is how the Minister of Foreign Affairs Miroslav Lajčák, who has threatened to resign over the refusal to sign the Global Pact for Migration, framed the issue. It has been demonstrated that most of the Slovaks see their country as some kind of a bridge between the West and the East, specifically Russia, having links to both, but not fully belonging to either. While Slovakia has become part of the West as defined by the EU and NATO more than a decade ago, for many the West is the "them" and not yet the "us", exemplified by the view of decisions on issues such as "migration being forced on", despite Slovakia's presence at the negotiation table.

The question has appeared whether Slovakia should not go the way of Poland and Hungary with their "illiberal democracy" experiments as an alternative to the model of the Western democracies and the (largely imagined) "Brussels bureaucracy". The head of the second strongest party in the leading coalition (the Slovak National Party) Andrej Danko has

notably been favourable towards the current governments in Poland and Hungary and, significantly, to Russia. At the same time, the “deposed” Prime Minister Fico has given traction to conspiracy theories about the role of Hungarian-American philanthropist George Soros in an “orchestrating a coup” against his government, the likes of which we have seen in Viktor Orbán’s Hungary. While the government as a whole has maintained an overall pro-West and pro-EU policy, views of those who doubt or flat out reject this direction have gained a substantial representation.

Conclusion

Overall, 2018 has been an especially tumultuous year for Slovakia. The public space was constantly occupied by hotly-debated topics, with one controversial issue replacing another. Whether 2018 will be a landmark year on par with the other “8” years in the Slovak history remains to be seen. As always, the most important factor will be to what extent the developments in the society influence politics. Finally, it needs to be stressed that Slovakia is by no way isolated from outer developments and many of the trends present here can be seen in the neighbouring countries or even all-around Europe (and even on the global scale). The political developments on the Europe-wide scale and the economic situation (with the threat of another crisis looming over Europe) will ultimately play a significant role whether positive or negative trends in the Slovak society prevail.