



Weekly Briefing

Slovakia political briefing:
Outlook on political development for 2019: Presidential elections
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Outlook on political development for 2019: Presidential elections

Summary

After multiple failed attempts at holding early parliamentary elections by protesters throughout the past year, in 2019, the protesters, as well as every other adult citizen of Slovakia, will at least get a chance to choose the new President in this year's presidential elections, which will be held in spring. Even though it might seem that when it comes to Slovak politics, the President does not play a very important role, and that the people would rather replace those in the parliament given the chance, the presidential elections and their outcome might be just as important as the early parliamentary elections would have been.

The current President

In 2018, President Andrej Kiska voiced his dissatisfaction with the political situation, or rather political crisis, and was not afraid to address the important issues directly, placing himself in a rather difficult position. By no means is President Kiska a saint, since just as any other political figure in Slovakia, he is being constantly confronted with various accusations and allegations of his own, including those claiming that he has gained his wealth and power by being a usurer; but despite this, he played an important role in last year's political and socio-political events as one of the few powerful political figures criticizing, and at some point also fighting, the ruling coalition. The events following the murder of the investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová, such as the protests demanding the resignation of multiple politicians, early parliamentary elections, and proper investigation not only of the murder, but also of multiple serious corruption cases involving high-level politicians, split the nation and made Kiska interfere and add oil to the fire by openly criticizing the coalition, and now it seems that the country turned black and white and those who blame the coalition for everything bad that is happening in the country like and support Kiska, while those supporting it would love to see Kiska replaced as soon as possible.

Even in his New Year's Address, Kiska was not afraid to talk about the issues of 2018, once again indirectly criticizing those in power while praising those who decided to fight for a better Slovakia: “[...] The murder of Ján Kuciak and Martina Kušnírová changed a year of celebration and commemoration into a year that will be remembered as a year of struggle for decency and justice. The murder of two young people and the events that followed forced us to

take a long, hard look at ourselves. To look directly at the society that we live in. To look directly at the state that we are part of and that we are building. We can no longer duck our eyes and look away. It has been a year when we could not avoid doubts about the sustainability of a society in which there was a deep lack of confidence in the state and its ability to ensure justice. [...] I am convinced that the people who came together – both in the squares and elsewhere – to express their wish for “decency and justice” are and will always be able to develop and protect freedom and democracy. [...] Others will be naming politicians who have made a mockery of justice and decency for years. And who still believe that they can cling on to power or get back into office. [...]”¹

Kiska also warned against extremism, calling it a real threat, since there is a chance that people might go looking for a way out of their anger and frustration in extreme solutions and politicians who despise democracy and freedom.²

This New Year’s Address was Kiska’s last, as he had confirmed that he would not run for re-election in the upcoming presidential elections. Despite this decision, Kiska still might stay in politics, perhaps forming a new political party or joining an existing one.

The candidates for the new President

The former Prime Minister and the current leader of the most powerful (and most controversial) party SMER-SD Róbert Fico declared that he would not run for President (in his former attempt he lost to the current President Andrej Kiska). The current Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini also declined to run, stating that the best choice would be the Minister of Foreign Affairs Miroslav Lajčák, since, according to Pellegrini, a President is more of a diplomat, someone who is supposed to represent the country rather than change it. Therefore, Lajčák would be the best fit, if only he did not decline as well. While back in autumn of 2018, looking at the candidates Pellegrini felt like “some people started to make a mockery of the elections”, SMER-SD members still have not announced the name of their candidate, despite Fico claiming there is one in early December 2018. According to Fico, the party will not reveal its candidate probably until February in order to shield the candidate from attacks he or she would face after

¹ --, “New Year’s Address by President Andrej Kiska,” President, 1 January 2019, <<https://www.prezident.sk/en/article/novorocny-prihovor-2019-prezidenta-andreja-kisku/>>.

² M. Terenzani, “Kiska: Murder turned 2018 into a year of struggle for decency and justice “ Spectator, 25 October 2018, <Kiska: Murder turned 2018 into a year of struggle for decency and justice>.

the announcement, which could mean that this person would not be acceptable for the protesters and the political opposition. Another possible candidate of SMER-SD was Ján Kubiš, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, who claimed to be interested in the elections, but Kubiš stated that he would not run as a SMER-SD candidate.

In December 2018, the Parliamentary Chairman Andrej Danko, a member of the Slovak National Party (SNS), admitted that he might also run for presidency, despite having no real ambition to become the President. According to Danko, whose scandal involving his JUDr. title is still very fresh, his political party should have a candidate and since no one is willing to run, it will most probably be him. However, Danko stated that his party would remain passive and would not lead any campaign, since the EU elections were more important.³

The third coalition party Most-Híd does have its own candidate and his name is known since June 2018. The candidate is Béla Bugár, the party's leader, who collected all of the necessary citizen signatures in September 2018.

When it comes to the opposition, a strong candidate seems to be Róbert Mistrík, a researcher who announced his candidacy in May 2018 and collected the signatures in November 2018. In May, Mistrík stated he would campaign as a non-partisan, independent candidate. Since then, he gained the support of opposition parties Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) and Together (SPOLU). Even though he is a strong candidate, he admitted he might not be strong enough to get to the second round without some other candidates stepping down in his favor. According to Mistrík's (alibistic) words, he respected them, but believed that without a good tactic, none of them would get to the second round (and by this he encouraged them to do so in his favor).

Candidates mentioned by Mistrík were mainly František Mikloško, a former Speaker of National Council campaigning as a non-partisan candidate, Zuzana Čaputová, an advocate running as a candidate of Progressive Slovakia, and Milan Krajniak, a member and a candidate of opposition party We Are Family, who is running instead of the party's controversial leader Boris Kollár.

Among other confirmed independent candidates are Juraj Zábajník, a security analyst, Bohumila Tauchmannová, a businesswoman and a civilian activist, Štefan Harabin, former

³ TASR, "Andrej Danko prvýkrát pripustil, že bude kandidovať za prezidenta," HNonline, 21 December 2018, <<https://slovensko.hnonline.sk/1863192-andrej-danko-prvykrat-pripustil-ze-bude-kandidovat-za-prezidenta>>.

Supreme Court Chairman and Minister of Justice, Radovan Znášik, former employee at the Ministry of Environment, and Róbert Švec, leader of the Slovak Revival Movement.

There are at least six other candidates who declared to run as well, including Marián Kotleba, leader of People's Party Our Slovakia (ĽSNS), an extremist party leaning towards Nazism.

What are the chances for the candidates?

According to the survey conducted by Focus in October 2018, if the elections were held in September, the winner would be Miroslav Lajčák (who later declined to run), getting 26% of the votes. Second would be Andrej Danko with 12,3% and third Róbert Mistrík with 9,5%. Štefan Harabin would get 9,1% and Marián Kotleba 8,7%.⁴

One of the candidates, Zuzana Čaputová, ordered a new survey, which was conducted by AKO in December and excluded candidates of parties SMER-SD and SNS. According to this survey, the new President would be Róbert Mistrík with 16,8% of all votes. Béla Bugár would get 16,2% of votes and Štefan Harabin 12,8%. Čaputová herself would be fifth in line.⁵

Conclusion

Even though the Slovak President has not as much power as for example the President of the United States, given the recent events and the current state of Slovak politics, it is important to choose the new President wisely. A President constantly fighting the coalition might not be the best solution to the political crisis, and a puppet with no opinion and stance of its own would be just as bad of a choice. The candidate of SMER-SD is not known yet, but it might be a strong candidate just by being a member of the strongest coalition party, and according to the polls, other coalition candidates are also very likely to win the elections, therefore there is a high chance that there won't be "another Kiska", unless an opposition or an independent candidate becomes strong enough to gain enough votes to get to the second round and eventually become

⁴TASR, "Najnovší prieskum agentúry FOCUS: Slováci by si za prezidenta zvolili Miroslava Lajčáka," TVnoviny, 2 October 2018, <http://www.tvnoviny.sk/domace/1937205_najnovsi-prieskum-agentury-focus-slovaci-by-si-za-prezidenta-zvolili-miroslava-lajcaka>.

⁵ L. Krbatová, "Čaputová si objednala prieskum, jej šance sú podľa neho vyššie," SME, 12 December 2018, <<https://domov.sme.sk/c/22006926/prieskum-prezidentske-volby-2019-vedu-mistrík-a-bugar.html>>.

the President. If a good-hearted person wins, it might not mean that everything will automatically get better, but there will at least be someone to remind the ruling politicians of their promise to serve the people, to be truly just and fair.