




Weekly Briefing

Slovakia social briefing:
The main developments to watch for in 2019
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The year 2019 will undoubtedly bring interesting developments in Slovakia which has just emerged from one of the most turbulent years since it gained independence in 1993. The aftershocks of the large scale popular demonstrations in 2018 will be felt long forward. However, the positive mobilization of the civil society may still be overshadowed by the ascending forces of populism and extremism, phenomena which have shaken the whole Western world. The development of the situation in the media and the education sector will determine if Slovakia can be a free and successful country. Last but not least, the very civilizational belonging of Slovakia, positioned between the West and the East and the question of following the example of “illiberal democracy” in Poland and Hungary will be at stakes.

In 2019, the developments of the civil society will continue to merit attention. It is quite uncontroversial to say that 2018 was a year of protests in Slovakia. The murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée brought tens of thousands of people to the streets in the biggest demonstrations in the country since the Velvet revolution of 1989 that had brought about the demise of the communist regime. The movement for “Decent Slovakia” as the protesters called themselves, has proven the vitality of the Slovak civil society. The continuing impacts of the movement can be expected to be felt throughout 2019. Large scale protest the likes of which were seen in March and April 2018 will probably not happen again, save for some very serious immediate fuse. The restructured government led by the new Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini, who replaced political veteran Robert Fico, has sought to take a more amenable stance and the public’s anger has, at least in terms of overt manifestation, blunted. With the strength of civil society proven, the government will be more cautious of igniting its anger again.

In previous year, Slovakia has manifested that public resentment towards the elites does not have to be accompanied within destructive and irrational antisystem undercurrents. On the contrary, it can buttress the democratic values, political environment and institutions within the country. However, Slovakia is also not exempt from the dangers of the current trend in Europe, where populism and extremism are on the rise. In the most recent election in 2016, a far-right party Kotleba - Our Slovakia with links to neo-Nazis won the most votes in its history. Despite the new government coalition having claimed that it would serve as a “dam against extremism”, the position of the extremists has not been weakened. On the contrary, former Prime Minister Fico’s tapping into the “Soros-instigated conspiracy” allegations that are characteristic for the

extremist parties has brought extremist views into the mainstream. With Fico continuing the embrace of the extremist and conspiratory elements in Slovakia even after stepping down from the position of Prime Minister (with the very real possibility of staging a comeback), the populist and extremist views may still very much unleash their strength. Moreover, one of the candidates in the upcoming presidential election, Štefan Harabin, fulfills the role of an anti-systemic candidate that is at home with the populist, anti-democratic, nationalist and extremist elements. His showing in polls has remained robust, and his possible victory in the election (still an unlikely black swan event) may make 2019 a year of stunning reversal.

Another development to watch for in 2019 is the media. As has been manifested in the past few years, the media are a popular target of populist politicians and orchestrated distrust towards them is a sure sign of a worsening political situation. In the whole region of Central Europe, the media freedom has been under growing attack. In Hungary, any media critical to the government has been marginalized. In the Czech Republic, the media owned by the Prime Minister have shown a clear and consistent bias in their reporting. In Slovakia, the murder of the investigative journalist Kuciak has become perhaps the most serious symbol of the attack on media, although this tragic event does not as such reflect the general situation in the media sector in Slovakia, which is better than in its neighboring countries. Still, former Prime Minister Fico has constantly bashed and demeaned the media, attacking their work and accusing them of having a political agenda. This has, undoubtedly, made the environment for media more unfriendly. At the same time, the so called “alternative media” are gaining still wider following as people’s distrust towards the “mainstream media” widens. In reality, they often become platforms for spreading distorted or even flat out fabricated news stories that are, not coincidentally, often similar to Russian propaganda.

One specific development that will merit close attention in 2019 is the situation in the national broadcaster Radio and Television of Slovakia (RTVS). Since the new director was appointed, the developments in RTVS have attracted a lot of controversy. A number of experienced and renowned journalists were either sacked, pressured to leave or made the decision themselves because of the worsening conditions for their work. This has been supported by accusations that the new leadership, seen as having links to the current government, was limiting the freedom of their reporting and endangering the neutrality of the broadcaster, which has gained solid reputation under the leadership of the previous director. Moreover, RTVS has brought in people from the “alternative media” circles which has given rise to concerns about the direction of the national broadcaster. In 2019, the moves of the RTVS

leadership will be worth following as a litmus test for the direction of the media and even the country's democracy.

Another issue to follow in 2019 are the developments in the education sector. In light of the current technology and employment dynamics, quality education is becoming even more important as a basis for building a successful country for the 21st century. Mismanagement in this field will be felt for decades to come. After years of lack of systematic thinking, inability to conduct meaningful reforms or even pure lack of attention towards the issue of education, the current situation has become unsustainable. The international testings show that Slovak primary and high school student exhibit lackluster performance. The style of education has not seen any fundamental reform since the end of communism. Meanwhile, teachers are significantly underpaid, which also affects the quality of the personnel seeking this carrier choice. In higher education, the situation is not much better. Only one Slovak University, the Comenius University in Bratislava, ranks among the best 500 universities in the world. A significant percentage of university students opts for studying in the Czech Republic or elsewhere abroad, which causes the issue of brain drain. On top of that, the value of education has been depreciated by the scandal of the Speaker of the Slovak National Council Andrej Danko, who has been proven to have gotten his academic title based on a copied work, yet has refused to take any responsibility. In 2019, the education sector will require serious public discussion and real political will to make difficult but gravely needed reforms. However, the prospect for improvement in the short term are not high.

Finally, in the most general terms, we are about to see the continuation of the struggle for setting the direction on the civilizational compass of Slovakia. With the growth of woes of the liberal democracies, long-lasting political crisis of the European Union and especially the aftermath of the migrant crisis, the centrifugal tendencies have been on the rise. A significant part of the Slovak population sees Slovakia not as a member of the West but a “bridge” between the East and the West. Russia is an important factor. The pro-Russian member of the coalition, the Slovak National Party, has gone so far as to block the strategic documents that designate Russia as a threat to Slovakia. In cultural terms, there are views among the Slovak population that see Russia as a more welcome partner than the “despotic Brussels” that is accused of spreading the values foreign to Slovak traditions and going against national interests. Some are also looking over the border to Hungary and Poland, where the governments have put importance on preserving traditional values and national identity, all the while pursuing some forms of “illiberal democracy”. Support for such direction is not held by the majority the Slovak population, but is nevertheless on the rise. According to the latest poll, one fourth of Slovaks

would prefer a strongman government to the current democratic system. Taking lessons from developments abroad, a possibility of a turn in this direction, especially in case of external shock and/or economic crisis should not be underestimated and is a development to watch in 2019.