Slovakia political briefing:
Government Crisis in Slovakia

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Summary

The political crisis in Slovakia deepened at the beginning of March 2021 after a member of the ruling coalition demanded a reconstruction of the Cabinet. The crisis was triggered by a secret deal to acquire Russia’s Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine orchestrated by the country’s Prime Minister despite disagreement among his coalition partners. Richard Sulík, head of the Freedom and Solidarity party (SaS), has often clashed with Prime Minister Igor Matovič over how to tackle the pandemic, but the recent crisis was the most serious problem the coalition had faced. After a month Slovakia’s Prime Minister stepped down (swapped posts with Finance Minister Eduard Heger) to clear the way for a Cabinet reshuffle that should defuse the political crisis.

Introduction

Pressure was mounting on Slovakia's under-fire Prime Minister Igor Matovič in a political crisis sparked after the country bought COVID-19 vaccines from Russia. He was facing increased calls to resign after two another cabinet ministers stood down three weeks after the vaccine business with Russia: Ivan Korčok, Slovakia's Foreign and European Affairs Minister and Branislav Grohling, Education Minister. It already meant a total of six government ministers - including the country's Health Minister - had quit Slovakia's 16-member cabinet. Opposition parties, as well as members of the ruling four-party coalition, had accused PM Matovič of mishandling the coronavirus pandemic. Slovakia's president, Zuzana Čaputová, also called on the Prime Minister to resign and clear the way for a Cabinet reshuffle.

First anniversary of Matovič's government

This time last year, Slovakia had five confirmed cases of the new coronavirus and opinions were divided: panic was taking over, but most people still did not believe the virus could lead to anything more than perhaps a few weeks of alert. Masks started appearing on
people’s faces in the streets and on TV, and became the symbol of Slovakia’s success in containing the coronavirus during the first wave, making headlines internationally.

Fast forward a year, and one-time coronavirus-slayer Slovakia now tops the global ranking of daily new deaths per capita, as it did for several consecutive weeks in February. A staggering 7,800 people had died of Covid-19 in this country.

President Zuzana Čaputová marked the first year of the pandemic in Slovakia by lighting candles for the victims in front of the Presidential Palace. The ruling coalition marked it in the same way it has throughout the less successful months of the second wave of the pandemic – with conflict and confusion.

Things had all seemed so different a year ago. Riding a wave of public disillusionment with political elites following a slew of corruption scandals and the brutal murder of the 27-year-old investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée, Igor Matovič – an anti-corruption warrior-turned-parliamentarian and media mogul who relished the limelight – and his populist movement OĽaNO (Ordinary People and Independent Personalities) sniffed its chance at power. Promising sweeping changes during the 2020 election campaign, OĽaNO appealed to a weary population and bagged more than a quarter of all votes, becoming the first political outfit since 2002 to beat the tally of Robert Fico’s populist Smer-SD. By banding together with three coalition partners, OĽaNO created a constitutional majority of 95 seats – the strongest parliamentary support in the country’s modern history.

However, rather than celebrating its first year in office, Matovič’s government was instead facing a coalition crisis. A coalition crisis, which had lasted almost a month, flared up when the Prime Minister secretly procured Russian-made Sputnik V vaccines that were yet to be approved for use by the European Medicines Agency.

The vaccines were purchased at Matovič’s discretion, who put on a last-minute show for the media by announcing their delivery via military planes. The act made the coalition partners confused and disappointed. The most voluble dissenter was Deputy Prime Minister and Economy Minister Richard Sulík, who leads the junior coalition partner Freedom and Solidarity party (SaS). He was soon joined by the For the People party (Za ľudí), another junior coalition member.

After weeks of squabbling and buying time, the crisis was still unresolved. On March 21, Igor Matovič issued a set of demands, the fulfilment of which he promised would lead to his resignation. These included the forced resignation of several prominent members of the
government, including Justice Minister Mária Kolíková from Za ňuďí and SaS leader Richard Sulík. The Prime Minister requested SaS return a ministry into the hands of OĽaNO in any newly formed government. He added that he intended to remain in the refurbished government in some capacity. It was later revealed that Matovič was pondering creating a new seat for himself in the form of “deputy prime minister for tackling corruption”.

Consequently, Sulík and Kolíková both resigned, as did Education Minister Branislav Grohling and Foreign Minister Ivan Korčok, both members of SaS. These departures were preceded by that of the Health Minister, Marek Krajčí from OĽaNO, and Labor Minister Milan Krajniak, from Sme rodina, the largest coalition partner, who had stepped down earlier in a futile bid to end the crisis. These resignations should only have served the purpose of motivating Matovič to finally step down himself so that the composition of a new government could finally be thought through. They were a signal for him to get going and finally solve this conflict.

**Slovakia’s new government ended the Russian vaccine crisis**

Slovak President Zuzana Čaputová on April 1, 2021 formally appointed a new government, ending a month-long crisis that had begun when the country’s now-former Prime Minister, Igor Matovič, unilaterally bought Russia’s coronavirus vaccine.

Eduard Heger replaced Igor Matovič as Prime Minister. The former Finance Minister was an executive for a Slovak vodka producer and a political novice, when elected to parliament in 2016 for Matovič’s Ordinary People party. Besides Heger, most of the other government ministers returned. An interesting fact is that Igor Matovič assumed Heger’s abandoned Finance Minister Office. While not a total debacle, it is an embarrassing comedown for Matovič, who was able to serve only one year atop the government.

The new government greatly resembles the one it is replacing. Only one Cabinet newcomer has been named, Health Minister Vladimír Lengvarský. In addition, a new Labor Minister has not yet been appointed, after Čaputová rejected the coalition’s nominee. In appointing the new government, Čaputová urged the new ministers to end the internal quarrels that beset its predecessor — even though many of the players remain the same.

Slovakia has a history of premiership swaps. Following journalist Kuciak’s shooting in 2018, Peter Pellegrini replaced Smer-SD leader and then premier Róbert Fico as leader. In 2010, Iveta Radičová stepped in for SDKÚ-DS chief Mikuláš Dzurinda.
In a fact, both of them stepped out of the shadow of their predecessors and became more popular. However Igor Matovič is probably not mentally set up for this. He likely does not want someone next to him who could jump over him and become more popular and trustworthy in the eyes of the public. Matovič needed somebody who will remain in his shadow and who does not even have the ambition to step out of that shadow Therefore, Eduard Heger was widely touted as Matovič’s successor. An esteemed bureaucrat who has not shown much authority so far, he is struggling to sell himself as a politician, making him the ideal candidate in Matovič’s eyes.

Matovič wanted to avoid another possible scenarios such as a technocratic cabinet led by an independent prime minister or a snap general election. Premature elections could be devastating for him, with the latest polls showing that more than 80 per cent of Slovaks wanted him to end his premiership. More than half of voters were unhappy with the Matovič’s government. Besides, former Prime Minister Pellegrini’s Hlas-SD party is soaring in popularity as its referendum on early elections launched earlier this year gained the required 350,000 signatures for it to be considered by parliament.

Besides fighting the virus, the new cabinet is likely to face another major obstacle in getting Slovakia’s economy back on track after the extensive lockdowns. With unemployment at well over 7 per cent, the new Economy Minister will find the extra measures needed to contain the spread of the coronavirus will make it harder to achieve the 4 per cent GDP growth rate predicted for this year by the European Commission.

**Conclusion**

It took some time, but finally on April 1, 2021 a new coalition government ended a political crisis triggered by a secret deal to buy Russia’s Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine. President Zuzana Čaputová appointed the new Cabinet led by Prime Minister Eduard Heger two days after the previous government of Igor Matovič resigned. Beside the swap between the PM and Finance Minister, the government has a new health minister and no immediate labor and social affairs minister who is expected to be appointed later. The rest remains the same. It was the first European government to collapse due to its handling of the pandemic, but the move kept the same four-party coalition in power and avoided the possibility of an early election.