



Weekly Briefing

Slovakia political briefing:
Troubles of the minority government in Slovakia
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Troubles of the minority government in Slovakia

Summary

Slovakia's government has lost its majority in parliament after a junior partner withdrew from the four-party coalition. Foreign Minister Ivan Korčok, Justice Minister Mária Kolíková, Education Minister Branislav Gröhling and the party's leader and former Economy Minister Richard Sulík all from the liberal Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) party, submitted their resignations at the end of August. With SaS no longer supporting the coalition in the parliament, the three parties of the coalition do not have the necessary 76 votes in the house, and rule as a minority government. It also means that the coalition has been struggling to function properly and in some cases has to rely on the votes of the opposition or even on far-right MPs.

Introduction

The SaS party has left Slovakia's government after a two-month ultimatum asking Finance Minister Igor Matovič to leave. The move came after he pushed through a package of family benefits, costing over a billion euros. These were criticized as unsystematic and were passed in cooperation with a far-right opposition party. The now former coalition party already upended Matovič last year from his position as prime minister after he surprised the country with an order of Russian Sputnik V vaccines.

The remaining three coalition parties now have 70 parliamentary seats, short of the 76 majority threshold to pass laws. The coalition plans to rely on support from the opposition, either by lowering the quorum by not attending sessions or by voting in support of their laws. Igor Matovič has refused to leave his post for the second time, despite being the least popular politician in Slovakia, with an 88% disapproval rate. He claims the ultimatum was unreasonable and accused SaS leader Richard Sulík of helping "the mafia" to return.

Coalition struggles in parliament

Ministers from the Slovak center-right Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) party resigned at the beginning of September, leaving the coalition government short of a majority in the midst of

an energy crisis and conflict in neighboring Ukraine. The resignations cast doubt over the long term survival of the NATO and European Union member country's center-right cabinet, which is trying to tackle soaring energy prices and has strongly backed Ukraine in its fight against Russia's invasion.

Almost a week after a group of ministers quit the coalition government, Prime Minister Eduard Heger delivered a list of candidates for vacant ministerial posts to President Zuzana Čaputová. On September 13, President Zuzana Čaputová appointed three new ministers at the Presidential Palace. Rastislav Káčer is the new foreign minister, Viliam Karas the justice minister and Karel Hirman the new economy minister. Temporarily, the prime minister took the education minister post, but three weeks later Ján Horecký was named as the new education minister.

New ministers have been appointed and Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) has returned to parliament, but Slovakia's government has been struggling to function properly. With three of its ministers back in their parliamentary seats, SaS now holds 21 seats in the house. Even though the party said they were going to contribute their votes to open the September session of the parliament, the first one after the summer break, shortly before the session was scheduled on September 13 they specified they would not do so at the first attempt. SaS decided to test its former partners.

The coalition of OĽaNO, Sme Rodina and Za Ľudí now has 69 MPs in the house. To open the session, more than half of all 150 MPs need to vote to approve the session program, meaning the government must find at least seven votes among the opposition each time parliament convenes. On September 14, Speaker of Parliament Boris Kollár (Sme Rodina) made two attempts to open the session, but both failed. At the first attempt, 64 MPs were present at the vote while 71 were present for the second vote. Kollár then adjourned the session until September 20.

In this precarious situation, parliament is scheduled to deal with an unprecedented number of draft laws during the September session. There are 147 points on the program, and more than 80 of them are MPs' own legislative initiatives rather than being proposed by government ministers.

Observers believe the increased activity of MPs may be either because they feel the chaotic situation in parliament may be a chance to have their own proposals passed, or because

they worry the current parliamentary term may soon come to a premature end and elections called, and want to try to push through their projects before that happens.

Among the more controversial proposals is legislation to force shops to close on Sundays and a ban on rainbow flags on public buildings (from conservative OĽaNO MP Anna Záborská) as well as the introduction of registered partnerships, including for same-sex couples, from SaS MPs. Sme Rodina MPs want a further increase in child benefits, and a reduction in VAT on foodstuffs for schools, hospitals and social care homes to 5 percent. Meanwhile, SaS wants a cut in VAT on fuels and for restaurants.

Besides, an extraordinary session of parliament was held on September 13 for a no-confidence vote in Interior Minister Roman Mikulec (OĽaNO) initiated by the opposition Smer-SD party. SaS said they would not vote to oust Mikulec, but would like to initiate a no-confidence vote in Finance Minister Igor Matovič (OĽaNO). They claimed that several former and current members of the ruling coalition would back the move.

To oust Matovič, however, the whole opposition would need to back the proposal. While members of the Hlas party headed by former Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini have said they would consider it their duty to vote against Matovič, Smer-SD leader Robert Fico said he would not as it would only pave the way for SaS to come back into government.

Finally, in the proposal, which was also signed by members of the Hlas party of Peter Pellegrini, SaS listed the mismanagement of public finances, maintaining the society in a state of conflict, vulgar communication and attacks against the media as reasons for Matovič to be removed.

Slovak Finance Minister Igor Matovič faced a non-confidence in the National Council on October 4, but was saved by several far-right members, which also increasingly support coalition proposals.

Slovakia has been left with a minority government after Freedom and Solidarity left the coalition at the end of August. Already then, some commentators suggested that the coalition could continue with the help of three MPs, who got into the parliament on the candidate list of the far-right People's Party Our Slovakia. Tomáš Taraba, Štefan Kuffa, and his son Filip Kuffa style themselves in the role of conservative pro-Christian National council members. They are especially close to the coalition. We are Family party of National Council speaker Boris Kollár. Although Taraba, Kuffa, and Kuffa were very critical of the government and Matovič for a long

time, they also were critical of Freedom and Solidarity and said they don't want to open a way for their return.

After Matovič survived the no-confidence vote, three proposals submitted to the National Council by Taraba and Kuffa got into the second reading. These proposals, supposedly, have also been discussed at a coalition meeting. Furthermore, the new Law Minister openly stated that he negotiated the support of his proposals with Taraba.

Several National Council members from Matovič's Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLaNO) said that they consider cooperation with far-right members a "red line." Nine OLaNO members criticized Matovič before the non-confidence vote for his recent attacks on journalists, whom he called "progressive fascists", and refused to participate in the ballot.

Conclusion

Slovakia's government has lost its majority in parliament after a junior partner, the liberal Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) party, withdrew from the four-party coalition. Although the four empty ministerial posts were already completed by new candidates, the minority government is still struggling with other challenges. For example, Slovak Prime Minister Eduard Heger's minority government has managed to open a parliamentary session only after the opposition Smer-SD party of ex-premier Robert Fico backed the move. Heger's cabinet had failed to secure majority of deputies (76 of 150) to open a session on two previous occasions, casting doubt on its ability to govern and pass measures to combat the energy crisis.

The SaS had demanded Matovič's resignation as a condition for staying in the government. Matovič could still face a SaS-backed attempt to be removed by parliament majority, but the question is whether Smer-SD would support such move or would rather wait for a more propitious time to bring down the government and hold early elections. The dismissal of Matovič might actually reinforce the government by allowing the SaS to re-enter the cabinet. Currently Matovič "survived" a no-confidence vote in the parliament thanks to three far-right MPs. It also could be a precedent and could cause more troubles for the minority government.

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