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DGAP COMMENTARY

Slovakia's 2020 Elections

Political Puzzling with Power and Populism



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Slovakia is facing a decisive moment. At the end of February, the country will hold its first general elections since mass anti-corruption protests shook its political establishment and toppled veteran populist prime minister Robert Fico. While Slovakia is seen as a leader in the fight for democracy in Central Europe, political programs and ideas have been side-lined by a pre-election campaign that has turned into a clash of emotions and populist moves.

Parliamentary elections on February 29, 2020, will put Slovaks back on a political roller coaster. Less than a year after the country elected Zuzana Caputova – female, liberal, and pro-European – as president, its political landscape is facing another shift. Voters are engaged in the process and turnout is expected to be very high. Current estimates show that close to 70 percent of the population will participate, exceeding the 60 percent of the last general elections in 2016. Polls show that about one fifth of voters will decide on a candidate in the final days before the election.

Consequently, it is not yet clear which parties and leaders will determine the course of Slovak politics in the aftermath of these elections. They could be a turning point in which a younger political elite, who is ideologically more diverse and whose agenda is more allied with its Western European peers, takes over. In such a case, Slovakia, which is located between Poland and Hungary, could become even more of a pro-EU anchor for the whole Visegrad Group – in addition to being its only eurozone member and a staunch political ally of Germany. But these elections could also result in a period of domestic gridlock, weakness, and instability. They could turn out to merely usher in an interim phase in which the country's political landscape continues to drift in search of a more stable arrangement.

Although Slovakia's politics have been characterized by instability for years, particularly on the center right, the current level of volatility is unprecedented. Chances are a record number of 10 to 11 parties and alliances will make it over the electoral threshold, likely producing a parliament that is

more fragmented than ever. The good news is that this fragmentation would not necessarily go hand in hand with the strengthening of anti-EU and illiberal forces. Even if the far-right Popular Party of Our Slovakia (LSNS) gains more ground – it is currently in third place, polling at around 13 percent (in the elections of 2016 it got 8 percent) – it is unlikely to shape the agenda or

cation skills of Caputova, who reached voters beyond the party's core urban constituency.

Still, one dark horse candidate has emerged for the opposition: Igor Matovic, the 46-year-old leader of the politically established anti-graft movement Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLANO). Matovic

likely not be able to find a new coalition partner in the next parliament. The Slovak National Party (SNS), its junior coalition partner, is currently polling at around 3 percent and unlikely to make it over the electoral threshold.

Still, Smer-SD needs to secure a relatively strong position to be able to protect its members and business networks from prosecution – perhaps by, as mentioned above, not shying away from cooperating with the far-right LSNS. While Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini, who has led the ruling party's pre-election campaign, has promised not to work with these extremists, party chairman Robert Fico has already engaged LSNS in a tacit alliance in the outgoing parliament.

Regardless of its next government, Slovakia will turn inward

become a kingmaker in the new parliament. A big unknown, however, is the future course of the ruling party, Smer-Social Democracy (Smer-SD). After dominating Slovak politics for more than a decade, the left-wing populist party of Robert Fico – who stayed party chairman after resigning as prime minister in 2018 – is likely to be voted out of power. The extent to which Smer-SD will embrace the illiberal agenda and cooperate with the extremist LSNS remains to be seen.

A DIVIDED OPPOSITION AND A DARK HORSE

The new parties of the centrist opposition were unable to unite into a single block and maintain the momentum that resulted from the protests and President Caputova's impressive victory. They are currently divided between the left-liberal party Progressive Slovakia (PS), which is allied with the center-right Spolu ("Together"), and the "For the People" party of former President Andrej Kiska, which has a more conservative profile. Both of these parties were polling just below 10 percent. PS could not find another candidate with the political talent and communi-

has best understood the wave of public anger over corruption and has surfed upon it to emerge as the unexpected favorite. His party has also consistently reached out to the countryside and all societal groups online. It has not shied away from populist moves, such as basing its party program on the results of an open internet survey. In a recent poll, OLANO was at over 15 percent, neck-and-neck with Smer-SD, the ruling party. If the centrist opposition will be able to form the next government, the center-right populist Matovic is its most likely candidate for prime minister. A skillful communicator, he is untested by government office and has a reputation of unpredictability.

FICO'S SMER-SD UNDER PRESSURE

The latest poll by the agency Focus had Smer-SD retaining a narrow lead with around 17 percent, but the ruling party has been steadily losing support. After the investigation of the February 2018 murder of investigative journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancée unearthed a corrupt web of politicians, judges, police officers, and businessmen around the ruling party, Smer-SD will most

As a sign of how high the stakes are in the frenetic lead-up to these elections, Fico emerged from the background of Smer-SD's campaign to arrange a special session of the parliament after it was already formally in recess. In a fast-track procedure on February 24, 2020 – just five days before elections are held – the outgoing parliament introduced a thirteenth month of pensions to be paid by the end of 2020 to the tune of 400 million euros from the state budget. With the help of the representatives from SNS and LSNS, as well as a few individual members of parliament, Fico managed to get the biggest social package of the current government approved. Simultaneously, he turned the tables on the centrist opposition and President Caputova, who still needs to either sign the measure for it to become law or return it back to the incoming parliament. This shrewd populist trick by the veteran political operator has the potential to sway votes to Smer-SD and would, if enacted, have fiscal consequences for the next government.

CHANCES FOR A COALITION AND CHANGE

If the opposition parties win enough seats to oust Fico's ruling party, it would herald a generational change and a new era in Slovak politics. In order for an opposition coalition to take power in Bratislava, it would need to be made up of five to six parties with very diverse platforms – from the left-leaning progressives to the traditionally conservative Christian democrats. Such a broad centrist coalition would include Slovak members of three party groups that are represented in the European Parliament: the center-right European People's Party (EPP), the liberal Renew Europe, and the European Conservative and Reformist (ECR) Group. Such a coalition might, however, also be dependent on the support of the small conservative populist party "We are the Family," which is led by media celebrity Boris Kollar and whose partners at the EU level are far-right Eurosceptics.

Some vagueness or flexibility in the programs of these parties could be an advantage for helping such a diverse coalition to succeed – especially since most tensions and divisions in the Slovak electorate stem from cultural issues such as registered partnerships or gay marriages, as well as approaches to migration. But how long could such a fragile arrangement in Bratislava last? On the one hand, it would be difficult to manage politically. On the other hand, there will be huge pressure from Slovak society for it to hold together until some tangible results are achieved, particularly on measures related to anti-corruption and law enforcement.

After the popular vote, the most consequential step in moving forward with anti-corruption investigations and renewing the people's trust in state institutions will be the election by parliament in mid-2020 of a new prosecutor general, the nomination of whom has to be approved by President Caputova.

RAMIFICATIONS FOR THE EU AND GERMANY

If the new government is formed by the broad centrist coalition, it will take a more proactive approach to some parts of the EU's agenda, including the Green Deal. If the cabinet will be headed by Igor Matovic, the center-right EPP will gain another prime minister but also a potential new headache in Central Europe. Matovic is socially conservative, populist, and not very predictable. His OLANO party only switched political affiliation from the eurosceptic ECR Group last year, for example. Yet regardless of who forms the next government, Slovakia will be turning inward rather than punching above its weight at the EU level.

Following its own national preferences might also make Slovakia more willing to keep some distance from the Visegrad Group and become more closely aligned with Germany and France. But because having its own agenda will also make Slovakia a less predictable partner, Berlin and Paris would be well-advised to engage with its new government and prime minister from the outset.

In his interview with Reuters on February 24, 2020, Igor Matovic pointedly took a swipe at right-wing governments in neighboring Hungary and Poland that have clashed with the EU over the rule of law and media freedoms, saying: "We want to show in this election that Central Europe has not gone crazy." It remains to be seen,

however, if the elections in Slovakia will prove his point.

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