PISM POLSKI INSTYTUT SPRAW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH
THE POLISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

BULLETIN

No. 34 (629), 14 March 2014 © PISM

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Trading Places: The Presidential Election in Slovakia

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The frontrunner of the presidential election in Slovakia is the current prime minister, Robert Fico. His victory would consolidate the existing political order in Slovakia, based on the personal authority of the leader, and may even, in the long run, give it a formal framework in the form of increasing the constitutional prerogatives of the head of state. However, if the election were to run to a second round, mobilisation of undecided voters and Fico's opponents could translate into a good result for his most likely rival, the non-partisan Andrej Kiska, who could become the dark horse of the presidential race.

In preparation for the end of the second term of Ivan Gašparovič's presidency (2004–2014), the presidential election in Slovakia have been called for 15 March (first round) and 29 March (second round). The frontrunner is the current prime minister and leader of the SMER–Sociálna Demokracia party, Robert Fico, who would become the first incumbent head of government to pass to the position of head of state in the EU's history. Although some polls have shown that Fico, who enjoys stable support of 35–40%, would win in the first round, the non-partisan Andrej Kiska has recently emerged as Fico's major competitor. Within four months, support for him has increased by almost 10%, mainly among the undecided voters (he currently has 25–30% support). Less likely winners are candidates addressing the liberal or conservative electorate directly. They include Milan Kňažko. Leader of the Slovak Velvet Revolution (10–12%, independent), lawyer Radoslav Procházka (8–10%, independent) and former chairman of the National Council, Pavol Hrušovský (5–7%, the right wing parties' candidate). But, if there were to be a second round, all of their votes could pass to Kiska, a fact that for Fico would threaten a repeat of the 2010 parliamentary election, when beaten right wing parties formed an alliance against the SMER–SD, depriving it of power.

Robert Fico's Ambitions. Fico's decision to run for president, announced only three months before the election, surprised not only observers but also many members of his party. Fico, who is the most popular politician in the country, has, since April 2012, been the head of independent Slovakia's first one-party cabinet to hold a parliamentary majority. For him, the narrow prerogatives of the head of state, which are limited mainly to representative functions, nominating and appointing the prime minister and three members of both the Constitutional Court and the Judicial Council, may be regarded as a political demotion in comparison to the role of the prime minister. However, it seems that Fico's apparently counterintuitive choice is the result of cold calculation.

Firstly, should Fico win, the current structure of power, with a strong leader, building its position on personal authority and balancing sometimes conflicting interests of his political and business environment, will be maintained. Fico as a president is likely to seek to expand his own prerogatives; a first attempt has been already made by SMER–SD, which tried to push through a constitutional amendment to increase the powers of the head of state regarding the nomination of members of the Judicial Council (the move was blocked by the opposition). Even if the constitutional order is not be changed, Fico would in any case keep control of the government, which would be headed by Robert Kaliňák (deputy prime minister and minister of the interior), Marek Maďarič (minister of culture) or Pavol Paška (chairman of the National Council), all of whom collaborate closely with Fico. Kaliňák seems the most natural candidate, due to his popularity in society, moderate views, and loyalty to the prime minister. "President Fico" would therefore, at least in the short term, sustain his impact on both the government and on party unity.

Secondly, Fico may remember the fate of former prime minister Vladimir Mečiar, who took part in the presidential election only when his party began to lose public confidence (and he lost). Support for SMER–SD, though still high at 30–35%, has been decreasing gradually and, if the trend continues until the 2016 parliamentary election, the party will not repeat its impressive result from 2010 and may face problems with creating a coalition due to the high reluctance of the other players on the political scene. For Fico, a return to opposition would mean not only reducing his chances before the next presidential election, but perhaps also the beginning of the end of his political career. Therefore, in order to gain the widest possible support, the prime minister presents himself as a candidate aside from ongoing politics, which is why he leads a rather mild campaign built on slogans of continuity and stability, free of anti-Hungarian accents, and addressed to both the social and conservative electorate.

Dark Horse Kiska. Andrej Kiska, a well-known businessman and philanthropist, who previously did not participate in political life, may also progress to the second round. His growing importance stems both from his personal popularity and a weariness with party politics among part of the population. Technocrat Kiska, who launched a campaign as early as 2012, has, from the beginning, been creating his narrative on the theme of "first independent president." His programme, not entirely clear, is therefore the result of the pre-planned strategy, prepared by journalist Rado Bat'o, but also reflects his lack of factual orientation in matters of state. This can be proved by his foreign agenda; Kiska idealistically declares his readiness to recognise Kosovo and to show stronger support for NATO, passing over the bipartisan consensus (in Slovakia there is concern that recognition of Kosovo would be an excuse for similar demands of the Hungarian minority) and public moods (Slovaks are among the most NATO-sceptical EU nations). In domestic affairs Kiska avoids controversy, emphasising his interest mainly in social issues, health care and economy.

Kiska's non-confrontational position, still beneficial in the short term, may not be sufficient in a direct encounter with the more expressive Fico, who benefits from strong party structures. Televised debates, which have already influenced the result of elections (for example, the negative effect on Magda Vášáryová's 1999 presidential election campaign), can be particularly challenging. Kiska's unclear past before 1989, and his business activity (his companies were engaged in quasi-usurious activities), may present problems, too. However, even if he loses, the elections will facilitate promotion of Kiska as a personality, as happened with Iveta Radičová, whose popularity from the 2009 campaign helped in her future government career. If, after entering the second round, Kiska received the votes of other candidates, he could become the spokesman of those dissatisfied with SMER–SD. After the elections, this capital may be used smartly in the formation of his own party.

Right Wing: A Long Road to Unification. The presidential election will confirm the Slovak right's crisis, which has lasted at least since the fall of the Radičová's coalition government in October 2011. The right wing, which for years was Slovakia's face of modernisation, is mired in programmatic and structural apathy, personal conflicts, and corruption scandals. Furthermore, since Mikuláš Dzurinda and Radičová left politics, the right has struggled with a lack of distinct personalities. SMER–SD has undertaken a successful attempt at further destabilising this camp during the election campaign, proposing an alliance with the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH), led by Fico's election rival Hrušovský over the issue of amending the constitution (changes to the judiciary and the conservative definition of the family). If the current paralysis lasts until the 2016 election, it is unlikely that the parties were able to re-ally against SMER–SD. However, presidential elections can also become an opportunity for sanation on the right, which may benefit from the results of some of the candidates. Depending on the final settlements, the new right could be formed either around Kiska (if he entered party politics), or the duo of Kňažko and Procházka; they have already announced the possibility of cooperation after the election.

Conclusions. The most likely winner of the first round is Fico—he has a balanced campaign, party mobilisation and the backing of some media in his favour. His victory would consolidate the existing political order based on the personal authority of the leader, and may even, in the long run, give it an official framework in the form of increasing the president's constitutional prerogatives. After Fico's departure from government one should not expect significant shifts in Slovakia's domestic, economic or foreign policy. Perhaps some generational changes will touch SMER–SD, a fact that will be facilitated by the promotion of those in Fico's closest circle to the presidential palace or the European Parliament. Some officials, such as deputy prime minister and minister of foreign affairs Miroslav Lajčák, do not disguise their interest in a career in international institutions (Lajčák's name is mentioned in the context of the new Secretary General of the UN).

However, even if Fico has been leading in the polls, he still cannot be sure of winning. He probably remembers Eduard Kukan, the former head of diplomacy, who, even on the eve of the 1999 election, led in the opinion polls but did not even make it to the second round. The recent mobilisation of both the undecided voters and Fico's opponents could translate into a good result for any of the other candidates, probably Kiska, who can become a symbol of change before the second round. If anyone other than Fico wins, a difficult cohabitation between the government and the president must be expected. The election is also a challenge for the right wing, but, paradoxically, they could be used to rebuild public trust.