

The presidential election in Slovakia: prime minister defeated by a novice

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In the presidential runoff in Slovakia, the independent candidate Andrej Kiska won 59.4% of the vote to beat the incumbent prime minister and leader of Smer-SD party, Robert Fico, who polled 40.6%. This is in spite of the fact that Fico had won the first round of the election. Given this strong public mandate, Kiska will most probably take on the role criticising the government. However, his impact will be limited due to his lack of a political base and the low prerogatives vested in the president under the constitution. Andrej Kiska is set to be sworn in on 15 June.

The presidential election has revealed that the public is increasingly disillusioned with the traditional political parties (around 60% of the votes in the first round were cast for independent candidates). This election brought a crushing defeat to the political centre-right, whose candidate was supported by only 3.3% of the voters. Consequently, while the emerging new political movements pose a serious threat to Robert Fico, his position in the government and in parliament will remain unchallenged due to the fragmentation of the parliamentary opposition. He is the unquestioned leader of Smer-SD, and his party can still count on a 30% support base in elections.

The centre right parties have found themselves in a much more difficult situation. Representatives of these circles have offered substantive support to Kiska in an attempt to reinforce their political position. However, an open alliance with the discredited centre-right parties would not serve Kiska's interests since he has promised a new quality in politics. Radoslav Prochazka, who came third in the first round of the presidential election, has announced that a new centre-right party will be formed. He will, however, have to face a bitter struggle with the well-established traditional parties.

President Kiska

Until 2012, Andrej Kiska was a businessman and a co-creator of one of Slovakia's largest charities, and was little known to the general public. He won the election as an independent candidate, the most apolitical of all those who ran for the presidency. In his election campaign, Kiska emphasised that he was not a politician and that he had financed his campaign with his own funds. He also emphasised that he did not represent any political option, but was the voice of the frustrated Slovakian public. He has responded to arguments concerning his lack of political experience by saying that his experience from business and charity has provided him with the knowledge of how to combat unemployment, reform the

welfare system and the health care service. A great deal of voters have beyond any doubt accepted the image of Kiska as a man who is no longer interested in earning more money after a controversial business career (he earned a fortune on shares in para-banking firms) and who has devoted himself to working for sick children, and has now stood up for ordinary citizens. However, for many voters, especially the young electorate in large cities, Kiska was above all the only real alternative to the unpopular prime minister.

Kiska's electoral promises could be summed up as "creating a counterbalance to the government", "protecting citizens' interests" and "bringing prestige back to the presidency." His formal competences, in addition to the traditional powers of the head of state, are very limited. The president has no right of legislative initiative, and any act vetoed by him can be adopted by a simple majority in parliament. However, his influence on the judiciary power is quite significant: he nominates judges, including the judges of the Constitutional Court (from among the candidates put forward by parliament), members of the presidium of the Supreme Court (upon a motion from the *Judicial Council*), the attorney general (upon a motion from parliament) and three members of the Judicial Council (Smer and the opposition Christian Democrats want to remove this competence).

Little is known about Kiska's views on foreign policy, although he has declared a generally pro-Western orientation. In his campaign, Kiska avoided taking a clear stance on whether sanctions should or should not be imposed on Russia in connection with the events in Ukraine, instead emphasising the need to develop a common stance as part of the EU. However, he has made it clear that Slovakia should help its neighbour Ukraine, which Fico criticised as an unreliable partner. Kiska is in line with the views of Prime Minister Fico in wanting European integration to be enhanced and Slovakia to co-operate more closely with France and Germany. Unlike Fico, Andrej Kiska wants to recognise the independence of Kosovo; Fico has criticised him for this. However, he has skilfully reverted this criticism back at Fico, pointing out that the prime minister illegitimately compares the Kosovo issue to the Hungarian minority's situation in Slovakia (Kiska received strong support in the areas inhabited by ethnic Hungarians).

Prime Minister Fico

Despite the recent electoral defeat, support for Prime Minister Fico has remained at a high level two years after heading the government. The almost 900,000 votes which he received in the runoff fell only 240,000 short of the number of votes which Smer-SD received in the parliamentary election in 2012, allowing them to form a government without the need to form a coalition. Fico's party may thus still count on solid public support, which guarantees it first place in pre-election polls and offers it a great chance of winning the election. However, the outcome of the presidential election indicates that the potential of Smer-SD as a party relying on the popularity of its charismatic leader is gradually running dry. Fico, who has been the unquestionable leader of Smer for ten years, still has no serious rival within the party, and his loyal deputies are definitely less trusted by the public. The defeat in the presidential election is likely to inspire Fico to reorganise the government and replace the less popular party leaders with new faces. A new party leader could emerge from this group in the future.

Changes in the right-wing parties

The greatest defeat in the presidential election was sustained by the parliamentary opposition parties. These groupings were either unable to set up a reliable candidate for the presidency (the populist OĽaNO and the liberal SaS), or their candidate received a low level of support (the bloc of centre-right parties: KDH, Most-Hid and SDKU-DS). The divided opposition is led predominantly by the same individuals who contributed to the fall of Iveta Radicova's cabinet in 2012 and they are unable to pose a real challenge to Smer, although a section of voters are growing increasingly tired with the governing party led by Robert Fico. These groupings may be further weakened since part of the centre-right's experts have joined the circle of President Kiska's aides. This will also affect the crystallisation of the president's views on vital political questions, including international issues.

The outcome of the presidential election has shown that Radoslav Prochazka (whose support level in the first round was less than 2 percentage points lower than that of Kiska) stands a chance of winning over the right-wing electorate. Prochazka (42), an ambitious lawyer and a Yale graduate, embarked on his political career as a member of the Christian-Democratic Movement (KDH). In 2013, he left KDH after a conflict with the party's leadership and remained in parliament as an independent MP. Prochazka is above all appealing to the younger generation of conservative voters from smaller towns. However, the fact that the next parliamentary election in Slovakia has been scheduled for 2016 is working to his disadvantage, since he will find it difficult at that time to capitalise on the energy accumulated in his campaign ahead of the presidential election.