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The presidential election in Slovakia: a vote for change

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The first round of presidential elections held in Slovakia on 16 March saw a clear victory for Zuzana Čaputová - a lawyer and vice-president of the liberal Progressive Slovakia party, winning 41% of the vote. In the second round (30 March) she will face off against Maroš Šefčovič, the deputy head of the European Commission, who is supported by the largest party of the ruling coalition Smer-Social Democracy, and who won less than 19% of votes. The third and fourth places in the election were taken by anti-system candidates, who also campaigned on conservative and pro-Russian platforms: Štefan Harabin (14.3%), and Marian Kotleba (10.4%). Turnout was almost 49%, i.e. about 5 percentage points more than in the first round of the two previous presidential elections. The incumbent president Andrej Kiska chose not to stand for re-election, allegedly due to family reasons, but he has stated that he will continue his political activity.

Commentary

- Čaputová's clear advantage after the first round makes her the favourite to win the second round. Her win is largely the result of the anti-government sentiments that have persisted among a large part of the Slovak public more than a year after the murder of the investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée. Čaputová's election campaign, stressing the need for 'a common front against evil', refers directly to the mass public protests held under the slogan 'For a decent Slovakia' organised across the country after Kuciak's death. Thanks to her good sense of the public mood, Čaputová gained the support of many smaller donors and volunteers. This helped her to succeed in those regions where her rivals had less of a presence (for example, she won the support of the Slovak Hungarians). Čaputová is known to the public primarily as a lawyer who defended the local people against the construction of a landfill at Pezinok near Bratislava by businessmen linked to the ruling Smer party. Her critics have highlighted her liberal views on moral issues and lack of political experience (especially when compared with Šefčovič). For many Slovaks, however, it was more important that Čaputová embodies their hopes for fair politics carried out in the service of the citizens.
- Šefčovič's result showed that the Smer brand helped in getting the support of the party's bedrock electorate (c. 20-25%), but makes it difficult to attract voters from other parties. Although Šefčovič, as a career diplomat, was also evaluated positively in opposition circles, in the election campaign he found himself in the position of the spokesperson for Smer, the party which has held power since 2006 (with a break in 2010-12), and has been

burdened by numerous scandals. PM Peter Pellegrini's government is trying to regain public trust, with the help of the police and the judiciary. Shortly before the first round, an influential entrepreneur was charged with ordering Kuciak's murder, and another was sentenced to a term of imprisonment and the forfeiture of his assets derived from crime. On the one hand, Šefčovič could present these moves as an example of a functioning state, but on the other, further reports from the investigation show the extent of the pathology which developed under Smer at the interface of government, business and organised crime. Šefčovič has also found it difficult to move beyond his image of 'a bureaucrat from Brussels' who is distant from the problems of ordinary Slovaks. Nor is he credible when he presents himself today as a defender of 'traditional values', especially as back in December 2018 he was coordinator of the extremely liberal election manifesto of the European Socialists.

- Another expression of public frustration at Smer's rule is the good results of the anti-system candidates. Štefan Harabin, a judge of the Supreme Court, a deputy prime minister and minister of justice in 2006-2009 on behalf of Vladimír Mečiar's party, owes his popularity to appearances in the media popularising various conspiracy theories. He presents himself in these appearances as a person fighting political corruption and 'Islamisation', and a defender of the traditional family model, Christian and national values. A similar tone was taken by Marian Kotleba, the leader of the xenophobic Kotleba-ĽSNS party, whose roots lie in the neo-Nazi movement, and which openly advocates withdrawal from NATO and the EU. If Kotleba had withdrawn from running in the elections, Harabin would likely have made it to the second round. Kotleba feared, however, success for Harabin would have induced him to found a political party which could become a serious rival to his own group. Both candidates pushed the notion that Slovakia's national sovereignty should be defended against Brussels and Washington, and demanded that Slovakia reorient its foreign policy - thus repeating the Kremlin's narrative.