

Slovakia: President Čaputová

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Zuzana Čaputová, the candidate backed by the opposition, won the presidential runoff in Slovakia on 30 March. She garnered over 58% of the vote, thus beating Maroš Šefčovič, who was supported by the governing party Smer-SD (and who received less than 42% of the vote). Čaputová is a lawyer and has been linked to the non-governmental sector throughout the greater part of her career, focusing mostly on the transparency of the government's work, the activation of local communities and environment protection. She became engaged in politics one and a half years ago, and shortly afterwards she was elected deputy president of a small party, Progressive Slovakia (PS). This party combines the care of social issues typical of left-wing parties with demands for streamlining and digitalising the operation of the state and the protection of liberal democracy. Čaputová will take office on 15 June. She will be Slovakia's first president since 1993 not to have applied for or been a member of the Communist Party. The turnout during the runoff – below 42% – was the lowest ever seen during presidential elections.

Commentary

- Zuzana Čaputová won the election because her campaign responded to the public demand for political change. The murder of Ján Kuciak and his fiancée in February 2018 provoked public mobilisation against Smer, the party led by the former prime minister Robert Fico, and contributed to the disclosure of a whole array of pathologies tolerated during its rule. Čaputová, focusing on the slogans of a fair and just Slovakia, attracted not only liberal but also conservative voters. Her non-confrontational campaign and clear message added to her popularity. Čaputová did not hide her controversial views (for example, her support for homosexual couples to adopt children), but she declared that political changes as regards worldview require a broad consensus. This was in contrast with Maroš Šefčovič's campaign, who presented himself as a defender of the traditional values in a rather unconvincing manner and did not refrain from attacking his counter-candidate.
- The result of the presidential election is a further defeat for Smer-SD, which will provoke a further increase in tensions inside the party. The leader of Smer, Fico has announced that he will combat 'ultraliberalism' in the name of a strong welfare state and traditional values. In turn, the party's deputy president, Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini, has appealed for a critical evaluation of the strategy adopted so far. Fico's position in the party leadership is still safe but public opinion polls indicate that the level of public trust in

Pellegrini is already much higher than that of Fico (52% and 20%, respectively).

- The president's competences are limited. The office has no legislative initiative, and the presidential veto can be rejected by the parliament by a majority of the statutory number of MPs. However, the president has a strong influence on the judiciary: the president nominates judges, including those to the Constitutional Court (from among the candidates put forward by the parliament), the authorities of the Supreme Court (upon a motion from the Judicial Council), the general prosecutor (upon a motion from the parliament) and three members of the Judicial Council. However, Čaputová's political position will depend on the outcome of the parliamentary election next spring. The opposition stands a real chance of removing Smer from power. However, extensive fragmentation is still a problem among the opposition parties. Unless a pre-election coalition is formed, conservative and liberal groupings will be vying for a similar electorate, as will the new forces – the coalition of Progressive Slovakia and the grouping Together (Spolu), as well as the political party being formed by the outgoing president Andrej Kiska.