

## Slovakia: the Matovič government with an agenda for hard times

Krzysztof Dębiec

The government of Igor Matovič, which was sworn in on 21 March, adopted a draft agenda that was sent to the National Council the following day, at the last constitutionally acceptable date. Voting on a motion of confidence for the government with a three fifths constitutional majority will be a formality. The prime minister's party, called Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLaNO), is demanding that corruption be tackled and the state repaired. Their coalition partners are: the pro-welfare and anti-immigration party We Are Family; the economically and ideologically liberal and Freedom and Solidarity party (SaS), which is wary of deeper European integration; and the centrist party For the People, established by a former president, Andrej Kiska.

The government agenda, which was developed amid the COVID-19 pandemic and uncertain economic prospects, includes ambitious goals regarding the reform of the legal system, fighting corruption, the improvement in the situation of national and ethnic minorities (nearly 20% of the Slovak population, mainly Hungarians and the Romani) and the extension of welfare programmes. The agenda also outlines the first measures which are part of the reform of the healthcare system which is planned to 2030. These include: an increase in salaries for nurses, improved training for medical personnel, and the accelerated construction of new hospitals. In foreign policy, an unequivocal Euro-Atlantic orientation and an active participation in the activity of the Visegrad Group have been underlined. As for the Visegrad Group, the Slovak government intends to more effectively promote its interests and enhance the role of the group in shaping EU policy and activity. The continuation of 'tried and tested co-operation with Poland' was mentioned right after the 'above-standard' relations with the Czech Republic.

### Commentary

- The agenda the government has presented is one of the most ambitious since the independent state of Slovakia was established in 1993. The priorities of the new government include fighting corruption, repairing the judiciary, and restoring the confidence of Slovaks in their state institutions. The Matovič government has taken over power following a long period of the rule of Smer-Social Democracy (in 2006-2010 and 2012-2020) which had been associated with numerous pathologies, symbolised by the murder of the investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée in February 2018. This

incident has also become a catalyst for civic outrage. Among other reforms, it was announced that there would be: a vetting of property (a test of the legality of accumulated property) for all judges and their families (including judges already active in their profession) would be introduced as part of constitutional legislation; the restrictions on lifting judges' immunity would be relaxed; an age of retirement for judges (65 years of age) would be established and the Supreme Administrative Court would be set up – it would also perform the disciplinary functions with regard to judges and prosecutors. In practice, these measures are set to accelerate the generational transition in the judiciary and, more broadly, in the entire state apparatus.

- The implementation of the entire agenda will be very difficult. This is mainly due to the COVID-19 pandemic and related uncertainty with regard to future economic development and the scale of decline in budget revenues as well as the government's great ambition. The agenda takes a pessimistic economic forecast into account only to a small extent (an institution subordinate to the Ministry of Finance has forecast that this year's GDP will decrease by 7.2% year on year, assuming that the pandemic-related restrictions will be in effect for two months, and by 12.5% if the restrictions are maintained for three months). It envisages that the path of economic growth will be recommenced already in 2021, which is highly uncertain. Numerous promises made, e.g. the extension of the council housing estates; increases in salaries in the healthcare professions and in education; the extension of the hospital network. Delivering on these is linked to higher spending from the state budget and the government has already announced that it may suspend the disbursement of a bonus monthly pension payment (this measure was adopted at the initiative of Smer during the election campaign). It may therefore be expected that the new government will focus on delivering on the promises linked to the repair of the state and fighting corruption from the very beginning as this will be possible with relatively low spending.
- The implementation of the agenda will also be hampered by divergences within the ruling coalition, e.g. with regard to economic issues, and it can be expected that the disputes will intensify after the pandemic ends and they will affect the functioning of the coalition. There are already many discrepancies in the government's agenda and several of the promises featured in it are even contradictory. The lengthy document uses the wording that the government will 'consider' a particular solution over 40 times. This, with the reluctance to withdraw from the promises made during the campaign, means in practice that the internal disputes in the coalition over particular questions are being postponed. Even at present, frequent frictions over the approach to be taken to combat the epidemic and to restart the economy can be seen between the Prime Minister (who would prefer to cautiously 'thaw it out') and Richard Sulík, the head of SaS and Economy Minister (who would be inclined to undertake bolder steps in this area).
- The government's agenda features solutions based on compromise in the areas which have been perceived as a potential ground for disputes for a broad centre-right coalition even before the election, including ones related to morality. In these cases, the coalition has chosen middle-of-the-road solutions: as for the reduction of the number of abortions (which is a demand of many members of parliament from OĽaNO) it was decided to provide financial support for pregnant women (200 euros a month, beginning from the

fourth month of pregnancy) instead of legal constraints; this can be seen as a gesture towards the pro-life camp, that is fairly dynamic in Slovakia, and it is a success of its representatives in the ruling camp that for the first time the term 'protection of unborn children' was used in a government's agenda. At the same time a type of a clause of conscience was introduced into the coalition agreement that excludes initiatives proposed by the members of parliament (exclusively) in this area from approval by all the heads of the coalition parties (the Coalition Council). In the case of civil unions, also for same-sex couples (a demand of SaS, opposed by OĽaNO), the agenda talks about seeking to improve overall regulations regarding the property rights of people living in one household. It may be expected that solutions in other contentious issues (such as taxation, the construction of council housing estates) will also be fragmented and, while based on compromise, they will not be fully satisfactory for any of the parties.

- The agenda includes non-standard, spectacular anti-corruption measures, designed to sustain the media attention and break free from the legacy of Smer. The measures include proposals, pushed by the prime minister himself, such as financially rewarding whistleblowers with an amount half the bribe offered, or the annual testing of high-ranking police officers with a lie detector. The agenda also features the demand that OĽaNO tried, to no avail, to push forward in the last term of parliament – halving pensions for the officers of the communist Security Service and spending the saved amounts for pensions of former political prisoners and their families.
- The Matovič government stands a real chance of becoming the first one in Slovakia's nearly 30-year history which will succeed in finalising work on legislation regarding national minorities. The legislation would push more for respecting the rights of these minorities and would support their implementation, e.g. thanks to the establishment of the Office for National Minorities. The extension of the use of the languages of minorities is also under consideration. The fact that the legislation has been included in the government's agenda is caused by the willingness to win over the vote of the Hungarian minority in the future (SaS has developed the issue of the rights of national minorities most in its manifesto). It is however also driven by reduced fears of Hungarians seeking autonomy or even finally historical revisionism. These fears were in the past fuelled by Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar (while in office in 1993-1998, he limited the possibility of using the languages of minorities in state offices) or Ján Slota, whose nationalist party co-ruled Slovakia in 2006-2010. In subsequent years defensive reactions were caused by the fact that the Viktor Orbán government had made it easier to apply for additional Hungarian citizenship for ethnic Hungarians, including those living in Slovakia (Bratislava replied by adopting the legislation which deprived people of Slovak citizenship if they adopted another one).
- The Matovič government is likely to pursue a policy of 'strongly anchoring' Slovakia in the EU, and Slovakia will aspire to take the role of the leader of European integration in the region. Compared to the previous government, the new one will be more unequivocally pro-Atlantic. This is borne out by the fact that in the document the US is referred to as the 'key ally' in defence policy, the contract for purchasing F-16 fighter aircraft has been sustained, despite the initial criticism that it is too costly for a country the size of Slovakia, and the commitment to spending 2% of Slovakia's GDP on defence policy by

2024 will be maintained, despite the expected budget difficulties. The withdrawal from practices that have been pursued up to now in the defence industry is illustrated by the government's decision to back off from the project – described by the new minister of defence as 'extremely non-transparent' - of purchasing Vydra (*Otter*) 8x8 infantry fighting vehicles based on the Finnish Patria Armoured Modular Vehicle 8x8 chassis. This opens up new possibilities of Polish-Slovak collaboration, for example the return to the project of Scipio infantry fighting vehicles based on Rosomak (*Wolverine*) multi-role military vehicle and Slovak Turra 30 tower. Even though the government's agenda does not mention Russia or China a single time, it indirectly criticises Russia's attack on Ukraine, by stating that Bratislava 'does not accept the breach of Ukraine's territorial integrity'. In security policy, Slovakia may take a more unequivocal position than previously. The previous government formally supported the sanctions against Russia. However, it challenged their effectiveness and made friendly gestures towards Moscow.