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Ódor's technocratic government in Slovakia: the calm before the electoral storm

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On 15 May, President Zuzana Čaputová appointed a technocratic caretaker government headed by Ľudovít Ódor, previously the deputy governor of the central bank. Recognised specialists, often close aides of the outgoing ministers from Eduard Heger's cabinet, will take charge of the individual ministries. The appointments signal continuity in areas such as foreign affairs and defence: the former is already headed by the outgoing prime minister's recent foreign policy advisor Miroslav Wlachovský, a former ambassador to the United Kingdom, while the defence ministry is led by Martin Sklenár, a former director in the ministry, who was invited to work there by the outgoing defence minister Jaroslav Naď. The task of the new cabinet is to run the state administration until a government is formed after the early elections to parliament scheduled for 30 September. The new ministers will not stand in these elections, as this is what the head of state required from the candidates for government. The main tasks that Ódor has set for his government include preparing the first draft of next year's budget and the efficient management of the disbursal of funds from the EU's Recovery Plan for Europe.

Ódor's government has until 14 June to request a vote of confidence from parliament. However, it is highly unlikely to receive it and will probably have to operate as a cabinet with limited powers, just like Heger's government had to do over recent months. The parties of the left (Hlas and Smer) and the far right have already announced their intention to vote against the new government, while OĽaNO is also leaning towards this. These parties have a combined 85 votes in the 150-member National Council.

The immediate cause of the Heger government's collapse was a scandal in which a company owned by the minister of agriculture and rural development received a grant of almost €1.5 million from the environment ministry. After the information became public, the minister announced his resignation, but did not give up the funds. The minister of foreign and European affairs, Rastislav Káčer, declared that Heger's response had been insufficient and resigned himself. This increased the pressure on Čaputová to appoint a technocratic government, especially as she had the power to do so since Heger's cabinet collapsed last December and began to operate as a government with limited powers (see '*Slovakia: the Heger government collapses, early elections ahead*').

Commentary

- The president's appointment of the technocratic cabinet is the final act in the crisis of the centre-right government which had been in power since 2020. Although it initially held a constitutional majority in the National Council and pledged to clean up the state, its rule came to an end with a minority cabinet, amid suspicions of a conflict of interest triggered by the grant scandal. From the outset, the centre-right camp was split by numerous ideological and personal disputes. It also faced multiple external challenges (see '*Permanentny kryzys koalicyjny: słowacka centroprawica na rozdrożu*'). In recent interviews, Heger has highlighted the genuine successes of his cabinet: the smooth implementation of the EU recovery plan and the effectiveness of steps to keep energy prices in check; in this respect Slovakia comes off well in contrast to the Czech Republic, where energy prices have been soaring fast compared to the rest of the EU. At the same time, Heger has tried to shift responsibility for his cabinet's failures onto the heads of two of the three largest parties in the original coalition: Igor Matovič of OĽaNO and Richard Sulík of SaS. As Heger put it, one of them "had a petrol can while the other had matches". In practice, however, much of the responsibility for the performance and nature of that government rests also with Heger himself, and the public's critical assessment of his actions is reflected in the dismal ratings (3–4%) of the Democrats, the party founded by him and some of the leading ministers in his cabinet, including Naď and Káčer (the latter has already retired from politics).
- President Čaputová is the key figure on the Slovak political scene today. Although the competences of the head of state are more limited in some aspects than these of the equivalent position in Poland (especially with regard to the legislative process), the president's importance increases during periods of political instability. Hence, Čaputová could have already appointed a technocratic government after the no-confidence vote in the previous government was passed, that is as early as December. She chose not to do so because of the potential political cost of such a move – both to the party she co-founded, Progressive Slovakia (PS), which is running third in the polls (13–14%), and to her own prospects for re-election in 2024. Moreover, the formation of a technocratic government is unprecedented in Slovakia (there have been three such cabinets since 1993 in the neighbouring Czech Republic, whose experience the Slovaks often cite). As a result of this decision, the Smer-Social Democracy (18%) party of former Prime Minister Robert Fico, which is currently leading opinion polls, has stepped up its attacks on Čaputová. Fico is courting the anti-system voters with his radical rhetoric: he has called the appointment of the technocratic government an "anti-democratic coup engineered by the US embassy", in which the Slovak president supposedly played an instrumental role. At the same time, there is speculation that the former prime minister may be trying to discourage Čaputová, who has consistently ranked as one of the two most popular politicians in the country since the start of her term in 2019, from running for re-election. The fact that she has postponed the date of her announcement on this issue (it was originally expected in April) indicates that she is hesitating. Other parties are also increasingly joining the chorus of criticism. For example, Matovič, the head of OĽaNO which won the 2020 election, has accused her of "monarchist inclinations". He is seeking to revive support for his party (which has recently been polling at 5–8 percent, compared to the 25 percent it won in the elections just over three years ago) by drawing a contrast between his declared conservatism and the centre-right's pro-family policies on the one

hand, and the alleged “heartless” liberalism of Čaputová and PS on the other.

- Ódor’s government is supposed to be in power temporarily, so its legislative ambitions are limited. The new ministers have only a short time to familiarise themselves with their work; that has made it necessary to appoint people who have already been involved in the ministerial processes, which signals that the existing policies will be continued. Due to the summer recess and the election of a new parliament, it will be virtually impossible for parliament to pass more complex laws at the request of the government. The new prime minister has also declared that his cabinet has no intention of engaging in disputes on ideological or ethical issues; the country is strongly divided here, particularly on the matter of regulating abortion and civil partnerships. Liberal circles have high hopes for the draft budget that the new government is preparing, as both the prime minister and the finance minister are among Slovakia’s leading experts in public finance: the finance ministry is headed by Michal Horváth, a former chief economist of the central bank who has a research background that includes Oxford University. For the Hungarian minority (8–9% of the country’s population), the Hungarian roots of the new head of government are of great symbolic significance, although he has mainly been recognised for his professional achievements (he does not emphasise his ethnicity, though he does not hide it either).
- The ongoing electoral campaign will make it difficult for the new cabinet to operate effectively. The Slovak political scene is deeply divided and new alliances are still forming, especially on the centre-right. This process will continue until early July when the electoral lists are due to be submitted. Smer, which combines left-wing demands with nationalist rhetoric, is currently leading in the polls. Its leader Fico is tapping into the reluctance of a large part of the population (up to 70 percent) to provide military aid to Ukraine, and has promised “not to send a single bullet there”. He is also drawing heavily on the anti-American attitude of some Slovaks, with warnings against dragging the country into the “conflicts of the superpowers” (see ‘*Slovakia: strategic dilemmas after the Russian invasion of Ukraine*’). At the same time, he has pledged greater social activity to counteract the effects of the cost of living crisis. However, during his previous years in power, he came to be known as a pragmatist who was able to combine harsh rhetoric targeting specific groups of voters in the country with the ability to avoid antagonising Brussels, Berlin and Washington. In the event of victory, he may form a coalition with the centre-left Hlas, a party that was founded by former Smer activists and is led by Peter Pellegrini, whom Fico once named head of government. Faced with falling support, Pellegrini has sharpened his rhetoric in recent weeks, adjusting somewhat to the message pushed by Fico. Depending on the outcome of the election, and in particular on which individual parties cross the 5 percent threshold, another possible arrangement could include the left-wing parties, the prosocial We are Family party, the nationalists and even the pro-Russian Republic (founded by former activists of Marian Kotleba’s People’s Party Our Slovakia), which has its roots in neo-Nazi circles. The latter, whose support is as high as 10 percent, has recently been touting its ‘anti-fascist’ profile in an effort to raise its coalition potential. After it dissociated itself from Kotleba, who was convicted of promoting extremist symbolism, this is another step aimed at helping its activists enter mainstream politics, but it has been poorly received by the more radical sections of its electorate. This stems from the fact that these circles cultivate the memory of the

wartime satellite state that collaborated with the Third Reich and its leader, Jozef Tiso. However, there are no such references in the party's programme.