

SLOVAKS VOTE TO DECIDE THE FUTURE DIRECTION OF THE COUNTRY

The Slovaks vote to decide the future direction of the country, but it is unlikely to be the Direction (SMER-SD), the party of Robert Fico, who has been in power for 12 years.

The Slovaks will go to polls this Saturday to elect the 150-member parliament for the next four years. The campaign has been overshadowed by the trial of the suspects in the murders of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová, which started less than two months before elections. While the murders took place two years ago, they are playing a major role in the elections and the future direction of the country.

Mafia state

For Slovakia, the murder of a journalist was an unprecedented event that became a turning point, triggering massive protests and forcing then PM Robert Fico to step down.

Over the last two years, the subsequent investigation has seen highly disturbing revelations in the press almost on a daily basis, uncovering a state penetrated by corruption and criminal behavior, encompassing ruling politicians, high state officials, judges, and some journalists. Against this backdrop, the central feature of the election campaign has been a change and a return of justice to the people.

Ironically, the ruling SMER-SD party, which has been in power for 12 years and is responsible for the current situation, has campaigned on the slogan 'a responsible change'. Apart from changing its logo by adding the word 'new' in front of the party's name, the party also changed its election leader, replacing the highly unpopular Robert Fico with the incumbent prime minister, another SMER-SD member. But not only does Mr. Fico remain on the ticket, he also continues to be in charge of the party. On the second anniversary of Kuciak's killing he said: "If it were not for the murder, I would still be the prime minister with 30 percent of support." It is highly unlikely that these cosmetic changes, combined with a poor campaign devoid of new ideas, will be enough to secure another victory for the party.

Authenticity and populism

The unifying feature of the previously fragmented opposition has become their willingness to get rid of the era represented by Mr. Fico and his close associates. Voters cannot complain about the lack of options - they can choose from 24 parties on the ballot. Some of them are more serious with real policy alternatives while others are less serious, offering populism and easy, at times extreme, solutions. However, those who did their homework and prepared elaborate manifestos have found themselves lagging behind a party which is more of a movement - the Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLaNO).

OLaNO is headed by Mr. Igor Matovič. While criticized by some as a populist or clown, Matovič knows how to reach the hearts of people which seems to be more important than reaching their minds. Above all, Matovič is authentic and has inspired the people to believe that if someone is able to bring about real change and stop corruption, then it is him. While Mr. Matovič is very different in many aspects to Ms. Zuzana Čaputová, who won the presidential election last year, they have two things in common which helped them to succeed – strong anti-corruption activism and authenticity.

Social media, disinformation, and extremists

Despite fears of interference from Russia or other foreign entities, disinformation in the Slovak elections has been mainly homegrown. The ruling SMER-SD party has been among the most active in this respect, spreading deceptive videos on social media and targeting opponents. For example, a SMER-SD video targeted the former president and the leader of *Za ľuďi* party (For people) Andrej Kiska, alleging he intends to bring thousands of migrants to Slovakia. It was blocked by Google for violating its rules but has continued to circulate on Facebook, where it was seen by more than 300 thousand people. While social media networks were used widely by all parties, OLaNO clearly dominated. According to MEMO 98, a media watchdog monitoring social media in the election lead-up, OLaNO significantly outperformed its competitors on Facebook. In one successful stunt, Mr. Matovič and his colleagues broadcast live on Facebook from in front of what they said was the former minister of finance's villa on the French Riviera, placing stickers saying "Property of the Slovak Republic", and accusing the former finance minister, nominated by SMER-SD, of buying it with the money of Slovak taxpayers.

On the other hand, the disturbing revelations about corruption involving high-level state officials have led to considerable frustration among voters. This has been reflected in the growing support for extremist movements, which has also triggered a counter-movement to confront extremists in public spaces, most notably by the PS and Spolu parties, which run together in a coalition.

The role of Slovakia's vibrant civil society and media can also not be overstated. They have played a critical role in revealing abuses of power and mobilizing the electorate that looks set to turn out in force on Saturday. So while time might be up for powerful and corrupt elites, the people of Slovakia are on the verge of choosing a new and hopefully more promising direction for the country.

The views expressed in this piece are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the organization.